

Essay

How to Worship in the Metaverse: Religious Experience and the Affordances of a New Medium

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Abstract: The extent to which the metaverse will become a site for religious and spiritual experience depends on how the aims of users align with the new medium's potentialities for action, or "affordances". Affordances are formed as the social, technological, and contextual capacities of a medium are recognized and then enacted by users. This exploratory essay argues that the metaverse's affordances, which overlap with those of already existing virtual reality (VR) environments, can deepen a sense of belonging for users of online religious spaces and mediate new ways of being present in those spaces. The following affordances of the metaverse (and of VR) are discussed analytically in the essay: immersion, presence, embodiment, usability, empathy, and contemplation. The phases of the continuing "buildout" of the metaverse are also assessed to uncover their likely effects on the metaverse's affordances. These phases are massive scale, system interoperability, robust rendering, and persistent continuity.

Keywords: metaverse; online religion; media affordances; new media; virtual reality

1. Introduction

For a long time, the constitution of a collective body and the participation of individuals in the physical community made use of purely symbolic or religious intermediaries: "This is my body. This is my blood". Today, it makes use of technological means. Just as we are able to share our intelligence and our vision of the world with others who speak the same language, we can now virtually participate in a communal body. (Lévy 1998, p. 41)

Religious and spiritual experiences mediated by communication media have been possible for more than a century. The advent of radio gave rise to experimentation in the 1880s for the purpose of aligning conceptions of spirituality and religious experience with radio's "action at a distance". Peters (1999) characterizes early radio history as "inseparable from daring imaginings about the flight of souls, voices without bodies, and instantaneous presence at a distance" (p. 104). Radio's extension of the sense of hearing was experienced by worshippers as a "still, small voice", a "voice in the silence" (Miller 1935, p. 135).

Online religious experience in the social environment of the metaverse may be viewed as amplifying the "still small voice" in ways that require foresight and understanding. In the U.S. and other countries, the use of online environments and digital information for religious purposes and in support of religious activity is common. The types of religious activity taking place online have increased since 2004, when it was found that two-thirds of adults using the Internet engaged in "faith-related matters" (Hoover et al. 2004). The metaverse is a successor environment to the World Wide Web. In its early form, it already attracted those who seek a religious experience online. Second Life, a VR environment released in 2003, has 37 virtual spaces for religious activity (Religious Places 2024). The religions represented by these places include Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. About a quarter of Americans go online to engage in non-participative religious activities, such as watching a religious service online, or as a support to religious activity, such as using an app to read religious texts (Faverio et al. 2023).



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The advent of the metaverse can be viewed in theoretical terms as contributing to the “electronic age” which McLuhan (1962) associated with the rise of the computer. McLuhan described media technologies as creating historical “punctuations” that had deep effects on culture. Oral tribe culture, based on orality and storytelling, was associated with small-group culture and the sharing of knowledge between generations. With the invention of writing, the oral tribe culture gave rise to the manuscript culture, which encouraged the rise of specialists in order to allow for the creation, interpretation, reproduction, and storage of manuscripts. The manuscript culture was transformed with the invention of the printing press. The “ear” of the oral tribe culture, which was immersive in its effects, gave way to the “eye” of the Gutenberg Galaxy (print culture) and the flourishing of the individual point of view. In the electronic age, individualism and fragmentation give way to a collective identity, in combination with what McLuhan called a “tribal base”. Religion in the electronic age is characterized by both the independence of the individual in seeking a religious experience that is shaped by personal values and by symbols circulated by mass media.

The metaverse is an informational and experiential layer of technology by which users can interact in a virtual reality (VR) space with other users within a social environment (Bolger 2021). As a medium, the metaverse exists in a nascent form but is expanding and developing rapidly. The metaverse therefore exists in a state of indeterminacy, which has given rise to questions and speculation concerning who will use the new medium and for what purposes.

Like previous media innovations, the metaverse will be used not only for tasks that have been accomplished previously in the actual world but also for tasks that are novel. An example of the first category would be completing a driver’s examination to receive a license to operate a vehicle. The examination has routinely employed a road test in the actual world to allow the prospective driver to demonstrate having acquired certain skills. The metaverse could be used to simulate driving conditions in an immersive driving environment. A Microsoft-developed virtual environment has already been used for this purpose and forms one of the foundational demonstrations of the value and use of virtual environments (Endicott 2020). The aerospace pilot’s environment is, in fact, an already existing demonstration example of the metaverse. In common with the aerospace virtual environment of the aerospace, the environment for automobile drivers can reduce the risks of completing the task in the actual world.

One may imagine radically novel uses of the metaverse for religious experience. In Mexico, some cultural groups maintain a religious and spiritual focus on revering the dead (Campos 2023). The metaverse could be used to create opportunities to visit deceased friends or relations who are represented by AI-generated avatars. Using sound and images of the dead, the metaverse could allow virtual communication with past generations of people. The metaverse in this context could become a space in which virtual guests are invited to take part in online religious rituals. The dead could in this sense be brought to life virtually.

Bolger (2021) assesses four dimensions that constitute the metaverse as a universal space for understanding and experiencing spirituality. These dimensions are virtual reality, which is characterized by sensory immersion and a sense of social presence, augmented reality, by which the actual world is annotated by virtually generated information, mirror worlds, or “digital twins”, offering a virtual replica of the actual world, and lifeblogging, which allows users to display aspects of their virtual and actual actions. Of these four dimensions of the metaverse, virtual reality (VR) will be considered here as providing a useful heuristic for what the new medium of the metaverse is becoming and will become. VR environments have allowed users to watch and respond to a religious environment online (Dawson 2004), but not to navigate fully and continuously in an immersive religious space—standing, sitting, walking, and communicating with others in real time, synchronously, and persistently.

Early scholarship describing and assessing online religious spaces assumed that the VR environment would exist as part of a hybrid environment with the actual world. Dawson noted the following:

Life online will likely complement life offline, and there is no reason to expect that religious uses of the Internet will differ. . . . It remains to be seen whether technologically mediated religious experiences are possible, and if so, how. (Dawson 2004, pp. 79–80)

The reasoning was that VR social environments did not provide the features required for a technologically mediated experience. These absent features included a sufficiently robust virtual environment and the synchronous passage of real time within the digital environment. However, VR now offers both immersion and social presence, and the metaverse in its “buildout” will offer the added features required for a fully mediated experience: scale, interoperability, rendering, and continuity (Ball 2020).

Scholarship has pointed to two necessary capacities that mark a new era for understanding religious experience: a sense of belonging and mediation (Therborn 1991). These capacities may be considered as defining online religious experience. The prevalence of such uses of media would be expected to increase as these capacities deepen and expand within the metaverse. Therborn (1991) argues that when considering the religious activity, a sense of belonging is more theoretically explanatory and useful than “community”. A sense of belonging is associated with preferences that are developed in the context of the following:

- Ends, desires, norms, and emotions;
- Cognitive and communicative competence which become part of a universe of meaning;
- Shared identity with some people and differentiation from other people.

In the same vein, Lundby (2011) notes that in the context of online religious experience, both identification and interaction contribute to a sense of belonging and that “patterns of belonging extend across online/offline interfaces” (p. 1222).

A view of online religious experience must take into account not simply its potential sense of belonging, as Therborn and Lundby argue, but also its mediated character. Online religious experience can be understood “through the forms and processes of mediation in practices that are considered ‘religious’ by people, as well as through the patterns of belonging that are shaped in such communication” (Lundby 2011, p. 1226). Lundby’s approach in which mediation is at the core of understanding online religious experience is part of the transformation of media use for “vicarious religion” to technology-mediated “participatory religion”. Mediation in this sense refers to how a user experiences the virtual world and how relations with co-present others are shaped. Mediation allows the user to be present in the virtual world. It therefore constitutes a hermeneutic process of making meaning (Areiza-Padilla et al. 2022; Sbardeletto 2023).

Although participation in formal religious organizations is declining in much of the world, the reported importance of religion for increasing social cohesion. Thomas et al. (2024), for example, argue that personal and corporate wellbeing is an expected outcome for those attending religious events and activities. In similar terms, Habermas claims that religion can be secularized in order to provide a basis for a more refined social understanding of morality (Habermas 2008). He also cites the role of religion in offering a sense of transcendence and belonging (Portier 2011; Fritsch 2013). Luhmann argues that religion during the print age (McLuhan 1962) was characterized by an individual’s agency but that such action was also associated with great changes in social structures:

[S]tructural differentiation made it possible to think of membership in religious organizations as a matter of private choice and to begin to develop decision premises and rules of control which made it feasible to separate members and non-members without using other roles (e.g., citizenship) as a guidelines. (Luhmann 1985, p. 13)

The metaverse is a complex technological development involving digital corporations providing hardware and software, small companies carrying out developmental work, governments and regulators, and other individuals and groups. Its use and implications for religion online are part of a historical arc in which previous generations of technology have given rise to fundamental changes in culture and society.

The possibilities for the full development of a sense of belonging and the mediation of religious experience have become more evident with the widespread use of VR environments. Second Life, for example, offers virtual spaces for religious worship. It allows users to navigate through 3D space by means of an avatar. The avatar is commonly fashioned after the appearance of the user, featuring, if desired by the user, the same hair color, typical clothing style, and so on. Some religious spaces in Second Life appear as ancient churches, with stone walls and stained-glass windows (see Figure 1). Others are designed in a contemporary style, with modern chairs facing a stage.



Figure 1. Chapel of Our Saviour in Second Life (Zelling) (Chapel of Our Saviour n.d.).

Existing VR environments, including Second Life, offer a developed example of what form the metaverse will take. A VR religious environment is immersive, in that sound is heard, including music and other people’s voices, and the worshipper may turn around 360 degrees to view the full 3D space. In a VR space, users may watch and listen to the proceedings or rituals of a religious gathering, and they can speak to one another in dyads or small groups. They can navigate the space in a fashion that is imitative of the navigation of the human body in actual space. The VR environment can be an imaginative space, with no correlation to the actual world. Alternatively, it can be created in the form of a “twin”, thereby corresponding to an actual existing or previously existing historical church’s exterior and interior.

This exploratory essay asks, “How will the metaverse increase the possibilities for online religious activity?” To answer this question requires the recognition that the extent to which the metaverse will become a site for religious and spiritual experience depends on how the aims of users align with the new medium’s potentialities for action or media “affordances”. Media affordances are formed as the social, technological, and contextual capacities of a medium are recognized and then enacted by users.

The concept of media affordances can be used to describe the incremental expansion of religious spaces in the metaverse. Religious activity in the metaverse will be possible if certain tasks are perceived and recognized as being “actionable” within the virtual social environment of the metaverse. These tasks include, for example, singing with others, hearing a sacred reading, and participating in a ritual. Users of the metaverse will recognize

affordances within the medium that will provide the means by which these and other tasks can be accomplished. VR's affordances for online religious experience may be described as a means of identifying the affordances for online religious experience that will be possible in the metaverse. In this way, the medium of VR and its affordances can be used as an indirect means of considering the affordances of the metaverse.

This essay argues that the metaverse's affordances, which overlap with those of already existing VR environments, can deepen a sense of belonging for users of online religious spaces. They can also mediate new ways of being present in those spaces. The affordances of the metaverse (and of VR) are discussed analytically in terms of their capacity to create an environment supportive of religious activity. Following this analysis, the phases of the continuing "buildout" of the metaverse are assessed to uncover their likely effects on the metaverse's affordances.

2. The Affordances of the Metaverse and of VR

The development of the metaverse as a successor to the World Wide Web has begun (Ball 2020). The metaverse is being organized and built using technologies that already exist, but its full form and buildout will require the use of technologies that do not yet exist. For example, rapid rendering or computing in 3D online space is not possible using existing technology, but gaming companies in particular are seeking solutions to this problem (GlobalNewswire 2023). Because of the incomplete nature of the metaverse, a definition must also remain incomplete. Yet, its distinctive character can be sketched by describing what the metaverse resembles now, principally in relation to VR, including a description of VR's current limits, and what it is likely to become once these limits are overcome. The heuristic strategy for carrying this out in this essay is to introduce and use the concept of media affordances.

Media affordances occupy a "third position" between the determinist and constructivist lenses on technological innovation (Hutchby 2003; Smith and Halafoff 2020). Designers and inventors of new media technologies create features that are assumed to be of value to users. Features determine to some extent the uses for the medium. However, a media affordance is discovered and constructed by users based on the medium's available set of features and its social and technological context. Media affordances are therefore in theoretical alignment with the concept developed by Campbell (2010) of the religious-social shaping of technology (RRST). For both affordances and RRST, social institutions and fields of action are required when considering the social sources of religious activities online. Both structure and action give rise to the shaping of technology in religion online.

Affordances are the perceived actual or imagined properties of a medium, emerging through the relations discovered by users to exist among the medium's technological, social, and contextual dimensions. Affordances enable or constrain certain uses of the medium (Majchrzak et al. 2013). Affordances have characteristics that distinguish them from the "features" or "designed capabilities" of a medium. Affordances are not features created by a medium's designers but rather "actionabilities" that users perceive as a consequence of the technological features of the medium in combination with the social relations and context in which the technology is inscribed. Unlike features, affordances are relational, perceptual, contextual, and discrete (Ronzhyn et al. 2023). They are relational because their recognition depends on interactions with other users. They are perceptual because they must be recognized by users before they can be acted upon. They are contextual and may therefore have varying potential for action depending on where and how the medium is being used. They have the potential for action (or inaction) based on the user's intentions, and they are discrete, which means that they may be understood and analyzed separately from one another. Media affordances, in short, are properties of a medium that are recognized by users and that contribute to the possibility of taking action in the technological, social, and contextual environment of the medium (Moreno and D'Angelo 2019, p. 111).

The affordances of VR are similar to those of the metaverse (Shin 2017; Steffen et al. 2019). VR's affordances for online religious experience can be used to identify the affordances for online religious experience that will be possible in the metaverse. The affordances of VR—and of the metaverse—are described below in relation to the social, technological, and contextual dimensions by which users act in an online environment and by which that environment acts back upon its users. Table 1 specifies the affordances of the metaverse (and VR).

Table 1. The metaverse's affordances and their use for increasing a sense of belonging and mediating action in online religious spaces.

Affordances	Social Dimension	Technological Dimension	Contextual Dimension	Example
Immersion	Hear, see, and listen to others	Experience sounds, images, moving images	Gather for religious rituals	Attend to a user by listening or speaking
Presence	Recognize and acknowledge others	Experience sounds, images, moving images as expressed by another	Gathering for religious rituals	Smile at a co-present user
Embodiment	Be in proximity with others	Create and use a self-styled avatar	Participate and be seen to participate in religious rituals	Sit or stand in proximity to others during a ritual
Usability	Select, read, and listen to texts	Use available databases	Act in coordination with others	Sing in ensemble, hear a text read aloud
Empathy	Express emotion for the situation of others	Be in proximity to familiar others	Maintain relationships with others over time	Offer condolences or congratulations
Contemplation	Share corporate and individual aspects of experience	Experience the reduction of signals (sound, images, light)	Express and experience a sense of unity	Pray silently

Table 1 depicts the model used here to explain how the metaverse will become a significant space and site for religious experience. The first column of Table 1 shows the six affordances of VR and the metaverse. These will be assessed here in terms of how users may recognize them in their relationship to online social, technological, and contextual dimensions. These dimensions are specified in the next three columns of the table, followed by a column offering examples of tasks, actions, and activities characteristic of an online religious environment.

The affordance of *immersion* refers to VR's capacity to engage users by providing information using all human senses. In a VR video game, the user is immersed in the visual display and sounds of the 3D environment. Using VR goggles, the visual display and sounds of the social environment outside of the video game are eliminated. The affordance of immersion thereby allows the user to meet and be co-present with those in the social environment of an online space. Once the threshold of that social environment is passed, all users gathered in the environment are able potentially to develop a sense of belonging because of the common purpose they hold. For users seeking a religious experience in VR and the metaverse, the immersive quality of the online social environment is set off distinctly from the actual world. Immersion of human senses is experienced completely in the religious context which has the effect of isolating and highlighting the religious experience.

Social *presence* is a state of being in a space that is synchronously experienced with others (Sensing 2023). A sense of presence pervades the VR gaming experience. Users can enter social environments for the purpose of acting in coordination with other users. This coordinated action is carried out in real time, meaning, for example, that users can communicate with one another in a conversational style. In religious social environments

of VR and the metaverse, too, users can express their unique and recognizable presence to one another by offering greetings, expressing welcomes, exchanging recollections of previous meetings, and in other ways, revealing the distinctive character of their identity. In this way, a sense of belonging is increased which focuses and increases the religious character of the online experience. The affordance of presence likewise contributes to the mediating function of the online social environment. Mediation makes possible the religious experience in the environment of VR and the metaverse.

The experience in VR and the metaverse is at all times constituted by *embodiment*, which is the user's sense of participating in social interaction as if occupying and acting within a shared space. Embodiment, which is referred to in the epigraph to this essay, is the desired state of sensing one's own bodily person while interacting in an online space in proximity to the bodily person of another. For users in an online religious environment of VR and the metaverse, embodiment mediates the user's capacity to control the avatar from within the online social environment. In a religious ritual, the user can, for example, stand to receive a blessing.

The affordance of *usability* in VR and metaverse draws on a "service environment". A service environment is a set of resources by which users select and exploit services and objects. For a user of online religious spaces in VR and the metaverse, this may include retrieving and reading from texts, which may be musical scores, prose poetry, or liturgical readings. These texts may allow for singing in an ensemble or reading and listening to sacred texts as part of a religious ritual. Usability is enacted when the user identifies and applies the social value of an object or service in VR and the metaverse. Usability mediates the user's intentions to apply a social environment's resources for the purpose of acting together with others for commonly held purposes and thereby increasing a sense of belonging.

The affordance of *empathy* in VR and the metaverse involves the expression of affect by a user as a consequence of perceiving the situation and context of another. Empathy entails actions intended to recognize and validate differences among users in an online religious space. Empathy has been examined in online environments in order to determine how users respond to changing and varying social contexts:

By leveraging immersive technologies such as [VR], . . .simulations enable users to understand the experience of others regardless of their own temporal, cultural, demographic, or spatial context. (Paananen et al. 2023)

In an online religious environment, empathy is required in order to establish, maintain, and expand the recognition users have for the situation of others. Empathy is an affordance that can deepen the sense of belonging held by users by creating a pattern of expressing and sharing the differences that users experience and that represent varying social contexts and conditions. Although users in a religious environment of VR and the metaverse may occupy these varying contexts, a sense of belonging can be established and expanded on by the enactment of the affordance of empathy.

And finally, the affordance of *contemplation* is made possible by VR and the metaverse through the design feature of noise reduction. The online religious environment can include periods of silence that are not interrupted by others present or by ambient noise. The online religious experience may include the task or activity of remaining silent and still. The affordance of contemplation is therefore a means by which a sense of belonging is increased by a common attention to the same task—in this case, that of silent reflection. Contemplation contributes to a sense of unity of purpose and synchronous action. The affordance of contemplation contributes to an increased sense of belonging when silence and reflection are practiced with others.

3. Effects on Affordances of the Metaverse's Buildout

VR already incorporates affordances that will also be available in the metaverse. While some of them are as yet not fully developed, some key phases of the metaverse's ongoing development can be forecast. These phases can, in turn, be applied to the online social

environment of religious spaces and thereby to understand the prospects for online religious experience in the metaverse. The phases of developmental phases, or “buildout”, of the metaverse include massive scale, system interoperability, robust rendering, and persistent continuity (Ball 2020). Table 2 specifies the effects of the phases on the affordances of the metaverse.

Table 2. Effects of the metaverse’s buildout on affordances.

Affordances	Scale	Interoperability	Rendering	Continuity
Immersion	Sites for religious experience are expandable and capable of multiplying	Seamless movement among online religious spaces	Sound and moving images are accurate and lifelike	Knowledge and information are carried from one environment to another
Presence	Religious spaces can be large or small	Seamless presentation of self carries across online religious spaces	Users recognize and respond to others as individuals	Individual presentation carries across religious spaces
Embodiment	Choice of when and where to participate increases	Continuous and coherent proximity to others	AI-based renderings are indistinguishable from sources	Individual presentation ages and varies based on actual conditions
Usability	Access to massive sources of data	Seamless access to sources of data	AI-based renderings of sacred books, relics are indistinguishable from sources	Immediate revisions and enhancements to databases
Empathy	Opportunities to express oneself expand and multiply	Continuous and coherent expression of empathy	AI-based renderings of bodily expression are accurate and indistinguishable from sources	Users occupy a common religious space over time
Contemplation	Choice of access to contemplative spaces expands and multiplies	Seamless access to preferred contemplative spaces	Ambient sound and images are accurate and indistinguishable from sources	Spaces for contemplation are available and predictable

The *scale* of the metaverse will be massive. While a video game has a limited number of places for players, the metaverse will offer an unlimited number of participants the opportunity to experience a likewise unlimited number of social environments. Spaces for online religious experience will be available in seemingly endless variety. Online religious spaces will be expandable and capable of multiplication. The online religious space of Westminster Abbey could be multiplied many times to allow multiple cohorts and sets of users to attend and participate in religious rituals in the space. Each cohort would be indexed to allow participants to maintain their experience within a community.

The scale of the metaverse is to be achieved in significant part through the *interoperability* of systems and domains. The metaverse will allow many systems, and systems of systems, to function seamlessly and invisibly. In the same way that one World Wide Web exists, rather than a large number of sub-webs, the metaverse will be a single massive and interoperable system. The World Wide Web became the focal and unified entity known today because the benefits of a single system offered the most advantages to the largest and most powerful interests. In the same way that people in an actual city can rely on finding others in public spaces during the day and night, the interoperable character of the metaverse will allow users reliably to assume that they will find others to meet with for the purpose of religious experience.

The metaverse, like video games, is *rendered*, or computed, to allow for three-dimensional (3D) images and moving images. Robust rendering in the metaverse will allow for sound, images, and moving images to change continuously, persistently, and accurately. For online

religious spaces, the presentation of one's personal appearance and physical expressions and emotions will be indistinguishable from a source such as a video recording. The computing power required to offer 3D rendering to the highest level of performance is a recurrent challenge already for video game producers. It will be a primary and recurring challenge as the metaverse is constructed, but it is one that video game producers and others are focusing their efforts and resources on developing (GlobalNewswire 2023).

Finally, *continuity* will be required in key dimensions of the metaverse to replace the silos of many systems (Ball 2020). The metaverse will be experienced in real time and will be experienced continuously. This means that the metaverse will always be available and always operating, in the same way that the World Wide Web is. Time will pass in the metaverse as in real life. A participant's identity and history in the metaverse will need to be continuous so that participants can use and experience the social environments of the metaverse in a way that is meaningful and lifelike. Similarly, entitlements and objects must be continuous in the metaverse. Communications and payments must also be made continuously across the vast network of social environments that constitute the metaverse.

4. Conclusions

In the epigraph to this essay, reference is made to the ideal of achieving common understanding with like-minded users of online religious spaces. Campbell (2010) calls this discourse the "religious-social shaping of technology". The meaning and uses of technology for religious experience are based on such domains as religious tradition, community values and priorities, negotiation and innovating of technology, and communal discourse. I have argued that the metaverse will continue to develop as a space in which both conventional and novel religious experiences expand as a consequence of the new medium's affordances. The affordances of the metaverse support the two fundamental requirements of online religious experience, which are achieving a sense of belonging and expanding the capacity to mediate ways of being in online religious spaces.

Some characteristics of the metaverse distinguish it from previous media online innovations. For example, the organizational structure of the metaverse, when compared to that of previous online forms of participation, is likely to be more decentralized, because the design of the metaverse will incorporate peer-to-peer relationships. The metaverse may even be fully community-governed. Second Life religious spaces such as the one shown in Figure 1 are created, developed, and maintained by user groups. Religion in the metaverse may therefore represent religious experience characterized by the full participation of members, reflecting the congregationalist beliefs of, for example, Baptists and Presbyterians in the Christian context. Consider the example of users of online religious spaces who are already using YouTube streaming to allow for their participation. Such uses are made possible through the centralized, privately owned capabilities of YouTube. The metaverse, by contrast, represents a decentralized structure in which users themselves may manage and govern online religious spaces.

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