Organizing on the Internet: Semiological Analysis of a Digital Apparatus of the *Online Candles*

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Abstract: Religion is massively present on Internet, and for two decades scholars have studied this presence essentially to understand the effects of Internet on religious practices. In this article we conduct a semiological analysis of a digital apparatus called Online candles in order to show how an apparatus for asynchronous cyber rituals has been developed for the benefit of a religious organization: the Sanctuary of Lourdes. In so doing, this article contributes new findings that advance our understanding of how religious practices on the Internet reveal a new age religious organization strategy.

Keywords: asynchronous cyber rituals, semiological analysis, Lourdes, Online candles, religious practice

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Le *Cierge en ligne* : entre rituel religieux et stratégie d'organisation

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Résumé : Le domaine religieux est particulièrement présent sur Internet et, depuis plus de 20 ans, les chercheurs étudient cette présence essentiellement pour comprendre les effets d'Internet sur les pratiques religieuses. Dans cet article, nous avons réalisé l'analyse sémiotique du dispositif *Cierge en ligne*, afin de comprendre comment le dispositif a été développé dans la perspective d'apporter des bénéfices à l'organisation religieuse : le Sanctuaire de Lourdes. Ce faisant, cet article s'inscrit dans des travaux qui cherchent à comprendre comment des pratiques religieuses sur Internet révèlent à la fois les effets d'Internet sur les pratiques, mais aussi les stratégies de développement des organisations religieuses.

Mots-clés : analyse sémiotique, cierge en ligne, Lourdes, rituel religieux, stratégie d'organisation

Introduction

There is a massive religious presence on the Internet, and it takes many forms, such as institutional websites, websites devoted to religious dialogue and community-building, blogs about religion and spirituality, videos posted on YouTube and other commentary posted on numerous social networks. These outlets provide an abundance of information and enable the development of religious practices. These phenomena have interested researchers for two decades and have inspired several lines of inquiry into how the Internet has changed religion and religious practices (Brasher, 2001; Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Golan & Stadler, 2016; Helland, 2000, 2005; Hjarvard, 2016; Hojsgaard & Warburg, 2005; Howard, 2005, 2010; Possamai & Turner, 2012; Tudor, 2015).

The aim of this article is to show the way a religious organization's global development strategy can lead to the implementation of a digital apparatus and to analyse the effects of this implementation. It does this by examining a specific digital apparatus called Online Candles, offered by the Sanctuary of Lourdes, which is a unique example of a digital apparatus that one religious organization has created to provide asynchronous cyber rituals.

This article[1] is part of a series of research papers addressing two things: first, how religious organizations establish a vibrant presence on the Internet; and second, how these religious organizations develop unique identities online. The visibility provided by the Internet highlights the way organizations conceive, develop and maintain their communities (Golan & Campbell, 2015), the way these communities conceptualize themselves in the modern context (Golan & Stadler, 2016), and the professional and technical competencies of the webmaster – whether this webmaster is an IT professional, a religious, or a lay member of the religious community (Hope Cheong, 2014). By focusing on an intrinsic case study (Creswell, 2013, p. 74), and by proceeding - as a first step of the case study - to a semiotic analysis of an apparatus, we have sought to identify the factors behind the religious presence on the Internet. The fine focus of our research has allowed us to employ not only the explanatory dimensions usually applied to this type of search object (the Internet as specific social space and the link between religious and sacred) (e.g. Golan & Stadler, 2016; Jacobs, 2007), but also other explanatory dimensions such as IT and communication skills. In so doing, we show how the mechanism used by the religious organization is not primarily the product of a communication strategy, but rather results from a combination of conscious and unconscious organisational, religious, economics, and individual elements. Lastly, we demonstrate how this mechanism has created a new space for religious practices (such as lighting a candle) without using the religious register of the web communication.

The paper is organized as follows: first, it will review the literature dedicated to the phenomenon of the religious practices on the Internet; second, it will present the

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research object and the qualitative methodology employed; third, it will submit the findings by a comparison between the traditional ritual of lighting a candle and the asynchronous cyber rituals practiced with Online candles; fourth, the discussion might address issues with regard to the effects of the digital device in terms of practices and sacrality.

1. Literature Review

1.1. *Internet and Religion: network effects*

A variety of researchers have investigated the relationship between the *source* of the information and communication processing and its *observer* (Brasher, 2001; Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Helland, 2000, 2005; Hojsgaard & Warburg, 2005; Howard, 2005, 2010). Analyzing religious websites, Helland (2000) established a fundamental distinction between "religion online" and "online religion". He precises (Helland, 2005, p. 1):

> "When I first proposed my theoretical distinction for 'online religion' and 'religion online' I did so based upon an examination of the religious based websites available to me at the end of 1999. At that time, there was a clear distinction between religious websites where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity (online religion) verses the majority of religious websites, which seemed to provide only religious information and not interaction (religion online)."

Helland's work has encouraged numerous researchers to test and refine this distinction by investigating more thoroughly the experience of Internet religion and clarifying the conditions under which religion is practiced online. He concluded (Helland, 2005), five years later, that many religious websites provide both information and interaction opportunities. Subsequent research has found that observers do, in fact, react significantly to what they see on the Internet (e.g., Howard, 2005; Kawabata & Tamura, 2007). For example, Howard (2005) showed that even where the website did nothing to encourage the faithful to pray or interact with others, the faithful did so anyway, actively praying as they viewed the website and frequently sending emails to others about their experience using the website. In another article, Howard (2010, p. 730) concludes:

> "Vernacular religion does not exist in media artifacts, but instead in the lived experience of the believers who deploy those media. Approaching online religious expression as vernacular religion can transcend the debates about 'religion online' versus 'online religion' by locating the religious in individual belief and action instead of in the media that carry them".

The existing research has generated a consensus that users are actively practicing religion through these websites, as show it Brasher's research (2001) and Dawson and Cowan' anthology (2004). Researches have tried to refine their understanding

this religious activity by comparing and evaluating the influence of these online with their real-world practices (e.g., Campbell, 2012; Foltz & Foltz, 2003; Jacobs, 2007). By identifying the unique attributes of each religious experience (praying, attending mass…), these researchers have been able to develop a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of online religious practice, comparing to the offline religious practice. Like many internet researchers, these researchers wonder what the digital future holds– a reflection that, according to Dawson and Cowan (2004), reflects each researcher's personal desire to propose perspectives that lean toward either a utopian (e.g. Lévy, 2001) or dystopian (e.g., Van der Laan, 2009) vision of the future. More globally, the approaches taken by these researchers tend to validate practices which fit the four cultural configurations on the Internet identified by Castells (2013, p. 170): "consumerism (characterized by the important role of the trademarks), network individualism, cosmopolitanism (that it is ideological, political or religious) and multiculturalism". Dawson and Cowan (2004) think that these practices, while building on ancestral practices as O'Leary (2004) demonstrates, highlight two social consequences of the Internet: (1) a crisis of authenticity and (2) a crisis of authority. Indeed, how can one consider unreal practices as authentic? How do religious online practices challenge the established system?

Thanks to the work of people such as Rosa (2012), who introduced the idea of "the acceleration of time" in our modernity and Castel (2001) who describes the "internet galaxy", some researchers have started to think more globally about the developments that promote or disrupt religious practice. These new frameworks for thinking about the interaction of the Internet and religion lead to questions about religious authority and sacredness, and have caused, according to Scannell (2016), many of these researchers to enter the debate about the secularization thesis (Turner, 2014).

The reflections on sacredness swing between analyzing the physical experience of transcendence which one can have in a religious place and the experience of being a member of a virtual religious community. On one side, Jacobs (2007), by proceeding to the semiotic analysis of websites that allow asynchronous cyber-rituals, asserts that "there are clearly differences between on-line and offline sacred spaces and rituals. In particular, the performance of asynchronous on-line rituals can be more flexible" (Jacobs, 2007, p. 1117). However,

> "despite providing a new arena, these examples do not seem to have a particularly significant impact as yet on the way in which sacred space is conceived or ritual is performed. The virtual is primarily conceived by the designers of both of these sites in terms of simulation – a false approximation of the real." (Jacobs, 2007, p. 1118).

In contrast, Helland (2007), by observing "diaspora's" uses of the Internet, expresses the idea that on-line religious activity "is having significant impact on members of the diaspora and also on the sacred areas that are being wired" (2007, p. 974) to the Internet.

Interestingly, according to Hope Cheong (2014), the question of authority has been researched in two phases. The first phase looked at the challenge issued by online religious websites to traditional religious authorities and observed that people who were inclined to practice their spirituality online were less committed to traditional religious authority. The studies conducted during the second phase "have subscribed to the prevailing theory of continuity and complementarity, which refer to digital media connections as being supportive of religious authority" (Hope Cheong, 2014, p. 4). Subsequently, in 2007, Campbell suggested that a traditional religious authority be evaluated primarily in accordance with its four defining dimensions: hierarchy, structure, ideology, and text - and secondarily in accordance with its contexts. Building on Campbell's work, other researchers (e.g., Burroughs & Feller, 2015; Campbell, 2010; Hope Cheong, 2014) are looking at how believers and religious institutions are using social networks, and the way these uses correspond to institutionalized religious authority.

This research indicates that the Internet is an essential explanatory matrix. First, the Internet allows researchers to investigate the variety of religious practices. Second, the Internet permits researchers to study religious organisations and institutions, in particular through the prism of authority. Third, the Internet as an explanatory matrix focuses on religion in relation to the sacred and the transcendental. In other words, researchers try to answer the following questions: (1) What are the consequences of the Internet on religious practices? (2) What are the consequences of the Internet on religious organizations? (3) What are the consequences of the Internet on religion itself? And (4) what do these transformations say about contemporary society?

1.2. *Beyond Internet as interpretative matrix*

Until the early 2010s, most authors analyzed the Internet as a religious principle on its own, which "incorporates principles and values from which it realizes its function" (Badouard, 2014, p. 32). That is to say, the Internet itself became the object of religious praxis (Lardellier, 2013). This Internet-oriented religion embraces the idea that

> "opening and decentralizing access to information and power over information are not a "happy" consequences of "anarchy" or of the "natural" evolution of the Internet, but rather are the direct result of the political project carried out by the pioneers of the Internet" (Badouard, 2014, p. 32).

Krüger (2015, p. 80), by returning to the conceptualization of the Internet as proposed by Burkhard Gladigow, stated:

> "the emergence of the Internet is considered to be the outstanding event in the history of evolution[2], indicating humanity's course from its divine (or however

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[2] These authors suggest that the development of the Internet marks the beginning of the final stage of human evolution.

transcendent) origin to a Christian or more commonly spiritual community of the world."

It is possible to find this understanding of the Internet in the writings of numerous authors who think that the Internet constitutes a natural space for all forms of religion, guaranteeing harmony and a general consensus among the participating individuals (e.g., Lévy, 2001). These authors

"provide the illusion of a rural (village) or organic (Gaïa) – religious or secular – global community, and they oppose[3] the experienced loss of actual communities (…) The medium now becomes a part of a superior cosmic process, apparently unfettered by human influences. In an age that lacks one common myth, the medium itself becomes the master narrative – die *Meistererzählung* – of the media society" (Krüger, 2015, p. 80).

In this utopia of the Internet, all forms of religion are a part of a Great Whole which is transcendent and which imposes on them a new authority (that of the multitude of individuals and the primacy of their experience) and a new sacredness, based on the idea of a universal community which, freed from its spacio-temporal obstacles, produces a collective intelligence.

Nevertheless, Possamai and Turner (2012), being interested in the presence of Islam, neo-paganism and *hyper-real religions*[4] on the Internet, demonstrate that:

"(…) in a supposedly free-floating territory in which authority can be redefined, localised, eroded, and fragmented on an individual basis, religious authoritarian habitus still functions, even for people who perform cyber-religious practices as means to avoid hierarchical and formal structures. In networked spaces, authoritarian norms relating to process and communication are still found; off-line (religious) authority appears to intrude on the reflexive on-line world, because actors on the Internet still inhabit an off-line world and their communications in both worlds are heavily but unsurprisingly influenced by the habitus that has been inevitably constructed in the off-line world" (Possamai and Turner, 2012, p. 205)

For these authors, the religious authority on the Internet is not only given meaning by its medium, but it is also defined by the designers and the users' habitus (Bourdieu, 1990)[5]. As Golan and Stadler (2016) demonstrate in their study on the

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[3] For these authors, the loss of actual communities in which people physically live is the natural result of the development of virtual communities. Thus, there is no diminishment of the human experience when people relate to each other principally on the virtual level.

[4] "Hyper-real religions are innovative religions and spiritualities that mix elements of religious tradition with popular culture." (Possamai, Lee, 2011, p. 229)

[5] According to Bourdieu (1990), habitus is a "[s]ystems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to

use of the Internet by Chabad, one should consider the impact of the institutional context and of the communications strategies. Hjarvard (2016, p. 8), for his part, "argue[s] that the visibility of religion is in part a reflection of a general *mediatization of religion* through which religious beliefs, agency, and symbols are becoming influenced by the workings of various media".

To conclude this literature review, researchers have mostly been focused on the significance of religious practice online, and the interaction between the Internet and religion has been explained almost exclusively from the perspective of the Internet as its own religious presence; however, researchers as Possamai and Turner (2012), Golan and Stadler (2016) and Hjarvard (2016), show us that there is another explanatory mechanism that can be used to understand this social reality. That is the way we want to examine a digital apparatus: the Online candles.

2. Research object and method

In the paper, we propose to apply an expanded perspective that conceptualizes the presence of religion on the Internet as a network of individuals and objects and proposes that it is the characteristics and interaction of these individuals and objects that constitute the presence. In other words, the presence of religion arises from the values attributed to and conferred by the Internet, as well as from the organizational and institutional frameworks of the websites, the webmaster and his hierarchy habitus, the technical characteristics of the websites, the characteristics of the religions themselves and the users' practices. The influence of the Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1987) is visible from this perspective. This theory is relevant to the extent that it supports the methodological development of this new proposed perspective. We do not exclude from our analysis the questions of values, hegemony or the impact of individual actors.

This approach required us to proceed on an intrinsic case study (Creswell, 2013)[6]. We therefore selected the Online candles application employed at Lourdes for our research[7]: it is a unique device developed by a religious organization. Since 2012, the Shrine of Lourdes has offered people who don't – or cannot – physically travel to Lourdes the option of being an "online pilgrim". This means that, using the Lourdes website, people from all over the world can submit requests to have candles lit in the shrine for their intentions. Jacobs (2007, p. 1103) calls this type of practice an asynchronous cyber–ritual.

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their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them".

[6] Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery and Sheikh (2011, p. 1) explain: "The case study approach is particularly useful to employ when there is a need to obtain an in-depth appreciation of an issue, event or phenomenon of interest, in its natural real-life context."

[7] The "online candles" has been developed by the service of communication of Diocesan Association of Tarbes and Lourdes.

Asynchronous cyber-rituals are rituals that are performed online at a time that is convenient for individuals and which do not require them to meet online at specified times. Considered in this light, the implementation of Online candles is surprising because the characteristics of lighting a candle online differs significantly from the characteristics of lighting a candle in person. Lighting a candle at the grotto of Lourdes can be an intense religious experience for an individual because it involves a pilgrimage that combines a physical and spiritual experience . If we agree with Jacobs when he claims that "we have to understand sacred space as *process* and *encounter*, rather than simply as *place* or *structure*" (2007, p. 1105), we must conclude that for the single rite of popular devotion that is lighting a candle at Lourdes' grotto, from now on, there will be two places where this rite is practiced that are defined by a unique configured space, a temporality and actors. Thus, even if the main objet of our research is the apparatus, we chose to consider the characteristics of both places of religious practice in terms of process, encounter and place, in order to understand how the religious practice is defined in those places.

This article is the first step of a research project which includes observations, a quantitative approach and interviews: a mixed methodology. The results of this exploratory research presented below are based on two types of data. With respect to the practice of lighting a candle in the Lourdes' grotto in person, we explored this experience by looking at numerous studies focusing on the grotto at Lourdes[8]. With respect to the lighting of candles online, we proposed studying how the Lourdes website creates a unique framework for a new kind of online religious experience. For that purpose, we have proceeded with a semio pragmatic approach: "The semio pragmatic approach focuses on the main modalities of the production of meaning and affects and on their conditions of implementation." (Odin, 2000, p. 57). To identify *modes* of production of meaning and affects that characterize the tool, the method combines a semiotic analysis (specifically of the website's tree, the different frames, the distribution of images and information, the types of images, etc.) and a qualitative content analysis (words, lexical fields, type of discourse, etc.). This approach helps us to understand the way the internet renews the experience of lighting a candle.

3. Findings

3.1. *Lighting a candle at Lourdes' grotto: conventional pilgrimage*

For centuries, the gesture of lighting a candle has been one of the most common, and well-established, expressions of faith practiced by Roman Catholics worldwide. While usually done in person, the faithful, when they are unable to visit a church or

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[8] The sanctuary of Lourdes is a main Christianism spot, which is described and analysed by a lot of researchers in the social science and humanities. The bibliography on which our refection is mainly based consists of: Agnew (2015), Bernadou and Guinlé-Lorinet (2015), Gugelot (2010), Harris (1999), Higgins and Hamilton (2016), Kaufman (2005), Terado (2012).

sacred place, will often ask others to light candles for them, placing their needs and intentions before God when they cannot do so themselves. According to Dupront (1987), the act of lighting a candle serves several purposes for the faithful. First, it is a concrete activity that gives one a sense of being able to physically manifest one's prayers and to place them before God or the saints. Doing so, the prayer interacts directly with God: there is no mediation. These prayers and intentions can be for one's own special needs or for the needs of others. They can also be prayers of worship, adoration, or thanksgiving. Second, it is an act of devotion that allows one to feel that one's prayer remains before God even after one resumes other activities. Third, in seeing the candles lit by others, the faithful are reminded of the needs and supplications of others and of the fact that they are part of a community. Properly understood, these sacred rituals allow the faithful to combine both the physical and spiritual elements of their faith and link them to a community of faith that transcends the limits of time and space. Such sacred rituals, however, are always in danger of being misunderstood and misused. With this in mind (Harris, 1999; Kaufman, 2005), the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments works constantly to structure the use of sacramentals so that the faithful's use is less likely to devolve into superstition and sacrilege. In other words, lighting a candle in a church is a deeply cherished act of faith, institutionalized, framed by the church, embodied by the faithful, which becomes meaningful in the space and time of a given sanctuary.

Theologically, a shrine, which often derives from popular piety, is a sign of the active and saving presence of the Lord in history, and a place of respite in which the people of God on its journey to the heavenly City (cf. Heb 13, 14), can renew its strength for the pilgrim journey (376) (…) To the faithful, shrines represent (…) an encouragement to cultivate an eschatological outlook, a sense of transcendence and to learn to direct their earthly footsteps towards the sanctuary of Heaven (cf. Heb 9, 11; Ap 21, 3). [9]

In this act of faith, the concepts of time and space are very fluid including the moment the candle is lit in the sanctuary and the hours that it burns there, as well as eternity and heaven, the time and space in which God dwells. For the individual also, time and space intersects multiple dimensions – the present becomes interwoven with the history of the church worldwide and of all of the history of the faithful souls who have lit candles in the past and who will do so in the future.

How is this ritual defined, in the case of Lourdes, taking place in a place of pilgrimage? Dupront points out that,

"during pilgrimage, forms, attitudes, acts and gestures by which the Pilgrim can detach himself from a stable daily life; the historical-spatial composition of the

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[9]   Page   consulted   the   4th   of   april   2016: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_2002 0513_vers-direttorio_en.html

sacral *locus*, this place that can be seen as a boundary stone or a space centre within the pilgrim universe; the sacral centre of the *locus*, holy body, relic or *imago* as well as all the legendaries are here to represent, for the vital imagination, the reliable reality; the specific rituals of need fulfilment; cult times and their position in the liturgical calendar; the processionary rhythms, scansion, hymn-related vocabulary which punctuate them; the coexistences of church liturgies and practices; ex-voto's language, everything in fact about the extraordinary act that pilgrimage represents is a sign of lived sacrality" (Dupront, 1987, p. 87)

The pilgrim fact is therefore analysed by Dupront as an individual experience, detached from daily routines, bringing a strong aesthesia dimension within the sacral locus. The church candle is a manifestation of the sacred, a *hierophany*, to quote Eliade (1987). This is equally true of the water and statuettes brought back from Lourdes which, fitted on a piece of furniture in the living room or in a garden niche, demonstrate the sacred dimension of a true home for serial pilgrims, despite the hundreds of miles that separate them from the sacral locus (Agnew, 2015). Thus, for some, the pilgrim experience can go beyond the only attendance of the sanctuary, it can become a daily experience. However, it is at least through the primary experience, if not renewed, of the pilgrimage within Lourdes's sanctuary, that the sacred manages to revitalize: it necessarily nourishes itself with the memory – forged by each pilgrim – of the sanctuary, its topography, its history, its crowd, its sick people, Bernadette's image... And these individual memories lean on the collective memory particularly supported by literary work[10], journalistic work or even the institutionalization effort given by the associations in charge of the sanctuary[11].

The established history of the appearances of the virgin in the grotto still amplifies the importance of the place in its materiality. Bernadette Soubirous was a 14 year-old girl from a poor family who saw of vision of the Blessed Mother of Jesus in 1858. In this vision, the Blessed Mother of Jesus described herself as the Immaculate Conception and thereby confirmed the 1854 declaration of Pope Pius IX in the document *Ineffabilis Deus* that Mary was always free from sin from the moment of her conception. That a poor country girl such as Berndatte should describe a vision of the Blessed Mother using the expression "The Immaculate Conception" was shocking to church authorities and testifies the truth of the appearance.

In total, Bernadette experienced 18 visions of the Blessed Virgin. There are two elements of the Blessed Virgin's message to the world through Bernadette that are particuarly interesting as a basis for this research. First, according to Bernadette, the Blessed Virgin called for penitence throughout the world and invited the world to

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[10] Gugelot (2010, p. 226) demonstrates the way literary works of Zola and Huysmans "participate in the ceaseless sacred refill of Lourdes, demonstrating the extreme plasticity of the place, of the clairvoyant, of the message and the foundation".

[11] Terado (2012) details out the way that the place has been institutionalized as a social space where the show of the suffering occurs.

come to Lourdes to wash in its miraculous waters: "Pénitence! Pénitence! Pénitence! Allez boire à la source et vous y laver". The second point of interest for study is the invitation to participate in processions to the grotto and the command to build a Shrine at the grotto. Again, in the words of Berndatte, "Allez dire aux prêtres qu'on vienne ici en procession, et qu'on y bâtisse une chapelle". Importantly, when Bernadette first entered the dark grotto in order to find firewood to take home to her family, she had a candle with her. During the first apparition, the Blessed Virgin told Bernadette to leave the lighted candle in the grotto. The same day, after hearing Bernadette's story, several other people brought lighted candles to the grotto and placed them in the spot designated by the Blessed Virgin. Since then, over the course of the last 161 years, lighted candles have been continuously placed in the grotto. With the instruction to keep the grotto lit with many candles comes a promise of great value. In fact, since 1854, the Catholic Church, has officially studied and recognized 69 incidents of persons being cured miraculously. In addition, the Catholic Church has collected thousands of stories and archives related to people who claim to have been cured by Lourdes, but whose claims have not been officially recognized. The history of the grotto, along with its natural properties and the tradition of individuals leaving lighted candles behind after a long walk, combined with the explicit words of Bernadette implore the faithful to make a personal pilgrimage in order to seek healing in the waters of Lourdes.

The history of apparitions, the site's institutionalization actually operated by the Diocesan Association of Tarbes and Lourdes, the maintaining of collective memory by the media and artistic spheres, the addictive characteristic of Lourdes's pilgrimage (Agnew, 2015), the pilgrimage intention as a place for the *communitas* (Turner & Turner, 1978), the transcendence experience in this place of the world where sky and earth meet: all these dimensions take part in the engraving of the churchgoer's body both in time and in Lourdes's sanctuary's space. This engraving is consubstantial with the practice itself: altogether it forms a religious experience within the framework institutionalized by the diocese (Turner & Turner, 1978).

3.2. *Online candles at Lourdes: asynchronous cyber-rituals in online spaces*

3.2.1. How does the website characterize itself as a place of religious practice?

There are two ways to have access to Online candles: via the institutional website http://fr.lourdes-france.org/, set up by the Diocese of Tarbes and Lourdes; via search engines which will suggest a page related to the placement of candles (https://fr.lourdes-france.org/sndlphp/frmpaie/frmCierges.php?p=W as soon as the "online candles" request is made. Google, taken as an example for being the most used search engine in the world and in France, shows this link first[12]. These two accesses do not suggest a similar comprehension of the religious practice, which we will further discuss. First, let us get in through the Home Page of the institutional website before focusing on the page dedicated to the candle placement.

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[12] Precisely at the moment of the research, in february 2016.

Figure 1. *First page of the institutional website http://fr.lourdes-france.org/, set up by the Diocese of Tarbes and Lourdes.*

The institutional website's home page consists of 4 horizontal frames. The first one holds at our disposal a navigation bar that you can barely see due to its sobriety and its cream-coloured background. It contains the sanctuary's logo, presents the website's tree view – divided into seven tabs/information modules (Stays in Lourdes, Pray, Develop; Youngsters and Families, Hospitality, TV Lourdes, Press zone) – and offers two functions triggering an action on the website (research and languages) but also four other functions allowing a direct access to news and religious commitments (volunteering and donation). This framework is permanent and enables to understand that the website's tree view originates from a reticular procedure made of seven mostly informative modules, except for TV Lourdes which allows us to watch the several religious demonstrations live.

The second frame is the most visible one when the page is opened as it is positioned in a blue background and covers half the screen in its "actual size" (internet

function). Taking the form of a slideshow, it scrolls pictures related to the sanctuary's news.

The third frame is made of three columns that seem, for a first impression, to match the three themes: "News", "The 140 signs of a Lourdes chaplain", "Remote Lourdes". In reality, each of these columns is also divided into two subsections: the lower sections of the left and right columns leads to the site's pages related to the site's history and future and suggests a link to the site managed by Tarbes and Lourdes's diocese; whereas the central column leads to the second section named "TV Lourdes".

Finally, the fourth horizontal frame, in a cream-coloured background, offers a second tree view of the site divided into four modules: "Stay informed", "Tools", "Practice", "Dedicated spaces".

Overall, the website's home page shows a clear visual display. Imitating the journalistic "front page" style, it combines images and headlines, pushing the internet user to go directly to such or such web page by using hypertext links. However, this visual display does not support the development of a coherent narrative weave. The lexical analysis shows that only three fields are present, assuming the possibility of an efficient articulation: information, religion (practice and history) and the public. Nevertheless, the display between the horizontal frames gives room for redundancy[13] and the main space gathers – without any overall coherence – icons, images and headings in micro-islets which are placed underneath the various sections which do not always relate to the content.

3.2.2. Which audience does this home page target, and what kind of social place does it intend to be?

Given its general organization and its mostly informative content, the website can firstly be considered as a window display of a place of worship: the Sanctuaire Notre Dame de Lourdes. The seemingly targeted audience is thus an internet user looking for information about the sanctuary, its history and activity, with or without the intention of spending some time in the sanctuary. If this home page represents a place of information, it is also a place of religious practice, as it suggests practicing some deeds that can only be done in a/this sanctuary ("Present online your prayer intentions", "Have your candles placed and lighted up inside the grotto", "Dispatching of Lourdes's water") and encourages believers to perform a "fundamental" action, that is to pray ("Pray"). In addition, the achievement oriented verbs, conjugated in the infinitive and imperative underlie the illocutionary act of the religious deed and probably the perlocutionary effect of the commitment, hope, or even meditation. To sum up, the home page establishes itself, in a fragmented way (see yellow areas on the screenshot), as a place for religious practice and faith and aims at the churchgoer internet user, particularly for somebody who cannot attend the sanctuary. Final-

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[13] The call to the donation and the news appear in three frames, whereas Heavy TV, the Press and the Jubilee of the Mercy in two frames.

ly, the icons (see green area on the screenshot) send you back to apps that allow you to produce some content. What is signified here is the interactivity given to social networks like Facebook (535041 likes), Twitter (4790 followers), Flickr (for pictures), and to diverse apps (for instance "In the subway, or at work, *log in and be in communion with yourself in the Grotto of Massabielle*"; "The kit of the perfect pilgrim"; "Meet the world's pilgrims. Installation of an instant messenger to discuss matters"; "I support the Sanctuary of Lourdes, Online donation is secured, tax receipt guaranteed"...) In this way, the home page allows for possible interactions an turns the internet user – to whom this place is addressed – into a member of the community.

From the home page, seen as a three-in-one social location for information, religious practice and interaction, the internet user, who may be either curious or a fervent churchgoer, can click on the graphic representation of the lighted candle in order to place or light a candle inside the grotto. This representation is an indication of this very sanctuary: it is the icon of an ancestral practice; it is the symbol of faith. Thus, it is a signifying representation that contains the promise of an on-the-spot practice and a transcendence. Yet, the click leads the internet user to a standardized form which reads:

Online candles

*The Lourdes Sanctuary offers you the possibility by internet of leaving and lighting a candle at the Lourdes Grotto.*You can link it with a prayer intention. In return for your offering, the Sanctuary will place and light your candle at the Grotto, in a candle stand set aside for this purpose. The Sanctuary commits itself to honour your request within 24 hours. [14]

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[14]   Page   consulted   on   4th   april   2016 :   https://en.lourdes-france.org/sndlphp/frmpaie/frmCierges.php?p=W

Figure 2. *Page related to the placement of candles (https://fr.lourdes-france.org/sndlphp/frmpaie/frmCierges.php?p=W*

If the last sentence refers to the guarantee of service quality via the Sanctuary's engagement, the underlined bold sentence specifies that the candle will be placed in a specific area of the grotto dedicated to Online candles. Without the intention to over-interpret the meaning to be given to this assertion, the differentiated localization of these candles do not give them the same value as the ones placed physically by pilgrims. But let us carry on with the form. Follows a second insert called "Your request for candles". The first information is about the amount of candles: "I wish to leave and light X 150-gram candle(s) in Lourdes grotto". Similar to an online purchasing form, the merchandize is quantified (up to a maximum of 100 candles) and described ("150 grams") allowing the internet user to set a monetary value of the candle. Logically, this set value will then be the value that the internet user will put on the form, via a scale ranging from a minimum amount of 3€ to an "unlimited amount". The amount of 4€ is set, suggesting a monetary value for the leap of faith.

Then, the Internet user can fill in an insert with a maximum of 500 characters, allowing them to follow the "placement of the candle for prayer intention". Last, the Internet user can ask to receive by email the Sanctuary's newsletter.

A third insert allows the Internet user to provide his email address (compulsory) in order to receive payment confirmation.

A fourth insert, optional this one, invites the Internet user to provide his personal details: surname, first name, mail and email addresses.

Finally, the fifth insert concerns the internet payment that can be made exclusively with Paypal and Paylib with the possibility to "get[ting] back to shop" instead of "confirm[ing] payment".

3.2.3. What difference is there between the "Online candles" page and a usual payment site where you buy shoes?

We suggest there is none. The wording related to lighting a candle is totally framed by the mercantile architect whose model specially excludes any other understanding of the action. So, by clicking on the candle representation on the home page – an action which shows the believer's wish for a religious practice –he/she moves to a location for standard financial transaction, thus placing the sanctuary's website into a wider internet space.

3.2.4. How can we interpret this stratification of communication locations?

One may think that religious practice is swinging towards a mercantile practice through the effect of putting in words the action of placing a candle which originates from the standardized form that can be seen as a metaphor. Like buying online (which turns the practice into a written transaction), the aim of that editorial practice is to eliminate intermediaries, and, more precisely, meditation which is at the heart of the pilgrim's bodily experience. By completing the Online candles form, by giving credit card details and by pressing the button "submit", the dematerialized action supposedly turns into a real candle placed in front of the Virgin, without requiring the effort and presence of the pilgrim's body in the sanctuary. The action's individualization is however possible and goes through the writing of a prayer intention. Thus, in exchange of a minimum of 3€, the editorial gesture of this web form promises a direct and individualized contact with the Divine, without any interference or constraint.

4. Discussion

This paper sought to demonstrate how a mechanism such as Online candles, if it meets the practices of prayers, also reveals the organization's strategy, in terms of balanced budget and targeted public. This section explores the reasons why the organization decides to develop Online candles and consider its consequences in terms of practices and sacrality.

We are aware that both places where we place candles are completely different: the strength of intermediaries such as the sanctuary and its history, time, the heat of the flame, the physical effort of the pilgrim and the assistance to the sick are in opposition in their materiality with the candle icon, the mercantile interface and the "submit" button. In the first location, the religious experience rests on the intermediaries' ability to be, to exist; in the second location, it emerges due to their demands and their ability to disappear. That doesn't mean that intermediaries actually disappear. They are different, but they remain. They tend to fade only in the action of the believer. Bratosin, Tudor and Coman (2010, p. 124) explain: "But the abstract visitor wanders and, therefore, is nowhere. He is all over space, but he does not penetrate it from his reality. The practice of the sacred is then only a claim asserting that there could be a production of meaning everywhere, even if it does not need to be there. It is only a right proclaimed: everything is a matter of indeterminacy." The Diocese responsible for Lourdes understood this difference well as it proposes to place an "online candles" as part as a "webpilgrimage", diverting the candle practice which is usually part of traditional pilgrimage.

This semantic precaution is essential as it confirms the diocese's point of view on both analysed locations: the religious practice does not have the same meaning, or the same value. So, what motivates the diocese to deploy this kind of apparatus if this very apparatus is likely to dissolve a religious practice? When consulting the three documents[15] relating the sanctuary's situation, the following answers are revealed.

First of all, communication technologies have been within the sanctuary for quite some time (Bernadou & Guinlé-Lorinet, 2015). The webcam, placed in front of the sanctuary in 1999, enables to broadcast the site's images and live ceremonies, via TV Lourdes founded in 2008. This apparatus rapidly became, thanks to the internet users' practice, an online religious practice device, allowing communion and prayers. Since then people in charge of the sanctuary have started discussing the idea of a "webpilgrimage". In this context, associated practices were considered: praying, placing a candle or even receiving Lourdes water. Following the international broadcast of the grotto's images and the institutional will to reinforce Lourdes's community via internet, "Remote Lourdes" was implemented in 2012 making the Online candles service effective. Such an example shows how, as Günter (2016, p. 37) wrote, the mediatization "is a mirror process, in which religious institutions anticipate the way the media observe religion and transform themselves accordingly."

Beyond this institutional view on the development of the "religious event that Lourdes represents" (Bernadou, 2015) within internet, it is suitable to put the

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[15] The document *"Au service de la joie des convives", Orientations pour le Sanctuaire de Lourdes*, by Monseigneur Nicolas Brouwet (2014), the study report drafted by Contours on *Le poids économique de Lourdes* (2012), Thierry Castillo's intervention, bursar of the diocese of Tarbes and Lourdes in the *Journeys of February* to Lourdes in 2015.

"Online candles" outbreak in a context that is both religious and economic. Since its humble beginnings in 1854, Lourdes' sanctuaries have grown into a significant international operation, with almost 130 acres of property to maintain, including several cathedrals, 1300 medical beds, 600 organized pilgrimages to Lourdes each year, 15,000 volunteers, a paid staff of more than 350 and annual budget (for 2014) of about 30 million Euros[16]. Ninety-percent of Lourdes's costs are covered by its annual offerings and donations. But, over the past decade, the donations attributable to pilgrims physically visiting Lourdes (from candles, donations at mass and other fundraising on site) have decreased. Monseigneur Bouwet specifies:

> "Despite the fragile economic situation and the decrease in the number of pilgrims, we ought to reach a budget balance in 2015. Consequently, we are looking for new resources (...). The economic crisis and floods, on the one hand, and the Christian faith crisis on the other hand have contributed to the decrease in number of pilgrims. It does not stop us from being inventive and having projects. Our sanctuary can have a future if it sticks with the mission that was given to it and if it understands the thirst of the ones who come to drink from the source." (2014, p. 30)

The Internet comes in as one of the means to tackle both the Christian faith crisis and the draining economic situation. The sanctuary of Lourdes is self-financed: it needs to hold/increase its income. Indeed, at the same time, donations attributable to Online candles (and to those persons who send donations by mail) have tripled. Thus, there are three strong forces promoting the phenomenon of the Online candles which was established in 2012: access to the digital age ideology, Christian faith crisis, economic difficulties. These drivers of action, by focusing mainly on urgency and ideology, do not drive the organization's managers to think deeply about the implementation of a digital tool of communication, about its definition as a location for religious practice and its link to sacrality. Yet, Online candles, beyond being a digital tool, constitutes a new location for religious practice; it consists of thoughts, and things not thought of; it is shaped by internet ideology, by a desire for evangelization, by financial needs, by technical mastery and finally, by an internet user practice.

And so are defined our two locations – as far as candle placement is concerned – characterized by a common history[17], institutionalization processes[18], the will to

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[16] And 19 million euros for the Diocesan Association of Tarbes and Lourdes. Cf. http://www.lourdes-infos.com/65100lourdes/IMG/pdf/organisation_sanctuaires.pdf

[17] The history of the appearances, but also that of the site who was the object of mediatization and romantic and cinematic stories. These processes of distribution of the image of the place, more exactly novels, maintain "a tension which appears as one of the elements of the sustainability of the place" (Gugelot, 2010, p. 226).

[18] Who analyse the process of institutionalization of the pilgrimage, In this connection, the reader can refer to the work of Terado (2012) which analyzes the process of institutionalization of the pilgrimage, in particular by means of the associative work.

perpetuate and broadcast the sanctuary, development strategies... Lastly, it is possible from this angle to ensure continuity of these two places. However, the two differ because they enter into two distinctive sign systems. The sanctuary is crowded with intermediaries who, like many hierophants, structure collective concentration and its desire to be in communion. The candle then becomes part of the religious event's *morphological dimension* as a *total social event* (Mauss, 1923-1924). The online candle service, considered in the context of Lourdes sanctuary's website, is a system which, through the writing of the sacred ritual, gets rid of traditional intermediaries to ensure a direct and individual communion with the Divine, who is dispossessed of a morphological dimension peculiar to the first location. On the one hand, lighting a candle makes sense within the community, sanctuary space and believer's physical experience; on the other hand, lighting a candle makes sense in the individual action that is relocated and (at least) partly disincarnated.

Placing a candle in the Lourdes grotto therefore constitutes the same sacred ritual of two locations and two religious practices. What about sacrality? Dufour and Boutaud noticed that there are "chiasmus effects between the religious being desacralized and merchants' temples sacralizing brands" (2013, p. 22). Can we believe in this particular case that the Online candles tool, standardized model of mercantile transaction, contributes to the desacralization of the religious event that is Lourdes? If we consider the overlay of the communications registers it involves – the merchant register on top of religious register –, the answer is yes. And can we say that the Online candles offer a space where the sacred can express itself? By placing the service in the wider context of a movement which sanctifies mercantile spaces and the internet (Bratosin, Tudor & Coman, 2010), and by considering Man as the agent of semantic production of the sacred, we are likely to respond in the positive once again.

Like the offerings terminals[19] scattered within the sanctuary and for the access road to the grotto, the Online candles service is already accepted by online religious people just like it is integrated as a religious ritual. If we follow Campbell's analysis demonstrating that, despite their criticism of new technologies, religious communities enter an online spiritualization process which allows them to use new media.

> "Previous research has focused especially on how mostly homogenous religious groups are dealing with electronic media, particularly when there is a conflict between the use of new technology and religious values. Thus, studies have analysed such social phenomena as the "domestification" of the telephone by the Amish in the United States, and, more recently, the introduction of the Internet in ultra-orthodox Jewish groups in Israel" (Krüger, 2015, p. 59).

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[19] Borders allow to put down an offering, the amount of which is advised, pre-estimated by the organization. The offering allows to obtain a wax candle, some water of Lourdes, or a souvenir medal.

We may suppose that, considering Lourdes's serial pilgrims' practice as illustrated by Agnew (2015). The latter feels the sense of the community and his devotion to the blessed mother by bringing home Lourdes water or statuettes representing the Virgin Mary. "Home altars are common in Catholic homes, and aid in mutually domesticizing religious practice as well as marking the home or at least some small part of it as sacred place" (Agnew, 2015, p. 530). Can the Online candles tool constitute, for serial pilgrims, an intermediary of that kind? When the serial pilgrim comes back home, is the apparatus Online candles a true connection to the grotto, to the "home away from home (…) the true, authentic home" (Agnew, 2015, p. 533)? Therefore, should we consider the hypothesis that Online candles, being both a mercantile communication space and a place for religious practice, can become a sacred apparatus through the effects of individual subjectivities?

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to examine the way a religious organization's global development strategy leads to the implementation of a digital apparatus. In pursuing this aim we have shown how economic needs and religious crisis have encouraged this implementation, while putting aside a reflection on the impact of this apparatus on the sacred character of the practice of lighting a candle in a pilgrimage place. Yet, the semiotic analysis shows the interweaving of the proposal of religious practice in a trade device. Does that necessarily mean a desacralization of the religious practices? Perhaps. However, having examined the cyberspace ideological context and the progressive sacralisation of the mercantile field, we suggest that believers may choose to ignore the page's mercantile characteristic – which belongs to the domain of the "infra-ordinary" (Perec, 1989) – in favour of its sacralization. A hypothesis that would need to be confirmed through interviews with religious and less religious internet users and with the observations of internet practices and uses. Our case study would be complemented, according to the definition given by Creswell (2013, p. 73):

> "Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case-based themes."

In so doing, we could take into account all the explanatory variables of the presence of the religious organization on the Internet, without overvaluing any of them. The question of the effects would then be treated accordingly.

In any case, our current contribution is an in-depth analysis of a unique example of the innovative practice occurring in the cyber religious world as organizations support increased religious engagement in this digital form. It shows how asynchronous cyber rituals can be studied not merely according to their effects, but according

to the original organizational intentions. In so doing, the apparatus is no longer the mainspring of a new dematerialized religious space: the Online candle service is an attempt of appropriation with the prospect of an organizational continuity. And we have seen how this attempt has to contribute to a budgetary stability in the short term while involving in the long term a profound modification of the religious practice. This article shows that, as Hope Cheong (2016, p. 25) affirms, "[i]n this way, new mediations grounded within older communication practices serve as the lifeblood for the evolving nature of religious authority and forms of spiritual organizing". Currently, french researchers are exploring this kind of issue from a communicational perspective (Douyère, Dufour & Riondet, 2014; Douyère, 2016): without a doubt, an important perspective for future research on religion, religiousity, new(media) and sacredness.

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