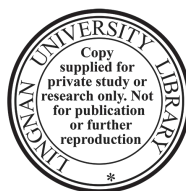


# Virtual Pilgrimages on the Internet



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Virtual pilgrimage on the Internet is an important religious phenomenon for understanding the new ways of being spiritual in the postmodern world. While often conservative in character, linked as they are to actual sacred sites that are permeated by the mythical *imaginare* of tradition, virtual pilgrimages exploit the new technological possibilities of the Internet to re-imagine the sacred. In what follows, I argue that virtual pilgrimage has four key characteristics as a form of religious travel. First, it creates a mythscape, an immaterial mental geography that originally comes from sacred oral or scriptural traditions. Second, it exists as an interactive visual-auditory medium for experiencing a sense of sacred presence. Third, it generates symbolic forms of entertainment that are liminoid in character. Fourth, as a leisure activity of individuals ‘Net surfing’ from their home or office computers, it can create ‘virtual travelling communities’ of pilgrims who use the discourse of *communitas* to describe their experience.

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## Introduction

Of the many definitions of ‘cyberspace’, the word coined in 1984 by science fiction writer William Gibson, the most useful is from Michael Benedikt, who defines it as follows:

Cyberspace, a new universe, a parallel universe created and sustained by the world’s computers and communication lines, a world in which the global traffic of knowledge, secrets, measurements, indicators, entertainments, and alter-human agency takes on form: sights, sounds, presences never seen on the surface of the earth blossoming in a vast electronic night. (Benedikt 1991, p. 1)

Benedikt’s definition highlights two important facts. First, cyberspace is a new kind of place, an electronic space between computers that is ‘everywhere and nowhere’. It is ‘like Oz—it is, we get there, but it has no location’ in physical space (Stenger 1991, p. 53). Yet despite the fact that it is immaterial, cyberspace has its own geography, landmarks and potential for freedom of movement like the real world.<sup>1</sup> Some trace its origin as the culmination of a series of technological innovations in information storage and retrieval. This process began with the rock, bricks, and mortar of temples and sculpture. Over the centuries, as technology became more sophisticated, information media became increasingly dematerialised, dislocated, mobile and ephemeral as a means of conveying symbols, myths, ideas and values. Clay tablets gave way to papyrus, that in turn was replaced by paper, the telegraph, telephone, radio and TV. According to Benedikt, cyberspace is the next evolutionary step, one that takes this process of dematerialisation of mass media to its ultimate stage. Cyberspace offers a new architecture that, like the physical temples and shrines of the past, orients the human sense ‘of what we mean by “reality”’. He compares this new realm with the image of the Heavenly City of the New Jerusalem in *The Book of Revelation*:

Like a bejeweled, weightless palace it comes down out of the heaven itself ‘its radiance like a most rare jewel, like jasper, transparent (Revelation 21:9). Never seen, we know its geometry to be wonderfully complex and clear, its twelves and fours and sevens each assigned a set of complementary cosmic meanings. A city with streets of crystalline



gold, gates of solid pearl, and no need for sunlight or moonlight to shine upon it for 'the glory of God is its light'. (Benedikt 1991, pp. 14–15)

For him, cyberspace is in effect the technological realisation of the Heavenly City, the ethereal paradise of weightlessness, pristine order and transcendence that is 'doubly imaginary':

[O]nce in the conventional sense, because it is not actual, but once again because even if it became actual, because it is information, it could come into existence only as a virtual reality, which is to say, fully, only 'in the imagination'. The image of the Heavenly City, in fact, is an image of *World 3* become whole and Holy. And a religious vision of cyberspace. (Benedikt 1991, p. 16)<sup>2</sup>

As a cyber-enthusiast, Benedikt shows the close connection, in some persons' minds, between cyberspace and religion. Indeed, some have argued that, despite the fact that cyberspace is a technological byproduct of the new physics, it has its conceptual roots in religion, particularly in a Christian spatial dualism that conceived of a 'soul space' of heaven and purgatory that were non-physical spaces that existed 'outside' the material world (see Wertheim 1999, p. 67).

Second, Benedikt's definition emphasises that cyberspace is a medium for travel. People online use their 'hypermedia navigators', like 'Netscape Navigator' and Microsoft's 'Internet Explorer', to get somewhere in the non-place of cyberspace. As Marcos Novak describes it,

... [a]s my location within the navigator changes new, perhaps distant realities are brought forth to replace the old ones. Entities, landmarks and landscapes appear and disappear, time and space become discontinuous, and the increment of my motion changes from one scale to another to fit the current reality. (Nova 1991, p. 230)

That this brave new world of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) is home to many sacred 'sites' is something that historians of religions have been slow to realise. For example, in his book, *To Take Place: Toward a Theory of Ritual* (1987), which was published three years after Gibson's *Neuromancer*, J. Z. Smith could ignore the topic of religion and cyberspace in his analysis of the relationship among space, place, and ritual. And yet today, if you type in 'religion' on Alta Vista, an on-line search engine, you will get over three and a half million sites (Morning Edition, 27 April 2000). According to a 1998 study by the Barna Research Group, over twenty five per cent of the 100 million Americans online use the Internet for religious purposes (Leibovich 6 April 2000, p. G1). Robert Nysten, the co-chairperson and founder of one of these sites, Beliefnet.com, gauges the Internet's importance in economic terms; there is a burgeoning forty billion-dollar business for religious 'ecommerce' (Goldman 7 June 2000, p. H10).

Not just investing and shopping, therefore, but trafficking in religion is a major part of the Internet. Among the forms of religious web travel, one that is particularly booming is virtual pilgrimage. 'Virtual pilgrimage' is an Internet neologism for a site on the Net where people can simulate a sacred journey for educational, economic and spiritual purposes.

An example of virtual pilgrimage is found on Beliefnet.com (<http://beliefnet.com/index.html>), a commercial Internet site that combines marketing with online prayer circles, discussion groups, encyclopedias and timely articles on contemporary spirituality. It has its own 'Virtual Hajj' site. While only Muslims can enter Mecca, any Internet user

can take Beliefnet.com's virtual tour. If we take Victor Turner's simple definition of pilgrimage as a 'journey to a center out there', is not that precisely what the Net surfer does in linking to the 'Virtual *Hajj*' or other similar sites that take someone beyond the confines of home or office?

What is a 'virtual pilgrimage'? Shawn Wilbur has noted that 'virtual' typically means something that appears to be but is not real, authentic or proper. It is important to note that some virtual pilgrimage sites fit this definition. They are informational only, designed to provide clever simulations or representations for instructional purposes. One can see this in the description of the official Lourdes site by its web master, Philippe Leroux. Asked whether people online can become pilgrims by using his site, he argues the following:

A pilgrimage is not virtual. We propose to visit in a virtual way, to discover Lourdes and its message. This is a site where you can learn about "What's Lourdes?" "What's the story?" Then, you can click on the pilgrimage blue tab, and you will find all the information needed for coming to Lourdes. (personal communication 7 July 2000)<sup>3</sup>

For Leroux, his site is to teach viewers what they need to know for when they actually travel to the real site. And yet even Leroux would dispute the other nuances of the popular usage of 'virtual'. While not the same as the real thing, he would still consider his site proper and authentic because of its official designation—an immaterial source for 'real' information.

Leroux's example shows the difficulties of drawing a distinction between the virtual and the real. When people talk about 'virtual reality', according to Shawn Wilbur, the very phrase 'attests to the possibility that seeming and being might be confused, and that this confusion might not matter in the end' (Wilbur 1997, p. 9). On this point there is again a comparison between cyberspace and religion. For the slippage of the line between the virtual and real has happened in religious life long before the invention of the Internet. Virtual reality can be found in the 'highly metaphorical world of the Christian Church that can conjure the (virtual) body of Christ any place.' (Wilbur 1997, p. 10). Of course, the most obvious example of this is the bread and wine of the Eucharist. The exact nature of Christ's 'presence' in the host was hotly debated throughout Christian history, especially during the Reformation. Nevertheless, both Catholics and Protestants could experience a 'spiritual presence' of Christ in the communion meal, whether it was conceived theologically as a physical transubstantiation into the body and blood of Christ or not. To describe the Eucharist as 'virtual' would not mean illusory, intangible or the opposite of real. Virtual comes from the medieval Latin *virtualis*, meaning 'strength' or 'power', and in scholastic philosophy it refers to something that exists potentially rather than actually (see Levy 1999, pp. 22–3). I argue that the Eucharist is virtual because, for the ordinary believer, it provides a ritual means of potentially experiencing Christ's spiritual reality.

Jonathan Z. Smith has shown how historically Christian rituals and architecture have created virtual realities through their symbolic 'relations of equivalence'. A recent example is the practice of the Stations of the Cross, popularised by the Franciscans in the late medieval period. The fourteen Stations, typically paintings or plaques that are displayed on the outer walls of a church, depict the key moments on Christ's way to the Cross. As such, they are symbolic substitutes for traveling on the actual pilgrimage to the holy city of Jerusalem, known since the sixteenth century as the 'Via Dolorosa'. By circumambulating as an act of piety, especially during Lent or Holy Week, the devout could ritually experience the same Gospel story and symbols of the 'original' *via crucis* in

the Holy Land. By the seventeenth century Pope Innocent XII legitimated this ecclesiastically by declaring that the same indulgences that the Church had given for actually going to the Holy Land could now be obtained by doing the mini-pilgrimage of the Stations in the Franciscan churches (see Smith 1987, pp. 86–7).

This same form of symbolic substitution goes one step further within the electronic architecture of cyberspace. The Web has many sites for doing the Stations of the Cross, such as Franciscan Cyberspot's 'Jerusalem—the Way of the Cross *Via Crucis*' (<http://198.62.75.1/www1/jsc/TVCstatn01.html>) and Jesus2000.com's 'Holy Sites Via Dolorosa'. Whether it is strictly for informational purposes or for something more, 'virtual pilgrimage' uses CMC instead of the walls and stained glass of a church to construct, symbolically, relations of equivalence with the real life (RL) sites.<sup>4</sup> It offers another means technologically for attaining a range of spiritual benefits—educational, ritual and spiritual communication for communing with the sacred.

Virtual pilgrimages are important to study for three reasons. First, virtual pilgrimage sites abound on the Internet. A good illustration of this is found in Pope John Paul II's recent historic pilgrimage to the Holy Land on 20–26 March 2000. An article published in the Catholic News Service (Thavis 15 March 2000) lists the ways people can 'follow his footsteps online'. 'Armchair pilgrims' can go to a site prepared by the Franciscan Custodian of the holy land ([www.custodia.org/papa](http://www.custodia.org/papa)) where pages of pictures and texts of every one of the Papal stops are available. They can also go to the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem to examine its alterations from the time of Constantine to the present. A link from there leads to the itinerary of the anonymous pilgrim of Bordeaux, one of the first Christian pilgrims whose journey is shown with maps, photos and text. Other links go to the Christian Information Center, which provides information on modern church life, or to the Franciscan Archeological Institute, where 'web pilgrims' receive an introduction to Mount Nebo in Jordan from the very same Franciscan priest who guided the Pope there. Virtual pilgrims can also select [www.mustardseed.net](http://www.mustardseed.net) to choose from a variety of mini-tours of holy places, including a 360-degree interactive picture. They can travel to [www.holylandblessings.com](http://www.holylandblessings.com), a site for sending personal prayers to specific holy sites that the Pope would visit. Or they can visit [www.virtualholylan.com](http://www.virtualholylan.com) to peruse the travel diaries of recent visitors to Israel. And of course there is always the official Vatican web site at [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). Afterwards, they can review the 'living memory' of every moment of the trip using the extensive photo archives at the 'Franciscan Cyberspot' (<http://198.62.75.1/www1/ofm/melita.html>). With these e-sites, tens of thousands of the faithful were able to go to the 'Holy Land-online', as the Pontiff did his pilgrimage.

Second, virtual pilgrimage is well traveled. Take, for example, Jesus2000.com (<http://www.jesus2000.com>), which touts itself as 'The Holy Land's Largest Shopping Mall on the Internet' (Newsbytes 1998) and whose founder, Alexander Barak, has boasted, 'What Yahoo is to search, we want to be to church' (see Richtel 1998). Jesus2000.com, a nondenominational site established in November 1998, was well timed to capitalise on the 2000th birthday of Jesus and the great interest in the holy land during the Jubilee year. As a marketing tool, if you will, it emphasises the millennial expectations of Jesus' imminent return, and preaches the unity among Christian churches. Make no mistake about it; this is an 'ecommerce' site that originally planned to go public, although the business model calling for an IPO in 1999 has now been shelved, partly because of recent collapse of Dot Coms in the stock market (see Jesus2000 Webmaster Personal Communication 24 June 2000). Nativity Holdings Ltd, associated with Venture Capital Technology Organisation Holdings (VECTOR) of

Luxembourg, owns the site. The original plan was to log on five million visitors, sign up 500,000 members, and have over 1600,000 buyers in the 'emall'. On its first day of operation, the site attracted great interest, getting over one million hits (CNBC 1999). According to its web master, despite difficulties in capitalisation that have postponed a major advertising campaign, the site still draws 500,000 visitors a month (with 87 percent U.S. and Canadian residents, nine percent European and Scandinavian, and four percent other countries) (see [Jesus2000 Webmaster, personal communication 24 June 2000](#)).<sup>5</sup>

Jesus2000.com offers a wide variety of merchandise and services. The site has a 'travel wizard' for making 'actual pilgrimage reservations' as well as guided tours, airline, hotel and car rentals. In the virtual shopping mall it sells souvenirs like candles, angels, rosaries, diorama triptychs, *eau de parfume*, spray bags of soil from sacred sites, Jordan River crosses and bottles of holy water. But the Jesus2000.com site is much more than a virtual shopping mall. A visitor, for example, can check Pope John Paul II's Holy Land itinerary, send an 'ecard' from Jerusalem, deposit a prayer or blessing at Christian shrines in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Megiddo, and the Sea of Galilee,<sup>6</sup> listen to interviews with recent pilgrims, view a 'netcast' of the Christmas Eve Mass in Bethlehem, recent CNBC news reports on Jesus2000.com, world premiere movies on Jesus' ministry, and so on. The site's main attraction, however, is its 'virtual guided tour', where the pilgrim can 'experience the land where Jesus was born, lived, walked, preached, was crucified and resurrected'. Given Jesus2000.com's numbers, is there any doubt that travelling to such sites on the Internet is an important means people have to satisfy, at the least, their spiritual curiosity, and, at the very most, to experience a powerful new means of religious expression?

Third, virtual pilgrimage on the Net has changed the way people 'do' religion. While radio and TV are passive media, the Internet is interactive. It provides a dynamic multimedia environment for communing with the sacred. A fascinating example of this is the Pope's recent pilgrimage to the holy land. The Pope wanted his first stop to be the ancient city of Ur because, as the traditional birthplace of Abraham, the patriarch of the three monotheistic traditions, it symbolised to him the unity of the three faiths. Beginning at Ur also satisfied his 'deep mystical attachment to the biblical chronology of his pilgrimage' ([Stanley 14 February 2000](#), p. A7). However, it was not to be. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein prohibited the Papal visit. To get around the Iraqi roadblock, John Paul began his journey virtually instead. According to *The New York Times*, it was one of 'the most unusual ceremonies held at the Vatican'. In Rome, the Pope sat on a throne decorated with oak branches behind and three flaming copper pots before it to give the ceremony a 'Middle Eastern look'. Next to a stone symbolising the altar where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac, Vatican aides placed a copy of a fifteenth-century Russian icon by Andrei Rublev that depicted the three angels who visited Abraham:

During the service, the Vatican broadcast on a huge screen a solemn travelogue, beginning with scenic shots of Ur and the surrounding desert, moving on to biblical paintings of Marc Chagall, and ending with sixth-century mosaics at San Vitale, a church in Ravenna. The pope watched on a small monitor next to his chair. Using a gold shell as a scoop, the pope poured incense into a copper pot that was then placed on the rock that the pope said signified both the intended sacrifice of Isaac and the place in the desert where Jesus offered to sacrifice himself'. ([Alessandra Stanley 24 February 2000](#), p. A7)

What is important to note is that the Pontiff began his journey as an ‘armchair pilgrim’. He not only surrounded himself with a pastiche of art and sacred utensils but, as part of ceremony, also used a ‘small monitor’ in order to go to the ancient city of Ur. Before ever taking an actual step on his ‘real’ pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he took a virtual step of the religious imagination. Such a techno-ritualised act underscores Sherry Turkle’s point that ‘as human beings become increasingly intertwined with the technology and with each other via technology the distinctions between what is specifically human and specifically technological become more complex. Are we living life on the screen or in the screen?’ (Turkle 1995, p. 21).

In sum, in order to understand the new ways of being religious in the postmodern world, virtual pilgrimages must be taken into account. They exploit the new technological possibilities of the Internet to re-imagine the sacred by constructing an immaterial reality from four components. First, they create a mythscape, a highly symbolic sacred geography, largely based upon oral or scriptural traditions. Second, they use interactive visual-auditory techniques to evoke experiences of divine presence. Third, they provide liminoid forms of entertainment for the traveler/viewer. Fourth, as a leisure activity done at home or office computers, virtual pilgrimages allow individuals to join online traveling communities, which they often describe using the discourse of *communitas*.

### ***Sacred Centres Out There/In There: The Mythsapes of Cyberspace***

Virtual pilgrimage does not fit Victor Turner’s classic definition of pilgrimage. According to Turner, pilgrimage is a form of ‘extroverted mysticism’, a journey to a centre ‘out there’: ‘The pilgrim physically traverses a mystical way; the mystic sets forth on an interior spiritual pilgrimage’ (Turner 1978, pp. 33–4). It takes place ‘on foot or donkey or camel through rough country with danger of robbers and brigands, and not much in the way of food or shelter’, or, at the very least in the modern world ‘by jet aircraft and stay in the best hotels’. In either case, it is a physical journey. The pilgrim moves from a ‘familiar place’ that is ‘secular, mundane, everyday, ordinary’ to a ‘far place’ this is ‘sacred, rare, often miraculous’ (Turner 1974, p. 305). Such a definition, as Alan Morinis has argued, emphasises the physical over the spiritual, the actual over the ideal dimensions of pilgrimage:

Anthropologists tend to pay far more attention to actual ritual goings-forth on sacred journeys in geographical space, but the other sorts of venturing toward ideals undertaken by humans are equally pilgrimages. It is, indeed, questionable to distinguish between terrestrial and “metaphorical” pilgrimages. The distinction portrays the earthly journey as somehow more real, when, in fact, most cultures subsume physical journeys and other quests into one more inclusive category: the spiritual life is a pilgrimage, the ascetic learns to visit the sacred shrines in his own body, devotion is a journey to God. (Morinis 1992, p. 4)

But pilgrimage, even to sacred places in the physical world, always has an interior, ideal, spiritual dimension. A good illustration can be found in Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In their first-hand accounts, Christian pilgrims drew explicit correspondences between *loci* they visited and the *topi* of the Gospel narratives (see Smith 1987, p. 86). The famous fourth-century pilgrim Egeria’s account of ‘the Lord’s Day’ on her visits to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre demonstrates this. Before the assembly of devout pilgrims, the bishop went to the door of the basilica with his Gospel,

where he himself reads the account of the Lord's resurrection. At the beginning of the reading the whole assembly groans and laments at all that the Lord underwent for us, and the way they weep would move even the hardest of hearts to tears. (Wilkinson 1999, p. 125)

The bishop's gospel reading directly links Egeria to the momentous events of Christ's death and resurrection that traditionally were thought to have taken place at the basilica where she stood. The ritual event creates what Glen Bowman has called a 'mythscape'—a fusion of Christian symbols, ideals, narratives and place in which Palestine is 'riveted to the ground of Christian scriptures' in pilgrims' minds. Egeria's experience displays the extent to which physical travel is largely an imaginative act, fictional in that the traveler sees what the traveler expects to see, which is often what was read (see Bowman 1992, pp. 154–6). Pilgrimage therefore is just as much a travel 'in there', in this case, inside the gospel, as a travel 'out there' to the Anastasis in Jerusalem. Bowman argues that this Christian mythscape was fixed by 1500. It is based upon the multitude of first- and second-person pilgrim narratives, such as Egeria's and the Bordeaux pilgrim's, that created a 'lexicon' for the popular religious imagination of Christian pilgrimage.<sup>7</sup>

What implications does this have for virtual pilgrimage? First, as Steven Jones has argued, if the Internet is anything at all, it is probably less some kind of futuristic cyberworld of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, where people find themselves inhabiting a totally simulated reality, than it is a narrative space.

[It is] . . . a silent world (where) all conversation is typed. To enter it, one forsakes both body and place and becomes a thing of words alone. . . . In that sense it is an imagined and imaginary space, and thus is a narrative both because it is an area of discourse interaction and because it contends, often very successfully, for our imagination. (Jones 1997, p. 15)

In other words, this imagined and imaginary realm is primarily textual. Cyber-pilgrims 'traverse' therefore the same mythical *imaginare* that is architecturalised *in situ* in the 'real' pilgrimages. This is so because cyberspace draws upon a similar

mental geography that has existed in the living mind of every culture, a collective memory or hallucination, an agreed upon territory of mythical figures, symbols, rules and truths owned and traversible by all who learned the ways, and yet free of the bounds of physical space and time (Benedikt 1991, p. 3).

Online pilgrimages are generally conservative in that way, drawing on the received mythscape from tradition. Jesus2000.com is a case in point. In addition to its pages of photos on its history and the notable architecture, the website also uses multi-media to simulate the sights and sounds of the Holy Land. There are several video travelogues on Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Sea of Galilee, etc. produced by Doko Video (which can also be purchased), and a sound library that the user can click to hear, for example, Psalm 147, the *lauda* of Jerusalem, which is streamed by 'real audio file' through the magic of 'Dot Com' companies like RealPlayer and Shockwave.com. Through text, sound and image, the virtual pilgrim can scroll/stroll down the Via Dolorosa, with each image juxtaposed with the corresponding biblical passage about Christ's journey to the Cross. A picture of station one, for instance, also includes an interior shot of the Monastery of the Flagellation, where 'Jesus was questioned by Pilate and then condemned'. The explanatory text then ends with the appropriate scriptural passage from John 12: 1–3. It

draws on the same lexicon of biblical symbols and stories that framed Egeria's spiritual vision of the Holy Land.

And yet, Jesus2000.com differs from Egeria's travelogue in important respects. Jesus2000.com's author is not a devout pilgrim but a multi-national corporation. Although it is true that pilgrimage has always been associated with the market and the tourist trade, it is obvious that a major focus of Jesus2000.com is entrepreneurial. Here we find an interesting addition to the site. While Jesus2000.com's 'virtual shopping mall' would have mystified Egeria, had she seen it, it is a familiar part of the Western postmodern landscape. It is important to note that the mall has its own roots mythically. It is an idealised vision of the quaint American Mainstreet of the 'Good Old Days', a utopian but also commodified vision of a friendly and safe neighborhood of shopkeepers that never was. The mall, which was originally built on the margins of our urban industrialised sprawl, is now digitalised. What Jesus2000.com has done is to create a simulation of a simulation to set up shop in its electronic Holy Land.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Real Presence in a Virtual Medium***

But cyberspace is not only textual. The great power of CMC is its visionary power. It combines narrative with a 'series of virtual images', a 'chain of signs with one image leading to another' (Beaudoin 1998, p. 47). It is a 'vision machine' that 'through its myriad, unblinking video eyes, distant places and faces, real or unreal, actual or long gone can be summoned to presence' (Benedikt 1991, p. 1). Walter Ong has noted that this power of 'telepresence' in electronic media marks a significantly new stage in human cultural evolution. Cyberspace is a kind of 'second orality' in which 'the divorce between word and image begun by print culture is reversed, so that the total sensorium again includes sight and sound, voice, image, and music' (O'Leary 1996, p. 785). According to Ong, this stage is a throwback to earlier primal societies whose oral traditions and ritual life evoked a 'participatory mystique'.

The ability of CMC to create a 'telepresence' is important for understanding the power of virtual pilgrimage. At the centre of most pilgrimages is an intensely visual experience. For Hindu pilgrims, it is *darśan*, or seeing the divinity at the *tīrtha*, or sacred centre. This is also true in the case of Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land, where, as we have seen, the Bordeaux pilgrim, Egeria and those who followed them saw tangible evidence of Christ's ministry and crucifixion in the objects and landmarks throughout Palestine. As noted by Paulinus of Nola, 'the principal motive which draws people to Jerusalem is the desire to see and touch the places where Christ was present in the body' (*Epistles* 49, 402, quoted in Coleman and Elsner 1995, p. 84). The heart of any pilgrimage is visual—seeing the visible traces of saints and divine beings in the evocative power of the temple buildings and sacred objects and in the powerful rituals that take place in the natural splendor of their setting.

CMC is perfectly suited to evoke this sense of 'real presence' that pilgrims have at the actual Lourdes, Fatima, Jerusalem and Croagh Patrick, a famous Irish pilgrimage site. Croagh Patrick is a mountain ridge rising 2510 feet above the seaside town of Westport in County Mayo that is capped by a spectacular quartzite cone named after Ireland's national saint, St Patrick. It was Patrick who, according to tradition, fasted on the mountain for the forty-four days of Lent before he banished the snakes from the island. Today it is one of Europe's great centres of Christian pilgrimage drawing over 100000 people annually. Pilgrims can also visit Croagh Patrick virtually by clicking on 'Croagh Patrick Ireland's Holy Mountain' (<http://www.anu.net/reek/>). This site shows the variety



of virtual pilgrimages available on the web. Unlike Jesus 2000.com, it is not a commercialised corporate operation meant to attract a broad based clientele, nor is it an official site sponsored by the clergy in charge of the RL pilgrimage. Joseph Rose, its webmaster, was inspired by his own intensely spiritual experience on the mountain in 1993.

What is striking about Rose's site is its power to convey telepresence. Part one opens with the lilting Christian hymn 'Lord of all Hopefulness', and Rose's brief poetical evocation of the ineffable power pervading the sacred mountain:

[It is] a mystical place of beauty and peace, where the surrounding glens, hills and mountains—like whales—seem to talk to each other. A stone church, weathered by storm and haunted by Ireland's prayers, waits at the summit. It is there where the people of Ireland flock and the descendents of emigrants return to kneel together in submission on the cold rock, asking for peace and giving thanks for their freedom. (Rose 29 April 1998)

Rose's site is filled with stunning photographs and Quick Time movies documenting his own climb up 'the Reek'. Users can also link to the sights and sounds JPEG gallery to get views of the Bay, sunsets in County Mayo, the fields below the mountain, and so on. They can also investigate the history, archaeology and geology pages to find more information.

The pilgrimage itself is divided into three parts: 'First Steps', 'Penance in the Mist' and 'The Summit'. 'First Steps' includes a movie taken by a handheld camera at the base of the mountain as Rose began his ascent. The viewer is able to see step by step, as if from his own eyes, Rose's difficult barefoot hike up the rocky trail to the summit. Part two begins with a photo of the author's bloody feet from the sharp stones, which reveals the difficulty of undertaking this penitential part of the pilgrimage. You can also hear audio files of the 'marrow-chilling wind' as you read following passage from Rose's 'Irish Journal' about his journey: 'I swear I heard a whisper in the air, a murmur mingling with the winds scream. It could have been God's voice. Hard to say. It was carried away before my mind and soul could make anything of it'. Part three has a 'Quick Time' movie of the summit as well as additional pictures and video clips of the view from the summit with an explanatory text. The tour concludes with some good advice: 'True to Ireland's mystic warmth, you can rest your sore body over a pint of Guinness or a cup of Irish coffee at a pub at the base of the mountain. Catching a ride back to Westport requires only a thumb and a passing car'. What Rose's pages show is the power of CMC to create a 'total sensorium' of sight, sound and even virtual touch with his evocative descriptions of the difficult climb up the mountain.

How Rose's site evokes a participatory mystique for his cyber-visitors is complex. In his analysis of the 'rhetoric of the image', Roland Barthes argues that photographs and film evoke different perceptual responses in viewers. The photograph is perceived as a 'recording', a natural rendering of an object despite the fact that the photographer has used artifice, self-consciously choosing a certain speed, focus, distance, etc to create the desired image. The photograph creates a revolutionary form of human consciousness, according to Barthes, 'since it establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing (which any copy can provoke) but an awareness of *having-been-there*. What we have is a new space-time category spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority' (Barthes 1977, p. 44).

This is exactly how some respond to Rose's photographically rich site. It allows them to take a trip down memory lane. For example, one virtual pilgrim, Leo Archer, writes

in Rose's guest book that 'As I took your virtual tour the innocent memories of my childhood have come flooding back'. Archer was born and raised in Ireland and climbed Croagh Patrick when he was a young boy. Visiting this site on St Patrick's Day opened a treasure of happy memories of his childhood and a longing to return:

I remember vividly how the slope turned to loose rock and appeared to drop off on either side into an abyss. Your description of the weather is exactly how I remember it. I felt very powerless against the force of the elements. I didn't make it to the top but remember coming back down to the bottom and how peaceful and tranquil it all seemed. I would love to return someday with my own kids to complete the journey. Most of all though I remember being struck by the simple devotion of my grandfather. It was apparent even to a boy. Both my grandparents are gone now but your page has helped me remember that and many more happy times I spent with them. It has reminded me of home and its richness of heritage and faith. It has made this St. Patrick's Day even better. (Rose 1998)

Others, however, experience the Reek very differently. Perhaps they have not had the opportunity to climb it themselves, but they feel that they have experienced 'being' at Croagh Patrick through the movies, text and sounds of Rose's site. Lisa Duncan, for example, writes, 'Hi! I really enjoyed your web page. Oddly enough, it did make me feel like I was there' (Rose 1998). David Freedberg has studied this response in Western art. Paintings and statues of the Greek gods, and, with the rise of Christianity, of Christ, the Virgin and various saints are often experienced, even by contemporary viewer-worshippers, as fully alive and real—the 'living embodiment' of their prototype. They perspire, move their arms, legs, and eyes, bleed when struck, exude healing oils and milk, speak, and so on. Their vitality goes far beyond mere 'caricatural simulation'. Freedberg argues that even if one were only willing to grant that viewers only respond as if the image were alive, one must grant that such responses 'provide proof of the constructive power of metaphorical and metonymical thought and of the way in which all perception elides representation of reality' (Freedberg 1989, p. 30).

Freedberg suggests that this experience of immanence is a universal human psychosensual response to the 'power of images'. In particular, this response often occurs for worshipers before enshrined images at pilgrimage sites. But it is not only iconic. As Duncan's experience of 'being there' suggests, images of the site itself can evoke a sense of real presence. This experience is intensified by the many movies on Rose's site. As Barthes has suggested, in film, the 'spectatorial consciousness' of photography is replaced with a more projective, magical fictional consciousness in viewers, 'where the *having-been-there* gives way to the *being-there* of the thing' (Barthes 1977, p. 45). In the case of Croagh Patrick and other virtual pilgrimages like it, the panoply of images—photographs, video clips, and, at some sites, real time video—can make the pilgrim/viewer experience it either way, as having it present to memory or 'really present' now on the screen.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Virtual Pilgrimage as a Liminoid Phenomenon***

Victor Turner's major theoretical contribution to pilgrimage studies lies in his characterisation of it as a 'liminoid phenomenon'. By 'liminoid' he means that pilgrimage has an initiatory structure like a rite of passage. The journey itself marks the liminal stage, a transitional state 'betwixt and between'. Only by traveling to the sacred centre out there, on the periphery of where they their lives ordinarily, can pilgrims temporarily escape from the usual social roles and realities that define who they are. At

the sacred site, with its dense symbolism of icons, temple architecture and rituals, pilgrims can intensely focus on the central values and mystical knowledge of their religion. This liminoid experience can be transformative existentially by giving them a new depth of understanding of their lives.

As a liminoid phenomenon, pilgrimage has five characteristics, according to Turner: First, unlike a rite of passage, it is usually a voluntary devotion rather than an obligatory rite. Pilgrimage continues to thrive because it appeals to the modern/postmodern view that being religious means participating not only in the collective rituals of a tribe, church, and sect but also in the spiritual activities of the solitary person whose 'idealistic mysticism', as Ernst Troeltsch originally labeled it, is a form of radical individualism where association 'is based on a "parallelism of spontaneous religious personalities"' (quoted in McGuire 1992, p. 134). Second, pilgrimage is ludic, as much a pleasurable leisure-time activity like sightseeing and tourism as a solemn rite. Third, rather than functioning as a means of transforming one's social position (e.g., a wedding transforms from single person to married person), it fosters personal autonomy, freeing pilgrims from ordinary social roles and expectations for more democratic and non-hierarchical forms of association. Fourth, it can be 'anti-structural', a place where novel configurations of ideas may arise that can generate social criticism that is populist, anarchical and anticlerical. Fifth, pilgrimage creates *communitas*, a special bonding based on a common experience of humankindness.

Does Turner's model apply to pilgrimage on the Internet? Turner was aware of the new ways technology had transformed religion. He noted that a new type of pilgrimage had emerged in the past two centuries that was 'frankly technological' (Turner 1987, p. 330). What he had in mind was the powerful impact that automobiles, airplanes and new electronic information sources had in the 'dramatic resurgence' of pilgrimage in the modern world. Turner also noted that modernity had created many 'liminoid specialized performative genres' in the leisure sphere beyond traditional religion. These secular forms of entertainment, such as theater, film and television, now can substitute for 'the orchestrated religious *gestalt* that once constituted ritual'. In particular, Turner saw film as 'the dominant form of public liminality in electronically advanced societies' (Tomas 1991, p. 34).

Since Turner's time, CMC has replaced movies as the newest technological medium of experiencing liminality. Like the darkness of a movie theatre, the electronic void of computers is a 'betwixt and between', a heterogeneous place apart from the quotidian places of home and office (see Stenger 1991, pp. 53–4). It can be emancipatory—an 'unshackling from RL constraints' allowing for a chance for liberating people temporarily from the normal flow of everyday experiences (see Wilbur 1992, p. 11). Other scholars also note the functional similarity between rites of passage and logging on to cyberspace. In his study of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, David Tomas shows how the hero, Case, uses his computer 'deck' as his vehicle to take off into cyberspace. Logging on or 'jacking in' for Case is equivalent to a rite of separation. The hardware serves as a 'portal' to a parallel virtual reality in which entry and exit are a sequential (though not necessarily unidirectional) means of obtaining not only hard data on cultural, political and economic matters, but also for sacred gnosis on the nature and meaning of his life (1991, p. 41). The fact that the Internet is a place for experiencing liminality has important implications for being religious online.

What about in the case of virtual pilgrimage? By using a hypermedia navigator, a pilgrim uses 'virtual devices for traversing vast hybrid hypermedia spaces that have both active links and dynamic nodes' instead of buses, trains and airplanes to get themselves

there (Novak 1991, p. 230). By initiating a search with a navigator, for example, by typing in 'pilgrimage Ireland', the user travels to a list of possible sites, highlighted in hypertext, that open portals in cyberspace. In the case of Rose's web pages the journey metaphor is used to describe how the 'virtual traveller' reaches an online site like Croagh Patrick. In the case of Rose's web pages, the liminoid character of the journey is also reinforced by the very structure of his multimedia presentation, which is divided into three parts that Turner, following van Gennep's model of a rite of passage has defined as typical of pilgrimages. By clicking on the site the cyber-pilgrim travels on the liminoid lines of the World Wide Web to the sacred centre out there.

What about the specifics? Like 'real pilgrims', virtual ones choose to do so voluntarily. Each has reasons for going. In the Croagh Patrick guest book, for example, ordinary persons offer many reasons for visiting the site. Some experience it nostalgically. The site moves Leo Archer because it helps him recall his childhood. Some find it enlightens them about their Irish heritage. Pat Mills writes:

Thank you for this wonderful tour. I shall visit it again and again to be sure. I haven't missed a thing. You enlighten my heritage and the thought of climbing Croagh Patrick on the Holy Days would certainly strengthen my faith in our Holy God. It's the top of the world. Thanks! (Rose 1998)

Others are simply tourists searching for an interesting holiday trek in Ireland. Still others talk about their deep religious experiences, such as Courtney Bayne: 'I too experienced the sensations you speak of: an overwhelming sense of being close to God and of voices of the past' (Rose 1998). In all these cases personal choice is key. Pilgrims choose to visit Croagh Patrick online. Their modems release them from their everyday lives for a trip to an 'awe inspiring' sacred place. And like the 'real' thing, this is best described as a leisure activity, as the metaphor 'net surfing' suggests. This is seen in Courtney Bayne and her husband's visit. They 'just happened by [the] web page while looking about real estate in Galway. . . .'. Archer did it on St Patrick's Day, a time to celebrate what it means to be Irish. People log onto this site for fun: to be entertained by the amusing format, to reminisce about the past, and to satisfy their curiosity—all forms of leisure activity.

Nevertheless virtual pilgrimage is not the same as 'the real thing'. First, it is instantaneous. Travel to the site is a click of the button away. Second, it takes place figuratively not literally. The arduous journey to a distant place, the ascetical practices that are so important in penitential pilgrimages, do not exist virtually. The virtual journey is a disembodied act of the imagination that cannot fully simulate the physical rigors of the RL original. On the Croagh Patrick website, we can look at the picture of Rose's bloody feet, but the pain he felt walking barefoot up the cold, rough rock cannot be simulated fully on the Internet, at least not yet. A third difference is that while the journey is sequential, it also takes place in what Steven Jones refers to as 'a discontinuous narrative space' (Jones 1997, p. 15). Users jump from site to site netsurfing wherever the spirit (or often a willful mouse) takes them. Rather than an ellipse, as Turner envisages the structure of real life pilgrimages from home to sacred site and a return, Net surfers jump all over the place, often in ways that have no logical or simple geometric form. Courtney Bayne, as we have seen, had no intention to go to Croagh Patrick when she turned on her computer. She got there by serendipity after looking over real estate in Galway. More research needs to be done on the implications of these differences between real and virtual pilgrimages.

### ***Virtual Pilgrims' Communities and Communitas***

What about Turner's final characteristic of pilgrimage, the experience of *communitas*, which he defines as an undifferentiated sense of community or 'even communion of equal individuals' who are bound together by the 'generic bond' of humankindness or comradely harmony (Turner 1969, pp. 131–3). Turner has in mind the special community created on the journey when social boundaries of class, race, gender, and social status break down and pilgrims share a sense of brotherhood or sisterhood. The *locus classicus* of *communitas* is recounted in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, when, while circumambulating the Ka'ba at Mecca, Malcolm X perceives the grand unity of Muslims who, regardless of their color, humble themselves as one before the almighty God, Allah (see Turner 1974, pp. 202–6).

Can virtual pilgrimages offer a similar experience of *communitas*? As Wertheim points out, cyberenthusiasts often argue that this experience of 'even communion of equal individuals' is the greatest promise of the CMC, one that realises technologically what the great religions through the ages have indicated is the goal of humanity's spiritual quest:

As with Christianity, cyberspace too is potentially open to everyone: male and female. First World and Third, north and south, East and West. Just as the New Jerusalem is open to all who follow the way of Christ, so cyberspace is open to anyone who can afford a personal computer and a monthly Internet access fee. . . . Like the Heavenly City, cyberspace is a place where *in theory* people of all nations can mix together. Indeed, many cyberenthusiasts would have us believe that the Net dissolves the very barriers of nationality, race, and gender, 'elevating' everybody equally to the digital stream. The dream of a global community is one of the prime fantasies of the 'religion' of cyberspace, a technological version of the New Jerusalem's brotherhood of man (Wertheim 1999, p. 23).

Such a view is also at the heart of cyberenthusiast Howard Rheingold's well-known definition of the virtual community as 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (Rheingold 1993, p. 5).

A virtual *communitas* does form inside the guest book of Croagh Patrick. Writing in the book and reading what others have said creates a web of personal relationships. Most in the guest book are linked by a common Irish heritage or their own deep spiritual experiences of climbing 'the Reek'. The site offers them shared symbols—St Patrick, the beauty of Ireland, Guinness Stout—that creates a common mythscape transcending their personal idiosyncrasies. Moreover, while some have had powerfully mystical experiences on the Reek, their letters are strongly non-hierarchical and non-clerical in nature. Catholic rituals, doctrines and ecclesiastical authority are never mentioned. This reveals the Internet's power to foster new possibilities of communion through online communication outside official religious channels. The Croagh Patrick guestbook supports Rheingold's argument that 'because we cannot see one another in cyberspace, gender, age, national origin are not apparent unless a person wants to make this characteristic public' (Rheingold 1993, p. 26). The anonymity of Internet guest books, chat rooms, MUDs and so on is ideal for what Turner calls 'spontaneous *communitas*, a form of community that characterises the immediate, ever changing circumstances in which modern Americans find themselves' (Healy 1997, p. 57).

But other evidence contradicts this view. Rather than *communitas*, CMC often reinforces a monadic individualism since, after all, 'all of its users exist as individuals extending their selves through the computer network but isolated by the necessary

mediation of the cathode ray tube and keyboard' (Foster 1997, p. 26). To be sure, virtual pilgrims can 'meet' at the Croagh Patrick site, but all that they have before them are the letters in the guestbook. Their inter-connectedness therefore is limited by the technology that binds them together, mainly textually. What sense of *communitas* they have therefore must lack the intensity of the RL pilgrimages with its face-to-face physical contact. As yet, CMC cannot provide the sights, sounds and feelings of circumambulating the Ka'ba with thousands of other *hajjis* or the feeling of the piercingly cold wind of the Reek on your cheeks. Other critics note that whether pilgrimage is virtual or real, Turner's model is simply wrong since pilgrimage is best understood as a form of individualised piety instead of a collective act, something that is privately meaningful instead of a public ally shared religious experience (see Morinis 1992, p. 8; Aziz 1987). The notes in the Croagh Patrick guestbook also support this interpretation; each letter tells how the pilgrimage affects the individual writer. Even when guests discuss how the Reek symbolises their common Irish heritage, it is always done in deeply personal terms.<sup>10</sup>

### *Cyberspace as a Place for Transcending RL Contested Sacred Centres*

And yet this discussion misses an important point. John Eade and Michael Sallnow argue that pilgrimage is less a field of social relations than 'a realm of competing discourses'. In their view, much of what Turner has to say about *communitas* 'can be seen as representative of a particular discourse about pilgrimage rather than as an empirical description of it, one which may co-exist or compete with alternate discourses' (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 5). This is particularly true in the case of virtual pilgrimage. What one has when one scrolls down and clicks the 'hypertext' of a site is the discourse of a religious group that highlights the 'valued ideals' they believe are central to the spiritual journey.

An important example is a site called The HOPE (<http://members.tripod.com/~TheHOPE/index.htm>), which describes itself in bold as a place 'to realize the vision of Jerusalem in our lifetime, the city of peace, a house of prayer for all the nations'. This site is maintained by High-Or (in Hebrew, 'Hi' means 'living' and 'Or' means 'light', or, Living Light) Partnership Enterprises (HOPE), a Jerusalem-based high tech design firm whose mission is to develop the technologies that 'lead individuals and organizations to a higher state of consciousness'. The site explains that 'there is a Light in each of us that is part of something much greater than ourselves. It is our simple HOPE that we can uncover this Light and allow it to lead us to peace and prosperity.'

Among this company's 'visionary projects' are 'The Heavenly Holy Land CD Rom, intelligent Internet conferencing programs, the PaRaDiSe theme park/fun garden, a Neo-Templar Saga multimedia project, a Heavenly Jerusalem animated film, and The Jerusalem HOPE Club for World Redeemers'. The actual site consists of the HOPE Club, art gallery, an extensive cyberlibrary with detailed files on its projects, and an online shop. However, this is not just another ecommerce site. All the projects have a serious religious purpose. The HOPE Club is a virtual New Age mystical community, whose 'desire is to make earthly Jerusalem a realization of the prophets' vision' of a New Jerusalem that 'will be a source of teachings that lead to peace and harmony for the entire earth' (21 March 1999).

The Hope Club owes its inspiration to the Academy of Jerusalem, a 'virtual Sanhedrin' modeled after the traditional court of Jewish sages who met to rule on

intellectual and scriptural matters. The academy was established in 1992 as a ‘think tank’ by the Hayut Foundation for the renewal of Judaism. It owes its origin to the cyber-visionary, Dr Yitzhak Hayut-M’an, an architect, urban planner and ‘cybertician’ who drew inspiration from the biblical Prophets, the Kabbalah and the city of Jerusalem itself, with its multicultural and pluralistic spiritual life that embraces the three great monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For the academy, the holy city of Jerusalem is ‘a crucial point for synthesis and reconciliation’.

The Academy’s vision, according to Hayut-M’an, is universal. As the political capital of the state of Israel, Jerusalem symbolises the fulfilment of the political Zionist vision of the past century, a homeland for Jewish refugees who have fled from oppression all over the world. Hayut-M’an advocates a ‘universal Zionism’, a movement for all those who appreciate the biblical tradition and who expect the development—even the transformation—of all humankind and not just the Jews, as announced by the prophet Isaiah (56:3–7), ‘for My House shall be called a house of prayer for all the Nations’. The Academy sees itself as inspired by the same sacred powers from the highest world (*Azilut*) as the biblical prophets themselves. Following the tradition of the Kabbalah, it sees itself as a means of manifesting the four worlds of the tree of life by bringing that vision to earth in practical ways by comprehending the divine inspiration (*briah*), and refining it conceptually (*yetzirah*) in the ordinary world humanity lives (*assiyah*). With its office located on a literal bridge in the heart of the Old City between Christian and Muslim quarters, the Academy bridges symbolically the RL divisions among Jerusalem’s religious communities. Christians and Muslims are welcomed to participate as well as those ‘inspired by its world-wide symbolic significance’. Members of the academy include cyberartists, scholars of the Kabbalah, a mathematician and Chaos theorist, architects, painters and a Hatha Yoga teacher.

While the site may seem at first like other Holy Land virtual pilgrimages with its pages of pictures of the Old City, it is very different. Inspired by Kabbalistic mysticism, faith in the biblical prophets, and millennialist expectations of the dawn of a New Age marking ‘the global evolution of man’s new consciousness in the 21st century’, the goal of The HOPE is to create a cyber-spatial heavenly New Jerusalem and third temple as a symbol for world peace and healing. This follows the prophetic visions by the ‘future Zionist’ prophets such as Isaiah (2:3) and Mikah (4:3).

Here we see a different kind of virtual pilgrimage compared with those like Croagh Patrick. As a virtual community, Croagh Patrick’s overlaps the RL one (see Wilbur 1997, p. 7). Many of the virtual pilgrims either had already gone or intend to go on the ‘real pilgrimage’ in Ireland. In The HOPE’s case, however, the focus is to go on a pilgrimage to their VR third temple—one that exists only as an ‘architectural-cybernetic model’.<sup>11</sup>

Why build a VR third temple? It is the realisation of Michael Benedikt’s ‘architecture of transcendence’, or what Marcos Novak calls ‘visionary architecture’, ‘the architecture of the excess of possibility that represents the manifestation of the mind in the realm of the body, but . . . also attempts to escape the confines of limiting reality’ (Novak 1991, p. 243). In other words, the HOPE is developing what cyberenthusiasts like Benedikt and Novak envisage as the highest possibility of CMC.

It is a ‘doubly imaginary’ place in the sense that it is, first, an impossible structure, an architectural design that could never be built in RL, and second, that it exists only in the digital realm. Hannah Omer, another member of the Academy, emphasises this very point in her essay on her ‘Joint Journey Poster’, a mandala of the Third temple or what



Figure 1. Joint Journey to the Heavenly Jerusalem Series: Holification Show Over Jerusalem (Realisation)

she calls the 'Templeship of the Omnipresent One' (Figure 1). Her drawing is of an impossible object, 'beyond rational conception' that serves as a

pictorial meditation, contemplating the accord between myths, theologies, symbols and beliefs leads the gold domed templeship. Appearing from higher space on four high pillars of hope, above Jerusalem, it is based upon the structure of the 'Kabbalistic Tree of Life on a vertical axis from the Kingdom (*malkut*) of the physical world to Crown (*keter*) of the spiritual divine worlds.' The painting contains more than 100 symbols relating to the quest for one's true identity, and place in the physical and spiritual world, and how to find it.

The HOPE designers realise that the reality of present day Jerusalem is one of violence and conflict since it is a contested sacred space:



Presently, there is hardly support for the idea of renewing the temple. For the majority of religious Jews—let alone secular ones—the subject is not a practical one. The feeling is that there is no deficiency. When the question of renewing the temple is raised, there immediately arises opposition to it. The main objection is the worry that this intention may bring war with the Moslem world. Parallel to this raises the claim that the traditional function of the temple is supposed to fulfill—a place for sacrifices—is no longer meaningful for the people. On the contrary: many object vehemently to this. Even among those who pray daily for the rebuilding of the temple, most of them actually object to its building, or claim that the temple will descend ready-made from heaven as a temple of fire. It seems as if Rabbinical Judaism, which has developed after the destruction of the Second Temple, has become accustomed to function without the temple. Moreover: the renewal of the temple may threaten its traditional institutions.

To overcome this conflict, The HOPE offers its new dream of the Third Temple that will not only be ‘relevant to the needs of the modern world’, but will ‘address the real dangers associated with its construction’. Their ‘virtual reality version’ is the perfect solution because it frees spirituality from the actual RL place of contestation:

Many contemporary movements (including, but certainly not exclusively, ‘New Age’ circles) have put individual growth, even transformation, as the highest aim. In developed societies this goal has replaced the struggle for national liberation. But such personal-spiritual gains may exacerbate the problems of alienation and disintegration of modern societies. At the same time, the most significant contemporary change of humankind is a change in the direction of unification, towards a universal society, a kind of giant human super-organism or a ‘Global Brain’. These changes are the result of the economic and technological (‘technotronic’) development of organizations, rather than individuals, and no appropriate socio-spiritual movement has developed to match it. The contemporary world needs new means of social and organizational change in order to add spiritual values into the new technotronic system. The future Temple can help create a spiritual community that includes all of humankind, a global community that leads to harmony and integration.

The model that Hayut-M’an proposes is a giant cube, 200 m on each side, erected on pillars outside and above the Temple Mount. Above its pillars are four steel ‘space frames’ containing thousands of cubical cells. This structure is based on the vision of the temple by the prophet Ezekiel as well as conforming to Christian and Moslem conceptions. While the cells’ purpose is not revealed in the prophetic vision, they are meditation rooms for individual development and self-sacrifice in The HOPE’s model. Additionally, the symbolism of the centre of the Third Temple breaks through the boundaries separating Christians, Muslims and Jews. It offers a place to attain *communitas* because for Christians, this cubical form is the New Jerusalem described in the Book of Revelation (21: 16); for Muslims, it is reminiscent of that most holiest of holy sites in Islamic pilgrimage, the Ka’ba on Mecca (which according to Muslim legend will fly to Jerusalem on the Day of Judgement); and for Jews, it symbolises the *Tefilin*, which every observant Jewish man wears during prayer ‘to bind his soul to God’. To conclude, the Third Temple design symbolises the unity of humanity and God because it functions as an *axis mundi*, vertically uniting heaven and earth, and horizontally uniting humanity as a whole regardless of particularistic religious preferences. Hayut-M’an stresses that such a unitary conception reflects our modern scientific world view. The same idea is the basis, for example, of ecology, ‘a new science that directs our attention to the fact that the whole earth is a single household, comprised of many independent forms of life’. In

like manner, the VR Third Temple of Jerusalem, rendered in Hebrew as *yeru-shalem*, ‘the demonstration of wholeness’, shows the possibility of a new human community celebrating ‘unity in diversity’. The designers hope that going on a virtual pilgrimage to this Third Temple will provide a peak religious experience to all

the Children of Abraham: to the Jew—participation in the new revelation of the Torah from Zion; to the Christian—participation in the revival of the Messiah; to the Moslem—ascend to heaven and the experience of ‘The Whole Man’ (*Al-Insan al-Kamil*). The temple cells may also offer their owners a type of immortality, where their image can still continue to appear and interact with living participants and influence their development.

In other words, the HOPE’s third temple creates an imaginary (virtual) space to experience *communitas*. Only in cyberspace can one ultimately realise the transcendental and universalistic ideals of the great religions that transcend the fractious RL field of contestation. Moreover, as a liminoid electronic reality, ‘betwixt and between’ the computers of Muslims, Jews, and Christians, it creates, as Victor Turner theorised, a ‘realm of pure possibility where novel configurations of ideas and relations arise’ (1991, p. 39). The HOPE’s ‘anti-structural inventiveness’ creates a subversive space by juxtaposing the grim social-political realities of the Middle East with its ‘utopian alternative model’. Its Third Temple offers an innovative solution to the intra-religious conflict over the Temple Mount. The HOPE’s site shows how ‘being virtually religious’ can criticise ‘real religion’ and may lead to a more thorough going religious practice (Beaudoin 1998, p. 40).

This essay began by noting that virtual pilgrimage is important because it offers new ways to do religion. Hayut-M’an and other virtual pilgrims are quite aware of this fact. Turner himself argued that the liminoid ‘leisure genres’ of modern media may be the new arena of religious experience and expression. Hayut-M’an believes this is what is happening today when he notes that ‘there is a whole generation of people nowadays who would not go to a synagogue or church, but would not neglect entry into a computer generated place of worship’. In the HOPE’s virtual temple we see Benedikt’s doubly imaginative architecture of transcendence. The templeship is not actual, only imaginary, it is true. But because it is informational, it can ‘only come into existence as a virtual reality, which is to say, fully, only “in the imagination”’ (Benedikt 1991, p. 16). Traditionally conservative religious leaders like the Pope as well as counter-cultural GenXers have entered this new virtual reality of religion.

### Notes

- 1 On the parallels between cyberspace and physical space see Michael Benedikt (1991, pp. 126ff).
- 2 By ‘world 3’, Benedikt is drawing on philosopher of science Karl Popper’s model of three worlds that make up reality: world one is the objective material/physical world; world two is the subjective world of consciousness; world 3 is the world of the ‘objective, real, and public structures’ that interact with the other worlds. These are ‘purely informational’ patterns of social organisation and communication, such as language, religion, the arts, sciences, social institutions, and, now, cyberspace (see Benedikt 1991, pp. 3–4).
- 3 Perhaps Leroux’s reluctance to see the official Lourdes site as anything more than information reflects the ecclesiastical orthodoxy in regard to the use of images in the Church. It was Gregory the Great who sanctioned the didactic, narrative roles of images in a church setting. Images were there to instruct the faithful in doctrine and practice, but were not in and of themselves objects to which to offer homage (*adorare*) (see Goethals 1990, p. 23).
- 4 In the case of the pilgrimage to Lourdes, Internet travelers can stick with the official site, or they can visit the many unofficial sites that blur the line between seeming and being. By clicking one’s mouse at the ‘Lourdes Grotto’ ([http://www.catholicpilgrims.com/lourdes\\_grotto.html](http://www.catholicpilgrims.com/lourdes_grotto.html)), for

example, an old black and white photograph of Bernadette's corpse transforms itself into a colourised life-like 'original' of the saint that looks as if she were sleeping. It offers a magical apparition on the screen of her spiritually powerful presence.

- 5 Other sites boast high numbers as well. According to Leroux, webmaster of the official site of Lourdes, for example, his non-commercial site receives 1500 hits per day.
- 6 Step-by-step of the procedure can be viewed online. The sender also receives a copy of the prayer or blessing with a stamped seal of the holy site. Many virtual pilgrimage sites offer this kind of service, perhaps reflecting the increasing importance of the Internet as a conduit for prayer. A recent survey of the religious use of the Internet had 52 per cent of respondents saying that they asked other people to pray for them in email messages (see McLaughlin 1999).
- 7 J. Z. Smith has also noted that the Christian Holy Land was laid 'palimpsest-like' over the older Jewish and pagan site (see Smith 1987, pp. 74–95). See also Leed 1991, pp. 144–5.
- 8 There are those, like Jean Baudrillard, who criticise CMC's potential to erase this line between the real and the virtual, and the postmodern 'culture of simulation'. Baudrillard dismisses our age of the 'hyperreal' in which what we know is only *simulacra*, copies that have replaced now lost real originals. For example, the Marlboro man that we see in cigarette advertisements becomes our 'real' image of the Wild West. There is no contrast between real and virtual since it is only the virtual that we have for constructing our world. For his critique, see Baudrillard 1983, pp. 3–12.
- 9 Another example of such a site is *MessiahCAM*<sup>™</sup>, a virtual holy land pilgrimage site run by the evangelical Christian Ministry of Daystar International Network (supported by a grant from CBN WorldReach and 'Internet pilgrims') that does this to 'watch and pray: be a virtual watchman on the wall'. Constructed before the turn of the new millennium, real time video was considered essential for those in distant lands that wanted to experience immediately Christ's imminent return to the Holy Land (<http://www.olivetree.org/Default.htm>). Another example is the official site at Lourdes, which has real time web cams broadcasting from the grotto where the Virgin Mary apparitions have occurred in the past and may take place again in the near future (<http://www.lourdes-france.com/fr/frwcam.htm>). In fact, Novak argues that it can offer an even deeper response because in cyberspace space is modulated not just for the subject to observe sculptures, but creates a 'liquid architecture' allowing the viewer to enter it (see Novak 1991, p. 243).
- 10 For more critical assessments of Internet forms of association as community building enterprises see Jones 1997.
- 11 The VR third temple is envisioned in The HOPE art gallery paintings, particularly those by artist Hannah Omer's 'The Yoru-Shalem Quest Visionary Art Project', a triptych of sacred 'mandalas' of the 'Way' and 'Return' that are based upon cyber-architect Hayut-M'an's vision. High-Or is also developing a CD ROM of the gate to the future Virtual Temple called the 'Inward Journey' which eventually will serve as the software for linking players via the Internet to a multi-user domain game (MUD) 'where their individual cells join into a giant temple, and their movements between cells may induce the appearance of their matching "Cyber-Angels" also at the cells of other participants'.

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