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RELIGIOUS NETWORKED PUBLICS: SEEKING AUTHENTICITY BY DIGITAL MEANS

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Introductory Statement

In recent years, religious communities have increasingly adopted social media tools for devotional activities. Drawing on Boyd (2010) and Papacharissi (2014), this panel will suggest that collective faith-based use of social networking sites (SNSs) can be framed as “religious networked publics”. We contend that these public formations advance an online sense of imagined belonging by users, as well as restructure existent religious communities through socio-technological affordances.

Currently, users and religious entrepreneurs are expanding the meaning of authentic experiences of faith. These innovators are challenging well-established forms of representation and authority for believers. Accordingly, religious networked publics aspire to approach the divine through various online platforms: apps, live-streaming of holy sites, blogs and more. For example, rather than visiting Church, users can turn to live-streaming, or instead of performing a ritual – apps can become a viable instrument to fulfill users’ devotional praxis. In this session, we aim to present current data on ways of approaching traditional and established religious practices online. More specifically,

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throughout this panel we thread the question: how is the authentic relation to the divine negotiated by users through their engagement with digital technologies?

The first presentation addresses the stormy civic discourse on the *burkini* ban in France, which reverberated globally, and gained fervent attention within social media platforms. On these platforms, the speaker found that key civic concepts concerning religious freedom and Islamophobia were intensely discussed to form a religious networked public that bridges Muslim identities, particularly from Europe and the US, and ultimately renegotiates the aesthetic traits of an authentic religious behavior.

The second presentation addresses religious networked publics that share an interest in holy places and ongoing worship. More specifically, the study focuses on Catholic live-streamed religious media and its meanings for emergent groups of monastic webcasters. Utilizing Walter Benjamin's discussion on the reproduction of authenticity through visual media, the presentation investigates how worldviews of religious networked publics are shaped and negotiated by live-streaming media, which are currently produced and disseminated by religious institutions.

The third speaker pivots the panel's discussion to focus on the transference of religious praxis to a technological sphere underscoring its socio-technological affordances. Through a case study of confessional apps, this study questions how religious authenticity and authority is interpreted by religious networked publics in relation to practices of faith that have a computational agent that supplements, and perhaps substitutes, the capacity of religious clergy. The presenter will conclude by discussing how the replacement of a priest with the silent logics of algorithmic automation has profound implications for the authoritative power of confession as a transformative ritual.

The final contributor will further the discussion of socio-technological affordances and technologies-of-the-self by offering a phenomenological analysis of religious ritual apps. The presentation contends that the smartphone functions as a hypermaterial ritual object, which embeds the virtual with its material properties. In line with the previous presentation, this study argues that the religious experience can nowadays be authentically performed using technological devices. Thus, ritual apps raise ontological and theological questions on the metaphysics of the sacred and the authority to mediate it, which the speaker interprets in light of the theological differences on the issue of the representation of the divine, and highlights the different discourses of authenticity that are triggered by the embedded properties of new media tools.

To conclude, this panel will offer a new conceptualization of religious activity over SNSs through the new framing of "religious networked publics". A term that integrates past discussions of networked publics, and their social-technological proclivities, with the scholarly studies of religious activity online. We suggest that this conceptual framing can be viewed as supplementing other scholarly discussions of online religion and an opportunity to reflect on past conceptual frameworks including that of "online religious communities" or other terms such as "mediatization", "e-religion" or the more recent "third spaces" (Karaflogka, 2006; Hjarvard, 2008; Hoover and Echchaibi, 2012; Campbell, 2010).

By adding this framework, panelists suggest the use of “religious networked publics” to discuss the meanings of new media virtuality with regard to religion. This is to say, understand the construction of a collective imagination that is afforded by new media platforms for devotional behavior. An understanding that can elucidate key concepts in the sociology of (online) religion such as authenticity, religious identity and authority.

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Extended Abstracts:

1. RE-MEDIATING THE “BURKINI” MUSLIM WOMEN’S NETWORKED DIGITAL DISCOURSES

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Religious digital practices mirror trends of religious change through dynamic interactions, resulting in what Campbell defines “networked religion” (2012). Characterizes of networked religion include the creation of networked communities and identities, articulations of non-traditional authorities, convergent practices and connections between online and offline religion. Different religious groups increasingly use the Internet as a space that contributes to the thickening of the religious experiences, thus creating “Third Spaces” and are generative of hybrid religious identities (Hoover and Echchaibi, 2014).

This research explores how digital practices helped to articulate transnational networks of Muslim women discussing the role of head-covering (hijab) in relation to 2016 French “burkini ban”. The so-called burkini, bathing suit that covers body and head created for

Muslim women who want to dress modestly, has been banned from French beaches as it is supposedly unsafe and unhygienic, a symbol of terrorist ideologies, and a perpetuation of women's oppressions. However, the burkini ban received criticisms worldwide for being Islamophobic; a picture of a hijab-wearing woman forced to undress on a beach by four policemen became viral on the Internet and contributed to kindle reactions of Muslim women. This research analyzes the creation of networked identities and communities and the negotiation of authorities that accompanied these reactions.

Hijab: a Semantically Complex Practice

Because the Quran does not contain specific information about the practice of veiling, the Muslim veil is often subject to meaning negotiations that makes it "semiotically overcharged" (Tarlo, 2007, p. 135). While certain Muslim women report to wear the hijab for cultural or political reasons, In France and other European countries head and face-covering have been banned because considered symbols of terrorism and gender inequality, connoting Muslim women as both submitted victims and threats for Western values (Bilge, 2010).

Material objects help the creation of religious communities based on shared aesthetic practices in allowing the mediation of the religious experience (Meyer, 2010). In the case of the veil, its materiality functions as medium to visibly mark the belonging to the Muslim community, but also gets re-mediated through circulation of images and discourses in digital spaces. This research looks at how Muslim women re-mediate their experiences with the hijab and focuses on the following questions: which are the predominant themes Muslim women employed to talk about veiling? How does the Internet allowed for the self-representation of Muslim women in relation to the burkini ban?

Exploring Muslim Women's Voices Online

The Internet can become a venue for Muslim women in Western contexts to discuss fashion and the meanings of the hijab, but also a "safe space" to address stigmatization, create counter-publics against stereotypes, and organize activism (Echchaibi, 2013; Vis, van Zoonen, & Mihelj, 2011).

Because French authorities that issued the burkini ban did not take into account Muslim women's viewpoints, it is important to analyze the emergence of digital discourses where Muslim women are producers rather than subjects of the conversation; in order to do so, this research takes into account 17 videos and 49 news and blog articles –all against the burkini ban – created and circulated in French and English by a total of 60 self-identified Muslim women, prevalently based in Europe and North America. The material is explored through a qualitative analysis that takes into account both the written and spoken content, images and graphic styles.

Freedom, Family, and Fashion

The analysis shows that the Internet is, for certain Muslim women, a venue to counteract stereotypes about the burkini and Islam in general. While the women come

from different linguistic and geographical contexts, they similarly report experiences of being Muslim in the West and create narratives that point to three common themes:

Firstly, descriptions of the material characteristics of the burkini connote it as practical for swimming and similar to a diving suit, as well as apt for sun protection. Pictures of women swimming and surfing with their burkini counteract the idea that it is “unsafe” or “unhygienic,” but rather gives hijab-wearing women freedom to participate in leisure activities in a non-segregate way.

Secondly, digital discourses refuse connections between burkini and terrorism by explaining that Islamic fundamentalists would not allow women to enjoy themselves on the beach. The non-threatening character of burkini-wearing women is enhanced by circulation of narratives and images of them conducting a fulfilling family life.

Thirdly, Muslim women discuss feminism by claiming their rights to choose to cover, criticizing also the hypersexualization of female bodies in Western culture. Through pictures of women that wear veils in fashionable styles, such narratives connote burkini-wearing women not as “submitted” subjects, but rather as women that cover their bodies feeling feminine and, in certain cases, empowered.

Conclusion: Digital Religious Authorities, Communities, Identities

The practices of re-mediation of pictures and narratives about the burkini exemplify how the Internet allow Muslim women to create alternative narratives as they can not only express themselves beyond social stereotypes and generalizations, but also gain agency on how they want to visually present themselves, discuss the material aspects of the burkini, and normalize the presence of the hijab in Western contexts.

These practices allow for the articulation of networked religion in-between offline materiality and online performances. While the narratives analyzed do not speak for all Muslim women, they show how for certain hijab-wearing women the Internet is a space of articulation of authorities, communities, and identities. The meaning of veiling is in this case not entrusted in institutional religious authorities, but relies upon the personal interpretation of women who wear it. These women form a transnational community based on shared narratives and aesthetics that virtually came together to show mutual solidarity in response to the burkini ban. The Internet functions as a “Third Space” of identity formation, where women perform unthreatening and hybrid identities in showing that they are able to live within Western societies while being Muslim.

In negotiating their head-covering practices women tend not to mention Islamic institutions and sacred texts in their narratives, as they frame burkini in terms of practical issues, personal choices, and modest fashion. Therefore, the analyzed discourses show how the Internet becomes a space where Muslim women can form a networked public that has agency in determining which aspects of their religious material practices and visual presences they wish to show, going beyond both social stigma and institutionalized religion.

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2. LIVE-STREAMING THE SACRED: ONLINE CONSTRUCTION OF AUTHENTICITY AND THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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In recent years, major religions have embraced live-streamed media for outreach to their own religious communities and to new audiences. From the Jewish Western Wall in Jerusalem to Islam's Kaaba in Mecca and beyond, live-streamed video images of many religious sites are being webcast, either during specific religious events or with continuous 24-hour feeds.

Religious believers view such live-streamed religious media not only in the privacy of their homes, but also on monitors situated in public places such as shops, hospitals, and retirement communities, as well as in religious venues (e.g. churches, mosques, religious youth centers). The innovation of live-streaming is embraced by key religious organizations and NGOs such as Aish Hatorah (Jewish), the Diocesan Association of Tarbes and Lourdes (Roman Catholic) and Makkah-Live (Islamic). The proliferation of institutional live-feeds for religious purposes raises the question of how user worldviews are shaped and how meaning is negotiated by live-streaming mediated communication from religious institutions.

We contend that exploring the meanings of live-streaming images of holy sites can shed light on the viewership, participation, and overall meanings of rituals and public gatherings in the information age. In addition, we suggest that exploring this question can illuminate the mechanisms by which religious live-streaming restores the centrality of holy sites in the religious imagination and provides traditional denominations a pathway for global outreach.

To investigate the meanings attributed to live-streaming, we draw on Walter Benjamin's renowned discussion of art's aura and authentic meaning in the age of mechanical reproduction. We suggest that engaging Benjamin's reasoning will allow a conceptual framing of the mediation between holy sites and believers, as viewed by media entrepreneurs.

For this purpose, we focus on a Monastic Catholic operation, namely the collaborative efforts in the Holy Land between the Franciscan order and the Brazil-based Canção Nova movement. The Franciscan order is the community of friars to whom the Catholic Church entrusted the mission of guarding the holy sites and the Canção Nova is a monastic community of technology-savvy believers whose evangelical ministry is operated through means of social communications. The joint efforts of the two groups have yielded a massive volume of media production as well as the construction of live-streaming feeds from sacred sites in the Holy Land. Through their media operations, the Canção Nova has started up and now currently operate one 24/7 streaming site in Nazareth and are also actively pursuing additional sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, all of which offer opportunities to explore the emergence of religious live-streaming as it occurs.

The study focused on live-streaming production between 2015 and 2017. A mixed-method approach was designed which drew upon ethnographic data gathered during fieldwork, including participant observations and interviews.

(1) Participant Observations and In-Depth Interviews – Attending ceremonies in monasteries and prominent holy sites in the Holy Land with significant video production activity, all of which form the basis for the streaming operations at hand. The lion's share of the study's findings was gleaned from 25 in-depth interviews with Franciscan and Canção Nova members, mainly volunteers, monks, and clerics who serve as webmaster production staff, on topics relating to live-streaming productions. Interviews included questions such as:

- How does the visual character of live-streaming fit your evangelizing mission?
- How does the global nature of live-streaming fit in with your evangelizing mission?
- Does the online broadcasting of religious rituals enhance their importance?
- Are there religious limitations to filming rituals and holy sites?
- Can an online feed convey holiness? How?
- Do religious groups compete for leading roles in representing the Holy Land?
- In the long run, will live digital media become part of the official (legitimate) Christian practice?

(2) Exploring Digital Footprints - Franciscan and Canção Nova productions were reviewed. Familiarity with this content supported the discussions with webmasters and enriched the understanding of the objectives and media productions of the interviewees.

Findings revealed three facets that frame webmasters' underlying mission:

1. **Evangelizing Youth** - Pushing the boundaries of religious socialization to fit the media-saturated environments of contemporary youth.
2. **Establishing Affinity Towards the Holy Land** – Among contemporary populations, forging a sense of closeness to sacred locations of the Biblical narrative.
3. **Maintaining Constant Presence of the Transcendental** – Generating a readily accessible experience of engaging with sites that utilize new media tools to mediate the divine.

The first, 'Evangelizing Youth,' is a key concern of clerics, who aim to approach the younger generation by adjusting to their digital literacy, fostering a sense of awe-inspiring engagement with the Biblical narrative, and ultimately enabling a connection with the *numinous*, in Otto's terms (1916). The second, 'Establishing Affinity Towards the Holy Land', reveals webmaster perspectives on live-streaming as an unfiltered channel for believers to engage in an experience that is traditionally available only to pilgrims and clergy who visit the ultimate in holy places. Finally, the third, 'Maintaining Constant Presence of the Transcendental', reveals web operators' desire to facilitate a global and omnipresent experience of users relating to the divine. They do so by offering a contemplative channel that believers can access through everyday devices such as smartphones and tablets, can use to meditate on live-streamed images, and ultimately to invoke God's intervention to act in the world.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin, we suggest a theoretical model that elucidates how the video feed mediates the aura of the holy site by evoking a proximity to the sacred. Accordingly, we observe a twofold impact of live-streaming. On one hand, the feed establishes a holy site as a center of worship and highlights the privileged relationship that exists between the clergy and the site. On the other hand, live-streaming enables the rise of webmasters as sources of secondary authority who can shape the online experience of users. Their authority is perhaps unexpected, but it is legitimized when they deliver live-streamed video feeds of well-established holy sites. Accordingly, in the presentation we aim to discuss how live-streaming connects believers with the divine and elucidates live-streaming's capacity to construct a sense of authenticity while transforming the religious experience, establishing secondary authority in the Catholic world, and ultimately propel religious change in the contemporary information society.

3. ALGORITHMIC ABSOLUTION: THE CASE OF CATHOLIC CONFESSIONAL APPS

Introduction

When *Confession: A Roman Catholic App* was launched in 2011 it was met with a mix of sarcasm and suspicion in the press and was widely derided as inauthentic. Yet the app remains popular and similar applications have proliferated with the same structural format: progressive stages of sorrow, confession, absolution and penance that follow the structural form and function of traditional rites of the sacrament of penance. In stark contrast these apps have received enthusiastic support from Catholic communities online and an imprimatur from Bishop Kevin Rhoades, the first of its kind. Confession as a social ritual remains relevant and these formal apps sit within a larger body of confessional platforms whereby users admit to moral deviations with varying degrees of anonymity, publicity and inferred notions of absolution and reconciliation. However, the moral dimensions of the ritual of confession combined with the computational processing of user input mark confessional apps with a particular significance. Accordingly I argue that these emergent practices are not substitutions of established forms but rather adaptations and renegotiations: of traditions, authenticity, authority and meaning. The question of confessional apps reveals a series of wider issues about the relationship between religion, digital media and culture as reflected in a rich and growing body of literature (Campbell 2005; Cheong et al. 2012; Connelly 2012; Lundby 2012).

The paper presents a case study of Catholic confessional apps that covers their design, marketing, and user feedback from review forums. My thinking moves between two parallel trajectories. The first is concerned with human perception: how is the app (and by proxy the algorithm) understood by users? How, if at all, does computational agency factor into how the app is used, how it is perceived, and how it is incorporated into everyday religious practice by users. I draw upon discussions groups to see how users self-report their experience of the app, observing that for most the computational is not even considered an issue: it is very rarely questioned and negative feedback is reserved to the reporting of technical problems (as opposed to ethical ones). The second line of thinking considers how we should conceptualise the algorithm in terms of the role it plays in this most intriguing of contexts.

Authenticity and Authority

In the context of religious practice, authenticity has two meanings that we must account for here: first, authenticity is a category through which to judge whether or not certain 'objects' are a legitimate part of a religious system. These can be symbols, beliefs, locations, rituals, etc. Secondly, it is a category with which to judge the participants in religious activity (Radde-Antweiler 2013). In other words, is the *system* authentic, and is the *experience* authentic? The second of these questions is relatively simple to address. The data is clear; users report an authentic experience over and over again. As with any ritual, the prescriptive validity stems from participation itself; the ritual is deemed authentic because the wider catholic community knows intimately the intention and the

content of the ritual. Additionally, users are observed to create their own authentication strategies; they have different ways of explaining, justifying, and integrating the apps into daily life and worship. Each must find their own way to navigate the sometimes brutal juxtaposition between technology and the ancient rituals of confession, in a process Heidebrink (2007) calls “individual rituality”.

Questions of authenticity are often problematic because when grounded in defunct dichotomies between the ‘online’ and ‘offline’. Turkle’s (1995) argument that the virtual is ‘mere simulation’ simply does not hold true. These are not ‘places’ we ‘go’ online. They do not have an *http://* or *www* prefix. They are embedded in our mobile devices, developed to be personal aids for personal practices. For the religious user, authenticity is simply what they understand to be a part of their own religious practice. Religious authority is in many ways as nebulous an idea as that of authenticity. What is really unarguable is that authority is performative, discursive and highly contextual (Cheong 2012a). What is certain is that the convergence of digital media with religion reflects an *expansion* of religious practices that results in new agents to account for in questions of authority. It is here that our attention turns to silent role of algorithmic agency.

Locating the Algorithmic

At the heart of any computational artefact is an algorithm: a set of mathematical procedures for transforming input data into output data. It sounds innocuous, yet algorithms are a key governing logic in society with ‘the power to enable and assign meaningfulness’ (Langlois 2013). The case of confessional apps has a particular veracity because of the significance of the human agent the algorithm is replacing: the Catholic priest.

Hardware and software are essentially meaningless machines until they have data to process, constituting the two halves of the ontology of the world according to computers (Manovich 1999). We must stop and consider this in the computational sense: an a confessional app this data is constituted by the moral deviations of the user: our individual and evolving catalogue of sins, recorded in perpetuity, and reduced to a series of zeros and ones. An algorithm, at its most basic, functions as *data-question-process-return*. If the input data is neutral, we can assume the return will be neutral. If the input data is moral, *by definition* the process return will have moral implications.

In theological terms a priest acts *in persona Christi* – in the person of Christ – during the Sacrament of Penance. The priest receives from the church the power of judgement over the penitent, as a direct bridge between man and God with the power of reconciliation. No matter how they are marketed people are using these apps in a way that replaces the priest with a computer programme in a manner that reassigns the transformative authority of ritual to a binary processing algorithm. Whilst these specific applications are – computationally speaking – relatively basic, they represent a much wider trend in which algorithms are now located in the moral and ethical dimensions of everyday life.

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4. HYPERMATERIALITY AND AUTHENTICITY: THE SMARTPHONE AS A RELIGIOUS RITUAL OBJECT

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Introduction

The discourse involving the authenticity of online religious rituals is almost entirely based on the perception of the internet as an immaterial space. Online rituals were often questioned as being a mere simulation or a reproduction of something “real” (Hill-Smith 2009, Radde-Antweiler 2008). MacWilliams (2004) found that people's perception of the “virtual” determined their judgment on the authenticity of online rituals.

Virtuality is understood as a realm of representations (Heim 1993) or a potentiality, an ideal immaterial dimension of reality (Deleuze 2002), rooted in practices of imagination and art-based illusions in the history of religious rituals (MacWilliams 2004).

However, in spiritual matters the ideal and the immaterial might be an advantage. An ideal space, free of the constraints of a dense globalized urban space, could be better suited to support ritual practice (Taylor 2003). According to Kapferer (2006) religious ritual is in itself a virtual technology: it is highly symbolized and representational, and its function is to virtualize a dimension of actuality. Indeed, technopagans preferred cyberspace over nature since they perceived it as a doorway to the astral plain (O'Leary 1996) and thus closer to divinity and in a better position to mediate the sacred.

In the last decade, ritual practice has extended to the mobile phone. Although both the computer and the mobile phone are internet-based, the affordances of the latter are not places we "go" to (Scot 2016) and are not included in the discourses of "cyberspace", "online", or the "virtual". Digital religion scholarship has merely begun to engage religious apps, mainly offering initial typologies (Wagner 2012, Campbell et al. 2014). A recent study is noted for demonstrating that apps raise novel transgressive challenges to traditional religions, such as replacing the moral authority of a priest with an algorithm (Scot 2016).

This paper contributes to this preliminary body of research, offering a phenomenological analysis of popular religious ritual apps from various religions and spiritual practices. The analysis draws on three years of experience of international students from various religious backgrounds at Tel Aviv University tasked with performing digital rituals during a semester. The paper argues that the smartphone functions as a hypermaterial ritual object, embedding the virtual with material properties, thus discourses of virtuality that seem outdated or exclusive to spatiality, remain relevant to ritual apps.

Doing Religion on the Mobile Phone

Mobile phones were used for religious purposes such as receiving and sending prayers, confession, and absolution, since the inception of text messaging services (Bell 2006). Upon providing internet access, they also became a conduit for sacred texts on the go (Bell 2006). However, mobile phones were not merely an extension of the internet. Their mobility and constant proximity to the body has allowed it access to additional facets of ritual practice and challenged the boundary between the sacred and the profane. Schwartz (2010) demonstrated how the camera phone has occupied a ritual role in Hassidic Judaism, redefining sacred space-time and allowing for their summoning at will, in potential conflict with Jewish ritual logic. Furthermore, GPS location technology enabled religious assistance such as pointing to the direction of Mecca/Jerusalem (Bell 2006). Mobile phones were also material cultural objects, often customized and decorated with religious symbols (Hjorth and Kim 2005).

The advent of smartphone apps engendered an explosion of religious mobile services. Wagner (2012) provided an initial typology of religious apps: prayer, ritual,

sacred text, religious social media, self-expression, and focus/meditation. Wagner's main concern is the individualization of religion and the challenges that the apps present to religious authorities and traditional means of determining authenticity. Campbell et al. (2014) expanded this typology to eleven categories based on a sample of 488 religious apps. However, Scot (2016) argues such categories almost always overlap, thus this taxonomy oversimplifies the more interesting questions we could be asking. Indeed, Scot's (2016) case study of a catholic confession apps' automated absolution of sins is a manifestation of Wagner's (2012) worry that confession apps might replace the role of the priest, bringing digital religion research to the posthuman threshold.

The Hypermateriality of the Smartphone

Both the computer and the smartphone are material objects, yet the spatial metaphor of the internet obscures the materiality of the computer. Similarly, the bodily proxy and transitional object metaphors of the smartphone stress its handheld materiality while obscuring the virtual quality of its apps. A phenomenological analysis of ritual apps demonstrates that by "transforming" into various ritual objects, smartphone affordances are repurposed to interact with the displayed images, embedding the virtual with material-like properties. The paper argues ritual apps invite a different discourse of authenticity that does not invoke the virtual as immaterial but rather as a different kind of material, digital-material (Hayles 2002). The paper offers a different criteria for taxonomy based on the digital-material interface metaphors the apps invoke.

Ritual apps raise ontological and theological questions on the metaphysics of the sacred and the authority to mediate it. For instance, if the sacred resides in the text and not in the material that stores it, why can't one be sworn with a bible app? If the purpose is to focus the attention on the divine, does it really matter if one's fingers move over the wooden, glass, or plastic beads of a rosary/mas'baha/malla or slide over animated beads onscreen? In conclusion, the paper interprets this challenge in light of the theological differences on the representation of the divine. The Jewish bible is rife with examples of representations that are tasked to mediate the divine but end up replacing it altogether, which might serve as a warning for the potential of such a technology to be idolized and become a religion (e.g. Campbell and LA Pastina 2010).

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