

Encapsulating values to expose tacit spirituality and build bespoke “Virtual Religions”

Joseph Lindley
HighWire CDT
Lancaster University
joseph.lindley@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This is a research positioning paper, proposing to explore a new paradigm for the concept of “virtual religion”. The argument is grounded in theories of universal human values [1], and the assertion that spirituality, despite its intangibility, is intrinsically linked to values [2]. By organizing spirituality, and integrating it with dogma and worship, I argue that it is possible to create instances of bespoke virtual religions, designed by, and for, the individual whom created it. These virtual religions, can be designed, practiced, amended, and shared, electronically. The specific utility of the proposed software is not posited in the paper and rather is expected to emerge through the design, building and trialing of the software with users. Anticipated uses, and directions for further research, may include work in the field of persuasive computing and software aiding personal wellbeing, or societal wellbeing.

Keywords

HCI, persuasive computing, values, spirituality, religion

1. INTRODUCTION & MOTIVATION

The intricacies of religion, faith, spirituality, agnosticism, and atheism, are intriguing and complex, and have stimulated a vast amount of thought and postulation for 1000s of years. This paper cannot attempt to explain or even appreciate the complexities and nuances that relate these constructs to one another, and it does not attempt to do so. Instead simple definitions are offered for various ‘entities’ (including values, spirituality, religion), which although not theoretically grounded definitions, *are* fit for purpose in this case, where the purpose is to explore a new paradigm for the meaning, definition of, and utility of virtual religions [3][4][5].

The core motivation for this proposal is based upon two tenets. Firstly that if one lives a spiritually rich life, various favorable outcomes will become accessible [2][3][6]. Secondly, that the popularity of ‘new atheism’, when combined with the escalation of religiously motivated violence, is fostering a new generation of staunchly anti-spiritual people [7]. My hypothesis is that the software application proposed in this paper may allow people that would not otherwise, access to the benefits of a spiritual life.

A second level of motivations, which are more speculative, are based on the premise that challenges facing the world, particularly in the realms of climate change and sustainable living, are so complicated – such wicked problems – that they can only really be addressed through a radical reassessment of individuals’ worldviews [8][9]. In order to readdress the trends and tendencies of living a life in modernity, new ways of thinking are required. Ideas of the (‘spiritually-enabled’) quadruple bottom line [10][11]

suggest that personal values (which could be described as spirituality [12]) are something that is almost entirely missing from the models for living characterized by modernity [13]. This paper asks whether software such as that described here, combined with theories of human values, and using religion as a design motif, can begin to integrate spirituality into everyday life [14] in a way that is palatable for the majority of society, religious or atheist.

2. DEFINITIONS

Defining the constructs that the rhetoric in this paper is based upon is not simple task, and thorough definitions with epistemological contexts described verbosely are outside the scope of the paper. These brief definitions are used to construct a model of religion: the model will be the foundation of the proposed software application.

Values: guiding principles, of which awareness is shared across humanity. Broad motivators influencing behavior and worldview.

Spirituality: an awareness of, and enquiry into, the ‘process of life’. The ‘lens’ any individual sees spirituality through is colored by that individual’s values.

Religion: structured spiritual practice that embodies the spiritual leanings and world of those following it, and in addition exhibits faith, dogma, and worship.

Dogma: explicit ‘truths’ that are usually constant and unchanging.

Faith: personal beliefs, usually congruent but distinct from the dogma and maybe not based upon a ‘truth’ (in the positivist sense).

Worship: a cognitive or physical practice enacted in the vision of a dogma, a faith and the spiritual-worldview of an individual.

3. NOTES ON THE MODEL

Using the definitions above, I have constructed a universal theoretical model that aims to be flexible enough to (1) describe the majority of world religions and (2) be suitable as a framework to design and provide ‘scaffolding’ for bespoke *virtual* religions.

It would be naïve to assume that attempting to design a model that can describe the majority of world religions could be done without contention: that contentiousness, and associated complexities of validity, are fully acknowledged as inherent to the proposal.

The model was developed using an iterative process that arguably lacks some academic rigor. The terms, definitions, and interplay between the constructs were tweaked subtly until a combination emerged that (based on intuition and informal consultation) appears to be fit for purpose (the requirement being to describe

existing religions, and to be a framework for describing virtual religions). Despite this lack of rigor, I posit that if one accepts the intangibility of each of the terms used to define this model, the it follows that *no* model could ever exhibit particularly high levels of rigor in their design. Therefore pursuit of a theoretically and epistemologically flawless design would be a fallacy, and a waste of time. Instead this more practical and experimentation-based, approach seems most appropriate given the exploratory nature of the proposal.

There are two rules that the model requires in order to work effectively. (1) Preconceptions of religion, and history, need to be disregarded. (2) Community is usually integral to religious movements, but in this model the community elements are not considered. Neither of the rules are *fundamental* to making the model work, and a more sophisticated second iteration may be able to exist happily without these rules in place, however in the interim these additions make the model more robust.

4. DESCRIBING THE MODEL

This theoretical model of religion is best described diagrammatically; the diagram on the following page shows the model.

The bullet points below follow the diagram starting from the top, and moving towards the bottom. Here I explain how each section interacts. It may be useful to refer to the definitions section for further clarity.

Values: all of us, regardless of attitude towards spirituality or religion, have values.

Intangible process: ‘something’ happens, that transforms pure values, into a spiritual life – this is what the software proposed here will attempt to beget.

Spirituality: emergent from this intangible process, spirituality as described in the definitions section.

Religion: in the diagram spirituality and religion have a two-way, mutually reinforcing, relationship. Religion is the organized encapsulation of spirituality, organized by the three characteristics that sit underneath religion in this model; dogma, faith, worship.

5. APPLYING THE MODEL

The model has dual purposes, as a descriptor for exiting religions, and as a framework for designing new bespoke virtual religions. The logic behind this structure is that *if* the model can effectively describe existing religions, then arguably anything else you design within the same model can, perhaps, be described as a religion itself (or, a *virtual* religion).

In order to test the first purpose of the model, personas may be created for individuals representing different religious groups. If it is possible to fill in each section of the model with parameters that appear feasible for that persona, then it follows that the model is sound. Some examples of such personas have been completed, although due to space restrictions cannot be included in this paper.

The second purpose of the model is a natural extension of the first. However in the case of the second purpose (a framework for designing new bespoke virtual religions) I anticipate the dogma and faith elements to be more diffuse than in their ‘real’ religion counterparts.

In both uses of the model it is important to remember that the relationship between spirituality and religion, as they’re defined in this paper, is a bi-directional and mutually reinforcing one.

6. INTO THE WILD

Although so far I have focused on constructs, the focus of this paper is to propose a tangible, and realizable, research offering in the form of a software application and a user study.

The majority of studies that refer to virtual religion are talking about translating traditional religions into cyber realms [15][16]. This proposal, however, is distinct in that it aims to create a *new* realm, one that has all the hallmarks (as described by the model) of religion, but that exists entirely in the image of the individual who created it. The software will allow the creation of any number of bespoke, unique, virtual religions.

The software will require input from the user, both to design the religion, and then to practice it (or worship, if you like). The initial design phase of a new religion will focus on establishing a baseline set of values for the user. In this instance I will work with the Schwartz Value System [1] (although there are competing value models available [17]). The user will initially complete a questionnaire to establish their values baseline. Having this baseline shown to them, the user can then select certain activities (physical or cognitive) that relate to values that they hold (it’s anticipated that users will relate most to values they either hold very strongly, or very weakly). The software will, over a stretch time period log and track the relationship between the baseline values, the aspirational values, and the *actual* values (inferred by recording of actions) of the users.

The dogma and faith elements of the model can either be specified ‘up front’ or included retrospectively – again at the discretion of the user. The dogma/faith should be congruent with the value-bounded activities, although judgment of this will be entrusted entirely to individuals. Using the software itself represents the worship element of the model.

7. LIMITATIONS & FURTHER WORK

As previously alluded to, this paper a collection of intertwined limitations. Defining religion, spirituality and values is a gargantuan, and in fact infinite task. Trying to create a model that can describe any religion is similarly impractical. Lastly trying to encapsulate the semantic essence of religion, spirituality and values in a software application not only requires an appreciation of abstract thought, but also must negate strongly held societal feelings towards theism, atheism and everything in between. These deep-seated limitations however do not mean that the line of inquiry is implicitly lacking in value or potential impact.

There are several factors that help to mitigate these limitations. The software as described here can be developed relatively easily without a large development overhead. A well-designed user study will rigorously account for the software’s utility. It’s important to note that although the project is *inspired* by difficult to handle constructs like religion and spirituality, it does not mean that spirituality or religion are the factors that must be *measured* in order to evaluate its usefulness. It is perfectly feasible to measure the software’s impact on less contentious factors ability exhibited by users, such as happiness, wellbeing, or empathy.

At this stage I am not attempting to posit a specific purpose or utility for this software. However I do propose that this is a valuable research project to establish what, if any, uses can derived from software designed to allow the creation of bespoke instances of virtual religions. Further study will be informed by the initial findings, and future work may seek to interrogate what specific issues that this type of application may affect, or how different user demographics are affected by using this type of software.

8. REFERENCES

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9. DIAGRAMS

Fig 1. A model of religion

