

Via Modem: Religion in the Digital Age

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The Digital Age

A recent report published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) entitled *How's Life in the Digital Age?* describes the increasing pervasiveness of digital technology in many countries in the world and its impact on societies and individuals. According to the report, from 2010 to 2016, 'the number of fixed broadband and subscriptions increased by 26% in OECD countries, while mobile internet subscriptions increased from 824.5 million to 3,864 million worldwide.'¹ *Statista* provides slightly different numbers: it states that there are 4.3 billion smart phone users in 2016, and predicts that by 2019, the figure will be 4.68 billion or 67 percent of the world's population.² According to the OECD Report, it was the advent of the internet in the 1990s that 'led some of the most transformative consequences of digitalisation for societal and individual wellbeing,' the report adds.³ Scholars like Steve Jones have pointed out that the internet is not just a technological tool but should be properly considered as a social landscape. This is because it is 'made up of people and thus as the "new public space" it conjoins traditional mythic narratives of progress with strong modern impulses towards self-fulfilment and personal development.' Since the appearance of the internet, several other new technologies that will impact society in far-reaching and unpredictable ways have emerged. These include mobile devices, the Internet-of-Things (IoT), Big Data Analytics, Artificial Intelligence and blockchain. Their appearance and ubiquity in the twenty-first century signal the dawn of a new age, which commentators have described as the Information Age, the Computer Age, the New Media and the Digital Age.

¹ OECD, *How's Life in the Digital Age? Opportunities and Risks of the Digital Transformation for People's Well-Being* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019). See https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/science-and-technology/how-s-life-in-the-digital-age_9789264311800-en#page4 (accessed 1 July 2019).

² See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/274774/forecast-of-mobile-phone-users-worldwide/> (accessed 1 July 2019).

³ *Ibid.*

The Digital Age may best be broadly characterised as an epoch where people are ‘networked’ through various devices and media such as the computer, mobile phone and the internet. This digital wave, which has swept across the globe, has redefined our social contexts and revolutionised the way in which we relate to one another. In his important work on the information age, Manuel Castells discusses the phenomenon of the network society where social relationships have become increasingly decentralised and yet at the same time profoundly interconnected. These radical changes in social relationship, Castells argues, have significant and sometimes worrying ramifications for our systems of labour, production and power.⁴ Lee Raine and Barry Wellman have shown that human relationships based on networks that transcend space and time have transcended traditional conceptions based on fixed groups set within hierarchical structures. These changes have transformed the way in which we work and play, provide support, learn and make decisions. They write: ‘The social operating system is personal – the individual is at the autonomous centre just as she is reaching out from her computer; *multiuser* – people are interacting with numerous diverse others; *multitasking* – people are doing several things; and *multithreaded* – they are doing them more or less simultaneously.’⁵

The digital age has transformed and complexified even the most basic medium of communication. For example, it has forever transformed the traditional text and profoundly changed the way in which we communicate and share information. It has revolutionised researching, writing, editing, publication and delivery and spawned the phenomenon known as hyper-textuality. Unlike the traditional text, hyper-textuality has attributes such as ‘dynamism, inter-connection of texts and digital objects (allowing the creation of webs), interactivity, non-linearity, multisequentiality, possibilities for simultaneous co-authoring and community authoring (e.g., wikis), and multimediality.’⁶ Anita L. Cloete points out that the ‘interactiveness of digital technology imply that people do not only use technology but are also cocreators thereof when using it.’⁷ However, such non-linear interactivity means that digital media can be easily subjected to modification, making manipulability one of the key components of this new media.

⁴ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Volume 1 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Malden, M.A: Blackwell, 2000).

⁵ Lee Raine and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 9.

⁶ Yoef Gotlieb, ‘Text and Hypertext in the Digital Age’, *The 21st Century*, <https://21century.wordpress.com/glossary/vol-i-no-1/text-and-hypertext-in-the-digital-age-by-yosef-gotlieb/> (access 1 July 2019).

⁷ Anita Cloete, ‘Living in a Digital Culture: The Need for Theological Reflection’, *HTS Teologiese / Theological Studies*, February 2015, 2.

Commentators have also raised broader philosophical issues that have emerged in the digital age that have serious implications to society. Digitisation has blurred, made more fluid, or in some cases even removed certain boundaries that have framed our perception of reality. For example, it has blurred the boundaries between human and machine, and between work and play, the real and the virtual. Digital technology has also created a disjunction between the online and offline self, raising important questions about identity and authenticity. 'Digital media', writes Nancy Baym, 'calls to question the very authenticity of our identities and relationships and practice.'⁸ But digitalisation has also forced us to ask even more fundamental philosophical questions, not just 'who is the real self', but 'is there such a thing as a real self?' In addition, the digital media has raised questions concerning presence, absence and embodiment. Writers such as Vincent Miller have proposed the concept of 'connected presence' to describe how one can be absent but also present at the same time due to the connectivity that digitality enables, regardless of one's actual physical location.⁹

One of the boundaries that the new media technology has blurred or removed is that between the private and the public. As more people use social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest to share their personal lives, beliefs and preferences with others with similar interests, the boundaries between the private and the public become increasingly porous. As Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner explain,

Though such spaces may appear to be private, where information is shared among friends, because of the tenuous nature of privacy settings and the fact that data such as tweets are publicly archived, what is perceived as private is often a publicly accessible data trail of the individual preferences and patterns of behaviour.¹⁰

This has given rise to a phenomenon known as 'publicized privacy'. According to John Sloop and Joshua Gunn, 'publicized privacy' is the situation that obtains when new communication technologies 'create an ideology or sensation of freedom that ironically leads to heightened states of surveillance and discipline.'¹¹ The new media has resulted in increasing amounts of our personal information being shared intentionally or unintentionally, and made accessible online. Once in cyberspace, how these data and information are disseminated and used is beyond our control. They are no longer personal property but have become a public and malleable artefact. They can be

⁸ Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 5.

⁹ Vincent Miller, *Understanding the Digital Culture* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2011), 203.

¹⁰ Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016), 57.

¹¹ John Sloop and Joshua Gunn, 'Status Control: An Admonition Concerning Publicized Privacy of Social Networking,' *The Communication Review*, Volume 13, Number 4, 2010: 292.

monitored, manipulated, and co-opted into unauthorised versions and, most worryingly, used by malicious actors for nefarious activities.

Besides ‘publicized privacy’ digital technology has also introduced other interesting paradoxes. For example, social media and other forms of digital communication have simultaneously brought about an expansion and contraction of the world. As Steve Coster explains, through this new media we ‘can broadcast intimate personal details to global subscribers, while also watching international geopolitical events in real-time video – all from our pillow.’¹² In addition, while digital media has in unprecedented ways opened up opportunities for exploration and contribution, it also presents ‘an increased risk of laziness, destructiveness and wastefulness.’ Thus, while we can connect with almost anyone on Twitter, we have also blinkered our view of the world by filtering our settings such that we see only tweets that echo our own viewpoint. A similar tendency for sloth and inattentiveness has accompanied the advent of the Global Positioning System. As Coster has again perceptively pointed out, you can ‘get yourself anywhere with GPS, and so never need to know your way around.’¹³

Needless to say, the digital age also has profound ramifications on religion in general, and Christianity in particular. In his article entitled, ‘The Mediatisation of Religion’ the Danish scholar Stig Hjavard lists several ways in which religion has been impacted by the new media. He notes firstly that the digital media has become an important – debatably, the primary – source for religious issues. Secondly, under the influence of the new media, religious experiences and information are often shaped and presented according to the demands of popular genres. And, finally, the media has taken over many functions of institutionalised religion such as spiritual direction, catechesis and moral guidance.¹⁴ Stewart Hoover maintains that one of the chief concerns as we reflect on religion in the digital age is an appreciation of how religion is expressed, understood and performed through digital media. Such discussions are often complex because it must take into account the changes in media technologies as well as changes in religion as it adapts to the new culture. As Hoover explains, ‘It must understand the religion “object” in a way that can account for, and hold in tension, the impulses and meanings surrounding it, in ways that can chart the contribution it makes to digital media and that it receives from these media practices.’¹⁵

¹² Steve Coster, ‘Both Utopia and Dystopia: The Digital Age of Workplaces’, *Dossier*, Set/Oct 2015, 46.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Stig Hjavard, ‘The Mediatisation of Religion: Theorising Religion, Media, and Social Change’, *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Volume 12, Number 2, 2011: 124.

¹⁵ Stewart M. Hoover, ‘Forward: Practice, Autonomy, and Authority in the Digitally Religious and Digitally Spiritual’, in *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures*, ed. By Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren and Charles Ess (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), ix.

The Church in the Digital Age

We turn our attention now to how the Church should appropriately respond to the digital culture. At the outset, Christians should acknowledge the fact that they are already inhabit a digital world and that this new technology is exerting considerable control over our way of life. In his 2013 message for World Communications Day, Pope Benedict XVI asserts that ‘The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young.’¹⁶ Today, the internet is indeed the place where we keep in touch with family and friends, form new relationships, do business and get the latest local and international news. There is therefore no question about turning back the clock or extracting ourselves from this digital environment. The Church must embrace this new reality and use the tools that it provides for her ministry and mission. To quote another Roman Catholic Pontiff – Pope Paul VI – who in his Apostolic Exhortation of 1975, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (‘Evangelisation of the Modern World’) stated with remarkable prescience that ‘The Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect.’¹⁷ But the Church must never use the new media or embrace the realities and cultures it engenders uncritically.

In the past two decades or so there have been some attempts to reflect theologically and Christianly on the implications of the digital age for culture and society, and for the Church and Christian discipleship. The CODEC Research Centre for Digital Theology at Durham University is certainly blazing the trail in this new field of research and theological reflection. But what exactly is digital or cyber- theology? How is it similar and dissimilar to other attempts to reflect on technology and culture from the standpoint of the Gospel and Christian tradition? In his paper entitled, ‘Cyber/Digital Theology: Rethinking about Our Relationship with God and Neighbour in the Digital Environment’, Anthony Le Duc, *SVD* defines cyber- or digital theology as ‘the systematic reflection on the transformative impact of the digital age on the various dimensions of one’s faith life and his / her response to this ever-changing milieu.’¹⁸ For Peter Singh, cybertheology is ‘the intelligence of faith

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, ‘Social Networks: Portals of Truth and Space; New Spaces for Evangelisation’, Message for the 47th World Communications Day, Sunday, 12 May 2013. See https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.html (accessed 2 July 2019).

¹⁷ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, para 45. See http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html (accessed 2 July 2019).

¹⁸ Anthony Le Duc, svd. ‘Cyber/Digital Theology: Rethinking about Our Relationship with God and Neighbour in the Digital Environment’, *Religion and Social Communication*, Vol, 13, No. 2, 2015, 140.

in a cyber age which influences the way we think, learn, communicate and live.’¹⁹ Stressing that cybertheology involves rigorous theological reflection and distinguishing it from social critique, the Jesuit theologian Antonio Spadaro asserts that

Cybertheological reflection is always a reflexive knowledge that starts from the experience of faith ... Cybertheology is not, therefore, a sociological reflection on religiosity on the internet, but is the fruit of faith that frees from itself a cognitive impulse at a time when the Web’s logic marks the way of thinking, knowing, communicating, and living.²⁰

This, of course, does not mean that theologians should not take the important work of sociologists and scholars in media studies and computational science seriously. Rather, it is a call to evaluate the new media technology and the cultures it creates from the Christian standpoint, using the immense resources found in Scripture and the Christian tradition. And finally, Debbie Herring has helpfully categorized the three different aspects of cybertheology as theology *in, of* and *for* cyberspace.²¹

In *Networked Theology* Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner argue that cyber- or networked theology must address the questions about the relationship between the physical and digital worlds. These questions, they insist, must relate to important issues surrounding human identity, human relationships and what it means to be a community. In addition, a cyber- or networked theology must never neglect ethical questions that deal with the way in which Christians can and must live wisely and wholesomely in both physical and digital spaces. For this reason, they explore the question of who is the neighbour and how one must treat one’s neighbour in this digital culture. Summarising the central concerns of cyber- or networked theology, Campbell and Garner write:

Networked theology takes seriously the belief that God’s involvement with human beings is not limited to the purely physical, everyday world but is also active in the digital locations we create and inhabit. It requires that we treat individuals and communities as subjects and persons, but not objects and things; it sees our relationship with God in Christ as integral to how we live and treat others in a world where the digital and physical overlap every day. Moreover, it calls us to take seriously some of the very real identity issues that arise out of the digital technology and media being

¹⁹ M. Peter Singh, ‘An Overview of Cybertheology’ (Paper presented at Seminar on Ekklesiology in Cyber Age, Bangalore, June 26-27, 2014), Quoted by Le Duc, *ibid.*

²⁰ Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 17.

²¹ Debbie Herring, Cybertheology.net. See <http://www.cybertheology.net/> (accessed 2 July 2019).

created and to think imaginatively about how we engage with those issues faithfully, lovingly and justly.²²

Digital theology must offer a theological assessment of the digital revolution and the cultures that it spawns in a way that is robust and honest. Put differently, it must take both the anticipated utopias and dystopias, promises and perils that this new reality presents seriously. To do this, it must never underestimate the profound power that the digital media has over people's lives. In the document 'The Church and the Internet' (2002), the Pontifical Council for Social Communications of the Catholic Church notes that the internet has brought about 'revolutionary changes in commerce, education, politics, journalism, the relationship of nation to nation and culture to culture – changes not just in how people communicate but in how they understand their lives.'²³ As we have seen, the internet can no longer be seen merely as a tool that we use for connection and communication. It has become so intricately a part of our lives that it is more akin to a 'habitat', an 'social space' or 'reality' that we inhabit, a domain in which we live our lives and conduct our affairs. Antonio Spadaro explains:

The internet is therefore not at all a simple instrument of communication, which one can choose to use, but it has evolved into a cultural 'environment' that determines a style of thought, creating new territories and new types of education, contributing also to the definition of a new way to stimulate the intelligence and to tighten relationships. It is a way to live in and organize our world. It is not a separate environment, but it is becoming ever more integrated into our everyday lives.²⁴

As digital technology becomes more and more an inextricable part of our lives, it begins to shape us in subtle but significant ways, not only changing the way we see our world but also how we behave. As Maggi Savin-Baden and John Reader assert: 'Technology is not something out there or detached from us that we happen to employ when it suits our purposes to do so, it is always already part and parcel of what we are and might become as humans.'²⁵ Theologians must reflect on the impact of the digital culture and discern the possible distortions that it might introduce and promote. I stress this point because I agree with writers such as Spadaro who repeatedly emphasise that the Church must never be so eager to embrace digital technology that it fails to critique it

²² Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 95-6.

²³ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, 'The Church and Internet', http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/peccs/documents/rc_pc_peccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html (accessed 3 July 2019).

²⁴ Spadaro, *Cybertheology*, 3.

²⁵ Maggi Savin-Baden and John Reader, *Technology Transforming Theology: Digital Impacts* (Lancashire: William Temple Foundation 2018), 17.

with sufficient depth or simply trivialise or brush aside its deleterious consequences.

However, as I have mentioned earlier, the Church must not because of these difficulties and challenges keep her distance from these developments or refuse to take advantage of the digital era and seize the opportunities it opens up for the propagation of the Gospel. Although these new technologies are the products of human creativity and ingenuity and are thus tainted by human sinfulness, the Church must acknowledge that they are also gifts to humanity that God has supplied through his common grace. It therefore behoves the Church to make use of them in creative ways to fulfil her mission. As Pope John Paul II has so eloquently pointed out almost thirty years ago, the Church must be grateful for the new technology that can serve as a depository of the theological, spiritual and theological literature of the Church.²⁶ Thus, pastors should take advantage of the new media by creating their own social media accounts and blogs, making available their sermons and reflections on different religious themes and topics. Churches and Christian organisations should also post sermons, videos and articles on their websites for the public. Christians must recognise the fact that the digital media has enabled seekers to search for God beyond the confines or limits of traditional channels like the Church or her ministers. And it is there, in cyberspace, that they may encounter the Gospel through the witness of the Church. As Joseph Macalanggan puts it, by using cybertechnology ‘the Church enriches peoples’ lives and faith and even bring other back to the Church especially those who are no longer active, those who have lost their faith and confidence, as well as those who have turned their backs on the Church entirely.’²⁷

Notwithstanding the potentials of the new media for evangelization and catechesis, there are also serious challenges and obstacles that the Church must recognise even as she takes advantage of the technology. There can be found in cyberspace a plethora of information on religion and Christianity from innumerable sources – not all of which are trustworthy – that compete with the

²⁶ In his message for the 24th World Communications Day (Sunday, 27 May 1990) entitled, ‘The Christian Message in a Computer Culture’, Pope John Paul II writes: ‘Far from suggesting that the Church should stand aloof or try to isolate herself from the mainstream of these events, the Council Fathers saw the Church as being in the midst of human progress, sharing the experiences of the rest of humanity, seeking to understand them and to interpret them in the light of faith.’ He adds: ‘Surely we must be grateful for the new technology which enables us to store information in vast man-made artificial memories, thus providing wide and instant access to the knowledge which is our human heritage, to the Church’s teaching and tradition, the words of Sacred Scripture, the counsels of the great masters of spirituality, the history and traditions of the local Churches, of Religious Orders and lay institutes, and to the ideas and experiences of initiators and innovators whose insights bear constant witness to the faithful presence in our midst of a loving Father who brings out of his treasure new things and old (cf. Mt 13:52).’ https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011990_world-communications-day.html (accessed 3 July 2019).

²⁷ Joseph V, Macalanggan, ‘Experiencing God in Cyberspace: The Role of Cybertechnology in Doing Theology’, *Scientia Bedista*, Volume 4, March 2017, 117.

resources provided by orthodox Christian organisations. This can be both overwhelming and bewildering for someone who wishes to get a handle on a particular religious topic. A simple search on Google using the word ‘God’, for example, yields over a billion and a half entries! Algorithms may become the unseen guide for Christians who search the web for religious resources, taking the place of their pastors and church leaders. Some of these websites can even be purveyors of misinformation or falsehoods about Christianity and other religions. Other websites and media platforms can be dangerous catalysts for religious fanaticism, extremism and even terrorism.²⁸

The question of authority therefore has become pressing and acute for religion in cyberspace. The internet is the place where what constitutes religious authority and leadership and which individual or group should be seen as the gatekeeper to religious interpretation and knowledge is constantly being renegotiated. The internet has spawned forums that discuss religious and theological issues where religious bloggers – ‘theoblogians’ – are aplenty, writers with no formal education in religion or theology but whose popularity sometimes give them the status of ‘experts’. In this way, the digital media has brought about a clash of ‘orthodoxies’ (where orthodoxies are placed in quotation marks). In this regard also, digital media has not only allowed a proliferation of religious material, it has also changed the way in which theology itself is done, fashioned after Wikipedia. Commandeering informatics jargon, Justin Baeder calls this ‘open source theology’ which emphasises the collaborative approach where different authors are free to edit and add a text.²⁹ Andrew Perriman uses the same expression to describe a new way of doing theology that is ‘exploratory, open to conclusions, incomplete, less preoccupied with establishing fixed points and boundaries than with nourishing dialogue that both reminds us of and is constructive between, text and context.’³⁰ Some theologians, however, have cautioned – rightly, in my view – that such ‘communitarian’ or ‘collaborative’ approaches to doing theology can introduce serious distortions to the concept of *depositum fidei*.

‘Wikipedia theology’ relates to the issue of religious authority. Which website, forum or blogger should be regarded as the authoritative interpreter of the Bible or a particular ecclesiastical tradition? As Campbell and Garner point out, in ‘new media culture authority may be constituted primarily on the basis of reputation systems (e.g., number of likes on Facebook, followers on Twitter, link rankings on blogs). It is the breath of social network online that elevates one’s voice and position online.’³¹ These ‘unofficial’ and ‘unsanctioned’ but

²⁸ See Sulaiman A. Osho, ‘The Militarisation of Religions in the Digital Age’, in *Religion Online: How Digital Technology is Changing the Way We Worship and Prayer*, Volume 1, edited by August E. Grant, Amanda F.C. Sturgill, Chiung Hwang Chen and Daniel A. Stout (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2019), 194-213.

²⁹ See <http://www.radicalcongruency.com>.

³⁰ <http://www.opencourcetheology.net>.

³¹ Campbell and Garner, *Networked Theology*, 74.

popular sites highlight the challenge that the internet poses to the traditional and orthodox (or legitimate) sources of theological knowledge, both online and offline. One's perception of God and understanding of Christianity could be shaped by a popular but idiosyncratic blogger than by the resources provided by officially sanctioned websites. Obviously, this problem is more acute for the Protestant Christian than for a Roman Catholic or an Orthodox. While pastors and church leaders must encourage their members to take advantage of the resources available online, they must be careful to point them only to reliable sources. However, due to the diversity of websites and forums that can be found online and their 'democratisation', this will prove to be a very difficult task indeed.

Networks and *Koinonia*

An important question for theological reflection as the Church ventures into the brave new digital world has to do with human relationships or community. As we have seen, digital technology platforms have enabled people to be connected to one another in unprecedented ways, often transcending space and time. The language of community is sometimes used to describe these digital-media enabled connectivity and social bonds. Of course, different platforms are used to form different kinds of networks or communities. For example, Facebook is often used for social interactions where one could become friends with others to discuss various interests and share day-to-day experiences, while LinkedIn is a professional network. The question that Anita Cloete raises in her theological reflections on the digital culture in this respect is an important one that is worthy of serious attention: 'At the heart of community lie relationships, and the question that is frequently asked is whether these virtual communities could be seen as valid, real and authentic.'³²

Unsurprisingly, there is no consensus among authors on how this question ought to be answered. In his book *SimChurch: Being Church in the Virtual World*, Douglas Estes asserts that there is little difference between human relationships in the real and virtual worlds. '[A] virtual world', he writes, 'is a created space where people can interact as if in the real world, but through some kind of technological medium.'³³ Not every author, however, is as positive and sanguine as Estes. Some are of the view that relationships on social media are often 'flattened' because of the nature of the technology itself. For example, on Facebook our closest family and friends and the people whom we hardly know are collapsed into the one undifferentiated category, 'friend'. On Twitter, everyone that is connected with us is our 'follower' regardless of

³² Cloete, 'Living in a Digital Culture', 4.

³³ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 24.

the actual nature of our relationship with them. In creating categories such as ‘friend’ and ‘follower’ and in using them in a particular way, social media has also changed the essential meaning of these concepts, often in distorting ways. In addition, social media can encourage the ‘commodification’ of relationships because, as Brett McCracken has perceptively noted, ‘In the world of Facebook, our “friends” are also destined to become collectible commodities and status symbols, things we collect to adorn the “walls” of our own online environs.’³⁴

Other commentators are of the view that it is perhaps a misnomer to describe online social networks as communities. This is due to the marked ‘individualism’ that pervades online networks where people are motivated to make these connections based solely on personal interests and choice, resulting in the transient and nomadic nature of their membership. This phenomenon has been described by authors such as community sociologist Barry Wellman as ‘networked individualism’, whereby the individual chooses to be part of a network based entirely on their interests and needs.³⁵ Some writers therefore insist that these networks are not community forming relationships. At best, they are what Nancy Baym has called ‘networked collectivism’, meaning that ‘groups of people now network throughout the internet and related mobile media, and in-person communication, creating a shared but distributed identity.’³⁶ Explaining the kind of relationships forged in these ‘individualised’ networks, Cloete writes:

Relationships that are formed through online communities are therefore person-centred and need-centred than place-centred. It further means that each individual has his or her own personal community, which also constitutes a shift in the nature of community. Community therefore hinges on individualized networks.³⁷

The advantage of networked individualism, as some see it, is that it encourages active participation and exchange with people from diverse backgrounds. For example, crowdsourcing and problems solving through the use of blogs have brought people with diverse expertise and experiences together. And social media platforms such as Facebook have brought family and friends (sometimes called ‘friendship tribes’) who are geographically separated from one another together for mutual support and encouragement. But the problems with networked individualism must not be trivialised. The phenomenon has often encouraged loose and fragmented networks of relationships that lacked

³⁴ Brett McCracken, ‘The Separation of Church and Status: How Online Social Networking Helps and Hurts the Church’, *Princeton Theological Review*, Volume 17, Issue 2, 2010:26.

³⁵ Barry Wellman, ‘Networks as Personal Communities’, in Barry Wellman and S.D. Berkowitz (eds.) *Social Structures: Networked Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 130-84.

³⁶ Nancy Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 101.

³⁷ Cloete, ‘Living in a Digital Culture’, 3.

commitment and depth. As Wellman and Raine have pointed out, networked individualism has created conditions where ‘people function more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members.’³⁸ It is for these and other reasons that some authors are hesitant to describe social groups in cyberspace as communities.

These discussions are important because of their direct bearing on the whole notion of online religious communities. Online networks or communities are also spaces where people talk about and even practice their religions, resulting in concepts like ‘digital religion’, ‘religion online’ and ‘online religion’. The latter two must be distinguished from each other: ‘religion online’ refers to the information about a certain religion that can be found on the internet while ‘online religion’ refers to religious practices that are performed online. Thus, the former represents a one-way communication, but the latter involves reciprocity to some degree.³⁹ It is important to distinguish the two ways in which religion is present in cyberspace because while many writers may approve of the former (online religion), quite a number would have reservations about the latter (religion online).

Be that as it may, some writers are of the view that in this digital age, the concept of the online religious community or an online church must be taken seriously. As early as 1998, the Barna Research Group prophesied that ‘The Cyberchurch is coming.’ In its 2001 *Cyberchurch Report*, the Barna Group noted that the idea of online worship is least appealing to the people it surveyed compared to other net-based faith activities like reading online devotionals, listening to online sermons and searching for online articles on religion. However, Barna predicted that by 2011 over 50 million Americans will be seeking spiritual experiences on the internet rather than in brick-and-mortar churches.⁴⁰

There are also Christian writers who have argued quite energetically for the place of cyberchurches and the unique role they can play. For example, the Nigerian Roman Catholic priest, Justine John Dyikuk has written favourably on the creation of an online church, which he envisions as:

A forum where the message of the gospel is transmitted either in English, French or vernacular through short messaging systems, Sunday and weekday reflections, rich Christian photo-enhanced messages, called tunes, hymns and videos on YouTube ...⁴¹

³⁸ Wellman and Raine, *Networked*, 19.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁰ Cited in Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are One in the Network* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 193.

⁴¹ Justine John Dyikuk, ‘Christianity and the Digital Age: Sustaining the Online Church’, *International Journal of Journalism and Mass Communication*, Volume 3, Number 1, August 2017: 47.

While cognisant of its pitfalls, Dyikuk is nonetheless convinced that ‘The need for an On-line Church cuts across Catholic, Protestant/Evangelical and Pentecostal persuasions.’ The call to embrace digital communication, he insists, is ‘a call for Christendom as a whole.’⁴² Other writers have explored how offline and online religious communities can be brought into creative and constructive relationship. Some writers have argued that offline religious communities can be impacted, shaped and sustained by online communities,⁴³ while others opine that online religious communities may one day displace or even replace offline communities altogether. Still others propose a complex relationship between online and offline communities where online communities do not merely reproduce the familiar structures of the offline churches but incorporates the features uniquely associated with the digital media.⁴⁴

Online religious communities can make available opportunities for people from all corners of the globe to ‘congregate’ in cyberspace and participate in religious activities. The formation of a new shared-space via digital media that allows people to meet in a way that transcends physical and geographical space has resulted in what sociologist Anthony Giddens has described as ‘disembedded relationships’.⁴⁵ While such online platforms appear to welcome people from vastly different backgrounds to participate in their activities, it would be a mistake to think that such communities are necessarily and always characterised by inclusivity and diversity (this is another instance of the paradoxical nature of the digital age alluded to above). Online religious communities, while attracting people from different parts of the world, may also forge a form of homogeneity that only endorses a particular theological viewpoint or practice while excluding others. The disembedded nature of online relationships also suggests that the compositions of these communities are often quite fluid, in the sense that individuals can join or leave on their own terms, exasperating the religious consumerism that is already seen in their offline counterparts. The question of whether online religious networks can be properly described as communities also returns us to the issue of embodiment. Scholars like Heidi Campbell have described online religious communities as ‘the congregation of the disembodied’,⁴⁶ and Ally Ostrowski has raised the legitimate point that ‘there is a concern in Christianity that the physical

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Pauline Hope Cheong, ‘Authority’ in H. A. Campbell (ed.), *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 78.

⁴⁴ Tim Hutchings, ‘Creating Church Online: A Case-Study Approach to Religious Experience’, *Studies in World Christianity*, Volume 13, Issue 2, 2011: 1112-1119.

⁴⁵ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

⁴⁶ Heidi A. Campbell, ‘Community’, in Heidi A. Campbell (ed.), *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 61.

presence of other worshippers is necessary.’⁴⁷ Some authors have argued that because of the Incarnation, the bodily presence of Christians in a specific place is important in the Christian understanding of *koinonia* or community.⁴⁸ The question whether the physical presence of Christians in one geographical location is imperative for them to be an *ekklesia* (‘assembly’) therefore demands careful consideration.

It is important to note, however, that online relationships are not always as superficial and fleeting as some critics have portrayed them. There is a sense in which profound similarities can be found between virtual and real worlds, and therefore between online and offline relationships and communities. Insofar as the virtual world must be distinguished from the fictional world, we have to say that the virtual world must be regarded as a mode of reality. As Cloete has perceptively pointed out, ‘Online communities represent social spaces where people still meet “face-to-face” but with a new and different understanding of what it means to “meet” and “face” someone.’⁴⁹ Thus, there are reasons to think that online relationships and communities should be regarded as in some sense valid, real and authentic. ‘Despite the perceived limitations of the Web’s mediated relationships,’ Le Duc argues,

the reality and the prevalence of such relationships require that we do not dismiss them categorically but attempt to recognise their existence as well as to see how they may help expand present parameters for what it means to be in relationship with someone or what it means to call someone a neighbour.⁵⁰

In her investigation on what people generally look for in a community, Heidi Campbell identified the following chief features.⁵¹ People generally are looking for committed relationships in a community which truly cares for them. They desire value and want to be in community of value where they are themselves valued as its members. They seek not only for consistent communication but also one that is characterised by an appropriate level of intimacy that allows them to share freely and openly about their spiritual lives. And finally, they want to be in a community which gathers around a shared faith. In her reflection on whether these requirements are met in online religious

⁴⁷ Ally Ostrowski, ‘Cyber Communication: Finding God in the Little Box’, *Journal of Religion & Society*, 8, 2006:7.

⁴⁸ For example, Simon Holt has argued that incarnational theology has ‘its impact upon every aspect of life, from our daily work to the food we eat, from the places we choose to inhabit to the relationships that colour our lives. God is the God of place.’ *God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood* (Brunswick East, Australia: Acorn Press, 2007), 83.

⁴⁹ Cloete, ‘Living in a Digital Culture’, 4.

⁵⁰ Le Duc, ‘Cybertheology’, 148.

⁵¹ Campbell, *Exploring Religious Communities*, 187.

communities, Campbell concludes that ‘the characteristics of the online community relates directly to the desirable social process of community in general.’ Her conclusions are corroborated by other studies, for example, that conducted by Anita Blanchard and M. Lynne Markus.⁵² Most crucially, Campbell’s study showed that many members of online religious communities find that their expectations are to a larger or lesser extent met by the networks to which they belong. However, Campbell’s study also shows that for many, the online religious community is at best a supplement to the offline church and not its substitute. She cites this response from a member of the Online Church (OLC) in London whom she interviewed:

You can’t live a total church life within OLC. You can’t be involved in Sunday School classes ... in leading music ... The fact that I do not have a regular church at present is of great sadness to me. The OLC is not something which takes the place of a local church for me and never will be.⁵³

Many cite the lack of physical contact as the main reason why they find virtual or online religious communities wanting. As a member of the Anglican Communion Online (AC) puts it: ‘I can’t share Communion with the List, and I can only very rarely hug them.’⁵⁴ This means that while there is a place for online religious communities, although, they can never replace offline communities and local churches. As Pope John Paul II has perceptively asserted nearly twenty years ago: ‘Electronically mediated relationships can never take the place of the direct human contact.’⁵⁵

Digitalising the Church

How should the Church take advantage of the new digital media and technology for her ministry? Besides the profound issues that we have discussed in previous sections, what are some of the practical issues that the Church has to consider – issues related to the selection and use of the new media technology?

Before we discuss these practical issues, however, we must attend to the reservations expressed by some Christians concerning the new technology.

⁵² Anita Blanchard and M. Lynne Markus, ‘The Experienced “Sense” of a Virtual Community: Characteristics and Processes’, *ACM. SIGMIS Database*, 35.1 (Winter 2004), 64-79.

⁵³ Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, 176-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵⁵ Pope John Paul II, ‘Message for World Communication Day 2002’, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html (accessed 6 July 2019).

Some Christians are of the view that the Church should not embrace the new media because of its negative uses and influences. Such a response is of course not new. For example, we may recall that some Christians had responded very negatively to the television when it first came onto the scene because of the negative values that this new device can help to promote. In responding to this negative attitude, Justine Dyikuk insists that Christians should not refrain from using the new media just because it has been used for nefarious activities. He argues that the tools provided by the digital age can be used for noble ends by the Church, especially in relation to young people who are adept in the new media. In ‘Christianity in the Digital Age’ he writes: ‘Christians must not make the excuse that these media have been polluted – if they are so polluted, who would purify them? Will their shying away from using them make the faithful especially young people use them less?’⁵⁶

The attitude of Christians towards the new media is to a large extent dependent on their perception of what it is about and the powers it possesses. In his article entitled ‘The Media of Popular Piety’, John Ferre discusses three ways in which religious groups have understood the role of the media.⁵⁷ Some groups view the media as a conduit. Here the media is seen merely as a neutral delivery system that transports content from the media producer to the user or consumer. Others maintain that the media is not a neutral conduit for information but a value-laden cultural artefact or environment. According to this view, media users must recognise the powerful and even seductive influence of the media and discern the value-systems that it is promoting. The third view, which occupies the middle ground, understands the media as a social institution. According to this view, the media is not value-neutral because it reflects the worldview of their designers and intended users. These values can and do influence users to take a certain perspective or to endorse certain behaviours. But at the same time, media technology is also a tool that can be shaped by the people who create it and those who use it. According to this view, while the use of media requires discernment, the outcomes of media use are never inevitable.

As John Ferre has convincingly argued, in using the new media we must acknowledge that both ‘content and technology matter, but neither is determinative.’⁵⁸ In concluding their discussion of this approach to the media, Campbell and Garner write:

With this understanding, religious groups need not shy away from media, because they can purposely shape technology for their goals and present media content in light of their beliefs. However, we

⁵⁶ Dyikuk, ‘Christianity and the Digital Age’, 47.

⁵⁷ John Ferre, ‘The Media of Popular Piety’, in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion and Culture*, ed. J. Mitchell and S. Marriage (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 83-92.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

must critically reflect on how the nature of media technology may impact their communities. This requires religious communities to be both technologically savvy and able to discern the long-range implications of their choices.⁵⁹

The Church should therefore take full advantage of the social media platforms such as Facebook Twitter, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Instagram, 2go, Pinterest, Snapchat, Skype, Facetime and blogs not only to reach out to her members, but also to the wider public. However, if the Church is resolved not to promote the very excesses and distortions she has cautioned against, she must always use the new media wisely and never uncritically. This means that in using the new media for her ministries and mission, the Church must always be guided by its core theological beliefs and values.

Campbell and Garner describe this approach as the ‘religious-social shaping of technology’, where the faith community decides which technology is most suitable for its ministry. To exercise discernment and to shape technology according to the community’s values and goals is to refuse to submit to the tyranny of technological determinism. ‘If the technology encourages behaviours or beliefs that run counter to the ethos of the community, they write, ‘a decision must be made about whether the technology must be resisted altogether or, more likely, what specific uses or aspects of the technology must be resisted or reconstructed if the technology is to be used.’⁶⁰ The theological commitments, traditions and values of the religious community should determine the trajectories of media usage. Campbell and Garner have also helpfully listed some important questions that a religious community must ask when deciding on which new media technologies to use and how they are to be employed:

- What values do those media applications seem to promote?
- Do they complement or contradict Christian values or identity?
- Which features or forms of new media are most useful in the mission of your group?
- Are there features of new media, or values associated with them, that are problematic for your group?⁶¹

While it is important to adhere to this principle, the selection of the appropriate media should always be a matter of negotiation by members of the faith community, especially its leaders. This is because there may be sharp disagreements among leaders of the same community on the most suitable type of technology as well as its most appropriate use. For example, the leaders may

⁵⁹ Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in a Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2016), 100.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

disagree about whether members of the community can participate in Holy Communion ‘remotely’ online. Some may concur with Reverend Tim Ross, who put the text of the ‘Cyber-Eucharist’ online and invite Christians from all over the country to sit in front of their computers with bread and wine and participate in the liturgy.⁶² Quoting the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:20 (‘For when two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them’), Ross argues that Christ promises his presence to believers not because they are gathered in a particular place but because they are gathered ‘in his name.’ Others who believe that there is very little difference between the virtual and the real world may take an even bolder step and create a liturgical service online where their avatars are ‘present’ together with the avatars of other members of the community to participate in the virtual Eucharist. They argue that since the avatar is the digital extension of their real self, there is a sense in which they can be said to be actually participating in the service, albeit in a different anthropological space. Leaders of the community who endorse this approach and who are willing to experiment with the new digital media may find themselves at odds with other leaders who agree with the document of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, *The Church and the Internet*, that:

Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community. There are no sacraments on the internet; even the religious experiences possible there by the grace of God are insufficient apart from real-world interaction with other persons of faith.⁶³

The point is that leaders and members of the community must negotiate the selection and use of a particular media technology. They must acknowledge the fact that even if there is agreement on the basic principles, they may still find that consensus on the suitability of a particular form of media is sometimes difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, even when the use of a particular technology suggested by some leaders of a faith community has been approved, users must still be properly guided and cautioned against possible abuses. For example, in 2011 Little iApps created *Confession: A Roman Catholic App* for the iPhone and iPad. The app was launched with the approval of the Executive Director of the Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.⁶⁴ It was meant to help users to keep track of their transgressions and

⁶² See Spadaro, *Cybertheology* 74.

⁶³ The Church and the Internet, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html (accessed 17 July 2019).

⁶⁴ iTunes’ description of *Confession* states that ‘The text of this app was developed in collaboration with Rev. Thomas Weinandy, OFM, Executive Director of the Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral

to confess them. While the Vatican generally approved of the app, it felt the need to qualify its support of its use. One day after the app was announced, Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi issued a statement stressing that ‘It is essential to understand well the sacrament of penitence requires the personal dialogue between the penitent and the confessor and the absolution by the confessor. This cannot in any way be replaced by a technology application.’

Besides these concerns, there are other practical – but no less important – considerations if the church or religious community is to use media technologies responsibly. For example, the faith community must consider the level of security required for the materials that it makes available online.⁶⁵ It has to decide if the materials it uploads on its website should be made available to the general public or only to its members. Security measures are important because of privacy issues and the protection of users of the online resources that the community provides. Another important practical consideration has to do with the issue of inclusiveness. Are some people prevented from using the resources that the religious community provides online, due, for instance, to lack of technical proficiency or perhaps to disability such visual impairment.⁶⁶ All these considerations would not only determine the kind of media the faith community elects to use, but also how and to what extent it is used.

Conclusion

In his book *Automatic Society*, the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler describes digital technology as a pharmakon – it can be either a poison or a remedy.⁶⁷ The new technology has the capacity to be either a positive or negative influence on people’s lives. The challenge is to identify which uses enhance people’s lives and which diminishes them. This, in part, is the fundamental task of digital theology, a task that it must always hold before it, and a task that it must constantly and perseveringly be engaged in, even as it commandeers and creatively uses the tools of the digital age for the service of the Gospel.

Practices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Rev. Dan Scheidt, pastor of Queen of Peace Catholic Church in Mishawaka, IN. The app received an imprimatur from Bishop Kevin C. Rhodes of the Diocese of Fort Wayne – South bend. It is the first known imprimatur to be given for an iPhone/iPad app’, See Pauline Hope Cheong and Charles Ess, ‘Introduction: Religion 2.0? Relational and Hybridising Pathways in Religion, Social Media, and Culture’ in Pauline Hope Cheong, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, Charles Ess (Eds.), *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 1.

⁶⁵ Julie Anne Lytle, ‘Moving Online: Faith Formation in a Digital Age’, *Lifelong Faith*, Spring 2010, 44.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Bernard Stiegler, *Automatic Society. Volume 1: The Future of Work* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).

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