Paper Title: Virtual World and Virtual Theology in Cyberspace
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Abstract:
Without a doubt, the Internet is the most public part of our universe today. It is the
modern version of the Agora - an open space in which free public discourse can be
conducted without mediation by those in authority and without an agenda specified by
the mass media. There are usually two typical approaches to the Internet by
theologians: one is a conservative rejection of this media and the other is an acclaim
of the Internet as a new life-space for virtual churches. I do not want to support either,
but instead seek to share my experiences and opinions of symbiosis of theology and
cyberspace.

We are building a new world by using and developing the Internet. Our virtual world
is nothing more than a big set of 0s and 1s. John von Neumann showed us how to use
these simple bits to create databases, homepages, portals, chats, forums, e-mails, etc.
It seems that the story of Babel can be repeated in the 21st century when we want to
create a virtual world according to our ideas, demands and wishes. I do not think that
churches should protest against Internet or adhere to an old-fashioned non-electronic
world. Nevertheless, theology has to be knowledgeable and inform the public that the
virtual world should not be another world, in addition to the world created by God. It
would be a fatal error to consider cyberspace, which is outside of reality, more than it
is. At first sight the temptation to view cyberspace as a real word is understandable,
since we think this misconception does not endanger us. However, in observing
Internet use and the motivations guiding many users, we can assess the enjoyment
experienced in building up this false world and the intention of creating a new cyber-
Babel.

If church can do anything about the Internet phenomenon, then it would be to
articulate the distinct identities of the virtual world and the real world. I see two
critical symptoms that render it more difficult to link reality to cyberspace. These are,
first, the impersonal nature of computer use, and, second, the ability to hide one's
identity behind the Internet. I would like to examine these features of cyberspace and
their interaction with theology.

Biography:
Tamás Kodácsy was born in 1975, in Hungary. He graduated in 2000 as a reformed
pastor, and in 2001 as a programmer mathematician at Debrecen University. From
2000 to 2004 he was assistant lecturer at the Department of Christian Dogmatics at
Debrecen University of Reformed Theology, and from 2004 he has been scientific
researcher in Károli Gáspár Reformed University. He studied science and theology in
Zürich, 2001-2002. He has been teaching Reformed confessions, early christian
doctrines, and on issues in the field of science and theology, systematic theology and
cosmology. The topic of his PhD studies was the Cosmological Anthropic Principles.
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Paper Text:

No doubt, Internet is the most public part of our universe today. It is the modern version of the Agora - an open space in which free public discourse can be conducted without mediation of those that in authority and without the agenda specific to the mass media. There are usually two typical approaches to Internet by theologians: one is a conservative refusing this media, the other is an acclaim of the Internet as a new life-space of virtual churches. I do not want to support none of them, but to share my experiences and opinions of symbiosis of theology and cyberspace.

This is a symbiosis, because when we are talking about the public theology in Internet, then the theological content sites enrich the cyberspace, on the other hand, the Internet effects on our theological phrases and thoughts. This interaction expressed by the Roman Catholic Church as follows:

> "As more than just a technological revolution, today's revolution in social communications involves a fundamental reshaping of the elements by which people comprehend the world about them, and verify and express what they comprehend. The constant availability of images and ideas, and their rapid transmission even from continent to continent, have profound consequences, both positive and negative, for the psychological, moral and social development of persons, the structure and functioning of societies, intercultural communications, and the perception and transmission of values, world views, ideologies, and religious beliefs. The communications revolution affects perceptions even of the Church, and has a significant impact on the Church's own structures and modes of functioning."[1]

I was a little boy when I got a LEGO toy from my parents at Christmas. It is a skill play where one can build different things from small blocks. I liked it very much and I thought that I could build anything from LEGO. A carefully reading of the story of Babel-tower can lead us to the same experience to the other when as a child has LEGO toys. People had learned how to build something by bricks and they had a high opinion of themselves to build city and tower.

> Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built.

We are building a new world by using and developing the Internet. Our virtual world is not more like a big set of 0 and 1. Neumann János showed us how to use these simple bits to create databases, homepages, portals, chats, forums, e-mails, etc. It seems that the story of Babel can be repeated in the 21st century when we want to create a virtual world according to our ideas, demands and wishes. I do not think that churches should protest against Internet or adhere to an old-fashioned non-electronic world. Nevertheless, theology has to know and inform the public that the virtual world should not be another world than world created by God. It would be a fatal error to consider the cyberspace, which is out of the reality. At first sight it seems that it is a stereotypy, and we think this temptation does not endanger us, but observing the

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[1] Aetatis Novae, Pontificium Consilium de Communicationibus Socialibus, 4.

directions and motivations of Internet using, we can assess the happiness of building of bricks, and the intention of creating a new city or tower startling appears again.

If church can do anything about Internet phenomenon, then it is to articulate her demand on the identity of the virtual world and the real world. Now I see two critical symptoms that render more difficult to link reality to cyberspace. These are the lack of personality and the hiding behind the Internet.

Impersonality in Cyberspace

In recent sphere of communication we send and receive information in two major forms, through sound and picture. In comparison of these two information-carriers, technically the sound is more fragile and unstable than the picture. Considering a computer network, we can recognise that computers can easily forward a hundred volumes lexicon from one computer station to another as a data file. With modern network cards and cables, it is no problem to carry megabytes or a gigabyte in a second. Nevertheless, when we want to send a sound-type information, then the computer sometimes frightened to do this, the applications run slower, and the resources of the machine focus on sending or receiving sound-type datas. For example, it is regularly impossible to listen simultaneously a radio channel both on the Internet and on radio, because the sound via Internet is late a little bit for the radio. The computer must save time in case of breaking or delaying of information (buffering). The reason of this phenomenon is the nature of sound. In order to transport sound is not enough to make computers and networks, which can communicate rapidly with each-other, but this communication must be continuously come to pass. The sound, because of its wave-nature, is information if it is continuos and ceaseless. In the case of sound, the point is the continuos transporting of a relatively small data rather than the capacity of carrying big data files. In fact, without continuity the sound-type information is useless. In other words, even it is meaningful to speak about 'still picture', but 'still sound' is meaningless.

In theology we found that the proclamation of good news is based on the more unstable equipment, on the sound. 'So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.' (Rom. 10:17). There are people between Scripture and faith, who have been speaking and hearing the word of Christ. God deemed sound good to mediate his message among people.

> "The Old Testament is necessarily something written, a book of laws and promises, and the term »Scripture,« *die Schrift,* properly designates the Old Testament alone. The New Testament, by contrast, is not *Schrift,* but *Botschaft,* something proclaimed: the joyous announcement that the promised Christ has at last come, the liberating news that the righteous God, notwithstanding his holy law and just condemnation of sin, freely forgives sinners for Christ's sake through faith alone. The gospel by its very nature of good tidings of deliverance requires the *viva vox,* the living voice of the preacher."[2]

> "The gospel should not really be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called his teaching

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[2] Martin Luther: Luther's Works (LW) St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76. Ref. 35.368 in David Lotz (Lotz): The Proclamation of the Word in Luther's Thought, Word & World 3/4. 1983. Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. p. 346.

page not Scripture but gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen, but by word of mouth."[3]

I think the lack of human speech is the crucial point in the relationship of theology and Internet. Of course, I do not think that we should change the monitors for loudspeakers, and it would not be a good solution to persuade mouse to move instead of a click. Seriously, without verbal contact we lack for personality and fragility in cyberspace.

Computer-engineers have been making efforts to develop faster and faster data-transfer on the Internet and more beautiful graphics on monitors, but it have not been so important for them if the person at computer was identical with the user on the Internet. It is one of the most expensive software-system what can hold the personal identity during the using of computer.[4] It is not at all important on the Internet, who is the person sending e-mails or surfing on the Net.

Hiding in Cyberspace

Despite of openness and publicity of cyberspace, the Internet is the most adaptable space to escape from real world. This hiding is usually subconscious, and the Internet offers a lot of facility to do this. When a user sits down before a monitor, a new virtual world opens in the real world where the user is living. When this virtual world becomes to the living-space of the user, then we are speaking about Internet-addiction. I would like to give a short list of this kind of addiction in order to show what is the background problem of the using of Internet. There are five specific types of Internet addiction:[5]

1. Cybersexual Addiction – Individuals who suffer from Cybersexual addiction typically are either engaged in viewing, downloading, and trading online pornography or involved in adult fantasy role-play chat rooms.

2. Cyber-Relational Addiction – Individuals who suffer from Chat Room Addiction become over-involved in online relationships or may engage in virtual adultery. Online friends quickly become more important to the individual often at the expense of real life relationships with family and friends. In many instances, this will lead to marital discord and family instability.

3. Net Gaming – Net gaming encompass a broad category of behaviors including obsessive online gambling, gaming, shopping, or stock trading behaviors. In particular, individuals will utilize virtual casinos, interactive games, e-auction houses, or e-brokerage houses only to loose excessive amounts of money and even disrupt other job-related duties or significant relationships.

4. Information Overload – The wealth of data available on the World Wide Web has created a new type of compulsive behavior regarding excessive web surfing and database searches. Individuals will spend greater amounts of time searching and collecting data from the web and organizing information. Obsessive compulsive tendencies and reduced work productivity are typically associated with this behavior.

5. Computer Addiction – In the 80s, computer games such as Solitaire and Minesweeper were programmed into computers and researchers found that obsessive computer game playing became problematic in organizational

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[3] LW 35.123 in Lotz, p. 347.
[4] Accessing and logging system with username and password.
[5] http://www.netaddiction.com/whatis.htm

settings as employees spent most days playing rather than working. These games are not interactive nor played online.

The consequences of this kind of addiction[6] are far from the upshots of the other addictions like drug or alcohol, but the realisation of addiction is quite difficult in cyberspace. Like hard drinker keep repeating to the very last that he or she can stop drink any time, the Internet-addicted person hardly confront with the fact of hours spending at computer.

In the cyberspace people can hide behind a nickname on chat, a dynamic IP address in web browsing, an unauthorised address in e-mail, or any workstation in an Internet café. This implies the problem of virtual community. The users can change their identity, username, sex and behaviour. It looks like a carnival where everyone may change his or her mask. But a carnival is not yet a community, above all not a Christian church.

Is there real community on cyberspace?

Yes, there are lots of Internet-churches, Christian web pages, religious chats. In the last years one of the most important themes on the European Christian Internet Conferences (ECIC)[7] was a good Christian web page, or how to build churches on the Internet. I would like to cite two presenters both are supporting the Christian virtual community.

> "The Internet is not just about technology and computers, but primarily about humans, human interaction and community. What we see on the Internet is that millions of people use this new medium as a means of communication, seeking information and community. And, by examining the human interaction on the Internet from a sociological perspective we can learn a lot about life in the 21st century. By examining the Internet from a theological perspective we may learn new ways of "being Church" in the 21st century." (Carsten Riis Jensen)[8]

The next presenter Dr. Matthias Schnell has drawn his conclusion: there is no alternative than being also a church on the Internet.[9]

> "People who think the Internet is just a new medium for publishing texts, have not understood the nature of this computer based network of human relations. A lot of people in the church think about the Internet in this way. For them, it's just a medium to distribute press releases and papers in a more efficient and cheaper way. That's true, but that's not the whole story. If you analyse it more carefully, the Internet is a medium which allows people to communicate with each other and to build up real virtual communities. That is the nature and character so special to the Internet… If the churches offers pastoral care, initiate discussions about relevant social or existential topics, if they are open to discuss about faith with the people on the net in a good way, in other words: if they build up real virtual communities, the churches and the christian gospel

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[6] As a programmer I have been charged two times with resolving Internet addiction problems till now. Both occurred in a theological seminary. One belonged to cyber-relational addiction, namely some students were playing MUD (Multi User Dungeon) day and night, which is an electronic role-playing game. The other was cybersexual addiction.
[7] http://www.ecic.org
[8] Carsten Riis Jensen: Being a Digital Church in the 21st Century. http://www.ecic.org/
[9] Dr. Matthias Schnell: Being a Church on the Internet - Just publishing texts or being a "real" virtual community? (ECIC IV, 8. - 10. 7. 1999, Budapest http://www.ecic.org/)

will be noticed by the people. That is what »being church on the Internet« means. That is the way we have go."[10]

I think it is a little bit unguarded direction. In my opinion, it is definitely not the way we have to go. My question is where the human relations are on the Internet? How can we chat on revelation in ambush? In what manner can we speak about incarnation without body? What does it mean to touch without hands? How can we "sing together for joy"[11] on the Internet?

Let alone, the virtual community is quite comfortable. Users can enter it when they want to do it. It is perfect for escaping from problems, troubles and there is not any obligation. I think it is far from the community, where people are really together. Probably someone, who expert in the Christian virtual communities, can answer me that the feelings and singing may be implemented on cyberspace, and definitely there are ways to create touch or near-physical contact on the Internet. Nevertheless, exactly it is my critique: why we create and make things, which normally just are coming?

In addition, we can argue with a lot of theological statements as the real world is saved, not the virtual. Jesus became a man, not a robot, etc. But behind these arguments lays the problem of the relationship of the virtual and the physical reality.

Conclusion

Carsten Riis Jensen wrote his theological thesis about "virtual Christian communities and Cyberchurches on the Internet"[12]. He says that "a theoretical examination of the Internet as a metaphor of life in the digital age, and a practical production of internet-related working tools, software programs and websites all in all has to do with being a Christian Church in a non-Christian Culture. It is, in another word, a question of contextualization."[13] What kind of contextualization it is regarding to the Internet? We are making the context too, in where we want our text to set in.

What do we have to do or what can we do in cyberspace? We should build very good-looking and very good-functioning Christian Internet sites, with chats, forums, e-mail lists, texts, graphics and music. Not because we want users to stay more and more time on our site, but in order to bring back the users into reality. It is a contradictory challenge.

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[10] Id.
[11] Psa. 65:13.
[12] http://www.ekklesia.dk
[13] Carsten Riis Jensen: Being a Digital Church in the 21st Century. http://www.ecic.org/