

Ethics and the Internet, Starting from Theology

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SUMMARY

What has Jerusalem to do with Google? The internet has its own theology and surfing the net is a theological activity. Since theological neutrality does not exist, even in the realm of technology, this article explores the ways in which Christian theology shapes a sustainable ethic for approaching the internet responsibly. The Trinity, the

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Incarnation, the communitarian nature of faith, claims of authority and the transformative force of the Gospel have massive ethical implications for the internet. The 'good news' for the internet provides a dynamic normative framework, a self-critical approach to the use of technology, and a powerful motivation for those who are involved in it.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Was hat Jerusalem mit google zu tun? Das Internet besitzt seine eigene Theologie, und das Surfen im Netz ist eine theologische Aktivität. Da es theologische Neutralität nicht gibt, auch nicht im Raum der Technologie, untersucht dieser Artikel Wege, auf denen christliche Theologie eine tragfähige Ethik für den verantwortlichen Umgang mit dem Internet gestalten kann. Die Trinität, die

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Inkarnation, das gemeinschaftliche Wesen des Glaubens, Behauptungen zur Autorität und zur transformierenden Kraft des Evangeliums haben gewaltige ethische Implikationen im Hinblick auf das Internet. Die „gute Nachricht“ für das Internet bietet einen dynamischen normativen Rahmen, einen selbstkritischen Ansatz zum Umgang mit der Technik und eine kraftvolle Motivation für diejenigen, die damit zu tun haben.

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RÉSUMÉ

Quelle relation Jérusalem peut-elle avoir avec Google? L'Internet a sa propre théologie et surfer sur la toile est une activité théologique. La neutralité théologique n'existe pas, même dans le domaine des techniques. C'est pourquoi cet article aborde la question de savoir quelle éthique découle de la théologie chrétienne pour un usage responsable de l'Internet. Les doctrines de la

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Trinité et de l'incarnation, la nature communautaire de la foi, l'autorité qui revient à Dieu et à sa parole, et la puissance de transformation de l'Évangile, tout cela a des implications éthiques considérables pour notre rapport à l'Internet. La « bonne nouvelle » pour l'Internet fournit un cadre normatif dynamique, une approche critique de l'usage des techniques, et une puissante motivation pour ceux qui l'utilisent.

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How do Jerusalem and Google relate to one another? Or the Bible and Wikipedia? Brotherhood and chat-lines? Since the days when Tertullian wondered how Jerusalem related to Athens, every generation should have asked a similar question, once that question had been modified to reflect the current age. At stake is the ability of the Christian faith to interact in a significant and positive manner with the culture of a given epoch, so as to avoid being passively affected by, or uncritically subscribing to,

that same culture. Today, culture is also shaped by the internet. Technological strides in the field of communication require us to ask what is the nature of the relationship – if any – that exists between the Christian faith and this new media-based culture.

This issue involves theology in as far as the internet has its own theology as well; every time we connect to the internet, a theological action is performed whereby we profess a vision of the world which is centred on absolutes. It is my aim here

to simply lay out a schematic and selective comparison of the two theologies, as well as to propose an outline of an internet ethic in the wake of our comparative analysis.

Internet theology is a rather complicated construct, which can only be described by resorting to simplifications. As to Christianity, it is Trinitarian, incarnational and conducive to transformation. While it is clearly more than this, these characteristics do belong to its defining identity. Let us therefore consider in turn some of the terms of comparison.

1. Trinity and the internet

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity operates through a plurality of languages, communicating subjects, expressive codes, and contents. Trinitarian Christianity endorses and demands multiple as well as varied forms of communication. Some Christians are concerned with the numerous possibilities offered by the internet due to their inadequate assimilation of Trinitarian doctrine. They are therefore questionably attracted to a heretical version of Christianity – namely, a monotheism unimaginatively conforming to monotonous repetition and unidirectional communication. Instead, Trinitarian doctrine restores reality to its fundamental unity. This signifies that languages must be translatable and communicable within themselves, that individual behaviour must be accounted for and that, lastly, the prevailing ethos of communication should adhere to criteria which safeguard dignity, honesty and participation. Trinitarian doctrine does not encourage any extreme “de-regulation” of communication, but rather mandates that the various media possibilities be creatively mobilised to promote God’s *shalom* across the entire world.

Pagan thought can be seen to constantly oscillate from extolling multiplicity (polytheism) to underscoring uniqueness (monotheism). Perhaps in this regard the internet is more akin to a polytheist theology than a monotheist one. Its development coincides with a cultural juncture (the postmodern age) which is characterised by a seemingly rampant multiplicity and unresponsiveness towards any Unitarian discourse. However, this is only one side of the coin, of which the other side cannot be concealed. When looking at the internet from an alternative viewpoint, one sees a large unitary space where, despite the diversities, the strings are pulled by few if not only by one party. Suffice it to recall the disquieting scenario of

“big brother” who, having also added the internet to the powers at his disposal, controls and directs the system, letting his presence be only partially perceived by those online. Also to be recalled are the economic and financial powers that be which, likewise through the internet, promote a general consensus on a homogenised, conformist religion of consumerism. While the internet is presently predominantly polytheistic, the pendulum keeps swinging. Monotheism is still quite capable of attracting (and is far from resigned to accept) the current outburst of multiplicity.

The challenge for any ethic of the internet lies in the ability to offer a balanced Trinitarian appraisal of the task ahead whilst considering radically different approaches to the questions being posed.

2. Incarnation and the internet

Christianity, in addition to being Trinitarian, also hinges on Jesus Christ’s incarnation: “*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.*” The Second Adam came to the distressed world which the First Adam had bequeathed to him. He was made to cope with a created reality debased by sin and, becoming fully integrated within it, acted towards its real transformation. Christianity has always been questioned by various forms of *gnosis* which are in essence dis-incarnated versions of Christianity itself. The controversy revolves around the corporal factualness of incarnation: how Jesus Christ, as a man, could be God, and how God could be the “begotten Son”. Gnosticism tends to opt for “light”, spiritualist versions of incarnation. Christianity depends instead on the mystery of the Son’s full humanity, and therefore on the full, incarnated, physical humanity of the disciples’ faith. While the faith in the Son of God’s incarnation takes up diversified cultural forms, all of these manifestations include sweating skin, bodily proximity and face to face communication.

Internet theology depends more on the “virtual” dimension than on incarnated reality. The notion of “virtual” transcends factual reality; it is a mode of being which cannot be traced back to the suffering inherent in corporal reality. I do not imply by this that the internet’s virtuality mechanically equates to the gnostic position. Nevertheless, failing to be stimulated by a robust incarnation theology, the internet does betray an evident gnostic propensity. In fact, the scope of Christian incarnation theology allows for the “virtual” dimension (I need only mention the wide-ranging possibilities for long-

distance communication, prayer or access to specialised sermons etc.), but on the condition that it remains centred on reality throughout. Should the internet encourage a closed virtual system which is both self-referential and based on the "virtuality" of connections and navigated universes, then the gnostic temptation and ensuing de-humanising effects become evident.

An internet ethic cannot shy away from a renewed world vision based on the incarnation, and must confront those virtuality-infused theologies which allow themselves to be tragically fascinated by anti-Christian and anti-human *gnoses*.

3. Community and the internet

Central to Christianity's history of salvation is the shaping of a community which is reconciled with God as well as the world God partakes in. The very project of creation was based on adapting one's own personal identity to that of the community (family, fellow citizens etc.). A disruptive virus, sown by sin, has derailed (but by no means dissolved) the momentum originally intended to favour community-life and redirected it towards oppressive instability. Salvation works to restore this shattered network of relationships while renewing the prospect of community life under the banner of reconciliation. Without these "incarnated" relationships to bind us to others, life risks degrading into social structures which are not only seriously deficient, but potentially dangerous as well. While the church functions as the community ambit *par excellence* – where one is taught anew how to live with one's own neighbours – other tangible relational ambits in need of restoration, which likewise are necessary for co-existence, include: family, circles of friends, colleagues, associative bonds, etc.

A peculiarity of the profile of internet theology is that, while encouraging the general "isolation" of each individual, it also fosters a "virtual" banding together of others who may be found online at any given time. On the one hand, the internet works towards loosening the ties to one's neighbouring community of real people. This prioritises one's own individual identity and allows for an increased freedom of choice which is now uncoupled from the conditioning influence of the individual's incarnated, neighbouring relationships. On the other hand, it facilitates virtual relationships among individuals and promotes new community typologies which are based along different sociological lines on different socialisation praxes. These commu-

nities may, for example, be entered and exited at will, usually under different identities. This befits interactions which are more "liquid" and elusive rather than "solid" and binding. To Christianity, "neighbours" who make up one's community may be connected to us in various forms (Paul was not personally acquainted with all of the addressees of his epistles, having learned about many of them only by hearsay). Yet, those who are physically near to us must by necessity be considered part of our community. The gnostic rejection of incarnation goes hand in hand with a temptation towards a gnostic anthropology and, by the same token, a gnostic ecclesiology. The notion of virtual church reflects a virtual incarnation and an equally virtual gospel. While Christianity has the capability to correlate community with "proximity", most of the time (albeit not necessarily) the internet is unable to do so.

Ethics is expected to investigate the motivations which lead people to connect in a virtual form to the internet community as well as the ensuing repercussions of this. Virtual societies mirror the frustrations caused by the distortions of social reality. As such, they cannot be dismissed offhand on moral grounds, but need to be carefully considered with a view to transforming them into communities which, despite their diversity, function as part of corporal reality.

4. Authority and the internet

Christian theology is innervated by a critical sense of authority. On the one hand, it acknowledges the authority of God as Creator, Provider and the Reconciler of all reality. For this reason, Christian theology also recognizes the Bible as the written Word: that which is certified by God's own authority (*sola Scriptura*). As a consequence of its submission to divine authority, faith also acknowledges authoritative bases which derive from the sphere of created reality. These are neither idolised as entirely worthy of obedience, nor denigrated and subsequently divested of their legitimate prerogatives. They are respected as long as they do not exceed their own limitations. On the other hand, Christianity provides antibodies which resist the degeneration brought about whenever authority exceeds its bounds of competence and claims jurisdiction over extraneous matters. Submission to God's authority and close scrutiny of local bases of authority also supply the criteria which enable us to discern the status of a particular authority in

relation to competing authorities.

It is conceivable that the internet has profoundly shaped a "theology of authority" of its own. In a way, it has called into question authoritative schemas of learning which were anchored in tradition and in the consolidated assets which knowledge offers. Its subversive action (in many regards positive and against idolatry) has led to an authority vacuum or, more accurately, a power rarefaction or, still more accurately, a process of authority individualisation. Being on the internet, one may bypass official authoritative frameworks while, in turn, raising the issue of when they should be applied. Information, once displayed on the internet, is on a par with that presented by other media, with no screening standards in place other than each viewer's discretionary choice. Christian teaching sets much store by the authority of sources and persons conveying it, even though further inspection is by no means ruled out. While the internet is helpful when it comes to questioning vested authority, the risk remains that individual authority may step in as a tyrannical "idol", or that the internet becomes devoid of sustainable criteria for assuring credibility.

Any ethical discourse regarding the internet is bound to take into account its reluctance to submit to authority, which however stops short of seeing authority itself as an undue restraint bound to be eventually removed. By necessity, we shall always find ourselves within a space ruled by an authority of sorts, which must be circumscribed and accountable.

5. Ethics and the internet

The Gospel is the good news which transforms reality. God's deeds are not directed at destroying the world nor creating it anew, but rather at transforming it into the new heaven and earth. The dynamics of the Kingdom aims to modify what exists (affected as it is by sin) and to alter it according to God's renovation project. Christian life makes sense if it conforms to this process of transformation. Otherwise, it is subservient to either idolatrous practices or an equally pagan pursuit of utopia. When confronted with the net, or operating online, Christians cannot afford to simply endorse or criticise it. Becoming part of this polarised discourse, in either the form of adversary or supporter, would amount to misunderstanding in a childlike way one's Christian call. So, what ethic is the internet in need of?

An internet ethic necessitates an approach which is critical of what currently exists. Moral vigilance commits us to keeping ourselves at arm's length from the internet, to resist being sucked into its vortex and to stay sufficiently lucid vis-à-vis its virtual culture and the movements therein. As briefly sketched above, Christian theology provides the proper amount of distancing as well as the tools needed for appropriately discriminating when assessing various situations.

An ethic must also be guided by referential models. When confronted with the internet pendulum, swinging as it does between polytheism and monotheism, gnosis and fiction, individualism and virtuality, Christianity proposes a normative grid for dynamic stability, capable of standing its ground before the ebbs and flows of the internet without drowning in its surges. Such an ethic, by being both personal and interpersonal, shareable and rectifiable, favours the plurality and accountability of the system.

Lastly, the desirable internet ethic will not come into being through our mere ability to discern the right course from within a variety of situations, nor by solely adopting normative models of reference. The internet awaits people (operating online for a variety of purposes) who are capable of announcing and incarnating the "good news" with a view to turning the internet into an accessible, dignified and responsible world. These people, having assimilated the basic foundation of a Trinitarian vision, would operate towards a fertile synthesis of unity and multiplicity. Having experienced Jesus Christ's incarnation, they would be willing to factually promote the good and right. When returning to their community, they would testify that personal relationships can be reconciled. When online, their authoritativeness would result from their submission to both the Word of God and the members of the virtual community.

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