

Vol. 9 (08/2008)

## Religion and IT

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## Editorial: On IRIE Vol. 9

Religion - from an evolutionary point of view - can be called the very first information business of humankind. The medicine man, the priest, the witch doctor were indeed the first institutions to deal with information only. Their core business was to provide information on the transcendent that is not directly present and accessible: the will of the goddess, the sense of life, what may come after death ... .

Information that is well sought after – today like in the early days. So over time many answers have been given on these and other religious topics all over the world. Formally spoken a huge amount of information has been produced in the various religions.

As substantial scientific progress has been achieved in the field of information science over the last decades, it is about high time to also reflect the relationship between information (respective the technology used to produce, store and distribute it) and an incumbent subject like religion. Yet the importance of that relationship cannot be overestimated as only a few examples may suggest:

- How many art treasures e.g. have been fallen victim to iconoclasm all over the world within as well as in-between various religions because of the disagreement if pictorial information is suitable for the divine.
- Besides the authority of the Pope the availability of the Bible to the people was in midst of the reformatory discourse and finally translated into the local language the Holy Book of Christianity was made accessible for the first time directly to non-academic believers.
- Finally, most interestingly the technological revolution of Gutenberg's invention of printing with movable types coincided with the intellectual shift included with that reformatory transformation.

Against the backdrop that until today some religions rely heavily on oral traditions while others are (not only virtually) written in stone our question is not only if that makes any difference for the doctrine itself: the content to be developed and/or passed on. We particularly want to take the ethical point of view and ask the question of the morality involved in the different usage of information in the different

religions. Will the technological revolution of the internet account for another religious one? Is it true that you can tell from one's media usage one's religious attitudes? And will the convergence within ICTs push a religious convergence adding another yet important facet to the notion of the global village to be promoted by the internet. And finally, is that ethically desirable?

We asked these questions and the editors of this issue: Udeani, Capurro and Frühbauer with notable support of Hausmanninger put them into a wonderful call for paper as well as into the introduction to this issue systemizing the problems involved in the relationship between 'Religion and IT'.

With Tamura & Tamura, Cohen, Shields, Zeilinger, Siwaswaroop, Kenway and Stückelberger it found an impressive echo from all over the world ranging

- from fundamental, philosophical deliberations on the influence of media usage on religious characteristics
- over specific examples to be found in Japanese Religion, Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity
- to speculations on possible future developments of religion promoted by the current enhancements of ICTs.

Admitting that we are not able to present final answers here is especially in the field of religion no weakness at all. Thus, we confine ourselves with the hope to contribute substantially to the ongoing discourse on the subject and to your personal deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

*the Editors*

Chibueze C. Udeani, Rafael Capurro, Johannes J. Frühbauer:

## Introduction: The Internet as an Ethical Challenge for Religions

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Religions are not only communities of faith but also of communication. Religious communication takes place vertically between human beings and a transcendent holy entity. It also occurs horizontally among individuals and groups. This is the reason why religions cannot remain unaffected by the development and the future directions of the global digital network.

Communication does not take place only within a single religious community but also among several religious groups and between them and the secular world. Functional, structural, communicational and occasionally ethical commonalities between religions cannot hide the fact that there are lots of deep differences as well as particular interests. This is the reason why these forms of religious communication are characterized by all kinds of tensions and conflicts. Mistrust, fear of living under constant threat, a hermeneutics of suspicion, and strategies of domination are common sources of potential conflicts in the present time.

In view of this situation, religions experience the challenge of giving ethical answers to pressing questions particularly in the field of information and communication technology that is at the same time an important instrument for religious communication:

- Do religions conceive ICT inventions and innovations as threatening or as beneficial?
- Do they see the opportunities offered by ICT as a possible avenue to communicate their contents and values?
- Or do they, on the contrary, see ICT as a threat arising from the free access to information that allows alternative groups to offer different kinds of meanings to texts and events?
- Which kinds of relations are being addressed by religions, in general, towards the media?
- Which principles of information ethics are being applied or betrayed?
- Which kinds of political, economic or ideological movements can become a threat for these principles being misused or undermined?
- How do religious institutions (such as churches, local communities, charity organizations, religious orders, religious groups, religious media institutions, etc.) use and evaluate ICT?

- To what extent can religious groupings contribute to the international ethical debate regarding ICT and its application?

The issue's conception had the following structure:

## 1. Religions and ICT

- a. Views of religions and their theologies on IT and the internet
- b. Impact of ICT on religious power structures (centralization vs. decentralization, vertical hierarchies vs. horizontal networking)

## 2. Religions inside Networks

- c. Basic questions concerning the presence of religions on the internet
- d. Theological discourses on the internet
- e. Presence and presentation of religious communities on the internet
- f. Religious and theological conflicts on the internet
- g. Comparative analyses of the presence and use of the internet by religions and religious communities
- h. Religious offers on the internet
- i. Digital networks as a missionary strategy
- j. Internet as a medium for political presence and the influence of religions
- k. The critique of religion on the internet
- l. ICT as platform for antireligious perspectives/activities
- m. Religious contributions to ICT for Development (ICT4D)

## 3. Religion and Information Ethics

- n. Information ethics theories about the presence of religions in the digital network
- o. Theological information ethics
- p. Changes of religious-based ethics as a consequence to the internet

## 4. Theological Theories

- q. Religious paradigms on the digital network
- r. The internet as religion or as an ersatz religion

- s. The internet as a place for religious community
- t. Apocalyptic potentiality of the digital network / Apocalypse on the internet
- u. Theological enlightenment through the internet

Contributions to some of these topics have already been published in journals and other media for instance "Concilium" (Vol. 41, March 2005): "Cyber Space – Cyber Ethics – Cyber Theology" (Erik Borgman, Stephan van Erp, Hille Haker, Eds.) as well as in the special issue of the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication (Vol. 12, issue 2, 2007): "[Cross-cultural Perspectives on Religion and Computer-Mediated Communication](#)" (Charles Ess, Ed.). We want to highlight also the Online- [Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet](#).

For this IRIE issue authors were invited to send an article from the perspective of one specific religion – among them, the abrahamic-prophetic in addition to Asian sage-oriented religions, 'traditional religions' such as African or Western ones, and other indigenous religious (excluding sects).

**Takanori Tamura** and **Daiyu Tamura** analyze the structure of unsuccessful chats over the internet within the context of Japanese religions. In Japan, chats about religion rarely succeed. This is due, according to the authors, not only to the lack of social cues and anonymity but also because there is a power balance between two groups, one with a positive attitude towards religion and the other with a negative attitude.

**Richard Cohen** examines Plato's two complaints in the *Phaedrus* about the new technology of writing in relation to Jewish rabbinic exegetical tradition and to Immanuel Kant's positive claims for text based religions in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

**Richard Shields** asks for how religions formulate ethical responses to the challenges arising from information-communication technology. He focusses on official teaching of the Catholic Church which attempts to provide a consistent and universal perspective for making moral judgments about these technologies and the communications media they enable and sustain. The author examines how ethics and religion come together in Catholic teaching, he discusses certain problems arising from that approach, and concludes with suggestions for a future religious ethics of ICT.

**Thomas Zeilinger** deals with the way the big churches in Germany traditionally address ethical issues by discursive memoranda and pastoral letters. The article explores the possibilities of a complementary approach by symbolic presentation.

**Patheni Sivaswaroop** presents results of a sample study on how Hindus are using the Internet for religious purposes comparing their online and offline religious activities. According to Sivaswaroop some 74% of the people sampled pray daily, but only 16% go daily to a local temple. In Hinduism going to the temple is secondary as each Hindu house is has generally a Pooja Room/Corner. They are equally divided on whether the internet increases religious tolerance or hatred.

**Ian Kenway** explores the limitations and distortions of religious discussion on the internet within the wider context of those ethical challenges posed by controversy and debate in cyberspace. It attempts to establish a series of critical connections between the emergence of polemical forms of 'feuilletonism' in the area of religious comment and the characteristic weightlessness of language which has become detached from the body, despite the latter's extension and intensification in the concrete social realisations found in specific faith communities.

**Christoph Stückelberger** analyzes chances of ICT for religious ethics such as access to information and argumentation; broader access to different traditions around the globe and to history of the own tradition; deeper understanding of other religious and non religious ethics through easier access and exchange. He also deals with the challenges of ICT for religious ethics such as relativism, pragmatism, syncretism, and opportunism.

We, the Guest Editors, are glad to contribute with this IRIE issue to this important international and intercultural debate on religion & the internet.

Takanori Tamura, Daiyu Tamura:

## Unsuccessful 'chats' for mutual understanding about religion in the Japanese Internet: preliminary studies for global information ethics

### Abstract:

This paper analyzes the structure of unsuccessful chats over the internet about Japanese religions. On the internet, people of different religions and beliefs can easily meet. However, in Japan, chats about religion rarely succeed. This is due not only to a lack of social cues and anonymity but also because there is power balance between two groups, one with a positive attitude towards religion and the other with a negative attitude. Their different pre-understandings of religion make the discussion difficult. It is important to analyze moments of pre-understanding of discussants in order to better understand the dynamics. We present an approach for such analysis based on Paul Ricoeur's theory for "Threefold *Mimesis*." This is a trial for successful communication among people from different cultures and societies via the internet. It could be a step forward in achieving *the global information ethics* that Charles Ess claims. This is because differences in the pre-understanding of a topic are an essential problem there.

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to analyze the structure of unsuccessful chats for mutual understanding about Japanese religions in the internet. According to Paul Ricoeur's theory, we will argue that this difficulty occurs because people have different pre-understandings of the topic. This issue is also preliminary preparation for Charles Ess's *global information ethics*. He foresees a global information ethics that achieve normative legitimacy among a wide diversity of cultures and ethical traditions in local and global situation<sup>1</sup>.

Between about 1995 and 2000, at the first stage of the internet era in Japan, religious institutions and researchers had some expectations of the internet for religious activities like propagation, rituals and prayer<sup>2</sup>. Such discussions have stagnated recently, and religious organizations do not have such high expectations for the Internet at this time<sup>3</sup>.

However, discussions about religion exist widely and continue in the Japanese internet. For example, more than 700 threads were built in *Ni chan'neru* (Channel 2), the biggest, extremely anonymous and sometimes infamous BBS. There are many online communities for religion in *Mixi*, the biggest Social Network Service in Japan.

Given both the quantity and continuity of this phenomenon, the expansion of chats about religion cannot be disregarded. The issue has hardly been taken up by the researchers, however, because chats about religion by common people have not been recorded and, as such, have not been researchable before the internet. Since dialogues in the internet are written text, they are visible and researchable insofar as research ethics allows.

Unfortunately, chats about religion rarely succeed in achieving mutual understandings.<sup>4</sup> The internet provides people with opportunities to communicate with other people, who are of a different religion, have different customs or different conceptions and understandings of particular matters. While this may be good, it may also invite misunderstandings and arguments. We presume that their failure to achieve mutual understanding is because of their differences in pre-understanding concerning religion. We think that analysis of internet chats about religion would help us to figure out the difference. Although, we deal with domestic matters, this failure is part of the cultural differences Ess deals with in his global information ethics.

We argue this issue based on empirical research and religious studies influenced by narratology. In order to understand their difference with reference to standpoints and the issue of terms, we would like to provide

- a) some examples of chats;
- b) an outline of Japanese religions;
- c) religious interests of the Internet users; and
- d) a theoretical explanation for terms and pre-understandings by Ricoeur's theory and global information ethics.

## Failure of mutual understanding, standpoints and terms

I chose some examples of failure of mutual understanding among believers and non-believers from the *Ni chan'neru* (Channel 2) BBS<sup>5</sup>.

On a Christianity thread, non-believer *poster A* simply asked a question about "original sin" and other basic concepts. He asked, "If you presume original sin, is there any practical benefit for your life or thought?"

A non-believer, *poster B*, replied,

*It is not beneficial but does huge harm to the human psyche. "Groundless guilt" is a typical symptom of depression, and it is nothing but the*

<sup>1</sup> Ess, Charles, *Ethical Pluralism and Global Information Ethics* (a). 1.

<sup>2</sup> International Institute for the Study of Religion (ed.): *Internet Jidai no Syukyo*.

<sup>3</sup> Kawabata and Watanabe: *Communication Gap between Believers and Non-believers in Religion*. 5, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Watanabe, Mitsuharu: *Conflict and Intolerance in a Web Community: Effects of a System Integrating Dialogues and Monologues*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ni chan'neru* can be freely quoted.



*object of treatment. Christianity plants the concept of guilt and makes people believers. That is a threat. Threat is the essence of Christianity.*

A Christian *poster C* replied, "Then, why is there suffering, unfairness, and death?" because he thought 'original sin' was the reason for such concerns. However, a non-believer, *poster D*, replied, "That is evidence of God's absence." They are talking about the same reality, namely, suffering, unfair and death, from opposite presuppositions. Also, the term 'original sin' is difficult to understand for Japanese especially because there is only one word, *tsumi* for 'sin' and 'guilt' in Japanese.

In a thread "How do we increase the number of Christians in Japan?" built by a non-believer, there are plural critical opinions about Christians in Japan. For example, "The Christians I know always have the attitude of teaching something to others," "People involved in religions are difficult to associate with indeed." "Christians get angry when they are asked questions they cannot answer and consider the questioner to be Satan." Some manners rather than teaching are the problem here. A non-believer, *poster E*, posted about Christians' comments,

*Christians' comments are often comprehensible to only Christians. Why can't they use common phrases to reach non-Christians?*

With regard to this thread, there is one Christian who repeatedly posts only words from the Bible with no explanation and ultimately strengthens others' antipathy. The examples indicate that terms and discourse manner are crucial for disagreement. The importance of terms and discourse manner is the same for Buddhism cases.

On a thread concerning Buddhism, there was talk about the concept of *Rinnne Tensho* (reincarnation in Buddhism). After a poster explained it, *poster F* wrote,

*Still I can't understand what Rinnne Tensho is. If it exists, in what way does it exist? If it does not exist, in what way doesn't it exist? For example, mirages exist because they are visible, but they don't not exist because they are not physical entities. What is the case for Rinnne Tensho?*

He got answers like, "The question was wrong. The right question is not the one that asks for an answer but the one that asks for the way to get an answer,"

and "You don't practice training and repeating primitive questions." *Poster F* wrote again,

*One says you need Satori to understand it and the other says it is a primitive question. Why can't you teach me if the question is primitive?*

In examples, we find that a) their standpoints (perspectives) are quite different and b) the difference appears to be an issue of terms and manner of discourse as *poster E* claimed obviously. These two things are related and discussed in this paper.

## For successful conversations

### The Japanese concept of religion

We would like to explain the Japanese concept of religion through results of empirical surveys. Table 1 shows results of the questions "Do you have belief?" ('belief') and "Do you have religious attitude?" ('religious attitude'). Only about 30% of population claimed to have 'belief'. However, about 70% of population have 'religious attitude'. Even amongst the people with 'no belief', 60-70% of them claim to have 'religious attitude'. They are religious even when they claim not to have belief in religion. It reflects the reality in Japan in that few people say that they have the religion, but most participate in Buddhism rituals every August and go to Shrines in January each year<sup>6</sup>.

This is different from other parts of the world where Christianity or Islam is dominant. Sometimes this difference has been used as an example of how Japan is odd, complicated and different from other countries. However, it is supposed to boast of Japan in the paradox. It is criticized as transformed ethnocentrism<sup>7</sup>. Fumi Hayashi conducted a meta-analysis of plural survey records and pointed to just the opposite phenomenon whereby, in western countries (Germany, the Netherlands and England), more than 10% of the population answered that they had both "belief" and "no religious attitude"<sup>8</sup>. Contrary to the Japanese case, respondents claimed to be not

<sup>6</sup> Amari, Toshimaro: *Nihonjin ha Naze Musyukyo Nanoka*. 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Iwai, Hiroshi: *Nihon Syukyo no Rikai ni Kansuru Oboegaki*. 81.

<sup>8</sup> Hayashi, Fumi: *Syukyo to Soboku na Syukyoteki Kanjo*. 16.

Table 1: "Belief" and "importance of religious attitude" in Japan, change in time series (%)

research year	1983	1988	1993	1998	2003
"belief"	32	31	33	29	30
"importance of religious attitude" in "belief"	94	93	94	93	94
"importance of religious attitude" in "no belief"	73	63	61	58	60
"importance of religious attitude" in whole	80	72	72	68	70

This table is cited and modified from a table in Hayashi (2006.) "Belief" is ratio for "yes" and "no belief" is answer for "no" to a question, "Do you have belief?" "Importance of religious attitude" is ratio for yes to a question, "Do you have religious attitude?"

religious even they had religious beliefs. Each culture has its own complexity and variety.

Additionally, since the Japanese word *Syukyo* (religion) is a translation from German, it reminds Japanese people that Christianity or other monotheisms (although there are no 100% monotheistic religions.)<sup>9</sup> For this reason, the Japanese do not include indigenous religions, like Shintoism, Buddhism and other folk religions, into categories of *Syukyo*. Religious scholars divide Japanese religions into two groups: "religion of awakened belief" vs. "unaware religiosity"<sup>10</sup> or "founded religion" vs. "natural religion."<sup>11</sup> The Japanese word *Syukyo* refers to the first understanding of religion in both cases. In addition to this, many Japanese have a negative image of religion, particularly of new religions<sup>12</sup>. This attitude was strengthened by the subway sarin gas attack perpetrated by Aum Shinrikyō in 1995.

Thus, there are some kinds of people who have different standpoints concerning religion. Such standpoints are reflected in the difference of posters in the examples. In the examples and this paper, we

deal with issues between believers and non-believers. Since there are few believers, this issue is more significant than the issue of one religion or another, such as Christianity and Islam.

### Japanese Internet users and religions

In order to deepen our understanding of the findings in the former section and understand the Internet users' perspectives concerning religion, we draw on the results of a survey<sup>13</sup>. It helps to describe the attributes of discussants.

To the request, "Please tell me your religious interest", choices from a given list were as follows: (1) I have faith, 25%, ('faith'), (2) I do not have faith but I AM interested in religion, 25.5%, ('no faith interest'), (3) I do not have faith and I HATE religion, 49.5%, ('haters')<sup>14</sup>. We combined the categories 'faith' and 'no faith interest' to create a positively-interested-in-religion group ('positive'), and classified the rest as negatively-interested-in-religion ('negative') (Table 2). The 'positive' group comprised 50.5% of the respondents; the 'negative' group 49.5%.

<sup>9</sup> Iwai, Hiroshi: *Nihon Syukyo no Rikai ni Kansuru Oboegaki*. 80.

<sup>10</sup> Inoue Junko: *Syukyo Syakaigaku no Susume* (Guide book for Religious Sociology) . 26, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Amari, Toshimaro: *Nihonjin ha Naze Musyukyo Nanoka*. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Tamura, Takanori: *Denshi Network Riyo to Syukyokan, Kachikan, Taikendan Kokan ni Knasuru Chousa Kaidai*. 138.

<sup>13</sup> Regis survey, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> We exclude "I do not have faith and I am NOT interested in religion" group from the original result because they are not related to religious discussion.

Table 2 Interest in Religion among Internet users in Japan

	freq.	%	classification
Currently, I have (religious) faith	101	25.0	positive
Although I do not have any particular faith, I am interested in religion.	103	25.5	
I do not have any particular faith and I would rather hate religions.	200	49.5	negative
Total	404	100.0	

This table is based on Regis research in 2003. Total answers were 876. We excluded 472 “yes” answers for “I do not have any particular faith and I am not interested in religion.”

Firstly, if we can generalize from the survey results and infer that the distribution among discussants is the same, this equilibrium may be one of the reasons for difficulties and continuance of discussion about religion in the Internet. Discussion is difficult because the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ are equally-represented powers. This is because opposite opinions are hardly compromised. Also, while the majority usually absorbs the minority, this does not happen here because they are evenly matched. For the same reasons, discussions persist – each side is positively or negatively interested in religion and keep a seesaw game moving.

Secondly, from the point of view of the ‘faith’ group, two-thirds of their debaters are religion haters (‘haters’). This is not a favorable situation for them. Additionally, the ‘no faith interest’ group is not necessarily comprised of potential believers. Although we need further research, we can infer that they are “no faith” not because of their ignorance; they can easily get information from the Internet but remain ‘no faith’ even after learning much about religions<sup>15</sup>. The same is true of persons in the ‘faith’ and ‘haters’ categories<sup>16</sup>. After receiving much information from

the Internet, they might become more hardened and fixed to their positions—unwilling to compromise. We found a reason for unsuccessful and continuous discussion about religion besides the general reasons including, for example, a lack of social cues, etc<sup>17</sup>.

This analysis shows why their perspectives are different in the examples. They cannot communicate well because their standpoints concerning religion are different. Some posters think that religion is evil and others think that religion is highly significant and that others are interested in religion but cannot understand the words of believers, as claimed by *poster E*. Their differences appear in their manners of discourse and terminology. We can give a theoretical reason for relationship of their standpoints and terminology.

### Terminology, narratives and mimesis

In the examples, we have shown how terminology differences between believers and non-believers affect mutual understanding among them as we quote *poster E*. Kawabata and Watanabe conducted a survey concerning impressions of sentences by

<sup>15</sup> See not direct but related discussion based on socio psychological computer simulation. Shimura et al.: Kakudaisuru Network ha Syosuha wo Zanson Saseruka: DSIT Simulation ni Okeru Hikinsetsu Tasya Joho no Donyu.

<sup>16</sup> Before the Internet, giving information to followers worked for anti-cult movement because the

followers had little information outside the organizations. See Kito, Masaki: Centripetal Force and Centrifugal Force of Religious Web Site from Point of View of Trial that Relates to Religion.

<sup>17</sup> Kiesler and McGuire: Social Psychological Aspects of Computer-Mediated Communication.

non-believers. They asked participants to read two documents containing similar claims and information, one written in traditional "religious" language and the other in contemporary non-religious language. They found that most subjects showed a strong discomfort with the former religious document and they were generally receptive to the latter non-religious document<sup>18</sup>. Miscommunication among groups occurs – at least partially – because of differences in terms and narratives.

Why do religious differences appear in the manner of discourse and the terminology? That is also a problem of what constitutes being a believer. According to religious studies under influence of narratology, an aspect of belief is a process of achieving technical terms and narratives of the certain religion. The more one understands the terms of a religion, the more one becomes a mature believer. He re-interprets and explains his life with the terms and narratives of the religion. Over time, the terms and narratives of the religion come to be embedded in the life stories that are expressions of his identity<sup>19</sup>. Those terms and narratives have become their pre-understandings concerning religions.

In order to understand the structure of pre-understanding, narratives and how human interpretation works, we refer Paul Ricoeur's theory for "Threefold *Mimesis*." *Mimesis*, a word in Aristotle's *Poetics*, means "imitation". It can also be understood to mean a reflection of the world that is a reconstruction and presentation of reality. Although a narrative is a series of events, each event and experience is not yet part of a narrative. They have to be located in some understandable order by authors as a narrative. That is the function of *mimesis*. In this sense, *mimesis* is similar to *emplotment*. Paul Ricoeur went far beyond this in his deliberation about power of *mimesis*. He wrote that there are three moments in *mimesis*. They are related and circu-

lated. He named each element as *Mimesis* 1, 2 and 3, respectively<sup>20</sup>.

*Mimesis* 1 is the pre-understanding of human action. To imitate or represent action is first to pre-understand what human action is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality. Upon this pre-understanding, common to both poets and their readers, *emplotment* is constructed and, with it, textual and literary mimetics. Ricoeur calls it pre-figuration of the practical field. *Mimesis* 2 is Aristotle's *mimesis*. It is a function of configuration and it constructs and represents the reality. *Mimesis* 2 constructs plots. *Emplotment* is the operation that draws a configuration out of a simple succession. *Mimesis* 3 succeeds procedure and it marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or the reader. That is refiguration of the practical field through the reception of the work. This interpretation produces the next pre-understandings. In that way, Ricoeur showed prior and succeeding procedure of this *mimesis* 2<sup>21</sup>.

This is a theoretical background for how terms and narratives of their religion became their pre-understandings concerning religion. As a process of *mimesis* 1, they have their pre-understandings (terms of their religion), and as *mimesis* 2, they construct their religious self stories. Their stories are listened to and shared with their communities in *mimesis* 3 and become their own and others' pre-understandings again (the circulation of *mimesis*.) This is also applicable to non-believers because *mimesis* theory is a general theory for human interpretation.

In the former section, we introduced three groups, 'faith', 'no faith interest,' and 'haters'. These three categories of people each have their own terms and narratives that consist of their pre-understandings of religion. That is why *poster E* expressed his annoyance about Christians' terminology and is a reason for mutual misunderstandings.

This circulation is very apt for the analysis of chats about religions on the Internet. This is because chats – conducted through the exchange of texts on the Internet – is a co-authoring process of a new narrative. Each author has a different understanding of religion and the terminology as pre-understanding

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<sup>18</sup> Kawabata, Akira and Watanabe, Mitsuharu: Communication Gap between Believers and Non-believers in Religion. 9-14.

<sup>19</sup> Iwai, Hirsoshi: Syukyo no Chisiki Keieiron (On the Knowledge Management of Religions). 78, Kawabata and Watanabe: Communication Gap between Believers and Non-believers in Religion. 9.

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<sup>20</sup> See Flick, Uwe: An introduction to qualitative research. 86-88.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, Paul: Time and Narrative 1. 64-71.

(mimesis 1). They then write a new text through interaction (mimesis 2). Readers read the text and interpret it (mimesis 3). They can refer and understand what past writers shared<sup>22</sup>. Thus, written co-authored text will be read, interpreted and become the next pre-understanding (circulation of mimesis). Internet text is down-to-earth practice of Ricoeur's theory. The Internet made this process faster and visible. Analysing Internet chat for religions will help us to concretely recognize what kind of pre-understanding they possess. This does not immediately lead to an agreement among discussants but helps them to understand why they cannot agree with one another.

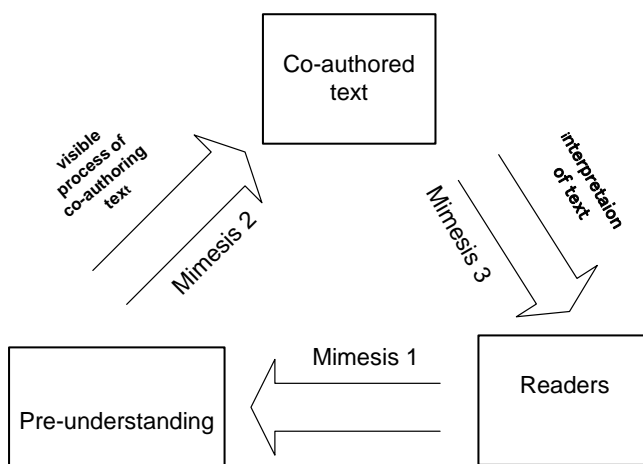


Figure 1 Circulation of Mimesis as co-authoring and interpretation in the Internet. This figure is based on Flick 2006<sup>23</sup>.

### Global information ethics

Communication difficulties due to religious difference are one with which Charles Ess concerns himself in his global information ethics. According to Ess, global information ethics must

- (a) address both local and global issues evoked by ICTs / CMC, etc. ,
- (b) in ways that both sustain local traditions / values / preferences, etc. and
- (c) provide (quasi-) universal responses to central ethical problems<sup>24</sup>.

That is, Ess foresees a global information ethics that achieve normative legitimacy among a wide diversity of cultures and ethical traditions based on *ethical pluralism*. Ethical pluralism seeks to avoid imperialistic homogenization and conjoins shared norms while simultaneously preserving the irreducible differences between cultures and peoples. It differs from *ethical relativism* which denies *ethical dogmatism* and abandon to seek global norms. While ethical relativism may have played an important role in shaping the Western liberal nation-state, it makes it impossible for us to condemn the views, values and acts at work in genocide, slavery, and dictatorship. Moreover, Ess claimed, that relativism was taken as a warrant for fascism<sup>25</sup>.

Analysis of Internet chats about religion will offer findings which contribute to Ess' discussion in the following ways.

(1) While we have discussed a domestic issue, it is related to the global information ethics that covers international and intercultural issues. This is because global information ethics should be applied to not only international issues but also domestic issues. Then, we dealt with the failures of religious discussion that were typical cases of cultural difference, which were based in differences of assumption, context, and pre-understanding.

(2) Analysing pre-understanding is related to ethical pluralism. Ethical pluralism does not intend to reconcile differences, but it seeks applicable ethics beyond the difference. For that purpose, we need to know precisely how they are different. If we find a way to analyze the precise structure of pre-understandings, we can contribute to ethical pluralism.

(3) The text in the Internet is unedited co-authored text by common people. This is important because global information ethics must be practical and applicable to daily situation of common people.

As we described previously, the Japanese situation mentioned above is not one conducive to having successful Internet chats about religion. Yet, it is a situation that presents the possibility of inventing new values which are not found in homogeneous environments. In ethical pluralism, it is crucial that

<sup>22</sup> Kato and Akahori : Influences of Past Postings on a Bulletin Board System to New Participants in a Counseling Environment. 1549-1557.

<sup>23</sup> Flick, Uwe: An introduction to qualitative research. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Ess, Charles, Ethical Pluralism and Global Information Ethics (a). 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ess, Charles: Ethical Pluralism and Global Information Ethics (b). 215-216.

people can bond *not in spite of* but precisely *because of* difference. As Ess quotes Taylor, "They can sense, that is, that their lives are narrower and less full alone than in association with each other."<sup>26</sup>

### Proposal for analysis

According to the theory mentioned above, productive conversation is building common terms and narrative in the mimesis circulation. In order to make it possible, we need hermeneutical deliberation about the way in which people's beliefs, thoughts and narratives were constructed in the circulation. Being aware of this structure helps one to find points of agreement among groups which have different pre-understandings. That is related to the way of Ess's ethical pluralism.

Hints for process of the strategy will be found in the analysis of practical knowledge of people's conversation. We should find and analyze successful cases to get a hint. Possible objects would be online counselling and self-help groups. In Japan, we found some counselling services by religious organizations<sup>27</sup>. At the beginning, they have no shared pre-understanding, then, a member or a client tells of his or her personal experiences. Counsellors and group members try to listen with empathy to those experiences and to understand them. This is an interactive process of sharing pre-understandings.

Literature on narrative analysis related to mimesis theory, regarding religion, includes Kikuchi (1998)<sup>28</sup> and Akiba and Kawabata (2004)<sup>29</sup>, Kawabata and Watanabe (2006)<sup>30</sup> and literature pertaining to self help groups include Ito (2005)<sup>31</sup> but they are not

about Internet text. Tamura (2006)<sup>32</sup> examines Internet text but does not deal with religion. We can apply these various treatises to the study of religion text in the Internet from the point of view of communication and ethical pluralism.

*Acknowledgment:* We thank Professor Nakada Makoto for his letting us use the survey data, and our reviewers for their educational comments. We also want to thank Carol Christine McKetty (Ph.D candidate) and Dr. Leslie M. Tkach-Kawasaki for their comments and checking our English.

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<sup>26</sup> Ess, Charles: *Ethical pluralism and global information ethics (b)*, 217.

<sup>27</sup> Kawabata and Tamura, : *Online-religion in Japan: Websites and religious counseling from a comparative cross-cultural perspective.*

<sup>28</sup> Kikuchi, Hiroo: *Shin'nyoen "Seinenbu Benron Taikai" ni Miru Jiko no Kosei to Hen'yo: Shin'nyoen. Shinsyukyo Kenkyu heno JikoMomonogariron teki Approach no Kokoromi.*

<sup>29</sup> Akiba and Kawabata: *Reino no Reality he: Syakaigaku Shin'nyoen he Hairu.*

<sup>30</sup> Kawabata and Watanabe: *Communication Gap between Believers and Non-believers in Religion.*

<sup>31</sup> Ito, Tomoki: *Tamerai no Koe: Self Help Group Genyukai heno Narrative Approach.*

<sup>32</sup> Tamura,Takanori: *Niho no Internet ni Okeru Jikomogotriteki Communication to Imikukan.*

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Richard A. Cohen:

## Plato, Judaism, Kant and Information Technology

### Abstract:

Plato's two complaints in the *Phaedrus* about the new technology of writing, namely, that reliance upon it leads to forgetfulness and fosters intellectual misunderstanding, which are here taken equally to be relevant. Possible complaints about contemporary information technology, are examined and assessed, in themselves and in relation to Jewish rabbinic exegetical tradition and in relation to Immanuel Kant's positive claims for text based religions in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

### Agenda

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## Plato's Fears about Information Technology

In the *Phaedrus* Plato warns of two fundamental dangers of a then relatively new information and communication technology (IT): the written word.<sup>1</sup> His reservations then apply even more now to our high speed, global, computer driven information technologies. Indeed, a sure sign of the continued relevance of his worries is precisely the fact that today we recoil almost instinctively from taking advice on a topic like this – contemporary computer technology – from a thinker so seemingly “out of date” as Plato. In today’s constantly changing world a few years, a few months, even a few weeks can make a leading edge technology outmoded or obsolete. Nevertheless, the amazing speed of our new technologies and the unprecedented rapidity of their development have not overtaken Plato. What are the dangers Plato foresaw?

*First, memory will diminish.* The reification of meaningful signs into independent storable spatial-temporal symbolic representations (writing), leads to the deterioration of living humans’ capacity to remember; it will “implant forgetfulness in their souls.”<sup>2</sup> *Second, misunderstanding will increase.* Because externalized symbolic representations (on scrolls, in books, on internet websites) “go on telling you just the same thing forever”<sup>3</sup> and facilitate solitary information retrieval (reading), true understanding will be overcome by erroneous interpretations undisciplined by any face-to-face dialogue/dialectic of questioning and answering. In sum, IT will weaken our memory and warp our understanding.

If correct, and to the extent that they are correct, the consequences of Plato’s two-pronged critique of IT for the continued significance of our social, cultural and political traditions are enormous. Jose Ortega y Gasset diagnosed several of these consequences in his book *The Revolt of the Masses*

(1930), in which he wrote, tellingly: “The mass-man believes that the civilization into which he was born and which he makes use of, is as spontaneous and self-producing as Nature, and *ipso facto* he is changed into primitive man.”<sup>4</sup> Loss of memory, in other words, reaches to a forgetfulness of history: only the present is real, surrounded, perhaps, by the news of the last two weeks.

### In Scriptural Religions

The consequences of the validity of Plato’s two-pronged critique for religious traditions based in sacred scriptures, that is to say, for religions based in exegesis and commentary, and thus for religions as globally significant as, say, Judaism, Christianity, Mormonism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, are no less profound and frightening.

Indeed, the consequences for scripturally based religions are nothing less than revolutionary. For one, it would mean that contrary to the treasured belief of the faithful, reliance upon a sacred text would already represent the *loss* of a more pristine religious revelation. Scriptural revelation would be spiritual devolution. Instead of the familiar critique of IT which chides that the internet, with the vast availability of information it puts at our fingertips, reinforces our isolation and seduces us away from living religious community, scriptural learning and closeness to the divine, according to Plato’s far more radical critique the scriptures would be themselves the original seduction and distraction away from true religious community and spiritual closeness to God. So the much clerically decried contemporary decline of traditional religious institutions in the West could, from this perspective, represent an overall gain for true religion, as found, for instance, in New Age spirituality or in evangelicalism (if it were not so obvious, on the contrary, that it usually represents the increased sway of a materialistic individualism).

On the other hand, this sounds quite a bit too clever, abstract and simplistic, indeed, it rings sophistical: sacred scripture as the unholy?<sup>5</sup> Plato’s

<sup>1</sup> See, Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 520-521 (275a-275e).

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 520 (275a).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 521 (275d).

<sup>4</sup> Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1957), 89.

<sup>5</sup> The Talmud has the exquisite spiritual audacity to declare that touching *sacred scriptures* makes one unclean! See, *Babylonian Talmud, Sabbath, 14a*.

critique demands to be taken more seriously, demands that we examine more closely the complex and nuanced transformations of memory and truth both consequent and constitutive of writing. Perhaps it is precisely the scriptural religions, which take writing more seriously than any other human perspective, can best teach us how to properly qualify Plato's criticisms, how to see in the changes wrought by IT not simply the dystopia of loss and deformation, but rather an innovative contribution to a different and higher human spirituality. But how, accordingly, can what Plato feared most about writing – memory loss, meaning distortion – represent something positive, and especially something positive in relation to the deepest significations that are the true care of religious traditions?

### Re-considered Positively

First, relative to memory loss, one can also see in IT a *disburdening* and *liberation* of the memory. Not, to be sure, in the sense that humanity need no longer know by remembering and embodying truths. The mass-man Ortega feared, the one who takes civilization for granted like nature, remains a genuine worry. To know genuinely remains a knowing of one's own, an existential self-enrichment. But the technology of information storage can better ensure that vast amounts of data – the documentary record of whole civilizations – can be preserved come what may, earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, floods, etc. Even if for whatever reasons humans do forget or lose vital information, it can be regained because of its having been preserved in objective forms. In pre-literate societies, in contrast, information forgotten to living memory is lost irretrievably, gone forever. At best it might be discovered anew.

Judaism, certainly, has treasured its written Torah as writing. The very writing of it is a holy act performed with an unequalled meticulousness and piety. Israelite kings are obligated, according to the Hebrew Bible, to write out two copies of their own, must always carry one on their person, and are enjoined "to read from it all the days of his life" (Leviticus 17:18-19). The Hebrew Bible even has the audacity to speak of its own loss and retrieval: The young King Josiah, grandson of the faithful King Hezekiah and son of the idolatrous King Manasseh, first learns of it and reads aloud from it to the Israelites from a Torah scroll found in the Temple of Jerusalem by the High Priest (II Kings 22:8-23:2). So, too, after the Israelites returned from Babylonian captivity, Ezra the Scribe read and expounded to them the Torah that they had forgotten while in exile (Nehemiah 8:1-9:3). For this communal re-

newal of the covenant the Talmud likens Ezra to a "second Moses. More profoundly still, and as if in response to Plato's second fear, Judaism complements its Written Torah (*Torah she-bikhtav*) with its Oral Torah (*Torah she-be'al peh*) – both understood to have been given by God at Mount Sinai.

Regarding Plato's second fear, namely, that by detaching signs from the living persons signifying them IT encourages a freedom for misinterpretations, falsehoods, ersatz wisdom, here too one can accept Plato's insight but temper it with a very different and positive alternative. One can see in this same freedom deriving from the differential ambivalence of signs not just an interpretive free for all, but rather the unfathomably rich source for multiple readings growing and building upon themselves to form a specific tradition kept alive and ever fructified through exegetical amplification. This is certainly, in any event, how the scriptural religions unfold and maintain their integrity across the changing emphases of historically situated discourse.

### By Wisdom

To properly understand this crucial difference between unregulated interpretative license, with its loss of historical development, and the rigors of an exegetical tradition, we must first make explicit the underlying premise of both of Plato's criticisms, and then show how this premise is understood by religious traditions in contrast to its philosophical appropriation. Very simply, Plato's underlying premise is that one can and must distinguish between opinion and knowledge, information and understanding, ignorance and wisdom.

In a preliminary way let us characterize philosophical wisdom as data humanly interpreted and integrated by reason into a holistic (though not necessarily a whole) worldview. If one imagines – for heuristic purposes – a continuum of symbolic signs, with mathematical symbols at one end, the "object" side, wisdom would lay toward the far other side, the "subject" side. But for Plato and scriptural religion wisdom is not subjective, but more objective, as it were, than the objectivity of numbers. It is not more objective because it can be measured, to be sure, but because it is more important, worthier of humans, closer, as Plato thought, to the eternal and absolute good that should direct human behavior and thinking. Of course neither side of the continuum is completely pure, since numbers must take on a material form, and wisdom remains in some sense cut to the measure of finite human sensibility, and both, furthermore, necessarily involve elements

of selection. Still, from this perspective we can now better understand Plato's critique of writing: by detaching signs from wise persons it sets them adrift from the discernment necessary to distinguish and value truth above falsehood, the important above the trivial, the revealing above the merely logical, and ultimately the good above evil. Signs by themselves can signify anything, as contemporary postmodern deconstructive practices demonstrate all too well. Signs are bound to truth through wise discernment.

The wise person is not, therefore, simply someone with a lot of information in their head. A computer can hold information, though it can never be wise. Rather, the wise person's wisdom is an embodied teaching, and the wise person is both a student and a teacher. Wisdom occurs, happens, transpires, is born and dies across a face-to-face relationship, as a social event, even if it is sparked by the solitary reading of the ancient books of "dead white males." For Plato, in other words, dialogue is not a luxury or a distraction but the very situation of truth, the testing ground and channel, as it were, of the truth of truth. His teacher, Socrates, philosophized but did not write at all. And Plato was only able to "write" philosophy in the form of dialogue, the form best suited, so it seems, to obviate the inherent dangers of IT. Because the written symbolic representation of what counts most, i.e., wisdom, is "unable to defend or help itself,"<sup>6</sup> is unable to clarify or expound its proper sense, is unable to prevent or mitigate false readings and misunderstanding, the living presence of a wise person is required.

Independent of their communicative context, conversely, signs lend themselves to endless manipulation, so that the better can appear worse and the worse better, or the true false and the false true, and ultimately so that signs mean everything and nothing – or, as Nietzsche better expressed it, they become "a book for all and none."<sup>7</sup> Writing or IT, detached from wisdom, promotes sophistry. Sophistry is not simply the product of evil minded persons; it lies in the seduction, the sirens' call of words. This does not mean, however, that the remedy must

come from some doctrine of "original intent," as if what is meant by an author is privileged as such. We know that Plato was especially hard on poets because he did not believe that as poets that they were the best interpreters of their own poetry, just as later Spinoza will argue that prophets, Daniel for example, are not the best interpreters of their own prophecies. Rather, he is saying that outside of its communicative context involving expository and argumentative interchange between teacher and student, the presence of writing, or a website filled with words, leaves open too many meanings to discern true meanings and to lead to genuine understanding. Wisdom emerges only through dialogue, conversation, discussion, communication, where what is said (what can be recorded externally) can be clarified, unraveled, sharpened, revised, refined, corrected, and otherwise submitted to an essentially social verification procedure, even in unresolved inquiries (Plato's *Euthyphro*, for example). This process, however, can be evaded or forgotten in the virtually solitary retrieval of the almost anonymous and seemingly infinite information sources made available by today's computer technologies. Many are the teachers who lament how often their students mistake Wikipedia for wisdom.

## As Ethical Exegesis

How, then, having said all this, can we suggest that in writing, and in IT more broadly, Plato's fears can be mitigated? How is it possible that the multiplication of meaning to which writing as writing is prone, can be seen to be something positive rather than the source of misunderstanding, confusion, and ultimately of the loss of meaning altogether? Plato has already pointed us toward the answer: in the communication situation, in dialogue. But his philosophical notion of a single or unified, non-contradictory, ideal, eternal, and unchanging truth led him astray, or rather exacerbated his fears. Scriptural religions, in contrast, provide us a better or more specific guide and model: in the communicative situation as an exegetical tradition arising from an essentially pluralizing sacred text. And Judaism gives us a concrete instance: the exegetical integrality and authority of its Written Torah inextricably bound to Oral Torah. Two elements are central to all of these answers which bind IT to wisdom: the writing or text, and the disciplining of the multiplication of meaning to which writing necessarily, as writing, gives rise. This discipline is what in religion is called "exegesis" or "tradition." Exegesis, in other words, is the positive alternative response to Plato's otherwise well justified cautions.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 521 (275e).

<sup>7</sup> *Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* – these words are of course the subtitle of Nietzsche's most personal book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

I have elaborated on this theme in my book, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*. There I defend the thesis that the meanings which count, the symbolic representations through which "wisdom" is achieved, do not depend on the univocal and exclusionary definitions which Plato has Socrates seeking, but rather and precisely on a multiplicity of non-exclusionary interpretations. This multiplicity, rather than deriving from and leading to misunderstanding and non-sense, reflects the multiplicity of interlocutors necessary to wisdom. The communicative context is not a sort of temporary ladder, as it were, to be discarded after rising through argumentation to absolute ideas which transcend the human condition altogether. Indeed, the auxiliary and secondary status accorded to the communicative context derives from what scholars have identified as Plato's "theory of ideas," whereby primacy is given solely to knowledge conceived in the light of a (impossible) disembodied mathematical ideal. If we are to take seriously Socrates' alleged turn from the natural sciences to a quest for the good, to "ethics as first philosophy," to use Emmanuel Levinas's expression, then the communicative context – dialogue, discussion, conversation – far from being a disposable prolegomena to a pure knowledge, changes status to become part and parcel of wisdom itself. Thus, so I argued in my book, philosophy should learn from religious exegesis the method of what I dubbed "ethical exegesis." In my book I summed this is as follows: "We must distinguish in exegesis four inter-related characteristics or dimensions: (1) concrete and productive integrity of spirit and letter; (2) pluralism of persons and readings; (3) virtue, or existential, self-transformative wisdom; and (4) authority, or the renewal of a living ethico-religious tradition."<sup>8</sup>

## In Kant's Reading of Religion

But instead of revisiting my book to elaborate the positive value of IT in the face of Plato's fears, here I will conclude by turning to a similar line of thought found in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, in one of his last works, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1794). Though Kant developed an enormously influential philosophy of science in his most famous work, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1787), he himself gave "primacy" to his second critique on ethics, *The Critique of Practi-*

*cal Reason* (1788). The primacy given to ethics over knowledge also determines Kant's conception of enlightened religion in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, where ecclesiastic faith is meant to serve ethics, indeed, to function as the historically concrete propaedeutic to a globally just sociality. But our specific interest in Kant's book on religion lies in what it says about scripture.

In a long footnote appended to the end of Part Three, Kant makes the following peculiar observation: "Yet a people which has a written religion (sacred books) never fuses together in one faith with a people (like the Roman Empire, then the entire civilized world) possessing no such books but only rites; instead, sooner or later it makes proselytes."<sup>9</sup> He gives as the reason for the resilience of scriptural religions what we have already indicated above: if lost, such writings can be found and can revitalize. But, again as we have also indicated above, this restorative power is not the deepest significance of the scriptural basis of religion for Kant.

More profoundly, the scriptures fructify through their interpretation, through exegesis. Because scriptural religions have books, writings, and because writing, as Plato worried, opens itself to diverse readings, exegesis can guide ecclesiastical faiths across historical peregrinations to maintain their true purpose, which is, as Kant succinctly puts it, "to make men better."<sup>10</sup> Scriptures thus at once both liberate and restrict. Kant, faithful to the primacy of practical reason, determines the latter in terms of moral edification.

Hence, even if a document is accepted as a divine revelation, the highest criterion of its being of divine origin will be: 'All scripture given by inspiration of God is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for improvement, etc.' (James II, 17); and since this last, to wit, the moral improvement of men, constitutes the real end of all religion of reason, it will comprise the highest principle of all Scriptural exegesis.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation After Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 246.

<sup>9</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. M. Greene and H.H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 127.

<sup>10</sup> Kant, *Religion*, 102.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 102

[A]n exposition of the revelation which has come into our possession is required, that is, a thorough-going interpretation of it in a sense agreeing with the universal practical rules of a religion of pure reason. For the theoretical part of ecclesiastical faith cannot interest us morally if it does not conduce to the performance of all human duties as divine command (that which constitutes the essence of all religion).<sup>12</sup>

And even more concretely (and despite the ideology of Christian supersessionism which elsewhere mars Kant's understanding of Judaism), he writes:

The later Judaism, and even Christianity itself, consist of such interpretations, often very forced, but in both instances for ends unquestionably good and needful for all men.<sup>13</sup>

Kant justifies the centrality of scriptures as sources of interpretation, even when these interpretations seem "forced," on two grounds. First, on the "possibility that their authors may be so understood,"<sup>14</sup> which flexibility is precisely facilitated by their character as writings about which Plato warned. And second, most importantly, on the ultimate aim of religion and "the highest criterion" of a text "being of divine origin," namely, "to make men better." This latter criterion provides the needed discipline to harness an otherwise wild interpretive freedom and to limit an otherwise unregulated and ultimately belligerent sophistry which Plato feared most.

Thus ethical exegesis, as dialogue with text and dialogue between readers, represents one positive and pacific response to Plato's justified fears, a positive way to put to good purpose the undeniable multiplication of significations released by writing as such, or, as we would say today, by the technologies of information storage and retrieval. Scriptural interpretive tradition is thus not only one way to preserve the heritage of a religious community, it is also able to propel such a community – as an assembly of speakers and hearers, teachers and learners, passing from one generation to the next – from and toward an ever more profound and growing wisdom.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 100

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 102

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 102

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Richard Shields:

## Toward a Religious Ethics of Information Communication Technology

### Abstract:

This paper deals with how religions formulate ethical responses to the challenges arising from information-communication technology. For over forty years the Catholic Church has constructed an official teaching that attempts provide a consistent and universal perspective for making moral judgments about these technologies and the communications media they enable and sustain. Because of its stature and size as world religion and because its moral understanding has attempted to keep pace with the rapid development of ICT, the Catholic Church's views have particular significance and can be taken as an artefact and model of how religion responds to the moral challenges posed by modern technology. This paper will examine how ethics and religion come together in Catholic teaching, discuss certain problems arising from that approach, and conclude with suggestions for a future religious ethics of ICT.

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## Introduction

Religions promote values for individuals and for the societies in which they live. It is natural that religions have something to say about the ethical implications of the technology on human moral life. Modern technology has posed successive challenges to religious-ethical thinking not simply because of the use or abuse to which it can be put, but because of what Hans Jonas (1984) has described as the altered nature of human action. Religions are legitimately concerned with how technology impacts on the way people view the world and make value judgments; they need also to be aware of the impact of technology on how people view religion and morality. Religions may no longer rest on a naïve sense of their own credibility as moral authorities. If they hope to mobilize their own members, find common ground with other religions, and influence the global forces that structure, animate and constitute the global world wide web of information and communication, they will need a multi-dimensional hermeneutic, an ethical method that is open, inclusive and inductive.

### The Roman Catholic Response

The Catholic response to the challenges of a rapidly developing confluence of media, technology, and information-explosion emerges in several pastoral-ethical documents. They reflect three concerns: the impact of technologically driven changes in public and social communication on the Church's mission, the development of communication and public opinion within the Church, and the ethical questions raised by an altered form of digitalized and globalized communication. This paper deals only with the final concern.

### A period of optimism

An official Catholic ICT-ethics begins with the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965). Among the challenges the Bishops addressed was that presented by technology-mediated communication – “the press, the cinema, radio, television,” and other such media, through which mass audiences

are reached.<sup>47</sup> The Council recognized that a new reality – multiple messages from multiple sources – was shaping the consciousness of Catholics and threatening the Church's traditionally powerful voice in an emerging worldwide communications network.

Of primary concern was the right of the Church (and of religion) to not be excluded from the new media systems. The ethical warrant for this claim lay in a three-fold argument, that (1) the formation of public opinion is an essential right of human beings, (2) which implies the right of access to information, and (3) truthful information is information that does not exclude religion. This position is based in “the absolute primacy of the objective moral order,” the natural law, established by God, that reveals humanity's supernatural finality.

A series of directives, aimed at media producers, church leaders, governments, professional associations of media workers, and consumers, especially parents, establishes a pattern of seeing media in terms of producers-regulators-users.

*Communio et Progressio* (1971) provides the theological framework for a Catholic ethics of ICT. Its starting point and foundational principle is the *purpose* of social communication: to build a responsible and responsive world community. Developments and applications in media technology must be evaluated by this goal, which is hierarchically ordered to God's “plan for [humanity's] salvation.”<sup>48</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity is applied analogously as a paradigm and heuristic for understanding the nature and goal of human communication. “[T]he bondedness and community of man – the highest purpose of every act of communication – is rooted in and modelled by the highest mystery of the eternal community in God.”<sup>49</sup> From this derives the universal ethical obligation to ensure that the media are used in the pursuit of truth and to create the conditions necessary for fostering “that mutual and sympathetic understanding that leads to human progress.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Inter Mirifica*, n. 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Communio et Progressio* (1971), n. 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibd.*, n. 8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibd.*, n. 18.

The moral measure of ICT lies in its use, either to "multiply contacts within society and to deepen social consciousness"<sup>51</sup> or undermine the formation of a just and equitable world community. *Communio et Progressio* applies general principles of the Church's doctrine of social justice to the quality and purpose of communication as impacted by ICT. The model of media apparent in both documents is instrumental: technology-machines/tools-producer-product-recipient.

### Taking stock

As ICT develops, access broadens, and restrictions become porous, the opportunity for exchanging and viewing objectionable materials grows. Alarmed by the "worldwide revolution in the perception of moral values," and the "the major role in the process of individual and social change" played by the media,<sup>52</sup> *Pornography and Violence in Media: A Pastoral Response* (1989) adopts a more judgmental discourse. This document invokes traditional ethical values and calls on various societal groups to defend human dignity, evaluate products and attitudes, and encourage the production and use of materials that "respect the common good and promote sound human development."<sup>53</sup> Without reference to the loss of boundaries inherent in the technology itself,<sup>54</sup> the Vatican finds fault in widespread weakening of traditional morality. The ethical role played by new ICT in this process is shortened to one of carrying images and content to be judged by established (natural law) criteria.

In what may be taken as a counterbalance to the anxious tone of *Pornography and Violence* (1989), *Aetatis Novae* (1992) acknowledges the dynamic and all-pervading aspect of ICT. The statement highlights ICT's positive role in the political reconfiguring of Europe and its power to cause "a fundamental reshaping of the elements of which people comprehend the world about them and

verify what they comprehend."<sup>55</sup> To insure the positive use of ICT, a sense of solidarity (a hybrid of social justice and compassion), enlightened consumption and regulatory policies should guide its development and application.

Both documents raise serious ethical questions, from availability of immoral content and lack of regulation of IT systems to depersonalization of communication and cultural colonialism. The ethical norm proposed is functional, measuring the applications of ICT against "the role, which, in the providential plan of God, the media are intended to play in promoting the integral development of human persons and societies."<sup>56</sup> These statements see the Church as apart from the media, maintaining "a linear and instrumental view," reflective of its own interest in the technologies for disseminating religious information and proclamation.<sup>57</sup>

### Toward establishing ethical standards

In its latest stage of ethical responses, the Church calls for self- and governmental regulation of ICT, as a means of bringing it in line with the hierarchically ordered purposes of a God. *Ethics in Advertising* (1997), *Ethics in Communications*, (2000), and *Ethics in Internet* (2002) continue with an essentially instrumental paradigm of ICT as neutral tools. Missing in these statements is an appreciation for the complexities of the Internet and its technology, of the protean-like reality and metaphoric meaning of cyberspace, and of the difficulty of locating ethical responsibility where users and producers are not easily distinguished. Ethically problematic areas (such as manipulation of the public, destructive patterns of consumptions, digital divide, governmental filtering, and privacy-security) affirm and are reaffirmed by the statements of international bodies. However, the generality of appeals to human dignity and the common good, as necessary "conditions for grounding one's vision, taking a stand, and action remain rather vacuous."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Communio et Progressio* (1971), n. 8.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibd.*, n. 1.

<sup>53</sup> *Pornography and Violence in Media: A Pastoral Response* (1989), n. 23.

<sup>54</sup> Svantesson, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> *Aetatis Novae* (1992), n. 4.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibd.*, n.9.

<sup>57</sup> de Feijter 2007, Helland 2005.

<sup>58</sup> de Feijter 2007, p. 63.



## Analysis of the Roman Catholic Approach

The Catholic response to ICT is fundamentally positive, approaching the technology as means that can be used to benefit the human person and community. The dominant model of media is one of neutral tools, instruments, used to strategically and purposively convey messages. Ethical norms, extrinsic to the technologies themselves, are applied to formulate moral assessments and provide direction for responsible action. The norms, derived from a religious worldview that privileges the concept "social communication" as an ethical starting point, depend on the Christian narrative and vision of society for their interpretative principle. But there are inherent shortcomings in this approach, which limit the Church's ability to influence public ethical discourse.

Little (if any) empirical research is available to demonstrate to what extent the Vatican has influenced the ethical development of ICT or ascertain its effect on the attitudes toward or use of ICT among Catholics. Religious ethical statements are meant to be normative (influencing judgments) and reformatory (changing behaviours). A reasonable assessment of the Church's potential to move ICT effectively to fulfill its moral potential must take both these aspects seriously. The Church statements see ICT as a means and opportunity for humankind to take decisive action toward human development and international cooperation. The Vatican's reading of media and ICT is morally sensitive both to areas such as violence, pornography and racism, and to concerns of privacy, security and criminal activity. It raises issues of social justice and inclusion, such as the digital divide, cultural domination, and community identity.

The nobility of these interests is not in question. What will be beneficial for religious ethicists, however, is to inquire into the form of ethical discourse employed by a particular religious grouping. In this regard, the Church's response to ICT is problematic in several aspects: (a) the appeal to a religious meta-narrative, (b) an instrumental appraisal of ICT, and (c) an authoritarian and deductive approach to ethical valuing.

### Appeal to meta-narrative

The Vatican's ethical evaluations are situated within the conceptual framework of *social commu-*

*nication*, a concept prior to modern ICTs and whose meaning is unaltered by their novelty. The Church, accordingly, seeks new ways to apply established values of social order and purpose rooted in natural law anthropology, construed within a particular religious discourse and narrative tradition.

Social communication as the pivotal interpretative concept, theologically interpreted by analogy to the Christian doctrines of the Blessed Trinity and Creation, presents a vision of media, their purpose and function that privileges a particular religious heuristic for understanding the ethical issues. As a basis for ethical dialogue and collaboration, meta-narratives or macro-level theories are problematic, because they "tend to abstract from particular cases, to impute rationality on actors' behalfs or posit functionality for their actions, and to be order-driven."<sup>59</sup> They raise the suspicion of a post-modern audience and impede the creation of an intercultural space of ethical response to a worldwide phenomenon that raises consciousness of diversity and difference.

### Structural-functional perspective

An instrumentalist description of what characterizes Internet communications betrays a structural-functional approach that applies traditional ethical frameworks to realities that have outgrown them. While acknowledging the Internet fundamentally reshapes "the elements by which people comprehend the world about them, and verify and express what they comprehend,"<sup>60</sup> the Church construes the Net and ICT as tools. "The media do nothing by themselves; they are instruments, tools, used as people choose to use them."<sup>61</sup>

Technology mediated information/communication is treated as "out there." In the foreground stands function: first, within the structural concept of social communication; then, as function within the structure of human community; finally, within the dynamic structure of the nature and action of God. This construct resists Greenfield's and Yan's (2006) insistence that we "see the Internet as a new object of cognition, neither a concrete arte-

<sup>59</sup> Misa 1994, p. 119.

<sup>60</sup> *Aetatis Novae* n. 4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ethics in Communication*, n. 4.

fact nor a visible social partner, but a gigantic complex network of networks...a hybrid of artificial (e.g. computer screens and key board), social (communications with people), and mental like systems (e.g. invisible virtuality).<sup>62</sup> The structural-functional model lags behind the emergent ubiquity of computing. It remains "abstract and under-developed" and of "limited value."<sup>63</sup>

Today we are challenged not primarily by the message-bearing capacity of ICT, but by a movement to computerize our lives, guided by "a euphoric and uncritical vision of the merger of flesh and machine in the wireless modes of the 'digital nerve.'"<sup>64</sup> Kroker sees the ICT future as "the forced integration of every facet of human experience into [what Bills Gates has termed] the 'digital nervous system',"<sup>65</sup> "a downloadable, ready to install, virtual memory: a cyber panopticon plugged into the flesh circuits of human subjectivity."<sup>66</sup> This kind of vision, itself open to ethical questioning, claims the same moral high-ground – improved health-care, education, politics, commerce, communication and freedom itself – as that staked out in the Vatican documents.

The new ICT puts into question the assumption: "that a firm, reliable boundary exists between humans as organism and tools regarded as material aids to activity."<sup>67</sup> In a world where "many computers will share each of us,"<sup>68</sup> totalizing digitalized and global networks broker the relationship of humans to the world. If ethics for the Information Age has realistic hopes of shaping the development and applications of those technologies, we must not only rethink our assumptions about ICT, but move beyond the instrumental view.

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<sup>62</sup> Greenfield and Yan 2006, p. 393.

<sup>63</sup> Svantesson 2005, p. 40.

<sup>64</sup> Kroker 2004, p. 105.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibd.*, p. 105.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibd.*, p. 107.

<sup>67</sup> Winner 2004, p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> Weiser and Brown 1996, p. 1.

### Authoritarian deductive approach

The teachings of the Pontifical Council are part of the ordinary *magisterium* (teaching office) of the Church. They do not claim infallibility, but expect Catholics to treat them as authoritative. This genre of communication is self-referencing, deriving from the claim to ethical expertise, based on "a tradition of moral wisdom rooted in divine revelation and human reflection."<sup>69</sup> While calling for dialogue about the application of church teachings, they exhibit scant evidence of openness to the worldviews and values of others.

Also, the ethical approach is deductive, the concept of social communication, understood in light of the divine communication in the trinity and with the world serving as its universal premise. Does "social communication" as an ethical category adequately cover what is happening in ICT as it expands, for example, into robotics and biometrics?

In a context of increased global awareness and moral sensitivity, an authoritarian model is obsolete. Precisely the technologies in question have brought about an informed 'laity' with its own sets of hopes and anxieties, whose moral concerns, although "unspecific and inchoate,"<sup>70</sup> cannot be dismissed as self-interest or naïveté. Their uneasiness in face of an altered state of human relations or the digitalization of life, although removed from the language of the professional ethicist and outside a religious-authoritarian context, is no less ontological or religious. Religious ethics that does not reflect a richer understanding of the full range of human ethical response to technology will appear disconnected from the historically unprecedented technological developments they assess, as well as from the lives of the citizens they wish to influence.

### Toward a religious ethics of ICT

"We live in a contested and morally ambiguous age."<sup>71</sup> The "global spread of awareness about moral problems ranging from human rights to the environmental crisis to problems of war and eco-

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<sup>69</sup> *Ethics in Communication*, n. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Deane-Drummond et al. 2001, p. 24.

<sup>71</sup> Schweiker 2006, p. 138.

conomic justice and medical advancements" cuts across traditional cultural and religious lines, causing a re-evaluation of moral and religious reality in the minds and practices of secular societies and traditional religious groupings. Access to information and borderless communication reveals the vitality of religion across the globe, but also its conflicts.<sup>72</sup>

Given the problematic character of Catholic teachings, how can an ICT ethics be religious and still communicate with the larger world? For religious ethics to communicate in a technologically shaped, information society it must understand itself in light of "the character and interaction of the religious and other cultural and social forces"<sup>73</sup> that shape modern consciousness. We experience ourselves "as interdependent parts of a complex network, not as isolated items that must be supported in a void." Moral knowledge arises not from the application of religious truth to experience but, like all knowledge, within "a network involving all kinds of lateral links, a system in which the most varied kinds of connection may be relevant in helping us to meet various kinds of questions."<sup>74</sup> The speed of invention, the importance attached to information and communication, and the amount of money, time, and energy invested in being "plugged in" means that no single approach is sufficient to grasp the moral reality of ICT.

In navigating the precarious waters between fidelity to a particular creedal source and ability to contribute credibility to human understanding and valuing, religious ethics must embrace a "multi-dimensional hermeneutic."<sup>75</sup> This two-pronged hermeneutic: (1) allows a religion to "know" ICT in ways that take it beyond a univocal religious perspective, and (2) offers clues to a different kind of theological response that reshapes its faith-grounded concept of the good and of the nature of human experience. A religious ethics must be able to move freely among "the practices, linguistic forms and ways of life"<sup>76</sup> of other religious, ethnic and mass mediated cultural meanings and

values, to give witness, as it were, to its own beliefs in the world as it is, not as it would like it to be.

How are religions to articulate an ethics that contributes to a public discourse of serious and respectful cooperation and that "create[s] a reflexive space of reasonable claims advanced and redeemed in response to basic human questions."<sup>77</sup> How can they make the lateral links that are constituent of understanding and responding to questions of common human interest, without abandoning their faith perspective? A future religious ethics of ICT will be an ethics that is:

- Inclusive – not imposing its worldview but discovering it in the human situation.
- Open – not announcing its position but arriving at it through communication.
- Inductive – not standing apart from the reality it interprets, but engaged with validating its own religious truths in the experience of the world.

"Insofar as people are parts of the networks, to say that 'technology' causes social change is really to say that people – through the sociotechnical networks they create and sustain – cause change."<sup>78</sup> Understanding people within the mesmerizing unfolding of ICT is the challenge religions face in making ethical sense in today's world.

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<sup>74</sup> Midgley 2003, p. 25.

<sup>75</sup> Schweiker 2006, p. 143.

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Thomas Zeilinger:

## Ethical Instruction via 'Anschauung'

### An Appeal for media-apt Contributions of the Church to the Ethics of the Internet

#### Abstract:

The way the big churches in Germany traditionally address ethical issues is by discursive memoranda and pastoral letters. The article explores the possibilities of a complementary approach by symbolic presentation. It is suggested that the specifics of the Internet point as well towards that direction as the specific understanding of the educational process as seen in the Christian tradition. Thus the idea of an ethical orientation by exemplary models using the power of imagination is stressed. Some examples from different areas are given to illustrate the notion of a participatory and dialogical exploration of the ethical challenges the net has in store. Rather than defining answers before meeting the challenges, the paper suggests to explore new and appropriate answers by ways of mutual, interpretative practice in the new medium.

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    Zwischen-Räume. Theologie der Mächte und Gewalten, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer 1999, 403 p.

## “Memoranda”: A Classical Contribution of the Church to Ethics

If in German-speaking areas the question of the church's contribution to an ethics of the internet is posed, one mainly looks to discursive contributions in the form of “official” church memoranda (so called “Denkschriften”) and pastoral letters. The societal contribution to ethical issues by the churches is especially noticed where the church, through its representative deputies makes itself heard in public, and does this in a differentiated manner. In the realm of media-ethics a prominent example of this kind of contribution can be found in a joint declaration of the (catholic) German Conference of Bishops (DBK) and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD): “Chances and Risks of the Media Society” for the year 1997.<sup>79</sup> The church (in this case especially noteworthy, the two large *Volkskirchen* together) enters the public discourse through its institutional public representatives, in order to promote, through its own arguments, grounds and considerations, the process of societal reflection about developments of the media. In the specific tradition of Memoranda of the Evangelical Church of Germany, a special study in the 1980's had preceded the joint declaration of 1997: Even before the existence of the internet as we know it today, an EKD study in the year 1985 discussed the opportunities, dangers and challenges for responsible planning in the use of modern IT techniques with the title “The new Information and Communi-

cation Techniques”.<sup>80</sup> Since the mutual text of 1997 no memorandum, nor a pastoral letter from the Catholic side, appeared in the German speaking world as a public contribution by the church to the topic of the internet.

However, in the year 2002 in Rome the “Pontifical Council for Social Communications” published a communiqué “Ethics in the Internet”, which appeared also in a German translation and was taken notice of in the German language areas.<sup>81</sup> At any rate, the impression that discourse and in turn the discursively developed criticism of discourse represent the primary places in which the church itself contributes to (media) ethics, can be seen as confirmed for media ethics and specifically for the ethics of the internet in the German language areas.

## The Internet: Not a discursive, but a presentative Medium

The more the internet itself developed in a multimedia direction, its visual quality became and becomes more and more noticeable as reflection on its characteristics continue. Several characteristics of the internet were repeatedly emphasized in this regard: Its hypertext structure, its multimedia character which is enabled through (moving) pictures and sound as part of the net, as well as the far-reaching integration of other media right up to and including telephone and television via IP. The multidimensionality, which distinguishes the internet from a medial viewpoint, can hardly

<sup>79</sup> Chancen und Risiken der Mediengesellschaft. Gemeinsame Texte der EKD und der DBK, Nr. 10, 1997 (online: [www.ekd.de/EKD-Texte/mediendenkschrift\\_1997\\_einleitung.html](http://www.ekd.de/EKD-Texte/mediendenkschrift_1997_einleitung.html)). Even as the internet does not yet appear as a subject in its own right in the document, the new medium is as much present as the word “internet” appears in the paper 18 times. The importance of the net is stressed in the introductory reflections on recent developments of media technology. Particularly the acceleration of the development and the changing framework the internet imposes upon other “classical” media are noticed. The question of responsibility for the content is viewed as a new challenge in a network of linked computers (part 1.1.1.)

<sup>80</sup> Kirchenamt der EKD (ed.): Die neuen Informations- und Kommunikationstechniken – Chancen, Gefahren, Aufgaben verantwortlicher Gestaltung. Eine Studie der Kammer der EKD für Soziale Verantwortung und der Kammer der EKD für Publizistische Arbeit, Gütersloher Verlags-haus: Gütersloh 1985.

<sup>81</sup> Ethics in Internet, (online: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_ethics-internet\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html); German version: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_ethics-internet\\_ge.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_ge.html)). A discussion of the subject followed in the Journal “Communicatio Socialis, Vol 35., 2002.

be encompassed discursively. The Darmstadt media pedagogue Franz Joseph Roell therefore asserts, that perception in the internet should be understood in a presentative, symbolic way which addresses dimensions of the subconscious.<sup>82</sup>

With this distinction, Roell refers back to the philosophical works of Susanne Langer. With Ernst Cassirer, Langer assumes that the ability to symbolize is basic for the humanity of men: In the use of symbols she recognizes the essential activity of the human spirit, which does not simply record sense data but always transforms them symbolically. According to Langer, this *symbolic transformation* finds its expression in presentative and in discursive symbols. *Discursive symbols* represent facts in a temporal sequence of grammatical structures and signs. This occurs in language as a prime example; whereas *presentative symbols* bring into our understanding what cannot be adequately expressed through language. They enable a holistic, intuitive comprehension (in a picture, in music, in rituals and in myths...), in them a "simultaneous, integral presentation" takes place.

This visual-holistic symbolization must be considered more appropriate for the symbolization process than the acoustic-analytical one through language. The presentative symbol translates a complex message immediately into a complex sign, whereas in linguistic communication the complex message must be split into a sequence of its various elements: "Visual forms – lines, colors, proportions, etc. – are just as capable of *articulation*, i.e. of complex combination, as words. But the laws that govern this sort of articulation are altogether different from the laws of syntax that govern language. The most radical difference is that *visual forms are not discursive*. They do not present their constituents successively, but simul-

taneously, so the relations determining a visual structure are grasped in one act of vision."<sup>83</sup>

The *image* in this view becomes a paradigm of the presentative-holistic symbol, which encompasses a wealth of meaning, and significance which cannot be matched in its ambiguity and complexity by discursive-conceptual language.

Langer's reflections appear indeed suitable to illuminate a characteristic trait of the medium: The internet presents a great deal more simultaneously rather than allowing it to be grasped in a discursive sequence. This view would therefore suggest that we look for contributions to the ethical formation of the net in the mode of *Anschauung* (through "presentational forms" rather than in that of discursivity.<sup>84</sup>

## The Church: An Educational Institution

For such preference of *Anschauung* over discursivity, the church can find grounds in its own tradition. If and where it remembers this tradition, it could certainly draft ethical contributions in the direction of a more pronounced image-oriented education.

In modern Protestant theology, it was Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher who espoused the importance of feeling and experience for the theory and practice of religion. Schleiermacher distinguished two basic kinds of action, symbolization and organization. In his systematics he outlines four spheres of socialization in a matrix composed of the kinds of actions of symbolization and organization on the one hand, and the respective characteristics of action as universal (identical) or individu-

<sup>82</sup> Röll, Franz J: Pädagogik der Navigation, 91. Röll ibid. 45 differentiates between a model of communication as a network and a model of communication as a tree or a pyramid. By that he also draws on the media theorist Vilém Flusser, who stresses a discrimination between discursive and dialogical structures of communication.

<sup>83</sup> Langer, Susanne K.: Philosophy in a New Key, p.93. (chapter "discursive and presentational forms).

<sup>84</sup> As there is no appropriate English translation which offers the rich meaning of the German term *Anschauung*, I stick to the German term throughout the paper. Besides the rather obvious meaning of "view" in the sense of seeing or looking at (cf. "what you see is what you get" as the surface-matrix of graphical PC-interfaces!) you may rightly so bear in mind the more philosophical notions of "perception", particularly sensual and intuitive aspects of perception.

al on the other. Science comes into being through identical symbolization, the state, the law and economy through identical organization, art and religion through individual symbolization and the sphere of free sociability through individual organization. The action of the church, as symbolizing action, deals not only with 'consciousness' but always also with "feelings" and "experience".<sup>85</sup>

Following Schleiermacher, the practical theologian Reiner Preul from the city of Kiel suggests to look for the specific contribution of the church in its function as an educational institution. Preul selects the expression "in order to include the church in a group of institutions, which address the consciousness, the emotions and the experiences of human beings and thus in some way contribute to their education. These are the educational institutions (from kindergarten to the school and the university and academy of sciences), of the arts of every genre, and the public media."<sup>86</sup> Insofar as educational institutions according to Preul not only develop and train, but also portray and present, i.e. bring into expression and representation, the "three-dimensional consciousness" of world consciousness, self consciousness and God consciousness, he also meets the obvious natural objection that an understanding of the church as an educational institution would narrow the understanding of the church to its didactic aspect. "Our own definition of the church as an educational institution lifts the church above the function of the school: It is not only a matter of education and formation of the Christian self- understanding, but also of its expression, activation, representation, and shaping."<sup>87</sup>

<sup>85</sup> An extensive presentation of Schleiermachers ideas on the different spheres and realms of human actions is given by Reiner Preul in his "church-theory": Preul, Reiner: Kirchentheorie, 143ff.

<sup>86</sup> Preul, Reiner: Kirchentheorie, 141 (my own translation). Again the German term "Bildung" offers a broader range of meaning than the word "education", as it involves formative aspects, which I try to illustrate by using "instruction" instead of "education" in the title of this paper.

<sup>87</sup> Preul, Reiner: Kirchentheorie, 152. (again my own translation).

A symbolic-presentative access to education, as well as and especially to education in ethics, is certainly not only indicated from the medium "Internet" but also from the self- understanding of the church. In other words: If the media ethics of the church would only base itself on individual processes of consciousness of a discursive nature, it would fall behind not only the "new" medium internet, but at the same time also behind its "old" content, the gospel.

## Anschauung as Participatory Exploration in Dialogue

Undoubtedly discursive criticism is necessary from time to time. And yet "Doing the Just" becomes an essential part of ethics in the internet as well: It is essential to explore the possibilities of the net in order to actively shape communication in the net in the freedom of the children of God and the Shalom of God.<sup>88</sup> This requires an experience oriented mediation in a "common, interpretative practice" such as the German Lutheran Theologian Joachim Track asked for in his "Sprachkritische Untersuchungen zum christlichen Reden von Gott".<sup>89</sup> A Christian ethics cannot be about a general recognition of already fixed claims to validity, rather it matters here to *give voice together to mutual experiences in mutual practice*.

Of course, the way of mutual, interpretive practice is not per se without discursive elements. However, it differs from the usual understanding of imparting general contents that are fixed in advance which then only have to be grasped individually. Rather, from an ethical viewpoint we are dealing here with a specific moment of the ethical way of understanding. The German ethicist H.G. Ulrich called it the *explorative and investigative search for the coming of the new creation*.<sup>90</sup> This search is nothing but the mutual interpretative practice as a teaching and learning situation of ethical education. It is executed always at the

<sup>88</sup> From philosophical grounds Rafael Capurros plea for a concept of "Vernetzung als Lebenskunst" bears important similarities to the ideas presented here from a Christian perspective. (see: Capurro, Rafael: Ethik im Netz, 50ff.).

<sup>89</sup> Track, Joachim: Sprachkritische Untersuchungen, 323.

<sup>90</sup> Ulrich, Hans G.: Wie Geschöpfe leben, 76.



level of mutual imagination and intuitive perception (*Anschauung*) as well. Without this imaginative and presentative moment the possibilities of ethical practice in the net remain hidden.

Now it is one thing to propose such contributions to the participative and dialogical exploration of the possibilities of the internet. This consideration gains special interest through the fact that it cannot only be elaborated as a theoretical postulate, but that such "*Anschauung*" oriented contributions, in my opinion, may certainly be also met in practice.

## Three Examples of Participatory and Dialogical Intervention

### In Dialogue with the Suppliers: "Future Conference: Quality Criteria for Children's Programs in the Internet"

In the year 2004, the Theologians Johanna Haberer and Roland Rosenstock together with the Media Work of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Commission for Youth Media Protection in Munich, launched a "*future conference quality criteria for children's programs in the internet*". Every year since that time has been devoted to the dialogue among the church, youth media protection and the suppliers of children's websites in the net. The conference series offers a platform by picking the theme of *quality* of internet offers for children to sensitize those involved in their production and control to ethical themes. A look at the choice of themes of the conferences in the years 2004 to 2006 serves to illustrate this: In all three conferences, the ethical aspect announced itself in various ways already in the title: "Remain a child – become a Customer?" (2004) – "Who bears the Responsibility?" (2005) – "Children and the Internet in Europe: other Countries – other Customs" (2006). In the content of the contributions, besides legal aspects, practical examples, reports of experiences of the examinations and comparative research overviews, there were also explicit ethical questions for discussion: for example, the themes "Communication of Values", "Perspectives of Responsibility", "Code of Con-

duct", "Tension between Media Control and Individual Responsibility".<sup>91</sup>

With the *Future Workshop quality criteria for children's programs in the Net*", the combination of church and theological science has succeeded in establishing a dialogue forum where in discourse with suppliers, via the cue word *quality*, ethical questions about the production and use of internet offers for children can be competently brought forward as a theme.

### A Quality Seal in the Internet: The "Erfurt Netcode"

Also aimed in a special way at the suppliers of web pages for children is an initiative which came into being already in 2002 through suggestions of the Catholic as well as the Evangelical Church, the Land Thuringia and the city at the "children's media location", Erfurt. The charitable organization "Erfurter Netcode e.V. promotes the improvement of the quality of children's web sites in the net through their specially created quality seal.

To accomplish this, the organization has developed standards for awarding a quality seal according to which web site suppliers can be certified. The seal has been awarded for the fourth time in May of 2007, nineteen children's web pages are listed on the web site.

The evangelical theologian Roland Rosenstock, who has involved himself in this organization, points in his statement on the occasion of the presentation of the netcode to the diverging approach, which the initiative chose in comparison to, say, the US American development of an independent, strictly separated and state controlled "children's internet" ([www.kids.us](http://www.kids.us)): "The Erfurt net code wants to carry on a broad ethical debate with suppliers and users about the contents and format of children's sites in the internet that are to be produced. Here the thinking is not guided by the idea of a ban for the "target group children" – as is the basic character of the US project – instead it envisions that children would

<sup>91</sup> The first of meanwhile three „Zukunftswerkstätten“ took place in April 2004 in Munich, the second one in April 2005 (see: [www.tv-ev.de/themen\\_2780.html](http://www.tv-ev.de/themen_2780.html)), the third one in May 2006 (see [www.ekd.de/jugend/pm91\\_2006\\_jugendme\\_dienschutz.htm](http://www.ekd.de/jugend/pm91_2006_jugendme_dienschutz.htm)).

be introduced to a responsible use of the net in a transparent and playful manner.<sup>92</sup>

### Computer media pedagogy: “Man at the Computer” – Josefstal

Already in 1984 the pedagogue Wolfgang Schindler from the study centre for evangelical youth work in Josefstal (Bavaria) began to “use” computers pedagogically reflected for extracurricular education, under the heading “Man at the Computer” (MaC). Schindler saw from the beginning that much more was involved here than just the instrumental use of a new medium PC for media-independent contents, that rather the medium itself was standing in an intense connection to its contents.

In 1984 he wrote with great foresight that for youth work with the computer, it would become important “to make resources available for young people, to create a trading centre for ideas. If to this is added a modem, i.e. a telephone connection for the computer, the utilization of a quasi unlimited information supply becomes possible. What could arise from this would be a network that far surpasses the current possibilities of the telephone and letter mail.”<sup>93</sup>

Twenty years later in an “interim assessment” of computer media pedagogy, he sees the technical development of digital, online linked media capable of editing as proof of the possibilities which today are available to reform pedagogy, to change from a (passive) culture of being-taught to an (active) culture of appropriation. “Computer media pedagogy is rooted in an emancipatory conception of educational and youth work. It basically aims at

the realization of this alternative culture of learning and action, which since the wide availability of home computers – and later the internet – is being practiced by a growing group of former pioneers.”<sup>94</sup>

“Spontaneity, self determination, and participation” can be realized, according to the Josefstal computer media pedagogy, in a computer supported “learning community” which “demands of the learners a high degree of responsibility for their actions and – wherever possible – instead of preset goals favours a mutual development of these, in order to increase in this way the ability of self-organization at a group level.”<sup>95</sup>

## Ethical Instruction via *Anschauung*: An Opportunity for the Internet and for the Church

Before the background of the examples from practice the way of ethical education qua *Anschauung* appears as a promising complement to a purely discursive understanding of the contribution of the church to an ethic of the internet. With its media pedagogical initiatives, but also with the manner of its self-representation in the net, the church – in the mode of *Anschauung* – makes important contributions to the ethical education in the net as well as to the ethical formation of the net. The church itself should consider these contributions more important than it has done up to now. The “classical” social ethical way of ethical instruction through reflection and analytical contribution to the discourse requires a complementary completion through presentative symbolization in the form of exemplary models (i.e. necessarily daring in their explorative and exemplary nature) and hence ask to be exposed to proof by way of *mutual, interpretative practice*.

As the preceding examples show, the interest is here not so much about a fixed framework of answers. In view of a new medium it seems necessary – as well as possible – to search for the

<sup>92</sup> Statement of Roland Rosenstock online: [www.erfurter-netcode.de/erfurter\\_netcode\\_rosen-stock.pdf](http://www.erfurter-netcode.de/erfurter_netcode_rosen-stock.pdf), (my own translation). All information on the initiative available online: [www.erfurter-netcode.de](http://www.erfurter-netcode.de).

<sup>93</sup> Schindler, Wolfgang: Computer in der Jugendarbeit, in: deutsche jugend, 3/1984, pp. 131-138; quoted from “Computermedienpädagogik - eine Zwischenbilanz”, in: deutsche jugend 7+8/2005,, pp. 24-36; online available unter [www.josefstal.de/mac/days/2004/buch/wolfgang\\_schindler\\_cmp.pdf](http://www.josefstal.de/mac/days/2004/buch/wolfgang_schindler_cmp.pdf). The whole project online: [www.josefstal.de/mac/index.htm](http://www.josefstal.de/mac/index.htm).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid; online available unter [www.josefstal.de/mac/days/2004/buch/wolfgang\\_schindler\\_cmp.pdf](http://www.josefstal.de/mac/days/2004/buch/wolfgang_schindler_cmp.pdf).

<sup>95</sup> Reinmann-Rotmeier, Gabi in: Schindler, Wolfgang et al. (eds.): Bildung in virtuellen Welten, 288 ff.

right questions and to look for courage to expose one's own ethical intuitions to examination and proof. The readiness for this can only happen in a joint and interdisciplinary approach through the venture of specific practice. Of course, such a way of ethical investigations in the net will be exemplary and not exhaustive. In this respect, the way of such model-like *Anschauung* takes two things seriously: We cannot escape a definite perspective to which we are committed in a specific way. At the same time, we also have to accept the insight into the particularity of our perspective. Following that insight contributions to the civil societal discourse about the ethics of the net will also become possible, which do not content themselves with the lowest common denominator of generalizable norms, but in their turn, – hopefully – create dwellings of humanity in the public space of the net – as insular as they may be for the time to come.

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Patheneni Sivaswaroop:

## The Internet and Hinduism – A Study

### Abstract:

This paper discusses some results of a sample study on how Hindus are using the internet for religious purposes comparing their on-line and off-line religious activities. The behaviour is similar to those reported for different religions from different countries. But it is found that 74% of the sample pray daily, where only 16% go daily to a local temple. This seems to be a major difference between Western and the Hindu religions. In Hinduism going to temple is secondary, as each Hindu house has generally a *pooja* (room/corner). The survey reports and the uses of the internet by Hindus as well as whether the internet increases religious tolerance or hatred.

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  - Educational Ethics: Need of the Hour, University News (Special Issue on “Private Participation in Indian Higher Education :Contemporary issues and Challenges” 42 (07) 2004. 72-75.

## Introduction

The lost tribes in biblical times saw God as a column of smoke or a pillar of fire. When kings and emperors emerged on the world scene, people imagined God as a King on a distant throne. In Hinduism, it is believed that God expressed himself in different forms of nature like fire, water, sun, moon, etc. In Lord Vishnu's *Dasavataras*, the Lord took the forms of different living beings like *Matsya* (the fish), *Kurma* (the tortoise), *Varaha* (the boar), *Rama* and *Krishna* (the form of human beings), etc. Each *avatara* was for a specific purpose in those times. Even today Hindus pray to different living beings on specific days like snakes on *Naga Panchami*, cattle on *Pongal*, etc. Thus the system refers to worshipping nature, as if God is being manifested in different forms. Even some depict God as *Nirakara* (without shape). As such some scholars state that there is no unique single/supreme God in Hinduism, even though different sects believe that their manifestation of God in that particular form is supreme.

In the present day certain cutting-edge religious scholars are likening the internet to as a space where the Divine resides. Some state that the internet serves as an "important way station" on humanity's journey towards a greater spiritual evolution.<sup>96</sup> A Hindu website states "Hindus use any form of worship available (... ) Why not then use the Internet as another venue of worship?"<sup>97</sup> Thus it appears that different religions are propagating their own theories using the web as an appropriate medium for spreading their own religions. As a consequence, the present trend shows that almost all religions have extended their presence in the "Cyber World".<sup>98</sup>

Charles Ess has done extensive work on religions and the internet. He reported that mainline religious websites functioned as static repositories of

texts, whereas others use in a more interactive way to actively engage potential converts with online forums, chats, etc. In initial stages of "cyber-religion," it was felt that "the authoritarian belief in religions will weaken and with availability on internet will lead to egalitarianism in religious matters. But the so far experience proved it wrong and "cyber-religion" is strengthening the existing religious system (Larsen, 2007)."<sup>99</sup> Ess has also stated that the technology has made the world a small 'global village' but that this phrase has been replaced with "global city" reflecting the modern metropolis life style of an ethnic neighbourhood. The internet has become so interwoven with daily life, especially in the developed world, that it has become a true mirror of daily life. So real world conflicts also are manifested on the internet as well.

With the advent of computers they were found to be a convenient and labour saving. But now with advances in technology, they have become a life transforming experience.<sup>100</sup> It was reported that when memorial services were provided online, it appears that the internet was not only good for collaborative working, but also for building communities. It was also reported that a prayer meeting in the virtual world may not provide the same type of religious experience as a conventional church service, but it certainly reproduces some of the essential features of the latter albeit in novel ways.<sup>101</sup>

Helland reports that 78% of religious websites are Christian.<sup>102</sup> But their usefulness depends on the spread of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in a particular geographical location. Many Asian churches are working among poor and marginalised, with lack of electricity and inadequate access to modern technologies. But ICTs are moving forward and bringing down costs, making communication tools affordable and accessible to an increasing number of people. The 6<sup>th</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Jennifer Cobb in *Cybergrace* as referred in Campbell (2005).

<sup>97</sup> Jacobs (2007).

<sup>98</sup> Helland (2004).

<sup>99</sup> Ess (2007a).

<sup>100</sup> Henderson (2002).

<sup>101</sup> Schroeder et. al. (1998).

<sup>102</sup> Helland (2004).

Bishop's Institute for Social Communication was held on June 2007 in Bangkok. The 'Orientation and Recommendations' made by this BISCOM VI state that the people matter the most, more than the technology. One should promote any ways and means to preserve the cultural identity and at the same time try also to integrate them into the new communication situation. The traditional means of face-to-face communications as well as the use of folk media and radio still have widest reach and importance at the lowest cost.<sup>103</sup>

## Hinduism in the present context

The Indian metropolitan cities, like other metro cities elsewhere, are immigrant territories with people from different cultures staying together. Immigrants attempt to preserve elements of what they have left behind while assimilating the new. They desire to re-create a lost group identity, as they are away from their native places. Technology can assist them in meeting their requirement. Also in the present day intense competitive world, individuals seek spiritual anchorage for a solace. The internet gives an avenue for this.<sup>104</sup> The cyber *darshan* of deities is an example. Sood indicates that it may not be strange to see Hindu houses in the future with computers in their *pooja* rooms, so that they can watch or participate in the online *pooja* of any chosen deity of a famous temple.<sup>105</sup>

But according to the traditional Hindu culture, the main deity (*Moola Viraat*) is not allowed to be photographed or video-graphed. So there is a culture of simulating the famous temples and also the religious theme parks have come into being.<sup>106</sup>

There are several websites offering options to people. For example [virtualtemples.com](http://virtualtemples.com)<sup>107</sup> is about Hindu temples through which one can visit temples virtually. There are sites which offer various

*stotras* (prayers) to different gods.<sup>108</sup> Through these, one can practice the *bhajans* and prayers.

Whereas the websites of ancient temples like Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) at Tirupati in South India do not give live *darshan*, as cameras are not allowed inside the Sanctum Sanctorum of any traditional Hindu temple, it is reported that Tirupati is the most visited place of the World, with around 50-100 thousand people visiting a day. The total visitors last year was around 19 million.<sup>109</sup> The temple's website gives information about *darshan* timings, special *poojas*, accommodation availability in guest houses, etc.<sup>110</sup>

Shirdi Sai Baba at Shirdi in West India is a shrine of recent origin (in 20<sup>th</sup> Century), where the deity of Shirdi Sai Baba is available for online *darshan*.<sup>111</sup> The live *darshan* is made available through the web and selected TV Channels. Its website also gives information about accommodation etc. Still, the number of pilgrims visiting the shrine is also very high (around 25,000 a day). Even the web site visitors of Shirdi Sai Baba Temple number around 2.5 million as recently as June 2008.

This underlines that nowadays people are following their beliefs according to their convenience. They might feel that is always good to go to a temple and mingle with people of like faith, but perhaps it is not wrong to watch a *pooja* online. Cyber worship does not need to replace real worship. Hindu tradition says that devotion is more important than the methods or procedures. Whether one has offered *pooja* luxuriously or in a simple manner has no religious significance. Devotion or *bhakti* is of primary importance. The submission or purity of inner soul or *atma* is more crucial than the outward exhibitions. Therefore these cyber *darshans*, on-line information, replica of temples can help people to sustain their religious faith rather than replacing it. The increasing number of pilgrims to temples substantiate the increasing faith in religion. *Is it reflecting that people are basically religious at their heart, but*

<sup>103</sup> FABC (2007).

<sup>104</sup> Hoskote (2006).

<sup>105</sup> Sood (2000).

<sup>106</sup> Hoskote (2006).

<sup>107</sup> <http://www.virtualtemples.com>

<sup>108</sup> e.g. <http://telugubhakti.com>

<sup>109</sup> NDTV (2007).

<sup>110</sup> [www.tirumala.org](http://www.tirumala.org)

<sup>111</sup> [www.shrisaibabasansthan.org](http://www.shrisaibabasansthan.org)

*their busy life styles make them turn to Cyber or TV darshans?*

There are several studies on usage of the internet among different religions.<sup>112</sup> Following these studies this paper provides a sample study aiming to analyze how the internet is used among Hindus for religious purposes and what their objectives are, how they view the internet, how frequently they perform *pooja*, etc.

**The Sample**

Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is the leading Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institute in India with 1.8 million students. They encompass a wide spectrum of sociological, economic, or cultural backgrounds. There are students from 18 years to 84 years, rural, unemployed youth to urban, highly paid professionals. In brief, the IGNOU learners represent a true cross section of society.

The sample comprises the IGNOU learners pursuing at two South Indian cities, namely Hyderabad (Metropolitan City) and Visakhapatnam (City). As far as the internet is a modern technology, care is taken that only graduates who can use this technology are taken as sample. The sample learners include those who are pursuing Master in Computer Applications (MCA) and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed). Very few respondents are from other cities and few Non-Resident Indians.

The demographic characteristics of the sample are as follows: The samples size is 185.

- *Usage of the internet:* 60% of the respondents said that they use the internet at least weekly once including 35%, who use it daily, 8% said they never use internet.
- *Performing Pooja:* 86% of the respondents replied that they perform *pooja*/pray to God at least weekly once, including 74% who are praying daily. 11% said they pray occasionally. It was reported that in USA, 86% of religion surfers pray daily as against 23% of all Americans.

<http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/9782.htm>

- *Physical visits to temples:* The following table gives data on the physical visit to a local temple and pilgrimage to a famous holy temple. Thus, nearly 3/5<sup>th</sup> of the sample are under 30 years

No.	Character	Percentage
1	Gender a) Male b) Female	56 44
2	Age Group: a) 21 – 30 b) 31 – 40 c) 41 – 60	58 35 07
3	Highest Education Qualification a) Graduate b) Post Graduate c) PhD	48 50 02
4	Employment Status a) Employed b) Unemployed	77 23
5	Total length of Service for employed (in years) a) 1 – 5 b) 6 – 10 c) 11 – 15 d) 16 – 20 e) 21 – 25	45 34 10 06 05

age. Men and women are nearly distributed. 77% or 3/4<sup>th</sup> of sample are employed.

<sup>112</sup> Bell (2004), Ess (2007b), Kluver and Cheong, (2007), Jacobs (2007).

S. No.	Parameter	Percentage
1	How frequently do you perform <i>pooja</i> ?	
	a) Daily	74
	b) Weekly	12
	c) Monthly	02
	d) Occasionally	11
2	How frequently do you visit a local temple?	
	a) Daily	16
	b) Weekly	40
	c) Monthly	15
	d) Occasionally	35
3	How frequently do you go on pilgrimage?	
	a) Frequently	16
	b) Occasionally	48
	c) Rarely	23
	d) Never	13

The figures above reflect that 74% of the respondents perform *pooja* daily, but only 16% of them are going to temple daily and 16% are going on pilgrimage frequently. It seems to be that the religiosity is very personal and individualistic and they may not find time to go to temple daily. In Hindu customs, a particular day in a week is specified for a particular God like Thursday for Shirdi Saibaba, Saturday for Sri Venkateswara Swamy etc. The devotees of particular Gods visit the corresponding temples on those week days. 40% of the sample visiting temples weekly once, reflect this tradition. This confirms the statement of the Web designer of Hindu Virtual Temple that "in Hinduism, going to a Temple is often considered to be secondary to domestic worship and many Hindus have a cupboard, a corner or a room that is dedicated shrine."<sup>1</sup>

*Religious information through the internet:* Asked if they get any religious information on the internet the responses from the sample are equally divided in affirmation (49%) and negation (51%).

<sup>1</sup> Jacobs (2007)

Among all US Citizens, 25% of internet users get religious information 'on line' at one point or another.<sup>2</sup>

*Type of information from the internet:* They are asked to respond to what type of information they get from the internet and are free to choose as many as appropriate, from the seven possible given options. The responses in the order of ranking are as follows:

The first ranking response was that the respondents refer to the internet for studying religious philosophy. In a way, it resembles the US studies which reported that most religion surfers use the internet as a library and search for general spiritual information.<sup>3</sup>

*Live darshan and email usage:* Only 18% of the respondents said that they watch any 'Live *darshan*' of Deities on the internet. A similar low level response (13%) was received about whether they sought any religious advice using e-mail. These reflect the less popularity of these aspects among the sample. As it is reported in USA 28% of the users have searched for religious advice through internet/email.<sup>4</sup>

*The internet supplementing religion:* 61% respondents accepted that internet is a supplementary tool for their religious commitment. Larsen also had the same conclusion based on PEW Internet and American Life Project Results.<sup>5</sup> 76% of the respondents agreed moderately to strongly that the internet is helping people to learn about their religion. 65% felt that the internet is helping to spread their religion across the Globe. And 80% accepted that the internet is helping non-resident people (in India) to keep in touch with their native cultures.

Hence a majority of respondents have positive opinion on the Internet as being useful for religious issues. The religious leaders of different

<sup>2</sup> <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/9782.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/9782.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Henderson (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Larsen (2007).



Ranking	Parameter	Percentage of those who get religious information from the internet
I	About Religious Philosophy	69
II	About Pilgrim centre	67
III	Accommodation availability and Booking	63
IV	Timing of Darshan	61
V	About God	58
VI	Booking of Pooja	53
VII	About availability of Darshan	48
VIII	All Seven options responded	23

expressed by the religious leaders in Singapore.<sup>9</sup> It reflects that the internet is not regarded as a foreign, imported technology. Its negative effects are less worrying the sample.

Among the sample, daily *pooja* performing Group and Female Group are checked for any deviant behaviour from the whole Sample. In sum they share the same opinions except a few as follows:

1. For going on pilgrimage, the general sample showed that 48% go 'occasionally', whereas the majority of these two specific Groups go 'rarely' to pilgrimage.

religions in Singapore had a broad based acceptance for the Internet.<sup>6</sup>

*The internet and religious tolerance/hatred:* Asked if the internet will increase religious tolerance or hatred, the responses are surprisingly same for both issues. 60% felt the internet encourages tolerance. Surprisingly even among US Citizens, 62% felt that the availability of material on internet encourages religious tolerance.<sup>7</sup> Whereas 55% of the present sample felt that the internet may be misused for increasing religious hatred. It reflects that respondents of this sample are of equal opinion on both the positive and negative effects of the Internet on inter-religious issues.

*The internet as a source of immoral content:* Surprisingly, 63% negated the opinion that the internet is a danger for being source for immoral content. So they see internet as a positive tool. In Kluver and Cheong's study,<sup>8</sup> some of the religious leaders saw a danger of immoral content from the internet. The present sample of common citizens, express less concern on this negative aspect of the internet. Also when asked about whether the internet is viewed as an imposition from the Western world, 60% said 'No'. A similar view was

2. The first ranking information on the internet for these groups is:

- a. for daily *pooja* group, it is 'about Pilgrim Centres'
- b. for female group, it is 'accommodation availability', perhaps they prefer family comfort during the pilgrimage.

### Conclusions

The sample study leads us to the following conclusions:

- 1. 86% and 60% respondents perform *pooja* and use the internet at least once a week.
- 2. 56% visit local temple at least once a week.
- 3. 50% use the internet for religious information. The majority use it for religious philosophy and getting information on pilgrim centres visit etc.
- 4. Live *darshan* watching and seeking religious advice through e-mail are less popular.
- 5. The majority agree that the internet is supplementing religion.
- 6. Respondents are undecided if the internet increases religious tolerance or hatred.

<sup>6</sup> Kluver and Cheong (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Larsen (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Kluver and Cheong (2007).

<sup>9</sup> Kluver and Cheong (2007).

This small sample study has shown that the internet is accepted and it is used for religious purposes by Hindus. But due to traditional and ICT limitations, its use is limited. Furthermore the internet is rather supplementing than replacing the real religious practices of daily *pooja*, visit to temples etc. Perhaps in the future we may see an increasing interweaving of the internet and of Hindu religion.

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Ian M. Kenway:

## Controversy and Charity: The Disembodiment of Religion in Cyberspace

### Abstract:

The paper explores the limitations and distortions of religious discussion on the Internet within the wider context of those ethical challenges posed by controversy and debate in cyberspace where “language that is no longer checked and verified by physical reality loses its very grounding”. In particular, it attempts to establish a series of critical connections between the emergence of polemical forms of ‘feuilletonism’ in the area of religious comment and the characteristic weightlessness of language which has become detached from the body, despite the latter’s extension and intensification in the concrete social realisations found in specific faith communities.

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## Introduction

It is not surprising that the Internet offers a useful platform or medium for both serious and more trivial discussion about religious belief and belonging. In recent years this has taken place increasing on weblogs which may or may not have been established by religious institutions, organisations or groups. Like those dedicated to sport and politics (to take two obvious examples) these frequently engender passions and psychodynamic energies which move significantly beyond the mere description of specific belief systems or the practices of particular faith communities.

Clearly the Internet provides (as it does, respectively, for almost every area of human knowledge) a much appreciated and used gateway for accessing and retrieving significant theological resources. However, it also offers at the same time a powerfully seductive arena in which religious beliefs do not merely get presented and convivially discussed but also baldly and repeatedly asserted in ways which can be genuinely hurtful and sometimes purposefully destructive.

According to Douglas Cowan "Taken together, the Internet and the World Wide Web constitute a more efficient technological platform for a contest that has been ongoing in the real world for millennia: the control, manipulation, and, most significantly, replication of symbolic resources".<sup>1</sup> However such a contest does not automatically lead to the kind of objectified knowledge which Gernot Böhme described nearly twenty years earlier as "the highly differentiated stock of intellectually appropriated nature and society which may also be seen to constitute the cultural resource of a society"<sup>2</sup>.

In one sense, there is nothing new here. Religious debate in the past has rarely been anodyne as witnessed by the phrase *odium theologicum*. However, the virtual world offered by the Internet offers greater scope for *odium theologicum* than perhaps hitherto because of its theoretical ability to allow the opinions of anyone to be published (leaving aside the spectre or, indeed, the actual

practice of censorship) without reference to tradition, canon or other relevant authority – past or present.

While comments on sport and politics populate the 'blogosphere' in fairly predictable ways, religious debate *qua* controversy is perhaps less happily served by the practice of 'blogging'. In particular the latter frequently fails to do justice to the way in which most religions seek to maintain and indeed foster the fundamental connections between enlightenment and civility, transcendence and genuine 'humanness'. Such connections are fragile at the best of times. However, the Internet, or more specifically the blogosphere, puts these connections at greater risk by limiting the ways in which we can understand and essay the truthfulness of specific claims.

Unfortunately, although there is now a significant and growing body of research dealing with religion on the Internet, very little of it at present deals specifically with the phenomenon of blogging. This relative dearth of interest may reflect the fact that blogging about religion, either in terms of beliefs or practices, frequently evades categorisation as either *religion online* or *online religion*, a distinction first made by Christopher Helland (2000) and subsequently developed by others. Most internet researchers tend to be interested in either how religious institutions, organisations or groups use the internet to promote their existence, tenets or practices or how the internet provides a suitable space for the develop new modalities of religious or spiritual expression. According to Morten Højsgaard, "The cyber-religious field, moreover, is characterized by such features as role-playing, identity constructions, cultural adaptability, fascination with technology, and a sarcastic approach to conformist religiosity."<sup>3</sup>

However much blogging about religion takes place on websites which are avowedly secular in intent and orientation; many of them indeed are promoted and maintained by those with a significantly continuing stake in traditional media (print and broadcasting). This allows not only the participation those either broadly apathetic or disaffected from religion, but also those who do not have a particularly strong interest in the internet itself.

<sup>1</sup> Dawson and Cowan 2004, p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> Böhme 1986, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Højsgaard and Warburg 2005, p. 62.

The phenomenal rise of blogging on the internet, assisted by easily implemented software, should not be underestimated; certainly it represents a significant development from the early days of web publishing which, to a large extent, was severely limited to the provision and access of discrete information. Blogging is, for many individuals, the main form in which the Internet 'comes to life', offering the possibility of participation rather than mere perusal.

Perhaps not surprisingly controversy and blogging feed off each other. Increasingly searches in cyberspace demonstrate the way in which subjects that generate intense controversy, hot topics, are to be found predominantly (at least in terms of volume) on blog pages rather than 'official pages' or pages of 'public record'. This is certainly the case when it comes to religious controversy. The ongoing dispute concerning the consecration of Gene Robinson, an openly gay priest, as Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire in 2003 for example, generated on 23 June 2008 290,000 hits on Google of which 226,000 relate to blog pages (78%). The controversy concerning the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed by *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005 generated 173,000 hits on Google on the same date of which 135,00 relate to blog pages (again 78%). *Jerry Springer the Opera*, which attracted attention for its alleged blasphemous portrayal of Jesus amongst certain Christian groups in the U.K., generated 127,000 hits on the same date of which 72,400 relate to blog pages (57%). Finally the forced closure of Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play *Behzti* (Betrayal) at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 2005, which among other things depicted rape in a Sikh temple, generated 4,960 hits on Google, again on 23 June 2008, of which 1,910 relate to blog pages (39%). Clearly these figures need to be interpreted with a severe methodological 'health warning', not least with regard to the assumptive biases of search engine algorithms and the dominance of English language in metadata. Nonetheless the trend is significant and revealing.

## Narrow Bandwidth/Flattened World

Unfortunately the slogan that the Internet makes 'geography history' is seriously at odds, possibly irreconcilably, with the idea that religious beliefs are irrefragably rooted to events in particular times and places, even when their espoused

doctrines and attendant worshipping practices are deemed of universal significance and benefit. While hypertextuality and iconic navigation through cyberspace initially suggest a vastly expanded world of richness, complexity and nuance, such conventions more often than not belie a seriously 'flattened' world, effectively limited to two senses.

According to Dan Thu Nguyen and Jon Alexander:

*"Language that is no longer checked and verified by physical reality loses its very grounding. Eventually it may cease to maintain its raison d'être as a tool for human communication. Without the materiality of lived existence how can one sustain responsibility for one's words, written or oral? How can people say what they mean and mean what they say? In short, to what does language refer?"*<sup>4</sup>

Such a world soon becomes 'feuilletonistic' in character as described by Hermann Hesse in *The Glass Bead Game*.<sup>5</sup> Indeed the latter writes of a cultural landscape which adventitiously envisages the Internet *qua* blogosphere.

*"...in the course of the aforementioned Age of the Feuilleton, men came to enjoy an incredible degree of intellectual freedom, more than they could stand. For while they had overthrown the tutelage of the Church completely, and that of the State partially, they had not succeeded in formulating an authentic law they could respect, a genuinely new authority and legitimacy. Ziegenhals recounts some truly astonishing examples of the intellect's debasement, venality, and self-betrayal during that period."*<sup>6</sup>

Cultural landscapes cannot be divorced from their epistemological presuppositions and epistemic practices, however obscure or deeply embedded, and these in turn are necessarily earthed, though not unambiguously, in how we understand and expressly give meaning to our bodies. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "we must avoid saying

<sup>4</sup> Nguyen and Alexander 1996, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> Hesse 1972, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Hesse 1972, pp. 22–23.

that our body is in time, or in space. It inhabits space and time"<sup>7</sup>. More specifically he observes:

*"The body is our general medium for having a world. Sometimes it is restricted to the actions for the conservation of life, and accordingly it posits around us a biological world; at other times, elaborating upon these primary actions and moving from their literal to a figurative meaning, it manifests through them a care of new significance: this is true of motor habits such as dancing. Sometimes, finally, the meaning aimed at cannot be achieved by the body's natural means; it must then build itself an instrument, and it projects thereby around itself a cultural world."*<sup>8</sup>

The role of the imagination in epistemology, rooted in our *bodily* or *sensuous* existence alone allows for a genuinely understanding of the world, morally as well as socially and culturally. This has been explored by both theologians such as John Henry Newman, whose exploration of 'natural inference' and the 'illative sense' in *An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent*<sup>9</sup> can be understood as an 'objective critical psychologism', and by philosophers such as Michael Polanyi whose discussion of 'tacit knowledge' or 'connoisseurship' is rooted in an understanding of knowledge as a necessarily complex interaction with the world. In *Knowing and Being*, Polanyi observes:

*"We can account for this capacity to know more than we can tell if we believe in the presence of an external reality with which we can establish contact. This I do. I declare myself committed to the belief in an external reality gradually accessible to knowing, and I regard all true understanding as an intimation of such a reality which, being real, may yet reveal itself to our deepened understanding in an indefinite range of unexpected manifestations."*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 139.

<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 382.

<sup>9</sup> Newman 1979, pp. 230-299.

<sup>10</sup> Polanyi 1969, p. 133.

## Courtesy, Civility and Conviviality

Ultimately the limitations and distortions of religious discussion on the Internet are created through the relative privileging of assertoric statements of belief over non-cognitive aspects of religious life and experience such as courtesy, civility and conviviality.

According to George Steiner:

*"Very concretely, the phenomenology of courtesy would organize, that is to say quicken into articulate life, our meeting with the other, with the beloved, with the adversary, with the familiar and the stranger. It would, on a tree of meaning, connect with the only partially perceived encounters between our conscious and unconscious selves to those meetings which take place in the lit spaces of social, political and moral conduct."*

*"The informing agency is that of tact, of the ways in which we allow ourselves to touch or not to touch, to be touched or not to be touched by the presence of the other...The issue is that of civility (a charged word whose former strength has largely left us) towards the inward savour of things. What means have we to integrate that savour into the fabric of our own identity?"*<sup>11</sup>

'Netiquette' is no substitute for *cortesia*. What are often missing in the blogosphere and elsewhere on the Net are those social clues which allow meaningful discourse and engagement. It may be, as Brenda Brasher observes, that much online communication exhibits "the free and easy neighborliness that characterizes a great deal of cyberspace conversation is an incredible testament to the human capacity to love one another – even strangers you have never seen and may never meet in your entire life."<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless much discussion on the Internet, especially on religion, and especially in the blogosphere, has a peculiarly 'autistic' quality to it. According to Damien Atkins, "a lot of autistic symptoms or autistic behaviors are really human behaviors magnified or dimmed

<sup>11</sup> Steiner 1989, pp. 147–149.

<sup>12</sup> Brasher 2001, p. 118.

to an extreme, like an oversensitivity or an under-sensitivity.<sup>13</sup>

Such distortions of sensitivity are often primed by how traditional media handle controversy. According to Julian Baggini:

*"There is something to be said for presenting a debate in terms of the two strongest cases that can be made on either side. But this can also lead to important distortions. This is particularly important in issues of great sensitivity such as 'Behzti'... The problem is that the traditional way of balancing is not just one way that debates are presented, but the formula that is almost invariably followed. The cumulative effect of all these discussions is to present a picture of a society which is dominated by adversarial conflicts and huge gulfs. The moderate middle ground, occupied by the majority, is left unrepresented, and so the striving for balance actually fails to fulfil its primary purpose of reflecting the opinions that are out there."<sup>14</sup>*

If traditional media have difficulty in handling controversial issues in a non-adversarial way, then *a fortiori* the virtuality of the Internet, with its radical foreshortening of distance and time, provides considerable difficulties for the practice of courtesy, civility and conviviality when it comes to vigorous religious debate. The non-physical nature of the on-screen environment encourages at best ambiguity and at worst obfuscation or naivety. In cyberspace there is no obvious way in which truth-claims can be checked out provisionally and practically, let alone juridically or determinatively.

Can on-line communities, not just within the Christian tradition, foster spiritual maturity through friendship *qua* brotherhood/sisterhood or their contemporary equivalents in the same way as envisaged by, say, Aelred of Rievaulx in his treatises *The Mirror of Charity* and *Spiritual Friendship*, in which Cicero's notion of union in friendship is re-imagined as the genuine basis of true spiritual development<sup>15</sup>, or, centuries later, Dietrich Bon-

hoeffer vision of 'community life' in *Life Together*<sup>16</sup> in which the Ministries of 'Holding One's Tongue', 'Meekness', 'Listening', 'Helpfulness' and 'Bearing' are seen as at least as important as the Ministries of Proclaiming and Authority? Questions such as this need to be explored more thoroughly when it comes to understanding the various relationships that have developed between religion and the internet.

When imagination goes hand in hand with courtesy, new forms of understanding neighbourhood and community emerge through our striving for solidarity with those who are progressively distant and different from 'ourselves'. Solidarity is a construct not a given. However, this does not detract in any way from its importance or imperative. Richard Rorty comments, for example:

*"We need to realize that a focus imaginarius is none the worse for being an invention rather than (as Kant thought it) a built-in feature of the human mind. The right way to take the slogan "We have obligations to human beings as such" is as a means of reminding ourselves to keep trying to expand our sense of 'us' in the direction set by certain events in the past. The right way to construe the slogan is a urging to create a more expansive sense of solidarity than we presently have. The wrong way is to think of it as urging us to recognize such a solidarity, as something that exists antecedently to our recognition of it."<sup>17</sup>*

Spiritual knowledge, like all forms of knowledge, must take the form of solidarity, a reaching out to that which is other. However it is a process which can only be realised *through* and *by* the body. Indeed no satisfactory account can be given of certain knowledge which does not proceed from a genuinely incarnational model of human rationality in which both imagination and conscience play a role as significant as discursive reason. The personal character of knowledge demands such an epistemology since when we know something for certain – in Wittgenstein's 'animal' sense<sup>18</sup> – there is an engagement of the whole person – both as a historical and social being. Imagination and con-

<sup>13</sup> Atkins 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Baggini 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Squire 1973, p. 106.

<sup>16</sup> Bonhoeffer 1972, pp. 69-85.

<sup>17</sup> Rorty 1992, p. 196.

<sup>18</sup> Wittgenstein 1974, 47<sup>c</sup>, 359.

science root human rationality primordially in time and space. That is why our acts of judgment always find themselves witnessing, without exception, to the bodily nature of our existence – even in the depths of cyberspace.

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Christoph Stückelberger:

## Chances and Challenges of ICT for Religious Ethics, its Networks and Power Structures. With an outlook on Globalethics.net

### Abstract:

Underlining the twofold characteristic of ICT this article deals with chances and challenges of ICT for religious ethics and practice. Chances are: access to information and argumentation; broader access to different traditions around the globe and to history of the own tradition; deeper understanding of other religious and non religious ethics through easier access and exchange. The challenges considered are: relativism, pragmatism, syncretism, opportunism. Both chances and challenges are related to the case of Globalethics.net. A final reflection is focused on changes in (religious) power structures on ethics: they are illustrated by three different models of generating ethics. This contribution closes by emphasizing the necessity of responsible ethics.

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Relevant publications:

- Stückelberger, Christoph, Mathwig, Frank (2007). Grundwerte. Eine theologisch-ethische Orientierung, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag.
- Stückelberger, Christoph (2008). Mehr Mut zu Wut und Weinen. Der Wert der Emotionen für die Entwicklung der Werte, Welt-Sichten No. 4/2008, June

Prayer online is booming, especially in the US. Religious internet sites are well visited. "Godtube"<sup>1</sup> as answer to "Youtube" has 351'000 registered members. One can post a prayer on a prayerwall (photo of the wall of an old church) like in a church, underlined with meditative music.<sup>2</sup> – Religious action groups struggle for social justice and human rights of minorities on the internet and organize urgent email actions<sup>3</sup>. TV chains spread Sunday worship around the globe. Muslim communities are rapidly increasing internet presence and muslim internet directories are enlarging their content<sup>4</sup>.

"Religion on the Internet" is not a new, but an increasing phenomenon. It first of all provokes the following questions: what do we mean by religion? The personal faith in God, a transcendent power? The institutional form of religion as religious communities such as churches? Religious educational systems such as theological faculties? Religious publications, blogs on faith issues, worship on TV? The globalization of religious communication?<sup>5</sup>

The same range of questions comes up when dealing with the following issues "ICT as an ethical challenge for religions": Which form of ICT? ICT for which religion and which part of a specific religion? What kind of ethical challenges?

## The twofold characteristic of ICT

### ICT is not more than a technology

Information and communication technologies are first of all technologies. Which means: The ethical challenge for religions is similar to the one for

<sup>1</sup> [www.godtube.com](http://www.godtube.com) (June 2008)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.godtube.com/prayerwall/>

<sup>3</sup> E.g. the urgent appeals of the Asian Human Rights Commission, founded by the Christian Council of Asia. [www.ahrchk.net](http://www.ahrchk.net), and its coalition of groups from various religions for human rights <http://www.rghr.net>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.2muslims.com/directory>

<sup>5</sup> Arthur, Chris (1998).

energy technologies, biotechnologies, medical technologies, agricultural technologies etc. Each technology is – ethically speaking – ambivalent. Not one is excluded from it. (Almost) Each technology can be used to serve people and to improve their lives and human dignity<sup>6</sup>, and it can be abused for personal interests, for the exploitation or oppression of other human beings or nature. The root of this ambiguity lies in the fact that each technology is the fruit of human activities. Human beings are – at least according to the Christian anthropology – able to do good and to do bad and therefore per definition not perfect. Human "sin" and "guilt" is an expression of the fact, that we are not able to do only good – and are not even able to know in a definite way what good is. The reason why no technology can be perfect but is ambivalent, lies not in the technology itself but in its inventor and user, the human being. No man-made technology exists independently of human beings, not even a robot, on the contrary, technology always remains in relation and dependency of them.

*The first answer to the question of "ICT as an ethical challenge to religions" is therefore: ICTs are the same challenge as every technology. The same ethical benchmarks are valid: A technology is ethically speaking negative when it a) destroys life and b) increases injustice, dependence, war, exclusion, egoism, environmental destruction, irresponsible behavior and conflicts. A technology is ethically speaking positive when it a) supports a life in dignity for everybody, b) increases the implementation of fundamental values such as justice, freedom, peace, participation, community, sustainability, responsibility and reconciliation.<sup>7</sup>*

### ICT is more than a technology

Each technology also has its specific ethical challenges. Four specific chances and challenges of ICT are: a) they deal with information. In an information society, information is one of the most powerful instruments of human action and to

<sup>6</sup> Plou, Dafner Sabanes (1996).

<sup>7</sup> These values are developed in Stückelberger, Christoph/ Mathwig, Frank (2007).

overcome poverty<sup>8</sup>; b) the same for communication. The way, communication is organized, has a very great influence on all sectors of life; c) the specificity of ICT to speed up all processes (speed becomes a key advantage in the market. To overcome time limits is one key motor of ICT and key factor in human action today) and d) to overcome space limitations, being able to be accessible all over the world via mobile phone.

In extreme, ICT – and the Internet is the symbol of it – means and aims at access of *"Everything for everybody everywhere at any time in any form with any method"*.<sup>9</sup> The positive side of it is an enormous increase of equal access, of participation, of freedom of decision, of transparency, of online communities etc. The question mark comes up with the still huge digital divide in spite of all networking<sup>10</sup> and with the question, if this corresponds to the reality of life and the goals of human existence. "Everything for everybody everywhere at any time in any form" is not an ethical goal in itself and negates the fact that still many aspects of life cannot overcome limits of time and space. The ethical goal is *"The right thing for the right person in the right place at the right time in the right form with the right method"*. Let us develop this thesis.

## Effects on religious ethics and religious practice

### Chances for religious ethics and practice

ICT substantially increases the access to ethical information and argumentation. Access to different moral traditions and ethical value systems around

<sup>8</sup> Information and Communication Technologies and large-scale poverty reduction. Lessons from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean (2005).

<sup>9</sup> "Ethical Challenges of Ubiquitous computing" was the theme of Vol 8, Dec 2007, of the International Review of Information Ethics. Ubiquity in the large sense includes the six "every": issue, person, space, time, form, method.

<sup>10</sup> Scheule, Rupert M./ Capurro Rafael/ Hausmaninger, Thomas (Hrsg.) (2004).

the globe as well as to the history of the own tradition has become much broader. This can increase mutual understanding of other religious and non religious ethics and deepen the own conviction.

The same applies to religious practice. In many cases spiritual life is strengthened by internet access to prayers and texts of the Holy Scriptures, videos and songs, case studies of encouraging behavior etc. The worldwide first "Internet pastoral Care Service" started in 1995 in Zürich/Switzerland, followed by the first "SMS Pastoral Care". The service of a team of trained protestant and catholic pastors could complement, not replace!, other services such as pastoral care in direct physical encounters or via telephone. The founder told me that the experience shows a specific complementary chance for people who prefer written instead of oral conversation and look for anonymity.

In past centuries, small chapels were built along trade routes, giving the traveler a chance for a meditative break and recreation. Later, religious communities built chapels along highways, in airports and now also in main railway stations. Centers for pastoral care and prayers or virtual libraries and discussion forum for ethical orientation on the internet as the modern "data highway" are therefore a logical continuation of past efforts and a creative use of these new tools.

### Challenges for religious ethics and practice

But of course, if we speak about ethical ambivalence of each technology, it is also the case for ICT related to religions. "Religion on the internet" supports not only understanding and participation, but also relativism, pragmatism, syncretism, opportunism and fundamentalism. "Everything for everybody everywhere ..." can be interpreted as "everything goes" and "all is relative" or religious values can be mixed in syncretism. Relativism and syncretism often provoke fundamentalism as a harsh reaction. This may be one of the great challenges of the Internet in the future. The social platforms such as facebook or Youtube can not only increase international communities and intercultural understanding, it can also provoke "religious wars" or conflicts on the internet as some new tendencies seem to show, as when likeminded religious groups build mass movements. The challenge therefore is how to increase the responsible use of these tools without restrict-

ing freedom of expression. The responsibility of social network users and of website masters is similar to the responsibility of journalists and other media producers. Broad participation means, that everybody becomes a potential expert. Self-responsibility and quality control systems therefore become ethically crucial in these self-organizing systems.

### Methodological shifts in ethics

Classical ethical orientation is mainly built on texts and verbal argumentation. In the modern media world, images play a central and still increasing role. This development from scripts to pictures<sup>11</sup> needs methodological reflections and leads to hermeneutical shifts. The wave of publications on the role of emotion and intuition in leadership as well as in ethical orientation is an expression of the tendency that logical and rational arguments become only one method to express positions and to convince others.<sup>12</sup>

### The truth is concrete and contextual

The incarnation of God in real life and the implementation of ethical values in behavior is a core conviction of many religions. For Christian Faith, "truth is concrete"<sup>13</sup>. God incarnated himself in Jesus Christ. Not in abstract, but in one concrete human being, by chance a man, at a specific time in history in a specific place with specific parents and a specific message to his time. This contextual faith is combined with the invitation, to spread the good news of liberation to the whole world. This was the early Christian movement of globalization.

The religious and ethical challenge therefore is, the question of how the ultimate vision of the one humanity, symbolized in the open global internet society and its confession "*Everything for everybody everywhere at any time in any form with any method*" can be combined with and transformed to "*The right thing for the right person in the right place at the right time in the right form with the right method*". The theological term for this contextualization of truth is "kairos", the Greek word

for "the right time", the time of truth and "salvation". Time in theological-ethical terms is not a neutral entity. The "real time" is the time, when truth appears and love happens. If I am able to say the right word to the person I love at the right moment at the good place and with the adapted emotion, then love can grow. For Christian faith, it is the gift of the Holy Spirit which enables to catch the "kairos". God's spirit is not an abstract feeling, but it is the very precise ability to do the right thing in the right moment. In this sense, kairos-ethics is a technique and an "art" at the same time.

## Chances and Challenges of international Ethics Networks. The case of Globethics.net

### Goals of Globethics.net

Globethics.net (GE) is a global network on applied ethics, founded by the author in 2004 as a global platform with individual and institutional participants and an international secretariat in Geneva. "Ethical reflection+action for responsible leadership" is the motto. It aims at "a) knowledge sharing through access to ethics information and know-how, b) networking to combine contextual and global ethical perspectives, c) empowering people and institutions in their efforts for ethical behavior and structures, d) training people for responsible leadership" (GE presentation 2007). These goals show the attempt to combine global values and networking with contextual values and networking. It includes faith-based and non faith-based persons and institutions.

### Challenges of Globethics.net

Three main chances and challenges can be briefly mentioned in the context of this article: a) Globethics.net is an open thematic network and at the same time needs an institutional identity. How can we invite everybody who shares the broad goals to participate in great autonomy and at the same time have a clear profile which makes a network attractive and fruitful?; b) Social and also ethical global networks like Globethics.net need to find the balance between horizontal, decentralized self-organization without control (or only minimal formal control) and vertical centralized top-down input (in organizing working

<sup>11</sup> Well described by Wiegerling (1998), 51-152.

<sup>12</sup> See Stückelberger, Christoph (2008).

<sup>13</sup> Sölle, Dorothee (1967).

groups, launching conferences etc.) as well as vertical bottom-up input from participants (e.g. upload documents to the common platform or the global digital library which will be started in September 2008, combined with a review committee); c) to balance the search for common global values which is needed for common action and interaction in a globalized world, with respecting and strengthening cultural, religious and linguistic diversity and contextual values which are crucial for human dignity and identity.

These challenges show the task of also dealing in a responsible way with the ambiguity of ICT in the context of ethics. ICT is a huge chance for broader access – the GE library will include a vast amount of full text documents on ethics free of cost for participants which is a modest contribution to fair access to information on ethics. But a responsible use of this information needs self-responsibility and training, learning processes and difficult quality control in a global context.

## Changes in (Religious) Power Structures on Ethics

The most radical changes provoked by ICT in the information society are probably the changes in power structures<sup>14</sup> which also influence the power structures of ethical discourse and decision making. In a very general way, one can distinguish three models:

### The “Catholic” model: top down ethics

The top-down model of ethics (clearly visible in the ethical decision making of the Vatican, but also existent in other confessions, religions and non religious value systems) declares values and moral behaviors to follow top-down, “ex cathedra”, with or without prior participatory processes and in accordance with the hierarchical church structure. This model predominates in closed or totalitarian societies, but is criticized and difficult to maintain in open democratic societies with participatory discourses.

### The “Protestant” model: bottom up ethics

The bottom-up model of ethics (practiced in Protestant churches, but also in other confessions, religions and non religious value systems) develops values and moral behaviors bottom up, from the discourse on the parish level up to synods and church declarations. Because of the participatory process, the results are pluralistic, with much freedom of expression but often contradictory and with a lack of unity. It corresponds to the Synodal, bottom up democratic structures of protestant churches. It is a vertical model like the bottom up model. This model predominates in democratic and open societies and is criticized by closed or authoritarian societies such as orthodox or Islamic countries.

### The “Pentecostal” model: “google” ethics

The third model – I call it “Pentecostal model” – seems to be neither vertical bottom up nor vertical top down, but horizontal: the Pentecostal spirit leads people in their decision without central structures but extended “congregational”, decentralized autonomy. The manifold expressions of the spirit – for outsiders in a random way – leads to self-organization, but also local “kingdoms” and lack of coherence and control. It is a kind of “google” ethics: a fast growing movement with random content, not centralized initiatives and expressions. “Google” or “Pentecostal” are used as expressions of the decision-making structures in a modern open global information society.

### For transparency in power structures

Where is the power, which decides on these three models? In model one it seems clear, in model two also, but decentralized model three seems to be free of power structures. Everybody and nobody has the power. But experience as well as philosophical, political, religious and feminist analysis tells us that each human interaction is also an interaction with power structures, visible or invisible, transparent or covered. A Pentecostal congregation often has very strong power structures even if it is negated. The Google search system is far from being objective and neutral. Behind it's mathematical forms are values and decisions. The company has a power structure and strategy.

ICT is an ethical challenge for religious and secular power structures. ICT and social or ethical networks represent a chance to develop a lot of

<sup>14</sup> Nethöfel, Wolfgang (1999).

decentralized, horizontal structures with much room for self initiatives. But behind are often very strong power structures which from an ethical perspective must be made transparent. Only transparent power can be controlled, accountable and shared power.

## Summary: Responsible Communication

Responsible use of Information and Communication Technologies are of great benefit for billions of human beings and a service instrument also for the ethical tasks and goals of religious communities. Responsible use and therefore responsible communication means to

- benchmark ICT as every other technology by the ethical values you defend;
- increase fair and equal access to information and communication especially of deprived people;
- empower people to participate responsibly in communication networks;
- protect people through legal instruments and education from being affected by irresponsible communication<sup>15</sup>;
- combine rational and intuitional/emotional methods;
- combine global and contextual perspectives;
- make power structures transparent and accountable;
- transform "everything for everybody everywhere at any time in any form with any method" to "The right thing for the right person in the right place at the right time in the right form with the right method".

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<sup>15</sup> Ziegler (2000), p. 31f.