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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Vol. 18 No. 2, 2020

ARTICLES

- The Pastoral Methodology and Prospect of Korean Catholic Church in the Post-COVID-19 Era: Centering on the Integrated On-Offline Pastoral Ministry**
Minsoo Kim 111
- John Hick's Critical Realism Approach in the Digital Milieu**
Fumihiko Matsumoto 133
- Promiscuous Teleological Reasoning:
A Pseudo Logical Reasoning**
Morad Nazari 165
- Mission as Dialogue with Vietnamese Culture:
The *Vietnamness* -- Vietnamese Theology**
Michael Nguyen, svd 188
- What is Good about Digital Technology in Discipling Youth**
Vo Huong Nam 212
- Analysis of the Malayalam Films "EE. MA. YAU" and
"AMEN" on the Basis of Regional Culture and Religion in
South Indian Context**
Smitha Elsy Sebastian and Unni Krishnan K 239

BOOK NOTES

- Humanizing Visual Design.
The Rhetoric of Human Forms in Practical Communication.
Routledge Studies in Technical Communication, Rhetoric,
and Culture.**
Charles Kostelnick 256

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BOOK REVIEWS

Communicating with Memes. Consequences in Post-truth Civilization*Grant Kien*

258

The Pastoral Methodology and Prospect of Korean Catholic Church in the Post-COVID-19 Era: Centering on the Integrated On-Offline Pastoral Ministry*Minsoo Kim***I. Introduction**

In 2020, humanity is experiencing an unprecedented situation called a pandemic. Although the spread of infectious diseases has swept the continent several times in human history, it is unprecedented to have spread simultaneously on a global level across continents, regions, and countries like this time. In Korea also, since February, the level and degree of coronavirus infection-19 (COVID-19) have been repeatedly spreading and re-proliferating nationwide.

In the face of an unprecedented crisis, we are experiencing changes unlike before in all areas of politics, economy, society, and culture, undergoing appropriate responses and adaptation processes through numerous trials and errors. It is called a ‘new normal’¹ for us. In order to comply with the quarantine rule of social distancing, the social system and daily life are switched from face-to-face to non-face-to-face,

¹ ‘New normal’ refers to a state in which old standards no longer work and new values lead the world change according to the changes of the times. In fact, this phenomenon is a cultural phenomenon that has already emerged as the 4th industrial revolution such as AI, big data, and robots progresses, as well as deepening individualistic society and the rapid increase of single-person households, and is rapidly becoming common in everyday life and society due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

with the tendency of increasing non-face-to-face online communication such as working from home, home classes, and video conferences. It is an entry into a so-called ‘non-face-to-face society’ or ‘un-tact society’.² Of course, as our society gradually becomes more individualistic and online-communicative, the ‘routinization of non-face-to-face’ has been predicted to some extent. It is now obvious that COVID-19 will spread online culture to all areas of society quickly and widely.

Online culture is being more used and developed even in the religious field, compared to the time before COVID-19. Korean religions, including Catholicism, face the task of creatively adapting to a new environment, breaking the traditional way of worship and practice of faith, in the pandemic era that even the most basic time and place of worship are banned or allowed partly.

The priority response for the Church to the pandemic is ‘online pastoral ministry’.³ Online pastoral ministry has become the only means for connection and fellowship between institutional churches, believers, and members of the community in a bleak situation where opportunities for direct encounters, fellowships, and sacred spaces are blocked in performing church activities and religious life. In fact,

² ‘Un-tact’ is an abbreviation of un-contact. In this article, I will use non-face-to-face and un-tact interchangeably, but mainly choosing non-face-to-face.

³ The term of online pastoral is a superordinate concept to digital religion. Digital religion is divided into ‘religion online’ and ‘online religion’. ‘Religion Online’ serves as a tool for the extension of the existing offline Church by providing religious information and various services. Websites and various portal sites are its examples. On the other hand, ‘online religion’ leads Internet visitors to participate in religious practices such as prayer, meditation, ceremonies, and spiritual counseling. For example, ‘cyber Church’ plays this role. The two are often mixed together rather than different distinctly. The ‘online pastoral ministry’ to be explained here is a sub-concept of ‘online religion’. In recent years, as smartphones become commonplace, online pastoral services through various SNS and applications are diversifying and continuing to evolve. (ref.: Helland, Christopher (2001). ‘Online Religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communitas’, In Cowan, Douglas E.; Hadden, Jeffrey K. (eds.). Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises. Emerald Group Publishing Limited. pp. 205–224.

during the period when the Mass was suspended for more than two months, Church authorities and believers have tried to satisfy their thirst for faith and spirituality by connecting and sharing with each other through various social media means, including TV broadcast Mass.⁴

However, there is a big dilemma here. Church activities and practices of faith require direct encounters and communication in the physical space. The practice of faith through online communication does not essentially guarantee a complete life of faith. Meanwhile, in a situation where the spread of infectious diseases is severe, online faith practice is bound to be the only alternative. Therefore, it is a natural and logical conclusion that the Catholic pastoral countermeasures in the pandemic era should introduce the existing offline pastoral ministry into the online one.

Online pastoral ministry has been actively used as a subsidiary means of pastoral ministries in churches even before the pandemic due to a routinization of digital culture. This is a reflection of Church media encyclicals teaching that it is the duty of churches and believers to view digital media as ‘a gift from God’ and to use it as a useful means of evangelization.⁵ However, in a situation where the pandemic forces the suspension of Mass and small group gatherings, online pastoral ministry has a different meaning and importance than it has been. It is no longer just a subsidiary or simple aid to existing pastoral ministries. While not undermining the necessity and importance of direct encounters and communion, it is revealing its position as a new means of evangelization that contributes decisively to the communion and unity of the people of God through a high degree of efficiency and convenience that offline pastoral ministries cannot reach.

⁴ The Catholic Peace Broadcasting ‘TV Daily Mass’ increased its audience rating by nearly 10 times, and the online Masses produced by each diocese and parish in the country also received great attention. Broadcasting Mass played a big part in offering as a substitute in the situation where they could not go to Mass. (ref: http://www.cpbk.co.kr/CMS/news/view_body.php?cid=778037&path=202004)

⁵ ‘Communio et Progressio’ (article 2); ‘Aetatis Novae’ (article 22); ‘Internet and Church’ (article 1)

This article focuses on the meaning and role of online pastoral ministry, which is inevitably emphasized in the pandemic era, and tries to explore the methodology and prospect of how the Church should achieve the integration of online and offline pastoral ministry. First, it looks at the reality of non-face-to-face communication in Korean society and its characteristics. Second, it recognizes the necessity and importance of online pastoral ministry in disaster situations on the basis of three recent statistical surveys⁶ conducted within the church. Third, it introduces the current status of online pastoral ministry in the Korean Church, especially its some cases in the COVID-19 situation, and finds out its limitations. Finally, it argues for its possibility of integrating with offline pastoral ministry.

II. The Phenomenon of Non-face-to-face Culture Increasing with COVID-19 and Its Characteristics

The ‘non-face-to-face culture’ is spreading around the world as one of the alternatives to solve the disconnection problem while causing and prolonging social disconnection due to the quarantine rule of social distancing. Since the era before COVID-19, a culture of non-face-to-face communication has emerged that meets the needs of generations who are familiar with online infrastructure by choosing ‘selective disconnection’ instead of ‘inconvenient communication’. However, the phenomenon of non-face-to-face culture, which allows convenient communication while protecting from the risk of coronavirus infection, is changing the paradigm of social structure. For example, many non-face-to-face consumptions phenomena are accelerating, such as working from home, online classes, video conferencing, non-face-to-face performance, non-face-to-face worship or online Mass, online shopping, and telemedicine. Even if COVID-19 is over, non-face-to-face

⁶ The result of a survey for ‘Practicing Faith in the Pandemic Era’ conducted by Woori Theology Institute on May 10-20, 2020; the result of a ‘COVID-19 Believers Consciousness Survey’ conducted by Uijeongbu Diocese on May 20-27, and the result of a survey for ‘COVID-19 and Religious Life’ conducted by the Pastoral Bureau of the Seoul Archdiocese on July 17-26.

industries and cultures will continue to take root and expand with the development of the 4th Industrial Revolution.

Non-face-to-face culture is characterized by immediacy, convenience, and untact-ness⁷. It allows easy and convenient access anytime, anywhere, and communicates with instant feedback without contacting anyone. Online shopping and non-face-to-face financing are common, and non-face-to-face online classes initially had a lot of trial and error, but now are adapting well enough to have systematic feedbacks between teachers and students. Online performances and concerts through the non-face-to-face method make numerous people participate beyond time and space. Online memorial services and grave services are also being used. People decorate the surroundings of the portrait of the deceased, and celebrate the life of the deceased through non-face-to-face remembrance. Despite the advantages of this non-face-to-face culture, its disadvantages cannot be ignored.

The non-face-to-face culture has the advantage of continuing multiple relationships by connecting disconnected relationships through online communication while practicing social distancing, but at the same time it causes various structural and everyday problems. First, due to COVID-19, the situation in which each person is trapped in his/her own digital grid is strengthening as much as the physical isolation of reality derived to excessive immersion in virtual space or online communication created by digital devices. They try to communicate more through social media than usual, or are more exposed to online games, gambling, and pornography. This is a situation where online access is increasing due to increased depression and anxiety due to ‘corona blues’⁸ and poor sleep.⁹ In other words, the more someone is

⁷ ‘Untact-ness’ is a neologism circulating in Korea, which means noncontact.

⁸ Corona blues is a Korean neologism which refers to depression caused by the coronavirus. It contains elements of depression, tiredness, hopelessness and a sense that work is unpleasant but unavoidable, becoming a cultural phenomenon.

⁹ Ref. <http://www.docdocdoc.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=2000492>

closed in the digital space, the more the phenomenon of escape from reality increases.

Second, the non-face-to-face culture amplifies indifference or hatred toward those who are suffering. A representative example is the malicious comment. How many people have become victims of malicious comments such as slander, gossip, and fake news about the other people's posts? Another case is about couriers in charge of fast delivery. The sweat and tears of the courier drivers who have to risk their lives every day due to overwork are behind the convenience of courier services that are easy to avail online. As of 2020, there are already 7 delivery drivers in Korea who died due to overwork.¹⁰

Third, non-face-to-face culture is creating waste that pollutes the environment. With the prolonged COVID-19 outbreak, recyclable waste such as wrapping paper, disposable cups, vinyl, and plastics are increasing. In fact, due to the disaster brought about by the climate change crisis, the spread of the deadly virus and global warming, which is driven by ecological destruction caused by environmental pollution and overconsumption, the earth is gradually reaching its end of life. As the groaning earth is filled of various kinds of garbage, its lifespan is expected to become shorter.

As one of the alternatives to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic, the non-face-to-face culture is accelerating further. However, it is necessary to recognize its strengths and weaknesses. All social fields are universally accepting non-face-to-face culture in a variety of ways. In particular, the religious world is making efforts to continue religious life by introducing non-face-to-face worship, Mass, and various cultural contents without exception. However, it can be difficult to realize a true religion without considering the positive and negative sides of a non-face-to-face culture. Now, I would like to look at the existing statistical surveys to find out how necessary and important to the life

of faith the non-face-to-face online pastoral ministry that the Catholic Church has been dealing with in the coronavirus era.

III. The Role of Catholic Online Pastoral Ministry in the Coronavirus Situation

1. The spread of COVID-19 in Korea and the response of the Catholic Church

The nationwide spread of COVID-19, which started in February, has had a tremendous impact on all areas of our society, including the religious world. For the first time in the 236 years history of the Korean Catholic Church, community Masses were stopped in all dioceses across the country. Catholic liturgy and sacramental life, which previously were never stopped despite severe persecution, ceased at once. The Catholic Church's religious life, which was led by the liturgy and the sacraments, was in an unprecedented crisis situation.

From the start of COVID-19 until Easter, Masses were stopped and Churches were closed. With strict quarantine measures, many faithful filled their spiritual thirst by watching the Catholic Peace Broadcast Mass on cable TV and YouTube or parish online Masses also through YouTube. Fortunately, in April, the spread of COVID-19 slowed, Masses were resumed, and from June, church group meetings became possible on the premise of quarantine compliance. However, in mid-August, some Protestant churches including Sarangeil Church in Seoul and the conservatives' rally increased the number of confirmed infections and began to re-spread the virus nationwide. Government authorities have raised the degree of social distancing to the second stage (the 2.5 stage has been practiced in Seoul) from mid-August to the present, prohibiting all group gatherings except for regular Masses. The authorities allowed regular Masses and Buddhist ceremonies, but issued an executive order to switch to non-face-to-face worship for Protestants which have caused frequent group infections. Some Protestants insisted on face-to-face worship,

¹⁰ Ref. <http://www.catholicnews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=22987>

claiming that banning worship such as life is a religious repression that violates religious freedom.

At the time of the spread and re-proliferation of the coronavirus, the Catholic Church made various alternatives creatively by paying attention to the online pastoral ministry that have served as an assistant to the offline pastoral ministry, as all church activities such as Mass rituals, group meetings, catechesis, etc., which had been held in the church space, became impossible. In the early days of the coronavirus outbreak, when Masses were suspended and churches closed, a representative online pastoral ministry was the video Masses produced and broadcast by Catholic Peace Broadcasting TV and its YouTube channel. This was watched nationwide by the congregation, in the place of the face-to-face Sunday Mass. Some parish priests directly produced and uploaded the videos of Masses for their members. Also, some other parish priests regularly shared lectures, contemplations, or parish news through social media. During this period, the Church had no choice but to rely entirely on a non-face-to-face modality so that the relationship with the faithful could not be cut off and the basic religious life could be continued.

More recently, church activities such as face-to-face Masses, group meetings, and catechesis under the condition of strict adherence to social distancing rules have been very limited. Nevertheless, it is very positive that existing pastoral ministries which was difficult to practice has evolved into a desirable phenomenon that introduces and resolves some practical methods by utilizing online pastoral ministry. New and diverse forms of online pastoral ministries emerged as follows; small group meetings and Legion of Mary meetings using KakaoTalk single chat rooms, YouTube catechesis education, Bible study or reading meetings using video conferencing platforms, and children's first communion doctrines that incorporate live Internet broadcasting and face-to-face doctrine. In order for the Church to continue without stopping its pastoral and missionary activities and practices under any circumstances, it is necessary to recognize the possibility of online pastoral and try to further develop it. Next, I would like to look at the analysis and evaluation of the online pastoral ministries

that were conducted at that time, using as a first research data for this paper with the statistical survey results already announced by various church organizations on online pastoral ministries that the Church responded in the early COVID-19.

2. Analysis and evaluation of online pastoral care in the early days of COVID-19

1) The survey result of the Woori Theology Institute¹¹

First, the Woori Theological Institute (Wooshinyeon) conducted an online national survey on May 10-20, 2020 and broken down to the following: 6074 believers, 134 priests, and 438 religious. According to the survey results, the viewing rate of 'Catholic Peace Broadcasting Relay Mass' was the most common at 43.3% of the respondents while community Masses were suspended. Next, 'online Mass such as YouTube run by dioceses or parishes' was 16.4%, 'The Rosary's prayer' was 12.5%, and 'Sunday Mass Reading and Gospel reading' was followed by 10.3%. By age, the higher the age and the more active believers in the parish, the higher the percentage of viewers who watched the 'Catholic Peace Broadcasting Mass'. The proportion of believers who responded that they did not attend the service was 10.5%. The younger the people and the more the those who are often absent or do not go to church, the higher the rate of the viewing. Among the changes in daily life after COVID-19, 'Internet and smartphone use including SNS increased.' was the highest at 63.4%. Among the answers to questions about the change in the life of faith, 75.1% of the respondents found that they were using a lot of faith-related online contents such as SNS and YouTube. 53.2% of the respondents said they frequently contacted the church members by phone, text message, or social media. 79.7% of the respondents, who are composed of clergy and the religious, answered that 'new pastoral attempts and gatherings in a non-face-to-face manner will increase.' regarding the question of predicting the

¹¹ Woori Theology Institute, "Report on the Results of a Survey on Faith Practices in the Pandemic Era," Wooshinyeon, September 15, 2020. From now on, Woori theology institute will be shortened to 'Wooshinyeon'.

change of daily faith life. It is clear eventually that according to the result of this survey, the status of online pastoral ministry in the Church will grow much more.

2) The Survey Results of Uijeongbu Diocese¹²

The ‘COVID-19 Believers Consciousness Survey,’ conducted online on May 20-27, was responded by 6,000 parishioners of Uijeongbu Diocese. According to this survey, among ‘the changes in daily life due to COVID-19’, ‘the increase of internet and smartphones use’ was the most with 84.2%, ‘Catholic Peace Broadcasting Mass’ was 34%, and then ‘diocese and parish YouTube Mass participation’ was 19.5%. Among the questions related to the changes in the life of faith during the cessation of Mass, 65.9% of the respondents was ‘the use of faith-related contents through online media’, and 65.8% of them was found as ‘the experience in frequently contacting church members with social media.’ 58.7% of them also predicted that “non-face-to-face online meetings would be activated”. In addition, among the topics that Korean Catholics suffering from coronavirus should be more interested, there was a significant response that the development of various online contents amounted to 27.2%.

3) The Survey Results of Seoul Archdiocese¹³

The Pastoral Bureau of Seoul Archdiocese conducted a survey on ‘COVID-19 and the life of faith’ on July 17-26. The survey responded by 21,439 people was also conducted by online. 81.9% answered positively to the question ‘I have been using a lot of faith-related contents through SNS, YouTube, and Catholic Peace Broadcast TV/RADIO.’ It was found

¹² Ref. The Laity Apostles Council of Catholic Diocese of Uijeongbu in Korea, “The Church Preparing for the Post-COVID-19: The Report on the Believers Survey Results of the Uijeongbu Diocese,” the same council, July 5, 2020.

¹³ Ref. The Planning and Research Team of the Seoul Archdiocese Pastoral Bureau, ‘the Report on the Results of an Emergency Survey on “COVID-19 and the Life of Faith” for Believers to Prepare an Alternative Pastoral Care in the Seoul Archdiocese’, Aug. 10, 2020.

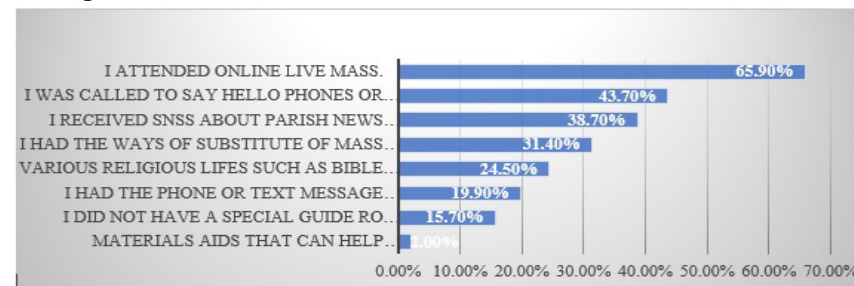
that most of the believers have been continuing their religious life through various types of media during the difficult time for face-to-face activities due to COVID-19. The results are represented in fig. 3 below.

Figure1: the use rate of online faith-related contents

Estimation	Rate	Respondents (No.)
1	6.7%	1,442
2	11.4%	2,443
3	19.9%	4,272
4	21.9%	4,685
5	40.1%	8,597

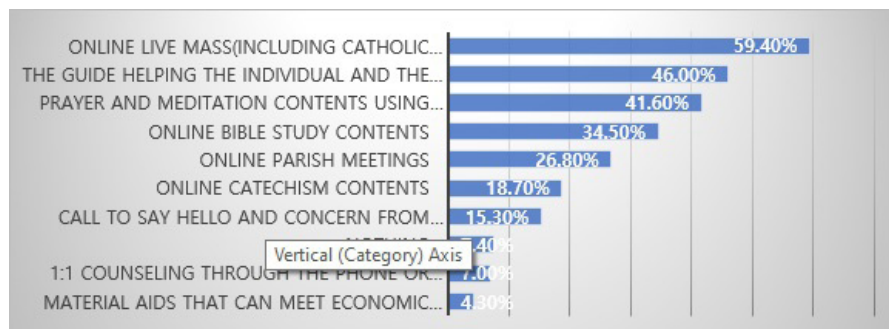
As for the assistance received from dioceses and parishes when Masses were suspended, the online live streamed Mass was the most dedicated at 65.9%. The believers answered that they were able to participate in online Mass through various media such as Catholic Peace Broadcasting and the Internet. Next, receiving phone calls and text messages (43.7%) from the district heads, group heads, and pastoral committees, followed by parish news and priestly homilies (38.7%). At the time of the cessation of Masses, the answers from the 1st to 3rd places assisted from the diocese and parish were all about online pastoral care. Figure 2 below shows the results at a glance.

Figure2: The Assistance from the diocese and the parish when the Mass was suspended



When they were asked what kind of assistances they would like to receive from the diocese or the parish in a possible pandemic situation, 59.4% (12,730 people) of the respondents wanted to participate in online mass through Catholic Peace Broadcasting or YouTube. 41.6% (8923 people) wanted the “online prayer and meditation material content”. 84.4% (18,089 people) agreed on the need for an online religious school program at the parish level (an online education system for learning the Bible and doctrines using the Internet), and responded that they are willing to participate actively. It was high at 70.9% (15,200 people). They also wanted an online parish community meeting (26.8%). In general, many of Korean Catholics approved the strengthening of online channels as one of the main measures to overcome the difficulties of living in faith caused by COVID-19. The following figure3 indicates the assistances that are expected from the parish and the diocese in the next pandemic.

Figure3: The assistance that is expected from the parish and the diocese in the next pandemic



4) The overall evaluation of the three surveys

Three recent online surveys conducted within the church reveal that online pastoral ministry has had a significant impact on the life of the faith, and it can be understood that the items that believers request to the diocese or the parish for a life of faith are primarily online contents.

First, the very significant and common responses of believers in the three surveys points out that even though the Mass was temporarily suspended due to COVID-19, they were continuing their religious life through TV or online channels. The following chart supports this assessment.

Figure4: The online Mass participation rate shown in three survey organizations

		Uijeongbu Diocese	Seoul Archdiocese
TV relay Mass	43.2%	34%	65.9%
Online Mass of diocese and parish	16.4%	19.5%	

(There is no difference between TV relay Mass and online Mass in Seoul Archdiocese)

The faithful must have had a great thirst for faith from the failure to offer the Eucharist when Masses were suspended due to COVID-19. Figure 4 above clearly demonstrates that this thirst was tried to overcome through broadcast or online Mass. Therefore, in the future, TV Mass and online Mass will play a huge role in allowing believers to access the Eucharist at any time and continue their religious life.

Second, another common point in the results of the three surveys is that believers, who are very faithful, frequently used online faith-related contents during the cessation of Masses.

Figure 5: Experience of using online faith-related contents

Wooshinyeon	Uijeongbu Diocese	Seoul Archdiocese
75.1%	65.9%	81.9%

In connection with Table 5 above, it can be seen from the common results of three surveys that believers have a lot of experience in frequently contacting and communicating with church members by phone, text message, and social media.

Figure 6: Experience of contacting church members and checking their regards by using online

Wooshinyeon	Uijeongbu Diocese	Seoul Archdiocese
53.2%	65.8%	82.4%

Lastly, from the results of the three surveys, if you look at the help you want to receive from the diocese and the parish in the future pandemic, or the prospect of your daily life of faith, you see that online pastoral ministry has a considerable position. In the results of the survey of the Seoul Archdiocese, the top five responses to questions about the assistance from the diocese and the parish in the future pandemic are all related to online. Online Mass, online prayer and meditation material contents, online faith programs, and online parish community meetings, and so on. It will be an indicator of how big the role of online pastoral ministry is in the future.

The results of the survey run by the Uijeongbu diocese suggests that online meetings would be activated in the future in a pandemic situation, and the survey results of Woori Theology Institute presents the following answer to the questions that predict changes in daily religious life, only for priests and religious people as its respondents. 79.7% of the respondents says that the number of new pastoral attempts and gatherings applied for non-face-to-face ways would increase much more. Not only ordinary believers, but also priests and religious affirms in common that online pastoral ministry will grow.

The dedication and efforts of the church authorities and believers who tried to maintain a continuous life of faith through a non-face-to-face

online culture in the unprecedented situation of the cessation of the Mass and the closure of the church due to the coronavirus outbreak is revealed through the results of the three surveys discussed above. In addition, it is estimated that the role of online pastoral ministry will further spread and evolve in the future.

IV. Current Status, Examples, and Limitations of Online Pastoral Ministry in the Era of COVID-19

1. The current status of online pastoral ministry

The formation and development process of online pastoral ministry within the church is in line with the development of Korea's ICT industry. Production and distribution of digital electronic products such as computers, tablet PCs, notebooks, and smartphones led by Samsung and LG globally, 100% penetration and 95% use of smartphones, the globalization of the Korean Wave led by idol groups such as BTS, Director Bong Joon-ho's film 'Parasite'(2019) which won the different World Film Festival Awards, and so on, have been carried out as a background that brought Korea's status to the global ranks, by means of the development of the digital culture industry beyond imagination and the creative use and spread of it.

The Church has also created a new church culture by accepting and indigenizing the popularized and routinized digital culture. In the beginning, the Internet network had an influence on church institutions, organizations, and individuals, but recently, with the advent of smartphones and various SNSs, various online pastoral ministries are actively unfolding. Catholic Good News (www.catholic.or.kr) as a portal site provided by the Seoul Archdiocese, different Catholic applications, Catholic Peace Broadcasting and Newspaper, all dioceses, monasteries, parishes and groups, and individuals are very active to use online communication. There has been a tremendous acceleration in online pastoral practices such as Internet catechism for the catechumens, confirmation, and marriage, e-learning Bible study,

Bible transcription and continuous use, and faith-related YouTube channels run by organizations and individuals. Cultural and spiritual contents related to Catholicism have been increased significantly as well. The following various and interesting Catholic contents have been poured out like a bot; 'New Materials', video contents planned by young priests(interesting faith contents introduced by the priests), 'The Sister and the Brother Reading Books Sister' podcast, 'Fr. Hong Seongnam's Stinging Spiritual Psychology', 'Saint Philippe Ecology Village' by Father Hwang Chang-yeon of Suwon Diocese, YouTube channel of 'church's Brothers', and Instagram's 'church's Sisters', and so on.

The coronavirus outbreak brought more attention to the online pastoral ministry that has already grown in the church. The online communication continued even during the period when Masses were halted. The TV broadcast Mass and YouTube channel were the most active stages of communication. In addition to the official channels of each diocese, many enthusiastic pastors, religious congregations, and enthusiastic laypeople who are proficient in online communication, began to communicate online in various forms. Now, I would like to introduce some representative examples.

2. The example of online pastoral ministry

First of all, it is a remarkable fact that the viewing rate of Catholic Peace Broadcasting TV's weekday Mass has increased three to five times from the usual, and that Sunday broadcast Mass has increased ten times. In addition, enthusiastic parish pastors have provided their online Mass through YouTube channels. This owes their thoughtful consideration on their parishioners who prefer to familiar parish places and people. The second case of online pastoral ministry is about an online communication led by some parish pastors who have regularly sent their homilies, meditations, or announcements through SNS or text messages, or that asked for their regards and for the continued religious life of believers between groups and individuals. Although this kind

of communication has always been made, there is a tendency to more frequently rely on online communication as an alternative to solve the social disconnection caused by COVID-19 and the resulting thirst for connection and communication.

The third case of online pastoral ministry is the use of various online meeting platforms so that the activities of parish groups could be continued during even the situation that all of group meetings are suspended and prolonged. It may be difficult for the group meeting to be reformed even if it becomes possible later. So, even in situations where everything has been suspended, online meetings should be able to continue. For example, I have encouraged to try parish Basic Christian Community meetings and Legion of Mary meetings online in my parish, and in fact, online meetings continue to take place using the KakaoTalk chat room to send and receive texts according to the given time and order. Another example, the council of the laity meetings or Bible study meetings are held regularly at a given time using the video conferencing platform Zoom.

Fourth, online pastoral ministry is active in Sunday school education. There are difficulties in practicing children and youth education in faith because of suspension of their Masses. As an alternative to Sunday school education, which has been mainly delivered through face-to-face activities, an online catechesis is devised through messenger and SNS such as YouTube and KakaoTalk. For example, a teacher creates a video on the subject of doctrine, uploads it to YouTube, and sends it to parents. This is the way parents watch YouTube doctrines at home with their children. The online pastoral ministry, which used to be a subsidiary means for youth pastoral ministry, has been at the forefront for youth care after COVID-19. As another example, the existing prenatal meeting is turned into a non-face-to-face one to help prenatal education through YouTube videos at a parish.¹⁴ Its materials are mailed to applicants so they can do it themselves at home. Furthermore,

¹⁴ Ref., https://www.catholictimes.org/article/article_view.php?aid=346311

it plays a role in relieving through faith the anxiety brought about by the coronavirus pandemic that pregnant women may experience.

3. The limitation of online pastoral ministry

There are several difficulties in the process of reproducing the offline-oriented church activities online. In the face of the coronavirus pandemic, more online pastoral ministry is requested, but without reconsidering its accompanying problems, it will not be able to go in a desirable direction. First, among church leaders and pastors, there is a negative consciousness of digital culture, broadly of media culture, or a tendency to narrowly perceive it as a tool or means. The pastors with these negative perceptions will hesitate to accept online pastoral ministries in their pastoral field. The duality of the benefits and harms of digital culture must be considered. Therefore, if digital culture is regarded only as a means or tool, active online pastoral ministry cannot be achieved. Second, there is a lack of understanding or skill in dealing with digital media. Young priests easily accept and utilize online pastoral works, but it can be difficult for middle-aged priests. Digital media curriculum is necessary for seminary education. Third, among believers, there is a possibility that they would only rely on online Masses and online meetings. Online Mass is a limited temporary measure when physical participation is impossible to the inevitable situations such as the sick, pregnant women, the elderly, or because of disasters. However, if the Mass resumes and we can come to Church and participate in Mass, we should no longer rely on online Mass.¹⁵ Also, if the parish Basic Christian Community, the Legion of Mary, or other group meetings depends only on non-face-to-face online for convenience, it will be difficult to share and communicate with others. The Church is a community. The Church community is not an online virtual community, but a place where people physically meet together, share fellowship, and build solidarity.

¹⁵ Ref., <https://philippines.licas.news/2020/09/13/online-mass-not-a-substitute-to-physical-attendance-in-liturgy-warns-vatican-official/>

V. The Preferred Pastoral Ministry: An On-Offline Integrated Model

As the digital cultural environment is rapidly changing, the area that online pastoral ministries occupy in the whole of church activities and religious life is expanding. In particular, in the era of COVID-19, the Church dominated by offline pastoral ministries is moving toward an inseparable relationship with online pastoral ministries. However, online pastoral ministries have several limitations already mentioned above. A possible alternative that can overcome or supplement it is an 'integration of online and offline pastoral'. It is necessary to recognize the physical characteristics of the liturgy and sacraments celebrated offline, which should be combined with the online form. In the same context, Father Song Yong-min, a professor at the Catholic University of Incheon, emphasizes as follows.

There is also a discourse that the Church could be moved to an online church or to a virtual reality church in the future with the 4th Industrial Revolution. However, this may be the self-rescue of the Church facing the pandemic, but the face-to-face culture, the essence of the sacrament, should not be reduced to non-essential elements... It is necessary to balance the non-face-to-face pastoral method and the face-to-face method.¹⁶

As Father Song Yong-min suggested that the harmony between non-face-to-face and face-to-face ministry is requested, the harmony and integration of online and offline pastoral ministry would be the most desirable method. However, whether online or offline pastoral ministry can be effective depends on a given situation. For example, the seven sacraments are realized through direct meetings and communication in the pastoral field.

¹⁶ Catholic Journalists Association of Korea, 'New Normal after COVID-19 - Korean Society and Religion: Religion to Face-to-Face, How to Change and Renew in the Non-face-to-Face Era', The 20th Catholic Forum, Korea Press Foundation Media Education Center, September 2, 2020.

Here are examples of how to integrate online and offline. The first Communion catechism was conducted online through live Internet lectures with minimal face-to-face education, and then the first Communion rite was held after completion at the parish. The offline participation took place in a holy physical space called the parish, strictly following the quarantine rules. In the event that most parishes could not carry out the catechism for the first communicant this year and postponed it to next year, the above case suggests the possibility of sacramental celebration even in the era of COVID-19. Another example is to conduct group meetings using both online and offline means. Of course, in the first stage of social distancing where small group meetings are possible, in order to end face-to-face meetings in shorter time than usual, it is enough to deliver the pastor's remarks or announcements to the members through KakaoTalk or text message in an earlier time. The reason is why minimizing the time to face to face is helpful for quarantine. Depending on the situation, it is necessary to flexibly deal with it, sometimes by online pastoral, sometimes by offline one, and sometimes by combining the two. In the future, I look forward to the development of creative faith contents based on the integrated model of online and offline pastoral ministry.

VI. Conclusion

The current coronavirus pandemic, which is putting humanity at risk, has been changing many things. The Church that carries out the mission of evangelization is also at the crossroads of change under tremendous influences. One of the changes is the reinforcement of the online pastoral ministry that enables connection and communication to maintain church activities and religious life while complying with the quarantine rules of social distancing. By analyzing and evaluating the results of the three surveys we have already dealt with, we can clearly recognize that online pastoral ministries have played a significant role in a pandemic such as COVID-19. Furthermore, they have confirmed that it is more necessary to continue the life of faith in the future. However, while increasing the quantity of online pastoral ministry in

the Church can have important meaning, in the long term, it is necessary to give new and strengthened meaning to online pastoral ministry in theological and doctrinal dimensions. In other words, online pastoral ministry has remained at an auxiliary level of pastoral aid until now, but there would be a possibility that it will have a stronger meaning in the future if special situations where access to sacred spaces and ceremonies is physically restricted are frequent. Although the necessity and importance of online pastoral ministry becomes more prominent, we cannot help but recognize its limitations.

The following advice on online pastoral ministry is very impressive in the result report of the Uijeongbu diocese survey on its parishioners during the early period of the coronavirus outbreak.

In the non-face-to-face pastoral approach, we must not forget that 'the warmth of evangelical values and love' must be conveyed. It should be a pastoral method in which the 'hospitality', which has been pointed out as the lack of the Catholic Church, is well conveyed. To express that it should respond in the 'gospel way' is not simply to follow the trend of tools or content methods, but to emphasize that the Church must have its own color and warmth... Also, the Church must prepare pastoral alternatives for those who are not accustomed to using non-face-to-face tools.¹⁷

It is required that the non-face-to-face online pastoral work must go beyond simple tools and then be settled down as a new church culture. This refers to the necessity of a 'DIGILOG approach' in which digital and analog are combined and to the research that should be accompanied to the complementary method of online pastoral ministry.

Now COVID-19 is opening a new era that humanity has not experienced, and we must live a life of coexistence with it. Jesus says,

¹⁷ Id., Uijeongbu Diocese Survey Results Report, Jaehwa Lee, 'Directions and Tasks for the Pastoral Response of Uijeongbu Diocese,' p. 47.

“New wine must be poured into fresh wineskins.”(Lk 5:38). In order for new evangelization to be realized in the era of COVID-19, an online pastoral ministry called ‘fresh wineskins’ is required. Pope St. John Paul II, during his visit to South America in 1983, has announced the ‘New Evangelization’, presenting its three characteristics composed of ‘new passion’, ‘new way’, and ‘new expression’. If the current Church applies them to online pastoral ministry to realize new evangelization, the present challenge can be an opportunity. With deeper pastoral reflections about the integrated pastoral ministry of online and offline, it is believed to find ways to cope with the changed situation of the modern world without damaging the identity of Christianity and the essence of evangelization.

John Hick’s Critical Realism Approach in the Digital Milieu

Fumihiko Matsumoto

ABSTRACT

How do we perceive things in the natural environment? How do we perceive religious others and the divine being(s) in the natural environment? How do we perceive things, religious others, and the divine being(s) in the digital milieu? What can we learn from a philosopher in the context of the internet world? This paper explores the reinterpretation of John Hick’s “critical realism” to see if Hick’s thoughts are applicable, valid, and beneficial for the digital world today in terms of discerning appropriate perceptions from harmful information. Hick had deeply engaged in the issue of epistemology for an extended period of time throughout his authorship—for a half of a century. Among his books, Faith and Knowledge in 1957, An Interpretation of Religion in 1989 and The New Frontier of Religion and Science in 2006 explicated epistemological accounts of faith and critical realism. Hick is well-known for his Religious Pluralism; however, this paper eschews from discussing it and focuses only on his epistemology and critical realism to analyze how perceptions are formed in today’s digital content. This article first addresses the impact of mass media and social media, both positive and negative aspects. Then, the exposition of Hick’s thoughts will be presented, which includes:

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1) the distinction between significance and interpretation by reflecting Hick's understanding of Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason; 2) three significances concerning the natural, other human beings, and the divine; and 3) the development of the notion "experiencing as" from the idea of Ludwig Wittgenstein's "seeing as" in *Philosophical Investigations*. After the exposition of Hick's main ideas, the researcher presents a case study in YouTube space in today's digital environment. By doing so, it becomes clear the marginal role of religious spaces in comparison with other entertainment contents in the digital domain. In conclusion, the researcher suggests that the idea of Hick's critical realism will help serve to prevent from receiving misleading perceptions, regrettable purchasing behaviors, and, most importantly, unnecessary suffering in the digital milieu.

Keywords: digital milieu, perception, epistemology, significance, interpretation, "seeing as," "experiencing as," critical realism.

1. The Mass Media and Social Media in Internet World

Pictures and motion pictures are oftentimes more powerful tools to convey a profound impression on human consciousness than words, and could lead to both positive and negative consequences. Nowadays, people in the digital age can share pictures and some segments of or the whole part of video files instantly with others anywhere in the world. Once they download the pictorial information or video footage from mass-media, the public can then upload it to websites and social media platforms such as Pinterest, YouTube, Vimeo, Twitter, Facebook, Line, WhatsApp and WeChat. People can also simply click the 'share' button to disseminate the information from the original hosting media platform to another platform immediately. Mass media is still an authoritative source of information. However, those who miss the mass media's scheduled broadcasting time on television or have not found time to read the newspaper on the day it was published, generally speaking, can still access the programs and information in order to help them stay informed.

Positive Impact

As mentioned, these powerful tools can work both positively and negatively. Let us examine the positive impact by taking a look at an example of Pope Francis' card with a picture of a little boy. Before visiting Japan and Thailand in 2019, Pope Francis sent a card to media reports in January 2018. The media reported this news immediately. It was phenomenal news for the Japanese. The *Japan Time* wrote as follows:

Pope Francis has issued a card showing a 1945 photo of victims of the U.S. atomic bombing of Nagasaki in a warning against war. According to media reports, the Pope asked that the card be distributed with the words "the fruit of war" written on the back. The photo captures a boy carrying his dead brother on his shoulders while waiting in line at a crematorium. A portion of the photo's caption says the young boy's sadness is expressed only in his gesture of biting his lips. The photo was reported to have been taken by a U.S. military photographer. The atomic bomb was dropped on Aug. 9, 1945, in the closing days of World War II, three days after the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima.¹

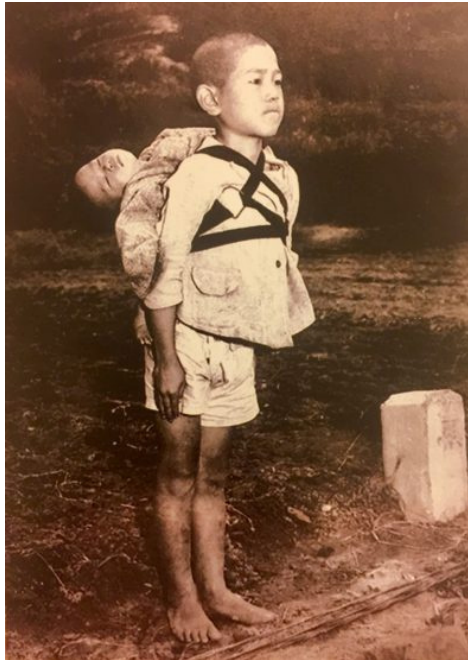
These words caught the public attention to some degree. Writers and theologians have warned about the unprecedented scale of weapons of mass destruction with harsh words long before. *Catholic World* editor James Gillis stated that the United States had broken Christian ethics with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and further indicated that the attacks were in complete opposition to the conduct of civilization.² Reinhold Niebuhr, who held pro-World War II position known for his Christian realism, said that, though the bomb helped secure victory, the results were disproportionate when compared to the crimes committed

¹ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2018/01/02/national/pope-issues-anti-war-photo-featuring-victims-nagasaki-atomic-bombing/#.XjtB0C2B0SI> (accessed January 15, 2020).

² Gills, J.M., "The Atom Bomb" in *Catholic World*, Paulist Press, 1945, p. 449.

by the Japanese empire.³ The bishops, including Archbishop John Quinn, stated that initiating nuclear war in any form is morally unjustifiable.⁴

Comparing these words with the card sent to the press by Pope Francis (pictured below), the image has a unique power to alter the perception of some who may have held the position that the atomic bomb was still justifiable in contributing to end the war.



This impression created by this image differs from that of gigantic mushroom clouds of the atomic bomb. This image depicts real children whose lives were tremendously affected by nuclear weapons. The picture suggests that the boy's little brother is already dead, but the boy is making his utmost effort to live, standing straight while carrying his little brother on his back until he finds his mother or cremates his little brother to let him rest in peace in the case his mother could not be found.

This picture that Pope Francis released to the press with his short message immediately spread worldwide, especially in Japan. Although

³ R. Niebuhr. "Our relations to Japan" in *Christianity and Crisis*. New York, 1945, pp. 5-6.

⁴ *The Role of Arms Control in U.S. Defense Policy: Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives. Ninety-Eight Congress. Second Session, 1984*, p. 359. Cf. Stephen R. Rock. From Just War to Nuclear Pacifism: The Evolution of U.S. Christian Thinking about War in the Nuclear Age, 1946–1989. In *Soc. Sci.* 7(6), 82, 2018, p. 9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7060082> (accessed Feb 9, 2020). Cf. also National Conference of Catholic Bishops NCCB, para. 15

the number of Christians in Japan is very small, estimated to be around two percent of the national population, the vast majority of Japanese were looking forward to the Pope's visit. The majority of civilians were not satisfied with the politicians' weak stance on nuclear weapons as reflected in the abstention by the Japanese government representative in the U.N. vote on a treaty to ban nuclear weapons on March 28, 2017.⁵ Most Japanese citizens, especially those who had experienced the bombing event and relatives of the decedents of this tragedy, wanted a ban of nuclear weapons in the nuclear treaty. Therefore, the picture was shared and disseminated among family members, friends, and acquaintances, and the new generations were reminded of the importance of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

A picture accompanied by a short message in the Pope's handwriting, which said 'fruit of war,' had a greater impact on people's minds and consciousness than the arguments excusing and justifying their actions by many politicians. In addition to the image, during his visit to Nagasaki, Pope Francis publicly and bravely condemned the military complex which generates monetary profits by making and selling weapons, despite the mayors of both Hiroshima and Nagasaki delivering speeches every year about building a world free of nuclear weapons. Such direct comments had been unheard of by Japanese central government officials for decades. Thus, many Japanese citizens' hearts and souls were captured and uplifted to think that we may be able to achieve a world without nukes as a realistic agenda and not as utopian dreams. Pope Francis states:

In a world where millions of children and families live in inhumane conditions, the money that is squandered and the fortunes made through the manufacture, upgrading, maintenance and sale of ever more destructive weapons are an affront crying out to heaven.⁶

⁵ Cf. for example. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/03/29/national/japan-australia-harshly-criticized-no-show-u-n-nuke-ban-talks/#.XkDYiVMzZQI> (accessed Feb 4, 2020).

⁶ Cf. for example. <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/24/782450610/pope->

The episode related to Pope Francis' visit to Japan and his anti-nuclear message illustrates an example where social media served as a tool for ordinary people to exert enormous positive impact on society by disseminating crucial information. The content disseminated contained spiritual, emotional and ethical significance. People engaged in information sharing felt encouraged, uplifted and reaffirmed in the importance of establishing a world without weapons of mass destruction. Without internet technology and digital devices, people would not have been so well-informed in such a quick speed.

Negative Impact

It is, however, also correct that social media and other apps help disseminate negative information which affects the image or impression of people and things. In the digital milieu, anybody can abuse others, and anybody can be abused with traumatic and lasting consequences. The problem with online bullying has become a global problem, resulting in countless number of young people falling into a state of sadness, depression, and in many instances, causing them to commit suicide.

Even Pope Francis is not immune to the negative impact of social media. Not long after his trip to Thailand and Japan, images of Pope Francis slapping away a woman's hand twice went viral. The images were taken from a New Year's Eve 2019 celebration at the Vatican which was broadcasted live on the internet. The next morning, New Year's Day of 2020, Pope Francis apologized for his misbehavior. Mass media loves scandals, be it involving celebrities, politicians, or religious leaders. This rare footage involving the head of the Catholic Church made for sensational news, the kind of thing social media loved. As a result, tens of millions of people who missed the live broadcast had access to the short video clip which had been uploaded onto YouTube and other social media platforms. To be fair to Pope Francis, the video

francis-in-visit-to-hiroshima-says-possession-of-nuclear-weapons-is-immoral (accessed, Feb 9, 2020)



showed that the Pope was shaking hands very gently only with children, and the Pope was about to leave the scene with security guards. It was then that the woman grabbed the Pope's hand with strong force from behind. It is evident that the Pope did slap the woman's hand. However, it is as though the Pope was reacting out of survival instinct—in order not to fall—since his face seemed aching and surprised.^{7 8}

⁹The next day, as mentioned, Pope Francis apologized to the woman and for losing the patience to the public. However, from the many comments on social media regarding the incident, there was a mixed consensus among viewers. Some said that

the Pope still should not hit anybody no matter what circumstance he was in, while others were more sympathetic to the religious leader.

⁷ Cf. for full video clip https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=65&v=fyAYL5CWIAo&feature=emb_title (accessed, Feb 9, 2020).

⁸ www.thetablet.co.uk/news/12327/pope-apologises-for-woman-hand-slap

⁹ www.ctvnews.ca/world/pope-francis-apologizes-for-scornful-slap-of-woman-who-yanked-his-arm-1.4749182?cache=yesclipId104062%3FclipId%3D89563

Some comments were hostile to the woman, saying that she would have received even harsher punishment than just a slap on the hand, “if I were him.” It is, at least, safe to say that if the Pope had fallen on the ground and were injured because the woman grabbed his hand from behind, it would have been another news among viewers in the digital environment, and different perceptions would have arisen in the viewers’ mind. However, this did not happen; the Pope was not injured. Thus, social media played a pivotal role in spreading this scandal among not only Catholics but also millions of non-Catholics around the world, feeding the appetite for gossip for weeks. Both cases involving Pope Francis, which took place not too far apart, demonstrate the extent that social media can drive both positive and negative impressions about people and things.

2. Exposition of John Hick’s Epistemological Accounts

The two social media events of the same public figure were all happening between human optical perception and digital devices rather than between human perception and actual site or person. Concerning perceptions in the digital age, it may be helpful to understand the epistemological account of a twentieth-century philosopher of religion, John Hick, though he did not describe this matter with specific regards to the digital milieu. The explanations as to how we perceive things, other human beings, or God is still a relevant matter to today’s digital context as well. Therefore, in this section, the exposition of Hick’s epistemological account will be illustrated. The researcher aims to demonstrate that Hick’s epistemological account, and subsequently his critical realism can be beneficial in comprehending the distinction between the perceptions we receive from digital devices and the real objects or persons. Hick makes three distinctions among ‘significances,’ which are the natural, other human beings, and divine being. The researcher carefully illustrates Hick’s main ideas before examining the viability of his epistemological account and critical realism in the digital environment.

The section follows Hick’s thoughts, which consist of: 1) the distinction between ‘significance’ and ‘interpretation’; 2) three significances in relation to the natural, other human beings, and the divine; and 3) Hick’s development of the notion of ‘experiencing as’ from Wittgenstein’s ‘seeing as.’

Significance

In *Faith and Knowledge*, Hick’s definition of ‘significance’ has more extensive meanings than the definition found in an English dictionary. Significance does not only refer to ‘importance’ and ‘meaning.’ In *Faith and Knowledge*, Hick writes that he does not use the term ‘form’ and ‘meaning’ instead of significance because he thinks it could mislead people.¹⁰ The first layer of significance indicates the medium which provides human beings with a stable mind to be aware of the surrounding world. In other words, the significance is a precondition for the subject to recognize things or other human beings consciously in the natural environment:

[Significance means] fundamental and all-pervasive characteristic of our conscious experience which *de facto* constitutes it for us the experience of a ‘world’ and not of a mere empty void or churning chaos. We find ourselves in a relatively stable and ordered environment in which we have come to feel, so to say, ‘at home.’¹¹

Therefore, the first significance refers to the stable environment in which human beings can exercise their intelligence as a basic characteristic of human experience. Negatively put, Hick says that human beings who are in the stage of infancy or states of a radial breakdown do not have the significance and lack the fundamental capability to view or experience the world intellectually.¹² Hick

¹⁰ Hick, John. *Faith and Knowledge* [1957]. (2nd edition). Reissued. (London: Macmillan. 1988), 97.

¹¹ *Faith and Knowledge*, 87.

¹² *Ibid*, 99.

considers that, given the significance, there are fundamentally only two ways to become conscious of the existence of other objects or persons in the universe. These two ways are “either by experiencing them directly for ourselves or by inferring their existence from evidence within our experience.”¹³ Hick divides the whole universe into two categories; either subject (I) or objects (Not-I), an idea similar to Thomas Aquinas’ distinction between the knower and the things known. Then, Hick considers that all objects consist of either human beings, except for the subject (I), or other objects. Thus, all the other materials in the universe except human beings are categorized as ‘other objects’, be they planets, galaxies, other animals, molecules or human creations such as tables, books, and automobiles, etc. Therefore, the category of other objects is disproportionately large.

Secondly, significance refers to cognizable information acquired through sense perceptions. Therefore, significance includes seemingly ‘not-important information’ as significance insofar as sense perceptions received it. For instance, when a person sees a red object, whether the person thinks that the object is important or not does not matter for Hick. That the person can cognize the color matters in this context; as long as one can cognize the color, it is within the domain of significance. Even though some psychologists may argue that the significance is under the threshold of the unconscious level so that it should be in the category of insignificance, Hick thinks that “the totally nonsignificant is thus debarred from entering into our experience.”¹⁴ Therefore, all visible colors perceived by optical organs are considered as significant.¹⁵

Thirdly, significance has an essential reference to bring about actions and reactions according to the environment. For the consciousness of a particular kind of environment involves a judgment, implicit or explicit, as to the appropriateness of a specific kind of action in relation to that environment.¹⁶ For this layer of significance, Hick explains the concept

¹³ Ibid, 95.

¹⁴ Ibid, 98-99.

¹⁵ Ibid, 98-99.

¹⁶ Ibid, 99.

of significance by showing the survival nature of human being as a psychological organism. Before describing the human noble thinking patterns and its correlative behaviors, Hick cautiously and repeatedly emphasizes the fundamental human survival instinct and its appropriate action and reaction adjusting to the environment as a quintessential part of significance. Hence, human beings are continuously taking actions and reactions, which are suited to the situation to survive; otherwise, they will perish. The behavior patterns are similar to those of most mammals. The necessity for taking action emerges to meet a demand for survival reasons. Again, although this may seem to be the sphere of unconscious activity to some scholars, Hick deems that appropriate actions and reactions take place constantly for pragmatic orientation in the realm of consciousness. Thus, Hick claims that “consciousness is a consciousness of significance.”¹⁷

To summarize the definitions thus far, there are three main points in Hick’s significance. The first significance is the ‘at home’ environment where stable human cognitive faculty functions well enough to understand the world as most human beings can. Secondly, significance means that all information is perceived by sense perceptions, however insignificant it may seem. Thirdly, significance renders judgments and actions. These judgments and actions range from running away from enemies for survival purposes, to constructing philosophical arguments, and to reaching out the hand to people in need. Consequently, all three significances contribute to form the characteristics of human experience.¹⁸

Interpretation

‘Interpretation’ is a cognitive activity to make sense of significances by the subject. Interpretation also suggests the possibility of differing judgments since human beings can recognize that there may be various accounts of the same significance.¹⁹ “It is precisely because

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 101.

of this suggestion of ambiguity in the given, and of alternative modes of construing data, that interpretation is a suitable correlate term for significance.²⁰ This is a notable point. A significance renders an action; however, an interpretation of a significance varies, and ends up rendering different actions depending on the subject's interpretation.

Hick then divides interpretation into two closely connected aspects; one is an explanation to 'why' and the other to 'what.'²¹ When interpretation answers a question to 'what,' interpretation becomes a recognition. When human beings attempt to answer unfamiliar questions or problems, they provide an intellectually acceptable explanation which can make oneself and others recognize the unknown or make sense for what was previously unclear or unbelievable.²² It implies that even in a situation that one cannot be sure about the real truth, one can provide an adequate explanation by using one's intellect so that one can recognize the matter as 'real.'²³ Thus, interpretation is both recognition and explanation.²⁴ This entails that there are different layers of realities and their interpretative elements as to how human beings cognize unresolved problems or questions. What constitutes reality depends on the most reliable or agreeable explanation that the subject can relate to as an authentic explanation on all natural, moral, and religious significances.

Subsequently, Hick gives an example of a book to offer a different degree of interpreting an object.²⁵ When a person saw a big red rectangular object, one recognized it as a red rectangular object. Then one came closer to the object and learned that the rectangular object was

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 101-102.

²² Ibid, 102.

²³ Throughout Hick's publications, the word 'real' contains a crucial meaning. Later Hick uses 'The Real' to replace the term God in order to be able to apply to all divine being. Hick also uses 'Ultimate Reality' which has a same direct translation in Buddhism and Hinduism to refer to transcendent being, but later he uses 'The Real' more frequently than 'Ultimate Reality.'

²⁴ *Faith and Knowledge*, 102.

²⁵ Ibid, 103.

an object filled with human languages. Then, a person can recognize the object as a book provided that one has the notion of a book beforehand. However, if the person was an illiterate person or an infant, or if the language was utterly foreign to the person, then the person still could not understand the content of the book. If the person was familiar with the language and had a reading comprehension of the content, then the person could understand what was written in the rectangular object. It is only then the communication between the sender and receiver of the language becomes successful through the medium of a book. Hick calls this phenomenon as "object-significance." The first example shows that object-significance is just a shape recognition; this shape recognition can be achieved by interpretation. The second example of the object-significance is a book without knowledge of the content. The third stage of object-significance is a book comprehensible to the subject so that the subject can interpret and understand the content of the book. Therefore, Hick presents here that there are three different layers of significance by different interpretations of human beings, depending on the known-knower relations.²⁶

After clarifying these two crucial components, significance and interpretation, Hick again illustrates the strong relation between significance and action and its reciprocal influence of action upon one's interpretations.²⁷ According to Hick, human beings receive the significance of an object and the significance renders subsequent attitude and action based on their interpretation of the object, either his immediately or more long-term.²⁸ It is only when one begins to act upon one's interpretation and has thereby verified that one's environment is capable of being successfully inhabited, that it becomes fully 'real' mode of experience.²⁹

²⁶ Hick often quotes "The thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower." Cf. *Summa Theologica*, pt. II, II, Q. a, Art 2.

²⁷ *Faith and Knowledge*, 103-104.

²⁸ Ibid, 103.

²⁹ Ibid, 104.

In terms of the ‘reality’ or ‘realism,’ in *The New Frontier of Religion and Science*, Hick explains the epistemological accounts from other angles: 1) naïve realism, 2) idealism (or non-realism), and 3) critical realism. Naïve realism is the assumption that there is no distinction between the world around us and the world of which we are conscious.³⁰ Idealism is the notion that the perceived world exists only in our consciousness, which could end up with solipsism or mere projection.³¹ Lastly, critical realism refers to “a realist affirmation of a world existing independently of us while recognizing the creative contribution of the mind to our awareness of that world.”³² Hick’s position is critical realism. While explaining the distinction between the thing in itself and the thing as humanly perceived, he acknowledges the thing independently existing in the world. Thus, his approach is neither naïve realism nor idealism.

Human Interpretational Elements in Relation to Three Significances

1) Natural Significance and Interpretation

In addition to objective significance, ‘situational-significance’ becomes an essential part when moral significance starts to appear in one’s perception. ‘Object-significance’ indicates the object’s physical structure and its function or communication to human beings, while ‘situational-significance’ refers to how the situation provides significance to human needs, interests, and wishes. ‘Situational-significance’ is, thus, more complex to realize consciously by its nature since ‘situational-significance’ consists not only in physical objects but also in non-physical entities such as sounds and odors as well as other people’s thoughts, emotions, and attitudes.³³ It also plays an important

³⁰ Hick, John. *The New Frontier of Religion and Science - Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 137.

³¹ Ibid, 137-138.

³² Ibid, 138.

³³ *Faith and Knowledge*, 105.

role in human relations. Persons are constantly acting and reacting according to their interpretations without realizing them because of habituation.

Hick agrees with existentialist writers that we are ourselves by definition within any relational system, which constitutes a situation for us.³⁴ However, Hick claims that those existentialists define their relational system in more limited space than that of himself. For Hick, real life lies not only in existentially threatening situations but also in mentally stable situations in our mundane life. Hick writes:

[T]hese writers have usually been concerned to bring out the more strained and hectic aspects of human experience, presenting it often as a vivid nightmare of metaphysical anxieties and perils. They are undoubtedly painting from real life, particularly in this anguished age, but I venture to think that they are depicting it in a partial and one-side manner.³⁵

HICK DEFINES THE SITUATION AS A “STATE OF AFFAIRS WHICH, WHEN SELECTED FOR ATTENTION BY AN ACT OF INTERPRETATION, CARRIES ITS OWN DISTINCTIVE PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE FOR US.”³⁶ Hick gave an example of the inclusive nature in situational-significance and its interpretation of the entire physical universe. Suppose even when Hick and his friend were only engaging in a chess game consciously. If suddenly a big fire occurred in the building near them, the attention of both participants of the game would immediately be shifted to the broader physical situation and space. If they experience a big earthquake when playing the chess, the attention would be shifted to an even larger physical space. Hick concludes that a subject’s inclusive consciousness in ‘situational-significance’ can also shift from a mere chessboard space to the street,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 105-106.

³⁶ Ibid, 106.

the state, Milky Way, and the whole physical universe.³⁷ In the same manner, the situational consciousness of significance for human relations can extend from small circles of friends and family to the spheres of nation and the entire human species.³⁸ This situational consciousness of the subject changes continuously depending on how one perceives various significances occurred in both natural and human relational situations, inducing new appropriate actions and reactions.

2) Moral Significance and Interpretation

When human beings recognize the moral significance, Hick considers that they inhabit in the dimension of personality and responsibility.³⁹ This does not mean that human beings no longer live in a natural environment. It is quite the opposite; they are always inhabiting the natural environment, breathing, eating, sleeping in the natural environment even when they are busy talking to each other or engaging in other activities. However, when the sense of moral obligation and responsibility comes into the surface of a human's mind, the moral significance supersedes the natural significance and treat other persons as morally appropriate.⁴⁰ Hick laid out an example of the perception of morality:

A traveler on an unfrequented road, for example, comes upon a stranger who has met with an accident and who is lying injured and in need of help. At the level of natural significance this is just an empirical state of affairs, a particular configuration of stone and earth and flesh. But an act or reflex of interpretation at the moral level reveals to the traveler a situation in which he is under obligation to render aid. He feels a categorical imperative laid upon him, demanding that he help the injured man. The situation takes on for him a peremptory ethical significance, and he finds himself in a situation of inescapable personal responsibility.⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, 106-107.

³⁹ Ibid, 111.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Natural objective significance only lets the person interpret the situation as it is—such as recognition of stone, earth, human flesh and blood. However, ethical significance tells the subject to interpret the situation as ‘being responsible’ or ‘being under obligation’ to the other who needs immediate help. Hick states that we cannot explain why we interpret this way or that way, but we as the moral agents, interpret this way. He also says if there is another person who ignores the injured person and cannot feel an ethical responsibility, others cannot convince the person to interpret the situation as ethically as the former person. However, it is possible to compel him by threats of punishment as a social moral code.⁴²

3) Religious Significance and Interpretation

Faith and Freedom

In addition to the interpretative element of faith in relation to religious significance, Hick claims that freedom must be included as a precondition to living and experience in a religious sphere. An appropriate opposite adjective to free is compulsory, mandatory, imperative. Thus, Hick claims that individual faith should not be established by mandatory or imperative motives. The subject must choose and attain religious faith by him/herself. Hick then brings many theologians to scaffold his claim in terms of ‘indirect communication.’ Hick points out that Søren Kierkegaard explained well as to how we perceive divine revelation and why God reveals to us indirectly. However, he indicated that Blaise Pascal, Martin Luther, and the twelfth-century theologian Hugh of St. Victor also discussed the same topic.⁴³

If human beings can prove God's existence from any scientific experiments, observations and verifiable results, then human beings do not need to participate in the interpenetrating of the natural significance

⁴² Ibid, 113.

⁴³ Ibid, 113-114.

by individual will, since the divine objective presence would compel human cognition to acknowledge its existence without difficulties. In other words, the supernatural existence would be confined into the sphere of natural significance. However, within the natural environment, human beings need not a specific ‘relational-significance.’ The natural significance will tell a human being the physical structure and its function of objects. However, religious significance appears on top of both natural and ethical significance. In terms of religious significance, it is a total interpretation of the world in which the divine character is dealing with the subject and vice versa. Therefore, the divine must appear in human experiences in a way that the divine provides signs of its existence and yet remains ambiguous enough to let human beings voluntarily will to believe and so the subject is interpreting the relational significance on top of both natural and moral significances. According to Hick, Pascal explains that human beings can understand God’s incarnation as long as they sincerely seek this knowledge. The divine being appears to human beings in a recognizable way but not recognizable for those who do not exercise the faculty to seek the divine.

It was not then right that He should appear in a manner manifestly divine, and completely capable of convincing all men; but it was also not right that He should come in so hidden a manner that He could not be known by those who should sincerely seek Him. He has willed to make Himself quite recognizable by those; and thus, willing to appear openly to those who seek Him with all their heart, He so regulates the knowledge of Himself that He has given signs of Himself, visible to those who seek Him, and not to those who seek Him not. There is enough light for those who only desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who have a contrary disposition.^{44 45}

To summarize thus far, freedom and voluntary will to believe in the divine being become necessary conditions for faith to be authentic and real. Accordingly, the subjectivity to relate to the divine being becomes

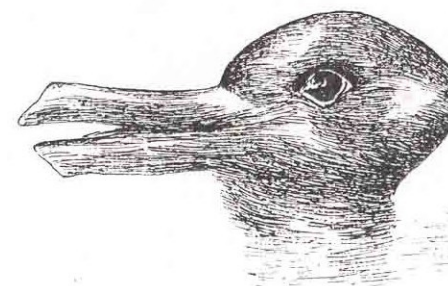
⁴⁴ Ibid, 114.

⁴⁵ Pascal, B. *Pensées*. ed. Brunschvicg, trans. by W. F. Trotter. London, 1906, p. 106.

religiously total interpretation, which is another name for ‘faith.’ This is Hick’s epistemological understanding of faith.

From “Seeing as” to “Experiencing as”

After clarifying freedom as a necessary condition for faith, Hick brings about Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘seeing as’ and extends it to Hick’s concept of ‘experience as’ to apply to experiencing the multiple natural phenomena as the relation to the divine. In his *Philosophical Investigation*,⁴⁶ by showing the duck-rabbit picture of Jastrow,⁴⁷ Wittgenstein claims that human beings can perceive two images out of one ambiguous picture.⁴⁸



If the picture is carefully examined, what it consists of in the natural object-significance dimension is simply the aggregation of lines and dots of ink on the sheet of paper. However, by collecting data and synthesizing them in the mind, a human being can recognize and construe either one image or another, but not simultaneously. The point here that the external object does not change, but the subject’s perception alters according to how the subject sees the picture as a duck

⁴⁶ Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigation*. Oxford., pt. II, sec. 11.

⁴⁷ Jastrow, J. (1899). The mind’s eye. *Popular Science Monthly*, 54, pp. 299-312.

⁴⁸ Cf. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Duck-Rabbit_illusion.jpg Accessed/ on the 23rd of December 2019.

or a rabbit, which equates with Aquinas' claim.⁴⁹ St. Aquinas explained that understanding of the object or the known depends on the capacity of the knower. Human beings see and understand the object according to their mode of the subject who interprets it. Therefore, if the knower's mode increases, their perception to interpret the object also change. Wittgenstein also says the similar idea by explaining the cultural and geographical context where only rabbits exist, or ducks exist. According to him, it is completely justifiable to say that both claims are valid; "I can only see a rabbit," and "I can only see a duck." The person whose cultural context does not have a duck cannot possess the idea of a duck and would claim that the picture is a rabbit, while the person, whose cultural context does not have a rabbit, would claim that the picture is a duck.⁵⁰ At the same time, Wittgenstein asserts that it would be wrong for either side to refute the other's claim.⁵¹

In the same manner, Hick claims that human beings can experience various natural phenomena as the divine revelations or encounters differently from the data human beings have acquired from the external objects in their cultural and geographical context and other human beings in both natural and ethical environment. Those data are not limited to optical perceptions but appear from all human sense perceptions, memories that human beings have accumulated from the past, and abilities to foresee the future by speculating on such information in accord with the present environment. Hick says, "We thus come to apperceive the familiar data as significant in a fresh way, a way which supersedes our original interpretation. To reach the religious case, however, we must expand the notion of 'seeing as' into that of 'experiencing as,' not only visually but through all the modes of perception functioning together."⁵² Thus, human beings will be able to 'experience those data' as the divine.

⁴⁹ "The thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower." *Summa Theologica*, pt. II, II, Q. a, Art. 2. Please check the reference for summa, *Summa Theologiae*,: Ia, q.12, a4.

⁵⁰ Hick, J. *The Rainbow of Faiths*. 1995, pp. 24-25.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 25.

⁵² *Faith and Knowledge*, 142.

Each individual experiences the present moment differently, as human beings perceive their natural and moral significance differently. However, there are common and shared religious understandings in the same community or cultural background. Among those different experiences, human beings construe perceptions through them. They are capable of 'experiencing as' the divine being's involvement just as a human being can have the faculty to see a duck or a rabbit in lines and dots on a paper. The difference between 'seeing as' and 'experiencing as' depends on the authenticity and strong value of the experience. If one believes that it is only an optical illusion or the experience of 'seeing something as' has no crucial impact on one's life, then what one sees has no real value, but only a temporal value. However, if one believes that the moment of 'experiencing something as the divine' has a significant impact on one's life, then the moment of that particular experience becomes the utmost important event on one's life and such experiences continue affecting one's future fulfilment of life as well.

Hick gives an example of the prophet Jeremiah from the Old Testament. There was a historical event in which the Chaldeans invaded Jerusalem. In analyzing this event, a secular historian might see the cause of the invasion in terms of economic, social, and geographical factors. However, in this tragic event, Jeremiah existentially experienced and participated in it and interpreted it as God's judgment upon Israel. Therefore, Jeremiah "finds his experience to be significant in a way which both transcends and transforms his earlier non-religious mode of experience and revealed it as mediating a personal relationship with the divine Person."⁵³

The ambiguity of the given data in the natural environment explains the existence of theism. This epistemological account does not prove the existence of God. Instead, Hick explains that if God exists, this would be how human beings construe the data in the subject's cognition within the ambiguous universe. When human beings immerse themselves in the religious sphere, the total interpretation sets in motion. Consequently, as soon as one establishes the firm relationship with the divine, the

⁵³ *Ibid*, 142-143.

interpretation of the world of both peace, chaos, and war becomes under the governance of the divine being. Thus, the interpretation of religious significance requires both volitional and fiduciary elements with practical trust and obedience to withstand, apprehend, and apperceive the environment in which one lives.⁵⁴ This is the crucial element of ‘critical realism.’ Hick says, “Thus the believer’s entire view of life and practical response to it are transformed—not as the same mind looking upon a new world, but as a new mind looking upon the same world and seeing it as different.”⁵⁵

To summarize this section, the researcher presented Hick’s epistemological account and critical realism. Significance has three meanings: 1) it is a stable ‘at home’ environment where human beings can exercise their intelligence; 2) it refers to sense perceptions including insignificant data; and 3) it renders attitude and action. The previous paragraphs also illustrated significance in relation to the natural, other human beings and the divine. As for the religious significance, the paper explicated freedom as a necessary condition for faith and dealt with the ambiguous character and plural interpretations by exhibiting the notion of ‘seeing as’ and ‘experience as.’ Since cultures and religious traditions are strongly preconditioned in their living contexts to perceive religious significances, it allows people to interpret the divine nature differently, which solidifies Hick’s claim that multiple faiths can be correct as human responses to the divine reality in ‘the religious ambiguity of the universe.’⁵⁶

3. “Real” vs. “Not Real” in the Digital Age: Hick’s Thought in the Digital Milieu

What constitutes “real” and “not real” in the digital age? Many scholars have studied this issue, and the trends seem to indicate that the more technology advances, the more difficult it becomes, if not impossible,

⁵⁴ Ibid, 144.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ It also refers to the chapter title of part two in *An Interpretation of Religion*.

to draw the line between what is real and what is not-real in the digital milieu. Computer software programs such as *Photoshop* can easily manipulate digital pictures so that modified digital images of fashion models became a norm in the professional industry these days. Software specialists can alter and adjust the eyes, hair, eyelashes, lips, weight, and virtually anything on the body to their clients’ preference. The discussion on the various subtle and detailed techniques can go even further. However, negatively put, by and large, people have already accepted the fact that we are being deceived by computer manipulation of the photos in the fashion industry.

In many cases today, it is impossible for most people to tell the difference between ‘real’ and ‘not-real’ in the digital world. With digital manipulation applications increasingly available and easy to use, this kind of deception is no longer exclusive to the fashion industry, but to anyone with a smart phone or a tablet. Presently, artificial intelligence (AI) can produce stunning and realistic looking portraits of people who do not exist, and it is extremely difficult to distinguish between “real” and “unreal.” AI can already produce the videos of famous people making a speech. It means that it is in fact that we might be led to see and listen to the persons who do not exist, and if AI can utilize to render human being’s purchasing behavior, violence or romance, the real people are already behaving by and taking action for and falling in love with not-real people in digital world.^{57 58}

However, in order to avoid explaining the broad technical side of digital manipulations, in this paper, the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘not real’ aims to limit strictly to Hick’s critical realism and its application for human beings’ benefits. Let us recapitulate his distinction between ‘realism’ and ‘non-realism.’ According to Hick, there are three distinct kinds of reality of human encountering with the transcendent. The first

⁵⁷ Cf. <https://petapixel.com/2018/12/17/these-portraits-were-made-by-ai-none-of-these-people-exist/> Accessed 8/August/2020

⁵⁸ Cf. <https://www.theverge.com/2017/7/12/15957844/ai-fake-video-audio-speech-obama> Accessed 8/August/2020

is 'naïve realism;' the second is 'non-realism;' and the third is 'critical realism.' It is this third kind, 'critical realism,' that Hick thought it to be the most reliable approach to view things. Hick explains the distinction between naïve realism and critical realism as follows:

Realism then [is] divided into naïve realism, holding that the world is just as we perceive it to be, and critical realism, holding that there is an important subjective contribution to our perceiving, so that the world as we experience it is a distinctively human construction arising from the impact of a real environment upon our sense organs, but conceptualized in consciousness and language in culturally developed forms.⁵⁹

Hick emphasized the complexity of cultural filters and their diversity. Then, he explained and refuted non-realism. The founder of modern non-realism in religious language is Ludwig Feuerbach, who characterizes God as merely the projection of the highest human ideals.⁶⁰ Thus, when human beings encounter God, Hick thinks that it should neither be only a projection of human mind, nor the notion that human beings can fully perceive the whole part of the divine encountering with innate categories. Critical realism is the ability to discern the distinction of what a thing really is in itself and what is humanly perceived and experienced. Then, how can this idea be applied to the digital milieu?

Case Study: What kinds of channels consist the YouTube Space

Focusing only on the social media platform YouTube, the interesting empirical data emerge. The researcher focuses on the quantitative analysis on YouTube channels and the number of subscribers only in this section of the paper. On the one hand, it is true that an uplifting sermon is very popular among YouTube viewers. One of the most successful Christian pastors in cyberspace is Joel Osteen. He had already been popular for more than a decade in the United States; but

in the present environment, the boundary is no longer limited to the United States. Virtually all people on earth have access to his sermon as long as they have access to the Internet. The number of subscribers to Joel Osteen's YouTube channel exceeds a million people, and some video clips of his sermon exceed five million views.

On the other hand, an intensive meditation session can also be popular as well. For example, S.N. Goenka's meditation channel, which contains one-hour long Vipassana meditation videos, exceed over two million viewers.⁶¹ However, the Catholic News channels on YouTube do not attract such large audiences. At the time of the research, Catholic News Service (CNS) has 44,100 subscribers, Catholic T.V. Network has 47,300 subscribers, and EWTN has 277,000 subscribers.⁶² Statistics shows that the most watched top five Catholic channels take up only 0.32% in YouTube space. However, in terms of population, Catholics make up about 14% of the world, considering the fact that there are about seven billion people on earth and about one billion people are adherents of the Catholic Church.

As previously argued, in the light of the incidents related to Pope Francis as discussed in the first section of this paper, the researcher finds that religion and religious institutions in the digital milieu can serve as both positive and negative forces in society. However, the research suggests that although religious leaders and institutions may do much good in society, their influence and value are not readily reflected by examining the statistics on YouTube space.

In reality, what takes up most of YouTube space are entertainment channels, while channels with religious contents are minimal compared to channels with entertainment segments. Thus, even if religious leaders and institutions exercise their presence in YouTube space, it is not easy to compete with the aggressive profit-motive channels in terms of time that the users spend in the space, no matter how convenient it

⁵⁹ Hick, John. *Disputed Questions*, 4.

⁶⁰ Cheetham, David. *John Hick: A Critical Introduction and Reflection*, 17.

⁶¹ Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuAgnfun0RE>

⁶² Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/results?searchquery=catholic+news+network>

is for people to have access to religious leaders' speeches and sermons in the online arena.

If we can imagine that the entire television or movie industry is run by the system of capitalism, it is not difficult to understand that the whole system underneath the YouTube space is also largely driven by profit-making people and channels. Generally speaking, the vast majority of the channels have their agenda and tasks to be successful under the rules of capitalism to generate monetary profit just as the military complex that Pope Francis warned and criticized does. To put this idea into another perspective, the number of religious viewers is one thousandth that of music viewers in YouTube space. Although it is true that some Christian ministers can attract millions of views, music stars such as Ed Sheeran attracts over four billion views for a song on YouTube alone, and his other songs attract over a billion views as well. Other musicians such as Maroon 5 can gain over a billion views for just one song. Thus, social media and free video-sharing service providers are strongly connected with the profit motive with intricate strategies. The contents seem to be, at a glance, "free of charge" to see, and it is indeed true in a sense. The users can watch the contents without paying any additional money except for the fees to the internet provider. However, these content-sharing-web companies are in fact profiting from the users through advertisement on their platforms, and by their ability to collect personal data from users, which subsequently could be sold to various other profit-motive companies for their marketing campaigns. As a result, such companies indeed succeed in making huge profits by letting people use these so-called "free services." It is highly unlikely that people will stop using these services, including social media via mobile phone and personal computers at the moment and in the near future. However, it is valuable and crucial to point out that there are hidden strategies attached to "free-services," which induces people to purchase goods and services by motivating users and viewers to use the "free services." What is worse, enormous amount of personal and collective data is collected to analyze more accurate information which renders another cycle of human purchasing behaviors and other

actions by tailoring and customizing advertisements to target specific people who have specific interests for goods and services. Thus, it is important to recognize the games and rules of the system if religious leaders and institutions aim to utilize this medium.

Hick's Epistemology for the Digital Milieu as a Practical Tool

Firstly, Hick's epistemological accounts of faith and 'critical realism' can serve the human mind to be able to distinguish between beneficial and harmful information, which subsequently render both moral and immoral attitudes and actions. 'Critical realism,' in simple terms, is the ability to differentiate how we perceive the objects and what the objects really are in themselves. With digital content perceived by human (sense) perception and experience through mobile phones and other computing devices, it may be crucial to be reminded, at least occasionally, that digital pictures and video clips appearing on the screen are just aggregations of small dots of colors. Those dots of colors are constantly changing, and those changing dots and colors have significant power over human beings' next actions and reactions. Additionally, various digital applications are essentially algorithms which are ultimately reduced to a binary system comprised of 0s and 1s. This simple realization enables the viewer to detach him/herself from the digital content and prevents one from becoming unreasonably controlled by the world of cyberspace. That is to say, when using digital devices, those critical thinking and reflection help preventing the excessive time that the users spend in cyberspace and to be prudent in retrieving the kind of information that can enhance their real life.

Secondly, critical realism also assists to limit unnecessary purchasing behaviors, be able to recognize deceptive images, and most importantly, avoid unnecessary emotional suffering caused by negative online exchanges and engagements. Differently put, if the human mind is critically realistic enough to be able to discern appropriate input and output of digital devices from potentially harmful information and marketing strategy, humankind will be better able to achieve well-being

in the digital world, gradually eliminating negative and pessimistic elements from our lives.

Having said that, the researcher also demonstrated the disproportionately small space in YouTube channels for the religious channels and non-profit channels compared with music and other entertainment channels in YouTube space. And it is most likely to be applicable to other social media and video-sharing website too. This entails that the time that average users spend in the internet space is mostly dominated by entertainment channels including professional ones. Thus, the internet tech-giants known as GAFE or BATH,⁶³ have tremendous power over the perceptions of the ordinary viewers and users, showing commercial before, during, and after watching the video. The empirical evidence indicated, at least at the moment, the religious leaders and institutions are not attracting the majority of the users' time YouTube space. Although, they can and do utilize the internet service to reach out to people in the world, the number shows that only 0.32 percentage of YouTube subscribers access Catholic-related channels.⁶⁴ Negatively put, amongst the users who open and watch their favorite channels in YouTube space, 99.68 percent of viewership was dominated by profit-motive channels. This fact needs to be addressed to for further discussion to engage in the cyber space.

Thirdly, the researcher believes that essentially Hick's epistemology points out the importance of distinguishing a significance and an interpretation of the significance as well as their subsequent attitude and action. It is true that we are taking action according to the environment; therefore, the environment, including digital environment is affecting the next human attitude and action. However, as Hick often quoted from St. Aquinas' words, "The thing known is in the knower

⁶³ GAFE: Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon. BATH: Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Huawei. YouTube is a company that Google owns.

⁶⁴ This is the ratio when compared with the top five profit channels with top five Catholic channels. Cf. also Appendix 4.

according to the mode of the knower."⁶⁵ Hick warrants that human can exercise the higher mode of knowing. "Do we use the digital device?" or "Does the digital device use you?" For such questions, Hick would seem to answer that human beings ought to know and analyze the purpose for what we are using, what information we retrieve as a result, and what kind of effect was created due to the acquired information from the digital contents. The lack of these critical processes will negatively affect the efficacy of using the digital device or any external devices for that matter. The internet world can possibly provide a lot of benefits—allow people can access the digital library and read books for free, especially those who cannot afford to buy the books. It also allows people without financial resources to educate themselves to be eligible to work as a computer programmer and earn their living by using digital devices for free or at prices much lower than the cost of a university education. Many skillful jobs in demand can be learned without having a university degree these days, and more and more companies care less about the certificate and more about the real skill which can benefit the company from day one. Also, people are now able to collaborate to work beyond national borders; companies can also pay salaries by the transfer of funds via internet.

However, human beings in the digital milieu should be able to distinguish the "free contents" for totally free, or "free contents" with strings attach to them with possible harmful consequences. In addition, we cannot impose anyone to reach this understanding and awareness as Hick suggest; it is only possible through indirect communications for users to realize many processes of cognition and recognition to perceive image, movies and so forth by themselves. Therefore, critical realism is a crucial and beneficial concept for those who tend to fall into naïve realism in the digital milieu. The researcher does not intend to impose this notion onto the reader, but hopes to provide an occasion that the people could increase the awareness of the significance, the interpretation, and the reinterpretation as well as the attitude and action appropriate to the digital environment.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Summa Theologica*, pt. II, II, Q. a, Art. 2.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that human beings live in a complex, constantly changing and increasingly digital world today. As tech companies try to develop and refine digital technology for their benefits, there are also positive outcome for the public. However, the negative impact on people is also abundant. On the one hand, we can conveniently send, receive, and exchange information every second through digital devices, helping to increase efficiency or productivity. On the other hand, the large companies such as GAFA and BATH collect enormous amounts of data of human behaviors and expressions, be it through text, photo, voice, and video at every second. Loss of personal privacy is one of the major consequences of our participation in the online world. In the future, we may be able to learn how to interact and react better and more wisely in the digital environment, reducing the negative impact from deceptive contents. This paper attempted to call attention for the risk of being manipulated by digital media when we do not exercise critical ability to be aware of what we perceive and interpret. Hick's epistemology, and the notion of critical realism was re-examined in the context of the digital milieu as a tool to enhance our life in the digital world. Furthermore, the research claimed that critical realism can serve to realize the possibility and choice to exit from the digital world or take preventative measures if we are aware of being manipulated by AI technology. If human beings know that they can no longer distinguish between "what is real" and "what is not-real" in the environment, we can choose to limit our involvement in this system, and choose to live in such a way that we can exercise our cognitive capability to process information in a personally beneficial manner. This was another important element of critical realism—to be able to live in the world where we can increase the positive attitude and action based on our understanding of significances and interpretations.

Hick's epistemology reminds us that we need to be aware of the significance, the human stable mind and input through sense perceptions, and its co-relative interpretation, which induces attitude

and action appropriate to the environment in which we inhabit. This critical ability to discern between significance and interpretation in all natural, ethical, religious levels, can help us to experience profound awe when we witness the wildness in the natural world, or the sense of long-lasting happiness when we encounter compassionate and kind people. Furthermore, this awareness increases the higher mode of knowing things, i.e., human capability to reflect our interpretations and to alter the next actions in their future for the better. In this sense, Hick's epistemological accounts and critical realism can be of great service to humanity in the digital milieu.

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Promiscuous Teleological Reasoning: A Pseudo Logical Reasoning

Morad Nazari

ABSTRACT

In this paper the concept of "promiscuous teleological bias" and reasoning based on it have been highlighted. It shows that teleological reasoning is promiscuous in the sense that it is scientifically and logically erroneous. This has been done through plenty of examples about false explanation of natural facts. It shows how and why children have a tendency to broadly construe all kinds of natural objects and events as occurring for a purpose and how and why this tendency continues on to adulthood until it becomes an obstacle for learning and understanding science. The relation between PTR and religious belief, particularly belief in supernatural, has been evaluated. The findings on reviewed sources show that adults and educated people, even non-religious educated people are not immune from this kind of reasoning. Finally, considering the reductionist mindset of most of the researchers in this field, especially on the definition of religion, and non-efficiency of science education to combat this kind of reasoning, calls for future comprehensive research.

Keywords: Cognitive science, Teleological reasoning, Religion, Supernatural

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A semi-educated man may very well dismiss as “contrary to science” a theological explanation of the universe, and yet find no difficulty in accepting the notion that the sun is there to give us light.

Jean Piaget

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, several theories have emphasized the natural basis of religious belief and experience found in cognitive biases that are byproducts of brain functions. Central among cognitive biases is the teleological tendency to explain phenomena by reference to function. Teleological bias, sometimes called “teleo-functional reasoning,” is a cognitive bias which explains phenomena by incorrectly referring to their intentional design, function, goal, purpose, or believing that something exists ‘in order to.’ While teleological bias comes in many flavors, from a judgement that the universe has been intentionally designed to the metaphorical expression that the purpose of the heart is to pump blood, research on teleological bias has primarily focused on the ‘in order to’ type of reasoning, called ‘promiscuous teleology.’ The thesis shall attempt to bring the concept of teleological reasoning to the fore and to show its importance in our explanations of natural events and phenomena. Accordingly, the focus would be highlighting “promiscuous teleological bias” and the reasoning based on it.

2. Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR)

Since religious belief is almost ubiquitous throughout cultures and across different eras (and vastly differ from one another) it seems that there is something inherent to human cognition which gives rise to these beliefs. Cognitive science of religion (the study of religious belief using the tools of modern evolutionary and cognitive science) is a multidisciplinary approach to the origin, transmission and content of the underlying mechanisms which facilitate religious beliefs. It encompasses psychology, anthropology, and biology among an increasing number of disciplines. Nowadays, it is a must for scientists,

philosophers and particularly theologians to study and reflect on the philosophical implications of the cognitive science of religion.

Pascal Boyer in his prominent work, ‘Religion Explained’¹ attempts to rectify the conventional belief that understood human mind as an all-purpose problem solver and considers it as a collection of subsystems carrying out content specific operations. In this new view, the human mind should be thought of as something akin to a Swiss army knife (or perhaps the numerous “apps” on an I-pad in contemporary parlance) with different parts having specific functions, rather than something analogous to a blank slate.² Thus, it is through a combination of these different modules that religious belief arises.

CSR assumes that religious beliefs and experience can be efficiently explained by ordinary cognitive structures and processes shared by all humans and it is not unique to religion. With this in mind, Barrett & Zahl (2013, p12)³ defined ‘religion’ as “the special cultural elaborations and the upshot of an ordinary, pan-human information-processing tendency that can be seen in many different domains of cultural expression.” They argued that cognitive accounts of religion rely on and utilize the cognitive sciences for insights and methods in developing causal explanations for the occurrence and recurrence of religious expression.

Cognitive scientists of religion maintain that religious beliefs and experience as cognitive biases and construe religious beliefs as by-products of brain functions. In their view, religiosity is an evolutionary by-product of universal human cognitive abilities to understand the human mind and the world. They suggest that human minds incline towards religious and religious-like beliefs and intuitions due to these

¹ Boyer, P., (2001). Religion Explained, The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought, Basic Books

² Sagar, R.J., (2011). The cognitive science of religion/Atheism and its impact on Plantinga’s reformed epistemology, accessed Dec. 10, 2019, http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/3191/1/Sagar_11_MPhil.pdf

³ Barrett, J.L. & Zahl, B.P., (2013). Cognition, Evolution, and Religion, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304989997>

cognitive biases. Accordingly, belief in supernatural agents such as gods, spirits, and related phenomena, emerge from a set of interrelated cognitive biases, such as perceptions of agency and mentalizing (theory of mind), mind-body dualism, and teleological intuitions.⁴ For example, the ability to understand human agency is commonly argued to make people naturally receptive to religious concepts.⁵

Cognitive scientists of religion argue that as a consequence of the ability to understand the minds of others and interpret behavior, people have begun to project humanlike and person-like features onto non-human or nonperson-like aspects of the environment, and to reason about random events as intentionally planned and to see purpose in life.⁵ Similarly, our ability to detect agents and being highly sensitive and even hyperactive (the concept known as HADD*), has led us to a general inclination to detect human-like agents even where there are none, inducing perception of faces in the clouds, voices in the wind, and emotions among interacting dots on a computer screen. In short, the capacity to interpret the human mind is assumed to have resulted in inclinations to attribute human characteristics to non-humans (anthropomorphism) and to perceive human-like purposefulness and intentionality that does not exist (promiscuous teleological reasoning).

3. Promiscuous Teleological Reasoning (PTR)

Serious discussions in the field of promiscuous teleological reasoning (PTR), though not with the very same name, started with Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) known for his pioneering work in child development. Piaget believed that young children indiscriminately generate artificialist explanations because they are psychologically incapable of conceiving of physical causes, a shortcoming that he argued rendered them insensitive to the

⁴ Willard, A.K. & Norenzayan, A., (2013). Cognitive biases explain religious belief, paranormal belief, and belief in life's purpose, *Cognition, Volume 129, Issue 2, November 2013, Pages 379-391*.

⁵ Lindeman, M., Svedholm-Häkkinen, A. M., & Lipsanen, J. (2014). Ontological confusions but not mentalizing abilities predict religious belief, paranormal belief, and belief in supernatural purpose.

fundamental distinction between natural kinds and artifacts. His claim that children are 'artificialists' who draw on their subjective intentional experience to conclude that all things are made by people for a purpose has encountered substantial skepticism. Contemporary studies⁶ have found that, although children are not entirely indiscriminate as Piaget believed, they do indeed, consistent with his results, evidence a general bias to treat objects and behaviors as existing for a purpose and are also broadly inclined to view natural phenomena as intentionally created, albeit by a nonhuman agent.

Ojalehto et al.⁷(2013) argued that while this kind of reasoning is acceptable in certain domains (e.g., artifacts), it is considered promiscuous when extended to natural kinds because it implies "agentive and intentional conceptualizations of Nature" where physical-causal mechanistic explanations would be superior. Deborah Kelemen^{6,8}, a prominent developmental and child psychologist, claims that children, as a result of their cognitive architecture, have a tendency to reason about nature in terms of purpose and intention, what she has termed "promiscuous teleology". She suggests that children are prone to apply teleological reasoning promiscuously, that is to say not only to artefacts (which typically are designed with particular functions in mind) but to a much wider phenomena, including the natural world.

Kelemen (2011) found that children were more likely than adults to explain natural kinds in terms of purpose and intentions, so when asked 'why prehistoric rocks were pointy?' young children preferred

⁶ Kelemen, D., (2004). Are Children "Intuitive Theists"? Reasoning About Purpose and Design in Nature, *American Psychological Society, Volume 15, Number 5*.

*Hyperactive Agency Detection Device

⁷ Ojalehto, B., Waxman, S. R., & Medin, D. L. (2013). Teleological reasoning about nature: intentional design or relational perspectives? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 17*(4), 166-171.

⁸ Kelemen, D., (2011). Teleological minds: how natural intuitions about agency and purpose influence learning about evolution, in *Evolution challenges: Integrating research and practice in teaching and learning about evolution*, ed., Rosengren, K. and E. M. Evans, Oxford University Press.

explanations that invoked purpose, ('so that animals could scratch themselves when itchy' or 'rocks are pointy to stop elephants sitting on them') as opposed to purely physical accounts (because bits of stuff piled up over a long time or due to the effects of long-term erosion by wind and rain). As another example, when asked about the first origins of living and non-living natural things (e.g., 'why did the first ever river occur?'), elementary school children were more likely to spontaneously give explanation for them in terms of the 'functions' they perform (e.g., 'so animals could drink from them') than either physical causal mechanisms (e.g., "it rained and rained") or purely intentional-causal antecedents (e.g., 'someone made them). When asked why mountains exist, seven- to eight-year-olds overwhelmingly prefer teleo-functional explanations ('to give animals a place to climb') over mechanistic, or physical, causal explanations ('because volcanoes cooled into lumps'). It's only around age nine that children begin replacing teleo-functional answers with scientifically accurate accounts.^{6,8}

Functional explanations are two types: whether invoked 'self-survival' functions (e.g., 'the rocks were pointy so that animals would not sit on them and smash them') or 'artifact' functions (e.g., 'the rocks were pointy so that animals could scratch on them when they got itchy').⁸ In children's view, the idea that clouds are "for" raining or that rivers are "for" bathing seems to be more natural than alternative, non-teleological explanations for their existence. Research⁶ has shown that even when given a pre-trial which explained in physical (non-teleological) terms how natural kinds formed and when children are told that adults apply physical kinds of explanation to nonliving natural entities, the results did not differ, teleological explanations were still preferred. Kelemen (cited in Whitehouse 2013)⁹ believes that teleological reasoning is a "side-effect" of our natural inclination to 'privilege intentional explanation' and view 'nature as an intentionally designed artifact,' the belief that nature was designed for a purpose. She maintains that this kind of creationist thinking originates in

early-emerging intuitive reasoning.

Willard & Norenzayan⁴ (2013) define teleology as the tendency to see things in the world as having a purpose and having been made for that purpose. This tendency is theorized to be an over-extension or a byproduct of 'artifact cognition'. They discuss that part of our ability to understand artifacts is the capacity to see them as designed by agents with specific goals and motivations. This ability is sometimes referred to as 'promiscuous' when it is extended to things that were not made for any purpose. For instance, children have the intuition that lions exist so that we can visit them at the zoo, clouds are for raining, and mountains are for climbing. Likewise, it is rational to say that a showerhead sprays water because it's designed for such a purpose, however, it would be illogical to claim that a waterfall is 'for' anything in particular (e.g. for what a showerhead has been made for). In contrast to a showerhead, the waterfall is simply there as the result of some naturally occurring geographical configuration.

Studies⁵ have revealed promiscuous teleology among children ('clouds are for raining') and adults ('earthworms tunnel underground to aerate the soil'). Therefore, it is reasonable to suppose that such a design bias continues into adult life and thinking of present-day adults as still being prone to use teleological explanations. Even when adults are apparently using scientific explanation there is still evidence of intentional reasoning. It is because explaining nature in a non-teleological way is quite recent to the history of human thought.²

Studies⁶ have demonstrated that adults have not been formally educated show similar preference for teleological explanations as educated adults under conditions of time pressure and hurried response. A study conducted among uneducated Romanian gypsy adults, lacking significant understanding of scientific accounts of evolutionary origins, has shown that they share similar intuitions to children of primary school age with regard to teleological explanations, which provides further evidence that a tendency to prefer explanations in terms of design continues on to adulthood unless specific measures are taken to try

⁹ Whitehouse, H., (2013). Immorality, creation and regulation, Updating Durkheim's theory of the sacred, in *Mental culture, Classical Social theory and the Cognitive Science of Religion*, ed. Dimitris Xygalatas and William W. McCorkle Jr.

and combat this. Moreover, elderly patients suffering from Alzheimer Disease, a condition that decays the semantic memory (including scientific schemas) demonstrate a renewed preference for creationist accounts of the world in contrast to beliefs held earlier in life.^{2,4,9}

PTR is not solely related to children or uneducated individuals. Even those who are steady advocates of physical explanations of the natural world are showing the tendency to think in teleological terms. Whereas Willard & Norenzayan⁴ believe that promiscuous teleology is not simply out-grown but is only pressed down in some cultural contexts, Ojalehto et al.⁷ (2013) suggested that the shift from physical-causal explanations to teleo-functional explanations focused on a self-serving or other-serving function. They considered two factors central to this shift: developmental time and exposure to Western science. They claim that promiscuous teleological reasoning decreases with age and Western schooling.

4. Are Children Intuitive Theists?

The inclination to construe the world and things as purposeful leads to the possibility of seeing one or more agents as having created the world. Therefore, promiscuous teleology makes people ‘intuitive theists’.^{4,6} Perhaps it is not much surprising that this teleological reasoning, the tendency to over-attribute purpose to the natural world, often finds a comfortable match with the idea that the purpose was brought about by an intentional agent or creator. It seems that this conceptual space invites a god or gods to fill the gap.

The basic idea that children might draw upon an “artifact analogy” or view entities in terms of intentional design, as “quasi-artifact,” derives from works by Evans (2001)¹⁰ who found that regardless of religious background at home, children favored ‘creationist’ origins explanations. One reason for thinking that children might intuitively

¹⁰ Evans, E.M., (2001). Cognitive and contextual factors in the emergence of diverse belief systems: Creation versus evolution. *Creative Psychology*, 42, 217-266.

analogize to the intention based artifact domain is that; even though infants show precocious abilities to discriminate physical, mechanical causes from intentional causes, they nevertheless evidence a bias to privilege intentional explanations of events. Gelman and Kremer (1991 cited in Kelemen 2004⁶) found that although American preschoolers recognize that artifacts rather than natural entities are human made, they favor ‘God’ as the explanation of the origin of remote natural items (e.g., oceans).

With regard to the term “intuitive theist” Kelemen⁶ discussed that:

“Even so, perhaps applying the phrase ‘intuitive theists’ to children— given all that the term ‘theism’ implies to adults— might seem misplaced, if not irreverent. After all, although young children might conceive of non-natural agents and hypothesize about their mental states, presumably they do not contemplate the metaphysical ‘truth’ of which such agents can be part, or experience emotions concomitant with endorsing a particular metaphysical-religious system....All that is under question is whether children make sense of the world in a manner superficially approximating adult theism, by forming a working hypothesis that natural phenomena derive from a nonhuman ‘somebody’ who designed them for a purpose— an intuition that may be elaborated by a particular religious culture but derives primarily from cognitive predispositions and artifact knowledge.” (Kelemen 2004, p297)

Other investigations³ into children’s ideas about who should be credited with the natural world’s apparent design and purpose, it is found that preschoolers show no confusion: ‘humans make pencils and chairs, but God makes animals and stars.’ Piaget believed that children used ‘God’ to refer to a person who was fundamentally similar to the dominant authority in children’s own lives—their parent. To sum up, although promiscuous teleology does not include a forthright, literal notion of agency and there is no clear evidence that promiscuous teleology is related to supernatural beliefs all that much, the human tendency to endorse promiscuous teleology is widely accepted as one

of the major reasons people believe in God and in supernatural design.⁵

5. The Origin of Promiscuous Teleology

Why does this bias occur? Why is it that this type of ‘purposeful life’ reasoning is ubiquitous? Scientists want to know¹¹ why it is so cognitively seductive and so defiant in the face of logical science. There are many possible explanations, each possessing slightly different implications for how this bias might be best approached, especially in science instruction. Deborah Kelemen⁸, the most well-known scholar and researcher in the field of PTR has classified the reasons for its prevalence into contextual factors and cognitive origins. Most of the contents of this section have been developed and summarized from her studies (unless otherwise indicated):

Regarding conceptual factors, one explanation might be that the tendency is caused by parents and their ways of responding to their children’s incessant ‘why’ questions. However, studies such as those of Evans (2001)¹⁰ suggest that parents are unlikely to be the source of this bias, at least not in any straightforward sense. Parents generally favor and offer causal rather than teleological explanations. In Evans’ study, children with creationist parents and those whose parents endorse evolutionary accounts of the origin of life show equal preference for teleological explanations of natural phenomena and only later (after age ten) in development do the children of non-creationists align their beliefs more closely with those of their parents.

Another possible explanation based on contextual factors might be: PTR is a result of media exposure such as the potentially widespread storybook convention of presenting the natural world as a personified and purposeful place. It might also be tempting to think that this creationist bias is simply attributable to cultural learning (e.g. regular retellings of the Genesis story). However research has shown that these factors are not significant either. For instance, whereas both Britain and U.S.A. are similar in the development of purpose-based thinking (e.g.,

popular media, social customs, literacy practices) but they are different on the dimension of religiosity, there is no significant difference between findings from children of these couple of countries.⁸ It is, therefore, concluded that external social forces are unlikely to provide a clear explanation of children’s affinity for teleological explanation and their broad tendency to reason about objects in terms of a function.

So, if ambient cultural religiosity or external social forces are not the obvious explanations, there must be an alternative possibility; something theoretically deeper and more coherent might drive children’s teleological intuitions. Kelemen⁸ believes that children’s generalized tendency to attribute functions to natural entities results from a far more basic, low-level cognitive mechanism: one that is sensitive to agents’ goals and automatically ascribes purposes to any object that seem to achieve them. She concluded that children have intuitions that natural objects have some kind of immanent, and potentially self-modifying, vital agency. In consequence, she hypothesized that animism is at least partially responsible for children’s promiscuous teleology.

An alternative hypothesis is that, lacking knowledge of scientifically valid physical causal explanations of natural phenomena, children compensate by drawing on their knowledge of a domain that they know well—the domain of intentionally designed artifacts. Even as young children may know that natural phenomena are not literally caused by people, perhaps they nevertheless plug their explanatory gaps by treating nature as though it has been made for a purpose by some kind of underspecified non-human agent. This option, of course, implies that children’s promiscuous teleology is underpinned by a rather “rich” theory-driven compensatory strategy.^{6,8}

6. PTR and Science Education

Teleo-functional reasoning isn’t simply an odd way of thinking. It has real consequences on our lives. Bering¹¹ (2010) believes that this style of reasoning brings about an important error in our social reasoning, one that entices us into thinking in deontic terms – that we

¹¹ Bering, J. (2010). The nonexistent purpose of people, *Journal of the British Psychologist Society*, April 2010, vol23, pp 290-293.

‘should’ and ‘ought’ to behave a certain way because that is what we are made for. This is at the heart the naturalistic fallacy, the conceptual error made in claiming that what is natural is also inherently good, proper or right. Examples of extreme teleo-functional reasoning are: “we so often feel we’re not doing what we’re meant for,” or when religious believers reason that “we’re here ‘for’ some divine purpose” are belong to “destiny beliefs”. This assumption that an intentional being brings about natural order make it difficult to teach evolution by natural selection as an alternative to direct creation. People also assign some vague purpose to human existence, such as ‘to love one another,’ even if they are not particularly religious. The concept of destiny doesn’t bother us as being ridiculous, insane, or conceptually flawed at all. It seems quite natural. In fact, what is natural is neither good nor bad. In addition, although we have a moralistic penchant for design reasoning, it should be noted that adaptive design offers no prescriptions for moral behavior.¹¹

Both Bering¹¹ and Kelemen^{6,8} suggest that young children’s intuitive teleological bias provide many major instructional challenges to secondary and post-secondary educators in the evolutionary sciences. They believe that without a basic science education, such thinking also remains a fixture of adult thought. The inaccurate intuitive ideas are, likely to have become deeply entrenched by being left largely unchallenged for a long period of developmental time. This, inevitably, affects students’ responsiveness to instruction negatively. Moreover, PTR cannot go away without being challenged and being replaced by scientific thinking. Teleo-functional reasoning is not so much replaced by scientific knowledge as it is consciously overridden. This indicates that scientific educations in some cases suppress rather than replace teleological explanatory tendencies.⁶

Cognitive developmental research⁸ suggests that everyday intuitive reasoning biases emerge early in development, persist covertly and sometimes overtly into adulthood and represent default assumptions likely to influence the construction and persistence of students’ scientifically accurate causal theories about natural phenomena. Crucially, if they are unchallenged from early childhood, ideas derived

from these deeply rooted biases may become so entrenched that their habitual nature creates a significant ongoing impediment to scientific literacy.⁸ The discussion about teleological reasoning and its relation with science education is not complete without quoting a few examples showing how science educated people, even science teachers, have difficulty to distinguish them. Deborah Kelemen⁸, whom the theory of promiscuous teleology entwined with her name almost from inception, has classified different types of PTR as follow:

There are three types of teleological explanations are three types: *basic function-based* (e.g., “giraffes have long necks *so that* they can reach high food”), *basic need-based* (e.g., “giraffes got long necks because they needed them to reach high food”), and *elaborated need-based*. A sub-type of elaborated need-based view is “*effort-based*”: A classic example of this is the notion that giraffes acquired long necks through repeatedly trying to eat highly placed leaves or fruit on trees. Another sub-type of elaborated need-based view is the potentially interconnected “*design-based*” intuition that a personified “Mother Nature” or “Evolution” responded to the animals’ functional needs by generating or conferring the functional part with a view to preserving the animal’s survival. An example of this is the idea that giraffes have long necks because Nature transformed, “evolved” or “adapted” them so they could reach food on the tops of trees to survive.

Findings about science education students⁸ revealed that undergraduates’ mean level of agreement with the scientifically unwarranted statement “I believe the Earth is driven to preserve living things” was relatively high (59%) as was their mean agreement with highly correlated statements such as “I believe the Earth is alive” (64%); “I believe Nature is a powerful being” (73%); “The Earth is driven to provide optimal conditions for life” (62%). In general, although these students strongly endorsed natural selection as an explanation of both human (M=82%) and non-human origins (M=81%), they had a marked tendency to view the Earth as a powerful, protective, controlling being. To mention another example, it has been found that⁸ in contrast to their ratings of belief in God, students’ ratings of notion that “Earth

is driven to preserve living things” strongly predict their promiscuous (but often covert) tendencies to teleologically explain not only living but also non-living natural phenomena in terms of a purpose: That is, an agentive construal of nature provides a significant reason why students find scientifically inaccurate teleological statements such as “the sun makes light so that plants can photosynthesize” highly believable even after extensive high school and college level tuition in both the physical and life sciences.

Teleological reasoning do not go away by mere claims. Margaret Evans¹⁰ (2001) enumerated some extra requirements for people who utterly claim that they are atheist or non-believers. This kind of reasoning is so deeply engrained that even self-professed non-believers require extra cultural scaffolding. Various environmental factors may suppress intuitive belief in the supernatural. First, man-made environment of urbanized societies which make it easier for individuals to interpret the events through human (or human-related) causes. Second, the advancement of science and widespread-ness of scientific knowledge based on which individuals no longer need to appeal to supernatural causes to explain events like earthquakes and hurricanes, but can turn to scientific explanations as alternatives. Indeed, non-belief in the supernatural in some societies appears to correlate with educational level. Third, the scarcity of survival threats in the environment means there are less likely Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD) to be activated. Even when HADD is activated, more alternative non-religious explanations for interpreting the experiences may be available. In other words, contemporary urban settings have created contexts in which it is easier to suppress supernatural explanations with more reflective, humanistic explanations.

Several factors have been counted⁶ for children’s science failures and developmental continuity. It can be summarized as follows:

First, reasoning about all aspects of nature in non-teleological physical-reductionist terms is a relatively recent development in the history of human thought, and contemporary adults are still

surprisingly bad at it. For example, evolution is generally misconstrued as a quasi-intentional, needs-responsive designing force indicating that even when adults elaborate alternative scientific explanations, signs of intention-based reasoning about nature are still evident. Second, students’ science failures may, in part, result from inherent conflicts between intuitive ideas and the basic tenets of contemporary scientific thought. Research has found that although university students endorse scientific explanations of why animals and inanimate natural objects exist in the evaluative contexts, in a less evaluative environment they will more promiscuously generate teleological explanations. Finally, and significant to the conjecture that scientific educations suppress rather than replace teleological explanatory tendencies.

7. Discussion

7.1. PTR is Scientifically Erroneous

Promiscuous teleology is teleological in that a child believes a general super-agent causally determines events in the world through purpose and design. It is promiscuous in that a child appeals to any kind of non-specific super-agent as the original cause. Promiscuous teleological reasoning holds that we are naturally biased to (mistakenly) interpret natural kinds as if they (like artifacts) were intentionally designed ‘for a purpose’. While this kind of reasoning is appropriate for certain fields (e.g., artifacts), it is considered promiscuous when extended to natural entities because it implies agentive and intentional conceptualizations of “Nature” where there are physical-causal mechanistic explanations.

Based on ‘promiscuous teleology reasoning’, statements such as ‘clouds are for raining,’ ‘earthworms tunnel underground to aerate the soil,’ ‘mosses form around rocks to stop soil erosion,’ and ‘bees frequent flowers in order to aid pollination’ reflect a deep-rooted belief that natural kinds are intentionally designed for a purpose. Such statements imply that the functional consequence of an entity is also its own cause in “backward causal fashion.” In fact, human minds are biased toward reasoning in this teleo-functional manner. These statements

are scientifically unsupported teleological explanations. They reflect inaccurate causal reasoning about natural kinds as intentionally made for a purpose. Therefore, teleological reasoning about nature is flawed because it reflects erroneous causal reasoning.

7.2. Adults and Educated People are not Immune from PTR

As we have seen throughout review of the literature, promiscuous teleological reasoning, the tendency to reason about entities and events in terms of purpose is not simply out-grown but is only forced down in some cultural contexts. As a result, human mind is biased towards explanation in this teleo-functional manner, which simply refers to people's thinking that something exists for a purposeful reason rather than, well, because it's just there. That most of research in teleological reasoning is focused on children, does not mean that the problem is not grave in adults. Although educated healthy adults tend to refrain from committing errors in teleological reasoning about objects, adults that have not been formally educated to show similar preference for teleological explanations as do even scientifically educated adults under cognitive load (conditions of time pressure and hurried response). Therefore, it is logical to think that such a cognitive bias continues into adult life and thinking of today's adults as still being prone to use teleological explanations.

7.3. Non-religious People are not Immune from PTR

Although religious people are more likely to commit teleological error, non-religious or people with low religiosity are not immune, especially when they are under cognitive load. Even when adults are ostensibly using scientific explanation, there is still evidence of intentional reasoning. Willard & Norenzayan (2013)⁴ attributed the sense that there is some underlying purpose to life to a residual of supernatural belief among the non-religious. Although many people have managed to stop believing in God, they argue, the sense that there is some purposeful intentionality behind life remains unchanged.

Based on these information, it has to be known that religion is not the sole factor to be accused of for teleological reasoning. Thus, it can be

concluded from literature review that there are two routes to teleological reasoning: one that represents an explicit system of belief such as religion, and one that reflects implicit intuitions about how the natural world works. These findings shed light on how, when faced with certain life events, both our belief systems and situational pressures lead us to rely on intuitive assumptions rather than utilizing careful consideration of scientifically sound alternatives.

7.4. Humans made Artifacts, Nonhuman made Natural Entities!

A question which always comes our mind is about the children's ideas about who should be credited with the natural world's apparent design and purpose. Piaget (cited in Kasler & Kelemen 2008)¹² believed that children used 'God' to refer to a person who was fundamentally similar to the dominant authorities in their own lives—their parents. Lindeman and his colleagues⁵ (2014) found that children show no confusion: 'humans make pencils and chairs, but God makes animals and stars.' After all, it should be noted that the children's tendency to construe natural events and entities according to purpose and intentionality is not an evidence to see them as believers of any particular religious system or in any kind of supernatural. In fact, children derive the idea from their knowledge of artifacts. For children, God is an agent to fill the gap, a place holder, when they lack knowledge.

7.5. PTR and Religion

Although the natural implication of PTR is a kind of creationist origins explanation, in addition, both religion and PTR are considered as cognitive biases, PTR does not include a forthright, literal notion of agency. Lindeman⁵ et al. (2014), emphasized that there is no clear evidence that promiscuous teleology is related to supernatural beliefs all that much. Nevertheless, these scholars admitted that the human tendency to endorse promiscuous teleology is widely accepted as one

¹² Kasler, K. & D. Kelemen, Developmental Continuity in Teleo-Functional Explanation: Reasoning about Nature Among Romanian Romani Adults, *Journal of Cognition and Development*, 9(3):340-362 · August 2008.

of the major reasons people believe in God and in supernatural design.

Zelma¹³ et al. (2016), having compared intuitive thinkers and analytical thinkers, concluded that the former will be more likely to endorse scientifically unfounded teleological explanations and more likely to believe in God. In contrast, the latter are less likely to have strong religious beliefs. It is because intuitive thinkers are less likely to reflect on causal directionality. They may endorse teleological explanations because they confuse an effect with an intention to cause that effect (i.e., a teleological cause). Analytical thinkers, on the other hand, are more likely to reject teleological explanations that erroneously reverse cause and effect. They are less likely to have strong religious beliefs. Religious beliefs are positively correlated with willingness to endorse teleological explanations but do negatively with analytical thinking.

Moreover, individuals are not pure intuitive or analytical thinkers. They switch from analytical thinking to intuitive thinking and vice versa in different situation. Findings showed that they are more likely to report a belief in God in situations when they used intuition to solve a problem than a situation that required careful reasoning to solve a problem. These findings are supported by Willard & Norenzayan (2013)⁴ who reported that religious skepticism and skepticism about paranormal phenomena were less prevalent among intuitive thinkers. They maintained that religious belief is rooted in intuitive processes. In contrast, they argued, religious disbelief can arise from analytic cognitive tendencies.

7.6. Do Cognitive and Evolutionary Explanations “Explain Away” Religion?

Much like Freudian or Marxist views on religion, Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR), better say cognitive explanations of religion, have sometimes been considered as a threat to religious

¹³ Zemla, J.C., Steiner, S.M., & Sloman, S. (2016). Analytical thinking predicts less teleological reasoning and religious beliefs, in Proceedings of the 38th Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society (pp. 1217-1222). Austin, TX: Cognitive Science Society.

beliefs. Cognitive scientists of religion may arrive at a naturalistic explanation of why some people believe the proposition ‘God exists’ and why some people believe ‘God does not exist.’ The general idea of religious beliefs threatened by CSR explanations for two reasons: (1) CSR makes religious beliefs more likely to be false, (2) CSR renders religious beliefs rationally justified and it is not an easy job, if not impossible. In response, cognitive scientists take a neutral position that: a scientific, naturalistic account of believing something does not affect whether the belief is true or false.

Whether the battle of cognitive science of religion and religious belief is real or not, religious belief is an obstacle for science education, in particular, for evolution and understanding of natural selection. The resistance to science arises in children when scientific claims come into conflict with early emerging, intuitive expectation. Students’ emotional resistance to instruction for students with religious commitments is the strongest. Nowadays, intuitive beliefs are supported and transmitted by religious and political authorities. Furthermore, since natural selection is a central evolutionary mechanism, it can potentially arouse emotional reactions in students with religious commitments. It should be noted that accepting evolutionary mechanisms by students is not equivalent to understanding it, and the relationship between these two is far from straightforward.

7.7. Is Teleological Reasoning Promiscuous?

There is an important question that always bother us: are children real animists? Is it out of immaturity and inability to discern between artifacts and natural entities that resulted in taking refuge to teleo-functional reasoning or there must be another interpretation? Ojalehto and her colleagues⁷ (2013) cast a serious doubt on interpretation of children’s teleo-functional reasoning. They challenged the argument that promiscuous teleology involves a defective idea of intentional agency. They suggest that instead of belief in intentional design, promiscuous teleology may demonstrate reasoning about context-dependent relations. Therefore, thinking that trees are for bird homes

would show the idea that birds realize trees as nesting places, rather than reflect the belief that trees have been designed for that purpose. In this view, teleological statements need not be basically about a single entity and its cause, but may instead represent reasoning about relationships among entities. In other words, the origins of teleological thinking are social and relational rather than individual and intentional.

Although this latter interpretation is not completely irrelevant, it cannot justify the presence of PTR in children and adults together. It cannot, for instance, explain PTR in uneducated adults (even educated ones in conditions of time pressure and hurried response). Another example is adults' taking refuge to teleo-functional reasoning and construing natural events based on intention when they face difficult questions and lack the scientific knowledge concerning the matter (what Kelemen called it "compensating strategy"). In fact, people, children in particular, compensate their lack of knowledge by using their knowledge of the domain they know well. Relational theory (Ojalehto's) is unable to justify these sorts of behavior.

In sum, promiscuous teleology may reflect two types of reasoning: reasoning that natural phenomena are intentionally designed for a purpose (Kelemen's theory), or non-supernatural reasoning about the relations among living things and their environments (Ojalehto's theory). Thus, accordingly some children understood the teleology statements in a supernatural way and some from a relational perspective.

7.8. PTR and Future Research

The authors, whose works have been reviewed in this paper, unanimously believed that the tendency to think in teleological quasi-artifact terms is a side effect of human mental design rather than socialization. If it is so, then, it remains as a default explanatory strategy throughout life. This idea contradicts the idea that through conceptual change such an explanatory approach is changed and replaced by a physical-reductionist view (so-called atheistic view) of nature in cultures acknowledging such ideas. These findings suggest that the

future research programs should concentrate on adults as much as children. Furthermore, regarding the correlation of religion and PTR, religion have been reduced to belief in the supernatural. Also in this reductionist view, intuition has been disparaged by putting it in direct opposition to analytical thinking rather than complementary to it.^{4,13} Therefore, it seems that the previous research are not sufficient. More research is required to evaluate the relationship between promiscuous teleological reasoning and religion, by proper definition of religion and even the concept of God in different religions.

8. Conclusion

The fact that teleological reasoning is promiscuous is not only incoherent logically and philosophically but also an obstacle in learning and understanding science. This study shows that how and why children have a tendency to broadly construe all kinds of natural objects and events as occurring for a purpose and how and why this tendency persists on to adulthood until it becomes an obstacle to learning and understanding science, unless specific measures are taken to try and combat this.

Through plenty of examples about false explanation of natural facts throughout the paper, one can re-evaluate one's beliefs. It shows that how one can believe in superstitions and science at the same time and it does not bother him/her. Whereas cognitive science is in neutral position towards religious belief and disbelief, research on promiscuous teleology would help to explain and reconsider both religious and non-religious beliefs in the light of scientific and rational thinking. Nonetheless, it seems cognitive scientists are not as neutral as cognitive science. As stated already, a reductionist approach towards religion and intuition in most of the reviewed papers can influence results and their interpretations negatively.

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Mission as Dialogue with Vietnamese Culture: The *Vietnamness* – Vietnamese Theology

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I. Introduction

In dealing with evangelizing to different cultures in the Roman world, the church in the first century AD approached mission as dialogue toward culture.¹ Asia is a continent of diverse cultures. Pope John Paul II reminds the faithful of this reality in *Ecclesia in Asia*, commenting, “The most striking feature of the continent is the variety of its peoples who are ‘heirs to ancient cultures, religions and tradition.’ We cannot but be amazed at the...intricate mosaic of its many cultures, languages, beliefs and traditions.”² Due to this nature of their own mission field, the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC)

¹ See Karl Rahner, “Toward a Fundamental Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 721. Rahner believes this mission approach never ceases but has journeyed along the history of the church. He thus divides the history of the Church and also of inculturation into three stages. The first stage was characterized by the Church being principally Jewish; the second one commenced when the Church opened its doors to welcome the Gentiles who belonged to Hellenism culture; and the third stage has commenced at Vatican II.

² John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on Jesus Christ the Savior and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia *Ecclesia in Asia*, AAS 92 (2000), no. 6.

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suggests dialogue with culture, one of the Triple Dialogue, to the Asian faithful and missionaries who engage in mission activities in Asia: “The churches in Asia must carry out a dialogue with the cultures in which they are situated in an attempt to take root in and transform their cultural environment. In this way new expressions of Christian faith can emerge which are at once deeply Christian and at home in the local churches.”³

Dialogue with culture toward inculturation, as guided by the FABC, enables people of a particular culture to recognize that Jesus and the Gospel have incarnated in their own culture, and as a consequence, embrace these two elements into their hearts and minds. This essay proposes a new mission approach in Vietnam. This mission approach entails carrying out dialogue with culture toward inculturation through the development of Vietnamese theology. Stated differently, due to the conflicts in the past with the Vietnamese Traditional Religion, doing Vietnamese theology is one of the remedies that would significantly resolve misconceptions among the non-Catholic Vietnamese that Christianity is a Westerners’ religion and the Vietnamese Catholics abandon their filial piety for this “false” religion. In order to achieve this objective, I will first present the *Vietnamness* as the common ground for this dialogue. It is from this common ground of *Vietnamness* that mission as dialogue with the Vietnamese culture will proceed.

II. The Common Ground: The *Vietnamness*

A. A Challenge to Mission as Dialogue with Culture in Vietnam

Dialogue with Vietnamese culture will certainly encounter various challenges. However, the challenge that this essay would like to bring to the table for discussion is that Christianity was branded as a “false religion” by the Vietnamese Emperors and rulers during the

³ FABC, “BIMA III: A Syllabus of ‘Mission Concerns’,” in Gaudencio Rosales and C.G. Arevalo, eds., *For All the Peoples in Asia*, Vol. 1 (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), no. 5.

seventeenth and eighteenth century.⁴

Christianity was recorded for the first time in the Vietnamese Imperial Historical Records, published in 1884. This historical document reports that in 1533 under the reign of King Le Trang Ton (1514-1548), “I-Ne-Khu,” mostly probably Ignatius, a Christian preacher, arrived in the two villages, Ninh Cuong and Tra Lu of Nam Dinh Province, North Vietnam.⁵ After I-Ne-Khu, the first missionaries arrived in Vietnam between the period of 1550 and 1615 from Malacca, Malaysia and Manila, the Philippines. However, these missionaries had virtually no impact in Vietnam due to language problems and the ban on Christianity.⁶ Only with the arrival of the Jesuits in 1615 did missionary work in Vietnam shift to new gear. From 1615 to 1659, mission work in Vietnam was carried out by the Jesuits, of whom Alexandre de Rhodes, who arrived in Vietnam in 1624, was an outstanding figure.⁷ Within 20 years, the first Jesuit missionaries had baptized more than 50,000 Vietnamese people in Central Vietnam.⁸ Alexandre de Rhodes cited 300,000 Vietnamese Catholics in North Vietnam by 1650.⁹

The infant church in Vietnam enjoyed a speedy blossoming, and yet was quickly prompted to the new chapter filled with blood because of her faith. The period of violent persecution in various forms lasted

⁴ See Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes and Inculturation in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 8.

⁵ See Bùi Đức Sinh, *Đa Minh Trên Đất Việt [Dominicans on Vietnamese Soil]*, Vol. 1 (Calgary: Veritas, 1995), 115; Phan Phát Huôn, *Việt Nam Giáo Sử [The History of the Vietnamese Church]*, Vol. 1 (Sài Gòn, Vietnam: Khai Trí, 1965), 78; Nguyễn Văn Trinh, *Lịch Sử Giáo Hội Việt Nam [The History of the Vietnamese Church]* (Sài Gòn: Đại Chung Viện Giuse Sài Gòn, 1990), 30-32.

⁶ See Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 9.

⁷ See Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 190-191.

⁸ See Hà Huy Tú, *Tìm Hiểu Nét Đẹp Văn Hóa Thiên Chúa Giáo [To Study the Cultural Value of Catholicism]* (Hanoi: Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2002), 291.

⁹ See Georg Evers, *The Churches in Asia* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 322; Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 191.

for nearly three centuries (1625-1860). About 30,000 Vietnamese Catholics were sentenced to death during the reigns of the Trinh lords, the Nguyen lords and the Tay Son dynasty. It is estimated that about 40,000 faithful were slaughtered by Emperors Minh Mang (1820-1840), Thieu Tri (1841-1847) and Tu Duc (1848-1883). In addition, Van Than (1864-1885), a patriotic movement by the intelligentsia of the Vietnamese Confucianism, had slaughtered more than 60,000 Catholics.¹⁰ Altogether about 300,000 of the Vietnamese faithful and foreign missionaries died by the most brutal tortures during three centuries under 20 Vietnamese rulers.¹¹

This phenomenon might raise a question in the mind of those who read the history of the Vietnamese. When the Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism arrived in Vietnam, the Vietnamese not only welcomed but also integrated the cores of their teachings into the Vietnamese Traditional Religion. Nevertheless, this is not the case with Christianity. Christianity was historically branded as “false religion,” and brutally persecuted for nearly three centuries. One may ask why such a brutal persecution could take place and was prolonged for three centuries. Replies to this question are varied. The political situation in Vietnam during this period is one of many explanations.¹² Another one is related to the core of the Vietnamese Traditional Religion; i.e., filial piety to the parents or the ritual of ancestor veneration. In other words, the core of Christianity, i.e., worshiping God alone, severely contradicts the core of the Vietnamese Traditional Religion, i.e., venerating the ancestors.¹³

¹⁰ See Đào Trung Hiếu, *Cuộc Lữ Hành Đức Tin: Giáo Hội Thế Kỷ XV-XX [The Pilgrimage of Faith: The Catholic Church in 15th-20th Century]* (Ho Chi Minh: Chan Ly, 2005), 241.

¹¹ See Evers, *The Church in Asia*, 323; Đào Trung Hiếu, *Cuộc Lữ Hành Đức Tin*, 181-186.

¹² See Joseph Nguyen Van Chu, *Tho Cung To Tien (The Veneration of Ancestors) and Evangelization in Vietnam: An Imperative of Inculturation* (Quezon City: Institute of Consecrated Life in Asia, 2005), 29-30.

¹³ See Trần Ngọc Thêm, *Cơ Sở Văn Hóa Việt Nam [Foundation of the Vietnamese Culture]* (Hanoi, Vietnam: Giao Duc Publications, 1999), 290.

When the missionaries from the West arrived in Vietnam, they taught the Vietnamese to worship “the Lord your God alone.” The immediate consequence of this particular teaching was that Vietnamese Christians were strictly prohibited to practice ancestral veneration. To the eyes of the Vietnamese, to abandon the practice of the ancestor veneration implied the rejection of the core of being a Vietnamese for a religion of Western foreigners. This rejection caused the Vietnamese rulers to arrive at the conclusion that Christianity was truly a false religion, for this religion encouraged its members to reject their own Vietnamese roots. As a result, Christianity was officially branded as a “false doctrine.” The words “false religion” were also carved by knives on faces of the convicted Vietnamese Catholics. What is more, in the nineteenth century, the Van Than movement even coined the phrase, “Destroy the West, kill the evil [Christian] religion,” in order to justify their actions and urge the Vietnamese to join in their movement.¹⁴

The reason that Christianity was branded as a “false religion” by the Vietnamese rulers or “the evil religion” by the Van Than movement was because Christian teachings forbade its faithful to practice filial piety, the core of the Vietnamese Traditional Religion.¹⁵ This unfortunate event “caused a split between the Gospel and the culture.”¹⁶ Phan thus concludes, “The condemnation of ancestor veneration was a tragic mistake and a disaster for the Church in [Vietnam]...because it was seen as a foreign religion that prohibited what was most sacred and religious in [Vietnam].”¹⁷ Similarly, Truong-Xuan Nguyen, an adherent of the Vietnamese Traditional Religion toward the branch of Venerating Ancestors, states, “The Vietnamese Christians are viewed by the non-Vietnamese Christians as those who abandon the Vietnamese culture for a Western religion.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Peter C. Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics* (New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2005), 52.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Joseph Nguyen Van Chu, “Tho Cung To Tien (The Veneration of Ancestors) and Evangelization in Vietnam,” 114.

¹⁷ Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, 52.

¹⁸ Truong-Xuan Nguyen, as recorded in Michael Q. Nguyen, “Missiological

Due to the conflict with the Religion of Ancestor Veneration, this essay, therefore, proposes upholding the concept of *Vietnamness* as common ground for mission as dialogue with culture in Vietnam.

B. The *Vietnamness*

It is accurate to say that “a newly born baby is cultureless.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, everyone is born not into a cultureless setting but a cultural environment. “From the moment of birth, [one] finds [oneself] inside a cultural setting.”²⁰ A newborn Vietnamese girl, for example, cannot speak the Vietnamese language. This habit or second nature is acquired through the course of times. Normally, this baby learns the Vietnamese language at first from the family, later at school and from society. Altogether, the family, school and society make up the cultural environment from which the baby is born into. From this analysis, it can be seen that a Vietnamese Christian is at first born into this world not as a Vietnamese Christian, but rather a Vietnamese. This individual is at first given the certificate of birth as a Vietnamese. Later, this Vietnamese person is brought to a church for baptism. This individual then adds into him/her another identity: the Vietnamese Christian.

From this critical evaluation, due to the conflict between the core of Vietnamese filial piety and the core of Christianity, I suggest the common ground for mission as dialogue with the culture in Vietnam is the Vietnamese cultural environment. To be more specific, the point of convergence between the Vietnamese people and the Vietnamese Christians is the *Vietnamness*, which comprises of the Vietnamese history and Traditional Religion. Actually, this *Vietnamness* has also been echoed by Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan. In his book, *Five Loaves*

Resonances in the Vietnamese Culture of the Multiplication of the Loaves in John 6” (S.T.L. thesis, Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies, 2020), 251.

¹⁹ Edgar G. Javier, *Anthropology and Mission: A Primer for Incarnational Missionaries* (Manila, Logos Publications, 2018), 65.

²⁰ Jose Vidamor B. Yu, *Inculturation of Filipino-Chinese: Culture Mentality* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1999), 8.

and *Two Fish*, the Cardinal explicitly advises the Vietnamese Catholics to be mindful of this common ground, the *Vietnamness*:

You have a homeland, Viet Nam. A Country so beloved, through the centuries. It is your pride, your joy... Love her glorious history. Love her hard-working people. Love her heroic defenders. One Viet Nam. One people. One soul. One culture. One tradition."²¹

III. Vietnamese History

A. Pre-Historical Period

The history of the Vietnamese which spans 4,000 years commences with the myth of Lac Long Quan and Au Co. The union of the Dragon Lac and the Goddess Au brings forth the one hundred sons and subsequently the many ethnic groups in Vietnam. Lac Long Quan and Au Co thus become the common ancestors of the Vietnamese.²² The identity of the Vietnamese people are culturally defined as the children or the offspring of the Dragon Lac and Goddess Au. The genealogy of the Vietnamese people or the history of the Vietnamese people therefore commences with the names of these two figures.²³

B. National Heroes and Heroines

Along with Dragon Lac and Goddess Au, the Vietnamese history also comprises of many other national figures whose lives contribute to the identity and also the survival of the nation. Mythological figures like Heavenly Lord Phu Dong²⁴ and legendary figures like Prince Tiet Lieu of

²¹ F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan Archbishop, *Five Loaves and Two Fish* (Garden Grove, California: TinVui Media, 1998), 84.

²² See Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Việt Nam: A Long History* (Hà Nội: Thế Giới Publishers, 2015), 20.

²³ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

²⁴ Trần Thế Pháp, *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái [Collections of Wonders in Lĩnh Nam]* (Pleiku, Vietnam: Hồng Bàng Publications, 2017), 8, 11, 13-16.

the legend of the Round Cake and Square Cake,²⁵ the Cao Brothers of the legend of Betel Leaves and Areca Nuts,²⁶ and An Tiem of the legend of the Watermelon²⁷ portray the characteristics of the Vietnamese race. While the Heavenly Lord courageously defends the sovereignty of Vietnam, Prince Tiet Lieu contributes his talent (under the guidance of Mr. Heaven) to the Vietnamese culture by fashioning the two cakes which are not only enjoyable but also philosophically illustrates the cosmic view of the primal people. While the Brothers of the Cao family and the wife of the eldest brother confirm the fraternal and marital relations among the members of the Vietnamese family, the character of An Tiem portrays the determined mind to overcome difficulties as well as the resilience of the people.

C. Struggles against Foreign Domination

Given its location in Southeast Asia, bordering what is known to Vietnamese as the Eastern Sea and China, Vietnam constantly struggles with its sovereignty from foreign domination since the dawn of their history. Under the domination of the Chinese for over a thousand years, French colonialism for almost a hundred years, and more recently, civil war between the Social Republic of North Vietnam and the Republic of South Vietnam for over twenty years, Vietnam struggles to be a nation of its own. The short poem, entitled “Mountains and River of the Southern Country,” has been enthroned by all the Vietnamese as the Declaration of the Vietnam Independence:

Over the southern mountains and rivers,
the Emperor of the South [Vietnamese Emperor] shall reign,
This was written down in the Book of Heaven.
How dare those barbarians invade our soil?
They will surely meet with defeat.²⁸

²⁵ See Vu Hong Lien, *Rice and Baguette: A History of Food in Vietnam* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 49-54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 54-59.

²⁷ See Trần Thế Pháp, *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái*, 29-30.

²⁸ Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Việt Nam*, 51.

Under the religious perspective, this declaration of General Ly Thuong Kiet, composed in 1077 while engaging in fierce battles with the northern invaders, confirms the belief that the existence of the nation of Vietnam is an undisputed matter since this is recorded in the Book of Heaven.²⁹ Lord Lac and Goddess Au and other national figures (mentioned above) in Vietnamese history have therefore become the points of convergence between the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese Christians. In short, the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese Christians share the same “[Vietnamese] heroic defenders.”³⁰

IV. The Vietnamese Traditional Religion

The Vietnamese have consequently cultivated their own religion: Vietnamese Traditional Religion. Phan divides the Vietnamese Traditional Religion into two branches: Religion of Heaven and Religion of Ancestor Veneration.³¹ Simply put, the Vietnamese Traditional Religion consists of “two basic characteristics, namely, belief in Heaven and filial piety.”³² These two branches or characteristics “constitute the core of Vietnamese [Traditional] religious beliefs.”³³

A. Religion of Heaven

The Vietnamese Traditional Religion is basically animist. In other words, “the most primitive religion of the Vietnamese is the Religion of Heaven.”³⁴ Its theological core, according to L. Cardiere, is the cult of spirits.³⁵ At the top of this spirit-hierarchy is Mr. Heaven, who,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan Archbishop, *Five Loaves and Two Fish*, 84.

³¹ Ibid., 35.

³² Ibid., 49.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Nguyễn Thùy Linh, as recorded in Michael Q. Nguyen, “Missiological Resonances in the Vietnamese Culture of the Multiplication of the Loaves in John 6” (S.T.L. thesis, Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies, 2020), 245.

³⁵ See Leopold Cardiere, *Croyances et Pratiques Religieuses des Vietnamiens [Faiths and Practices of the Religions in Vietnam]*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Ecole Francais

Cardiere asserts, is “the Supreme Being above all creatures and spirits, as the Subsistent Cause of [phenomena] such death, birth, blessings, calamities, wealth and poverty, and as a just and powerful judge who can reward and punish what people did.”³⁶ After Mr. Heaven come genius loci, spirits and demons. Genius loci are the national heroes or heroines like Heavenly Phu Dong, General Ngo Quyen and Trung Sisters, who receive veneration from the Vietnamese people. Spirits are the souls of the ancestors and addressed as the spirit-souls. Demons are those spirits who receive no offerings from their relatives, and so become evil. While genius loci have power to save and the spirit-souls can intercede for the living, demons have evil power to harm the living.³⁷

In the mind of the Vietnamese people, Mr. Heaven has power over all things. This Being controls nature, knows everything, punishes sinners, and rewards the righteous. This God can bless people and grant them health, protection, wealth, nourishment, and prosperity. Mr. Heaven is the source of all forms of life. He is the cause of all beings in the universe.³⁸ From Him, every being has come into existence; and to Him, every being shall be returned. The functions of Mr. Heaven are vividly described in many sayings or verses in Vietnamese folk literature; some common sayings include:

Without Heaven, whom can you live with?

Know Heaven’s will, and you won’t suffer for ten generations.

What you spurn, Heaven gives you.

Know that all things depend on Heaven.

Heaven has assigned to each person a position.

d’Etrême-Orient, 1992), 22.

³⁶ Cardiere, *Croyances et Pratiques Religieuses des Vietnamiens*, 22.

³⁷ See Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 24-26.

³⁸ See Vũ Kim Chính, *Thần Học Bản Vị và Những Vấn Đề Liên Quan [Theology of Inculturation and the Related Studies]* (Hanoi: Religions, 2018), 85.

Heaven is partial to no one.

Heaven does not bestow talent and good fortune to anyone at the same time.

Each of us carries his or her own karma

Then do not reproach Heaven for being near or far.³⁹

B. Religion of Ancestor Veneration

Filial piety to the parents and ancestors is the creed of the Vietnamese Traditional Religion. This filial piety situates all of the Vietnamese in an undisputed expectation; i.e., to honour and to take care of their parents while they are alive and also after they have passed away.

There exist in the Vietnamese society numerous proverbs that vividly describe the practice of the filial piety to the parents and ancestors. The proverb, “Do not neglect your obligations of filial duty. Rather, you must venerate your ancestors in all seriousness,”⁴⁰ sternly reminds the Vietnamese of the filial obligation to their parents that should not be ignored. Furthermore, according to the Vietnamese, a home setting is considered a better place than a Buddhist seminary (for those who desire to become Buddhist monks) because in a home setting, the Vietnamese can look after their parents when they are alive and also after they have passed away. Thus, the Vietnamese believe that “There is no better place than home to be a religious. Venerate the

³⁹ Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, 37-38; For more information on Mr. Heaven, see Trần Minh Thương, “Tin Ngưỡng Thờ Ông Thiên và Tính Cách Người Tây Nam Bộ [The Animist of Worshipping Mr. Heaven and The Characters of the Southwest Vietnamese],” in Nguyễn Thanh Lợi, ed., *Văn Hóa Dân Gian Nam Bộ: Tín Ngưỡng Dân Gian/The Culture of the South Vietnamese: The Animist Religions* (HCM City, Vietnam: Van Hoa – Van Nghe, 2017), 7-18.

⁴⁰ Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, 53.

father and respect the mother; that is being a true religious.”⁴¹ In this sense, ancestor veneration is not only a sacred obligation but also a religion to the Vietnamese.

In view of ancestor veneration, on November 14, 1974, the Conference of Vietnamese bishops issued a pastoral letter in which certain practices pertaining to ancestor veneration were permitted.⁴² For instance, Vietnamese Catholics were permitted to set up an ancestor altar under the Catholic altar. They can burn incense and bow in front of the ancestor altar to show their respect to the spirits of the ancestors. This permission was also extended to the veneration of the Vietnamese genius loci, like the Heavenly Lord Phu Dong, Trung Sisters and General Ngo Quyen. The Vietnamese bishops also added the phrase, “Remember in particular our *ancestors*, our *parents*, our friends who have left this world” into the Eucharistic Prayer II.⁴³ This additional prayer reflects the effort of the leaders of the church in helping the Vietnamese in general and the Vietnamese faithful in particular realize that Vietnamese Catholics do not abandon the cherished tradition of filial piety.

Most recently, on October 7, 2019, the Vietnamese bishops have launched further instructions on ancestor veneration as another attempt to integrate the Catholic faith into the Vietnamese Traditional Religion. In this document, the leaders of the church acknowledge the ritual of ancestor veneration, which, according to the bishops, “has been sown by the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁴ In the conclusion of this document, the bishops quote from the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* by Pope Paul VI: “The split between the Gospel and culture is without doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times. Therefore every effort

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the South Vietnamese, *The Sacros of the Vietnamese Bishops on the Rites of the Ancestor Veneration (14 November 1974)*.

⁴³ Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, 122-123.

⁴⁴ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnamese, *Instructions on Ancestors Veneration (7 October 2019)*.

must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture...to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel.”⁴⁵

Having established the *Vietnamness* as the common ground for mission as dialogue with culture in Vietnam, we now proceed to the mission as dialogue with culture toward inculturation in Vietnam.

IV. Mission as Dialogue with Culture in Vietnam

A. Theological Implications of the Vietnamese History

Viewing or reading the history of the Vietnamese through a theological lens, one can notice at least three theological implications drawn out from the Vietnamese history.

First, the history of the Vietnamese is under the governance of the many deities of whom Mr. Heaven is the Supreme Being. As the Declaration of Vietnam Independence indicates, Mr. Heaven has allotted a piece of the land located in Southeast Asia to the Vietnamese people. This divine will is recorded in the Book of Heaven. Because the nation Vietnam is a land granted by Mr. Heaven, the Vietnamese people will not only respect but also treasure their own nation; moreover, they will not give up this territory to any foreigners.

Secondly, Mr. Heaven has journeyed along with the Vietnamese since the dawn of their history. Consequently, when the Vietnamese encounter difficulties, as the legends of Heavenly Lord Phu Dong and Prince Tiet Lieu illustrate, Mr. Heaven rescues His people by sending a divine messenger like Phu Dong to the people; and, in the case of Prince Tiet Lieu, appears in dream to the Prince.

Thirdly, the Vietnamese people originated from two deities: Lac Long Quan and Au Co, who are the common ancestors of the

⁴⁵ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, AAS 68 (1975), no. 20.

Vietnamese.⁴⁶ From the divine union of the two figures, the Vietnamese people came into existence. One of the immediate consequences of this belief is that the Vietnamese become the offspring of the Lord Lac and the Goddess Au.

Reading the history of the Vietnamese from a theological perspective, one recognizes that the Vietnamese essentially claim a divine origin. In their language, the Vietnamese express this profound belief by referring to themselves as “children of dragon, grandchildren of fairy” (*con rồng, cháu tiên*). One of the significant implications of this creed is the conviction by the Vietnamese that Mr. Heaven, Lord Lac and Goddess Au have journeyed among the Vietnamese people throughout the span of more than 4,000 years of national history.

B. God Pitches Tent along the Vietnamese History

The countless verses about Mr. Heaven in Vietnamese folk literature reflect what the church fathers in the first three centuries called “the *logos spermatikos*,”⁴⁷ or the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* affirms as “elements which are true and good,”⁴⁸ or *Ad Gentes* defines as “elements of truth and grace.”⁴⁹ To be more accurate, the figure of Mr. Heaven is what *Nostra Aetate* defines as “a ray of Truth that enlightens all humankind.”⁵⁰ Toward the existence of God in the religions of the word, the fathers of Vatican II observe, “Religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing ‘ways,’ comprising teachings,

⁴⁶ See Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, 7-8.

⁴⁷ Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 64; Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2001), 58

⁴⁸ Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, AAS 56 (1964), no. 16.

⁴⁹ Vatican II, Decree on the Church Missionary Activity *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, AAS 58 (1966), nos. 9 and 11.

⁵⁰ Vatican II, Declaration on the Relation on the Church to non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate*, AAS 57 (1965), no. 2.

rules of life, and sacred rites.”⁵¹ The fathers then continue, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.”⁵² With these expressions of the church fathers in the first three centuries and of Vatican II, one can see that Mr. Heaven of the Vietnamese Traditional Religion is “the ray of Truth” or “elements of truth and grace” in *Nostra Aetate 2* and *Ad Gentes 9* respectively.

From the understanding of the *Vietnamness*, one recognizes that Mr. Heaven is “a ray of truth,” who has faithfully journeyed along the Vietnamese since the dawn of their history. The collection of the countless proverbs about this Supreme Being indicates that God has pitched God’s tent among the Vietnamese through the length of more than 4,000 years of their history as a people and nation. In addition, the famous folksong that vividly depicts this very act of God’s pitching tent is “Heaven, Please Send Down the Rain.”⁵³ The images of bowls of steamed rice and slices of fish recorded in this folksong are the key foods that the Vietnamese have received and enjoyed on a daily basis from the almighty God from the very beginning of their history. When the state of Vietnam is threatened by the foreign invaders, the Vietnamese people turn to God through the image of Mr. Heaven, who then responds to their plea by sending the Heavenly Lord Phu Dong to fight for the sovereignty of the nation.

C. Vietnamese Theology

When speaking about theology, there exists no theology but a contextual one that attempts to understand the Christian faith in a particular context. While classical theology covers only two *loci theologici* of the Scriptures and the Christian tradition, contextual theology comprises of three theological sources; i.e., the Scriptures, the Christian tradition and the present human experience. The last item in this list is the context of the Christian faith.

⁵¹ Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.

⁵² Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 2.

⁵³ Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, 36.

The Fourth Evangelist of the New Testament states clearly in the Gospel that God loves the world and desires to save it (John 3:16). However, Rene Padilla asserts, “God does not shout his message from the heaven.”⁵⁴ God, therefore, sends the only Son to the world. The Logos then incarnates in the human flesh as a man in a particular culture in a particular time. Anthony Gittins believes, as a person, “Jesus was socialized...and imbued with certain values.”⁵⁵ In other words, the Word was born of a Jewish woman in Palestine in the first century AD. Incarnated as a Jew, the Logos spoke Aramaic, ate bread and enjoyed drinking wine with his friends. The reader therefore encounters Jesus who shared the Jewish meal of barley bread with the Jewish crowd in John 6. Through the process of incarnation, Stephen Bevans argues that the Logos “could become visible and in some way (not fully but in some way) become graspable and intelligible.”⁵⁶ Likewise, Padilla believes that “the incarnation unmistakably demonstrates God’s intention to make himself known from within the human situation.”⁵⁷

Because God desires to manifest God’s self to humanity within their own context and since the human life is evolving, the process of incarnation must continue. As a result, the Gospel written to the Jews and the Gentiles who lived in the Roman world during the first century AD must be contextualized. Through the contextualization of theology, people of a particular culture with their present human experience will come to grasp God’s revelations through the person of Jesus as depicted in the Gospel within their own sociocultural context. As a consequence, contextual theology is not an option but rather an imperative.

⁵⁴ René Padilla, “The Contextualization of the Gospel,” in C. H. Kraft and T. N. Wisley, eds., *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1979), 286.

⁵⁵ Anthony J. Gittins, *Bread for the Journey: The Mission of Transformation and the Transformation of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 9.

⁵⁶ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2003), 12.

⁵⁷ Padilla, “The Contextualization of the Gospel,” 286.

Jesus was born on Asian soil. His first followers were also Asians. Through the development of its religion, Christianity moved to the West and became a Western religion. During the first century AD, the apostle Thomas, according to tradition, set foot on Indian soil. In 635, Alopen of the Nestorian church arrived in the capital city of Chang'an of the T'ang dynasty.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, when Christianity returned to Asia in subsequent centuries after a long hiatus, it had been categorized and perceived by the majority of the Asians as a Western religion. The “foreign missionaries came to Vietnam and brought a Westernized Gospel.”⁵⁹ Vietnamese who received baptism from Western missionaries were labelled as those who followed the religion of the Westerners. Hence, John Paul II points out in *Ecclesia in Asia* 20, “Most Asians tend to regard Jesus – born on Asian soil – as a Western rather than an Asian figure.”⁶⁰ Why is Christianity viewed as a foreign religion? Felix asserts that the reason is “because the local Churches in the countries of Asia have, by and large, kept themselves aloof from the mainstream of the life of the people, their history, struggles and dreams.”⁶¹ Above all, “the uncritical import and transfer of Western-style theology and liturgy hampered the development of truly indigenous churches.”⁶²

Recognizing this existential shortcoming, the FABC, during the meeting in Taiwan in 1974, came up with a recommendation in regard to the evangelization to the churches in Asia: “The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church.”⁶³ The FABC went further with a description

⁵⁸ See Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 105.

⁵⁹ Luan-Vu N. Tran, “Challenges and Opportunities for the Vietnamese-American Church in the 21st Century,” *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 11 (2011-2013): 141.

⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 20.

⁶¹ Felix Wilfred, as quoted in Teodoro C. Bacani, Jr., “The Need for a New Evangelization,” in Cirilo R. Almario, ed., *Evangelization in Asia* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1993), 17.

⁶² Luan-Vu N. Tran, “Challenges and Opportunities for the Vietnamese-American Church in the 21st Century,” 14

⁶³ Peter C. Phan, *In Our Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and*

of the local church, identifying it as “a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions.”⁶⁴

In responding to the teachings of John Paul II and the FABC, Vietnamese Catholics in Vietnam should build the local church that is able to read and interpret the Gospel from the Vietnamese eyes and within the context of the *Vietnamness*, or simply put, from Vietnamese theology.⁶⁵ In this missiological perspective, “the Gospel [is] ‘en-fleshed,’ ‘em-bodied’ in [the Vietnamese] people and [their own] culture.”⁶⁶ In short, in the words of Pope Francis, the Gospel must have a “[Vietnamese] flesh and face.”⁶⁷

With regard to Vietnamese theology, it should be noted that this theology had already taken shape since the arrival of the missionaries in the 16th century. One of the leading figures in regard to this theology is Alexandre de Rhodes, who employed the traditional Vietnamese opera (*chèo* or *tuồng*) to compose the 15 Standing Meditations (*Ngắm Đứng*), which meditate on Jesus’ passion during Lent.⁶⁸ Another symbol of Vietnamese theology is the well-known Phat Diem Cathedral, located in Ninh Binh Province, North Vietnam. This church, built in stone by Fr. Tran Luc in 1892, has a significant value in Vietnamese theology, since it is designed and constructed in the shape of the Vietnamese pagoda

Inculturation (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 15.

⁶⁴ Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia,” in Gaudencio B. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo, eds., *For All the Peoples in Asia*, Vol. 1 (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), no. 14.

⁶⁵ Thomas C. Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2003), xiii.

⁶⁶ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 454.

⁶⁷ Nguyễn Trung Tây, “Khuôn Mặt và Thịt Da Việt Nam [The Vietnamese Face and Flesh,” *Nguyệt San Đức Mẹ Hằng Cứu Giúp [Journal of Our Lady of Perpetual Help]* 401 (January 2020): 44.

⁶⁸ See Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 97.

(Đình) – a prominent component of Vietnamese Traditional Religion.⁶⁹

Sources that point to concepts of Vietnamese theology can also be found in contemporary Vietnamese literature. The famous poet Han Mac Tu composed two poems, entitled “Being Born” (*Ra Đời*) and “Lady of Virgin” (*Thánh Nữ Đờng Trinh*).⁷⁰ In these two pieces of literature, Han Mac Tu successfully illustrates the two Bible accounts of the Infancy Narrative and the Annunciation in the Vietnamese poetic language which profoundly reflects the Vietnamese mindset. Phan recently suggests that Jesus can be seen through the images of Jesus as the Firstborn Son/the Eldest Brother (*Con Cả/Con Trưởng*) and Jesus as the Ancestor or the First Ancestor (*Ông Tổ*) in Vietnamese society.⁷¹ And Michael Nguyen recently suggests one more image of Jesus: “Jesus as the Steamed Rice of Life.”⁷²

Vietnamese theology should continue develop in the following three dimensions:

- WITH the Vietnamese culture – Vietnamese Christians are first and foremost Vietnamese;
- AMONG the Vietnamese people – Vietnamese Christians live among the Vietnamese people, just like any other Vietnamese who believe in Mr. Heaven/Spirits of Ancestors, or Buddha, or Confucius, or Lao Tzu, or *Caodai*, or Vietnamese Christians should also come to believe in Jesus;
- FROM their *Vietnamness* – The Vietnamese can view the Gospel and the Christian faith from Vietnamese eyes and with Vietnamese hearts.

⁶⁹ See Thiện Cẩm, “Hội Nhập Văn Hóa: Một Đề Tài Không Phải Là Mới” [“Inculturation: A Topic That Is Not New,”] *Chia Sẻ* 6 (May 1995): 15.

⁷⁰ See Peter C. Phan, “Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand,” in Peter C. Phan, ed., *Christianities in Asia* (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 140.

⁷¹ See Phan, *Vietnamese – American Catholics*, 105-107.

⁷² Michael Q. Nguyen, “Missiological Resonances in the Vietnamese Culture of the Multiplication of the Loaves in John 6” (S.T.L. thesis, Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies, 2020), 196.

Above all, as encouraged by the church’s documents vis-à-vis inculturation and as recommended by the FABC, through Vietnamese theology, “the message and life of Christ [will] truly incarnate in the minds and lives of”⁷³ the Vietnamese people.

As already mentioned above, Christianity arrived in Vietnam in 1533. The year 2033 will mark 500 years of Christianity in Vietnam. In 2003, there were over six million Catholics in the country, representing about 7 percent of the Vietnamese population of 80 million at that time.⁷⁴ These statistics pointedly speak of the small number of Catholics in Vietnam after 500 years of evangelizing. One of the reasons that accounts for this reality is that due to various historical developments, Christianity in Vietnam has commonly been associated with the notion that to become a Catholic implied the rejection of the core practice of Vietnamese Traditional Religion, i.e., filial piety to the ancestors. This misconception should be rigorously clarified so it is no longer an obstacle to the effort of evangelization in Vietnam. Dialogue with culture toward inculturation, therefore, is a prudent missionary approach in the Vietnamese context.

Summary

This article dealt with mission as dialogue with culture toward inculturation in Vietnam. The study demonstrates that God in the figure of Mr. Heaven has pitched God’s tent among the Vietnamese people from the dawn of their history. This essay suggests that the church in Vietnam should continue to develop Vietnamese theology, through which Jesus and the Gospel can be viewed from the Vietnamese eyes and within the context of the *Vietnamness*. If the Vietnamese have embraced Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and integrated them

⁷³ Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia,” in Gaudencio B. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo, eds., *For All the Peoples in Asia*, Vol. 1 (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, no. 9.

⁷⁴ Peter Phan, “Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand” in *Christianities in Asia*, Peter Phan, ed. (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 138.

into the Vietnamese Traditional Religion, they can also embrace Christianity as long as the Church in Vietnam is able to demonstrate to the Vietnamese people that Christianity does not oppose filial piety but is in harmony with the creed of the Vietnamese Traditional Religion. In other words, just like any other Vietnamese who believe in Mr. Heaven/Spirits of Ancestors, or Buddha, or Confucius, or Lao Tzu, or *Caodai*, Vietnamese Christians have come to believe in Jesus. In conclusion, Vietnamese theology in particular with the threefold aspect of WITH – AMONG – FROM can be a significant step in resolving the misunderstanding due to the conflict in the past between the Vietnamese Christians and the rest of Vietnamese society.

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What is Good about Digital Technology in Discipling Youth

Vo Huong Nam

ABSTRACT

Digital technology has permeated our everyday lives, especially the life of the young people called the 'Net generation' (or Gen Y and Z) who grow up immersed in it. Recent studies in the West have shown the downsides of this immersion in digital technology: the displacement of real community, cyber addiction, and the hypertrophy of self-publication. How should the church theologically and practically respond to this contextual challenge? This paper will engage these problems as well as the positive sides of digital technology in the lives of youth in the digital age, focusing particularly on how youth ministry might understand the task of discipleship in this digital age. Digital technology gives us creative and dynamic ways to connect with, care for, and to reach out to young people immersed in cyberspace. The online domain can be a window to be entered in which believers can learn more about youth, since often there, the youth are open to freely sharing their lives. There is a huge potential for adults to befriend the youth in cyberspace where the generation gap seems to be smaller. As Christ went into the far country to seek the outcasts, the church is called to reach out to the outcast young people of the digital age. The internet makes it possible for these young people to raise their voices and

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come to the church's attention. Digital technology can also serve as a new means for spiritual formation. Discipling the youth of the digital age is helping the youth to come to know and to live out the Christian life, especially in today's world surrounded by digital media. The church is called to become all things to all people, to reach out to the youth who are surrounded by digital media. It is important that the church fosters the community with care and help the youth to be disciples of Christ in both the physical and the digital world.

Keywords: *digital age, youth, discipleship*

Digital media, especially the internet, has permeated our everyday lives. The youth of today's generation, being the first to grow up surrounded by digital media, are eager to adopt modern technology for both convenience and entertainment. Most of them are very familiar with email, Google, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, online games, etc. However, it seems that the church¹ either has missed the importance of digital media in the life of the youth or does not know what to do about it. As a result, churches are haemorrhaging youth. As one who has been ministering to youth for quite a number of years, I understand the struggles the youth are going through making sense of this new world crashing down on them. Fascinated by the newfound freedom and access the internet allows them, they also have a hard time sifting through the good and the bad, discerning what to keep and what to discard, and avoiding the temptations so tantalizingly present at every click of the mouse. More importantly, the youth are not equipped to recognize and handle the moral implications the digital media have on their spiritual life. Among older Christians, fear and feelings of inadequacy in addressing the issue are also understandable. The aggressive pace of technology makes it tremendously difficult for the leaders of the church, mostly several generations removed from

¹ What I mean the "church" here is the Evangelical Protestant church where I come from, though the meaning of church can be extended to those who worship the Trinitarian God and confess Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour.

the youth, to keep up, let alone to utilize its impact for the good of the youth. Their seeming lack of concern is thus also best sympathized with rather than criticized. Youth theologians and youth workers need to come alongside the church to encourage and assist Christians in their effort to disciple youth in this digital age.

Recent studies in the West have shown the “evil” of digital technology such as: replacing real community, causing cyber addiction, and promoting “self” publication.² In the context of the post-colonial communist Asian country of Vietnam, the majority of the generation who are currently parents of teenagers assume that digital media is inherently evil. Parents and church leaders often tell children or young people to stay away from digital media because it can cause addiction, contains dangerous information, and is a waste of time. Christian parents typically enjoin their children to stay away from digital media and focus on their studies and the Bible. With this approach, of course they never succeed, since young people can never stay away from the excitement on offer in the online environment. How should the church of Christ respond to such dynamics and disciple this generation? This paper discusses the positive side of digital technology with regards to discipling youth and how discipleship proceeds in the digital age.

1. What Aspect of Digital Technology is Really Helpful?

In the digital age, information is delivered faster and more effectively than ever before.³ This enables people to receive information from others quickly across long distance. In some ways, digital technology can shorten geographical distance. A very important feature

² Willis Towers Watson, “Digital Media and Society: Implications in a Hyperconnected Era,” *World Economic Forum Report* (Jan 2016), [e-journal] <http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEFUSA_DigitalMediaAndSociety_Report2016.pdf> (accessed 5 July 2018), 31-37.

³ Robert S. Fortner, “The Gospel in a Digital Age”, *Communication Arts & Sciences – PaperWeb* (1999), [e-journal] <<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/faculty/pweb/gospel.pdf>> (accessed 04 November 2008), 10.

of the digital age is how networking technologies move us toward a “network society”.⁴ Online chat and videotelephony services such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp or Zoom make it possible for people to communicate with or in some sense to be present with someone else despite being separated by space. Social networking sites enable us to do this by sharing photos, videos, status updates and chatting. Family members or friends can stay in touch easily despite the long distance. Though this is not the same thing as embodied friendship in the flesh that can be “smelled” and “touched”, keeping this digitally mediated connection can still sustain relationship in substantive ways.⁵

Thus social media stands as a challenge to the traditional concept of community and its insistence on physical presence. Social networking sites facilitate the formation of virtual communities of fan clubs or groups of like-minded people.⁶ Of course, this cannot solve the issue of “echo chambers” where we only engage with people like ourselves which is not healthy for diversity and true inclusivity. However, this issue happens in physical life too. The premise of digital social media is that physical presence is not required. These online communities have much to offer in providing ways to share knowledge, personal experiences and interests with people across the globe. People can make friends with someone they have never met before. Facebook claims that it creates online communities. In reality, it provides the platform for people to gather online and form online communities. People can argue on the positive or negative effects of this. However, it is clear that digital technology makes it possible to care for your loved ones and to be there for them in a new way when physical presence is not possible.

The apostle Paul used the latest technology of his day – writing letters (Col. 2:1, 5) – to share the Word and to accompany Christians.⁷

⁴ Philip R. Meadows, “Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture,” *Mission Studies* 29 (2012), 165.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷ Brian Brock, *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids, MI:

Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, “For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is” (Col. 2:5). He also wrote similarly to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 5:3-5). Despite not being physically present, he still engaged with both these churches in worship practices and church discipline. Paul viewed that geography could not limit his participation in the church.⁸ Elizabeth Drescher even considers Paul as a blogger or a “networked communicator”⁹ who not only wrote letters to stay connected with churches in order to nurture their spiritual health, but also constantly provided “status updates” on his travels and well-being for the churches.¹⁰ He was revolutionary in using letters as a means of multi-directional and networked communication. His letters were written together with his companions, addressed to many churches, and carried to churches by his companions (such as Timothy) who made the written text more collaborative:¹¹

When Timothy carried a letter for Paul, he would have had to purchase food for the journey and fare for a ship across the Aegean Sea along with provisions for the two-day trek from the port to Corinth. Pulling such a trip together would have required the support of a number of people who went well beyond the ancient equivalent of clicking the “like” button. Folks actually had to pony up emotional, intellectual, and material support. Such efforts certainly gave everyone involved a personal stake in Paul’s ongoing conversations.¹²

Not only the means but also the content and language of his message was multi-directional in reaching out to and bringing

Eerdmans, 2010), 274.

⁸ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 45-46.

⁹ Elizabeth Drescher, *Tweet If You Love Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2011), 78.

¹⁰ Ibid., 78-79, 91.

¹¹ Ibid., 80-83.

¹² Ibid., 83.

transformation in many people, whether Jews or Gentiles.¹³ Digital technology gives us creative and dynamic ways to connect with, care for, and reach out to others. Parents can watch over their little children in school through cameras or neighbours can record video proof when somebody mistreats the child. Digital monitoring can locate people with Alzheimer’s during an episode of wandering.¹⁴ All such forms of surveillance must be practiced with special care to make sure that it serves the people, not enslaving them or undermining community lives.¹⁵

What are the impacts of digital media on the youth? It is easy for adults to point out the negative impacts such as attention deficit disorder, poor communication, game addiction, violence, and the lack of work ethics.¹⁶ However, Don Tapscott gives a strong defence arguing that young people relate to technology in a different way from their parents’ generation:

For the first time in history, children are more comfortable, knowledgeable, and literate than their parents with an innovation central to society. And it is through the use of the digital media that the Net Generation will develop and superimpose its culture on the rest of the society.¹⁷

Tapscott names eight characteristics of the Net Generation:

They prize freedom and freedom of choice. They want to customize things, make them their own. They are natural

¹³ Ibid. 79.

¹⁴ Eric Stoddart, *Theological Perspectives on a Surveillance Society: Watching and Being Watched* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), Chap. 1, Kindle Locations 372-374.

¹⁵ Ibid., Chap. 6, Kindle Locations 3915-3918.

¹⁶ Don Tapscott, *Growing up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 3-5.

The Net Generation, or Net Gen for short, as Don Tapscott defines, is the cohort of young people aged from 13 to 30 who have grown up in an environment in which they are constantly exposed to computer-based technology.

¹⁷ Ibid., 2.

collaborators, who enjoy a conversation, not a lecture. They'll scrutinize you and your organization. They insist on integrity. They want to have fun, even at work and at school. Speed is normal. Innovation is part of life.¹⁸

Nonetheless, Tapscott also concedes that there is a dark side in which the youth can undermine their future privacy due to their willingness to give away their personal information on social networking sites,¹⁹ and being open to answering other questions about their private lives.²⁰

It is certainly true that the internet can have both positive and negative influences on youth, but it is also a fact that they will have to grow up surrounded by digital media. The sheer inescapability of digital technology means that it is important that churches and youth leaders learn not only to recognize but even to take advantage of the good aspects of digital technology in discipling the youth. Online spaces can be a window through which adults get to know more about young people, since often they are much more open in sharing about their lives on it. There is a huge potential for adults to befriend young people in cyberspace, where the generation gap quickly appears to lessen when adults engage and befriend young people in a caring way, always taking into consideration the pitfalls of digital media.

When I served as a youth worker at a local church in Vietnam, I found that Facebook gave me a good opportunity to get to know and interact more with the young people. I also ministered to some young people who dropped out of school due to addiction to online games. Besides befriending them at the youth service and small group Bible study and other face-to-face activities, I also befriended and accompanied them on Facebook. Digital technology makes it possible to reach out to and care for the young people who are immersed in

¹⁸ Ibid., 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 41.

cyberspace. As Christ went into the far countries to seek the outcasts, the church is called to reach out to the outcasts too. Looking back on my ministry, I see how Christ has changed my ministry focus from the “bright” or “well-mannered” youth to those with more difficulties in life. I also see that the internet makes it possible for these young people to raise their voices or get some attention. In this changing world with its modern technologies and revolving ideas of community living, there is a constant challenge to the church to be all things to all people.

2. Being All Things to All People

Digital technology challenges the church and church workers to care for and disciple the youth by getting to know their culture and use language that they can understand and relate to. The digital context gives new meanings to Paul's assertion to the Corinthian church that he had become “all things to all people” in order to save them (I Corinthians 9:19-23). Brian Brock and Bernd Wannewetsch suggest that Paul cleared away any obstacles to the gospel by refusing “both itinerancy and patronage—the main markers of spiritual authorities of the day” which might manipulate people's response to the gospel.²¹ They explain:

Up to this point Paul has developed his apology for the kenotic apostolate he embodies by explaining why his renunciation of rights is necessary to preserve the freedom of the gospel in the course of his proclamation. In the famous passage now before us he describes with some precision how the kenotic character of his mission positions him within varying cultural and religious contexts.²²

He was willing to empty “his own designs” for the shake of the

²¹ Brian Brock and Bernd Wannewetsch, *The Malady of the Christian Body: A Theological Exposition of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, Volume 1 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 198, 209.

²² Ibid., 216.

gospel.²³ Following Paul's example, the church, youth workers and parents are called to step out of their comfort zones to reach those in need, including the young people who are lonely and lost in both cyberspace and physical life.

In this digital age, despite tremendous interconnectedness and wonderful benefits brought about by technology, conditions leading to isolation and loneliness are also rampant. As David Kinnaman et al. observe, "An epidemic of loneliness sequesters tens of millions of people. Barna's data shows that adults are twice as likely to say they are lonely compared to a decade ago; about one out of five Americans say they feel lonely."²⁴ The solution to this kind of isolation is spending time together with the youth.²⁵ This requires Christians to sacrifice their time and energy as they share their many talents and God-given gifts with others. The church is called to reach the Net Generation for Christ, and to experience the joy of bringing other people to the kingdom of God. The church is called to share and bring the gospel to young people in their everyday life situations – studying, working, pursuing their interests both online and offline. The kind of presence exercised here is not as "police" but as friends and mentors who seek to bring out the best qualities in the youth, inspiring them towards a life devoted to Christ.

To "be all things" to the youth does not mean that youth workers have to do the same things that young people do: In my past experience as a youth worker, sometimes I felt out of place because the young people were talking about online games which I knew nothing about. I found it helpful to privately ask one of them to tell me more about the game they were interested in when I did home visitation. Not only did my interest pay off in strengthening my relationship with that particular

²³ Ibid., 215, 219.

²⁴ David Kinnaman, Mark Matlock and Aly Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), Practice 3, Kindle Locations 1344-1345.

²⁵ Ibid., Practice 3, Kindle Locations 1351-1352.

youth, the information I gained helped me build relationship with other youth interested in similar games. What is important for youth workers by becoming "all things to all people" is to be able to communicate the interest, care and concern that the church has for young people.

"Being all things to all people" often requires one to go out of his/her comfort zone, and for some that means venturing into cyberspace. In reality, many still refuse to do so and prefer to stay "safe". This situation is similar to the preachers that received payment when sharing the gospel during the time of Paul while he himself refused compensation. The church can learn from Paul's zeal to clear away any obstruction to the gospel and bring the gospel to all people by making some extra effort to reach those in need. This includes breaking down barriers with those who are different from existing church members, and making them feel welcome in their midst.²⁶ However, this is difficult in practice since human beings are born with innate selfishness and self-centeredness that prevents us from accepting those who are different from us.²⁷ Therefore, Christians need Christ's redemption for their life and community. It is Christ who establishes the true community that is the church, as Bonhoeffer states in Thesis 3 of his *Eight Theses on Youth Work*: "The church-community is Christ's presence as the true Lord and Brother. Being in the church-community means being in Christ; being in Christ means being in the church-community."²⁸

Regardless of youth culture in the digital age, the youth remain part of the church community where they can experience Christ through the preaching of the Word, sacraments, and acts of love. Since none of the Christians is isolated but is part of the community that God has placed them

²⁶ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2007), 20.

²⁷ John Hare, *Why Bother Being Good?* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 28.

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932-1933*, Volume 12, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, edited by Larry L. Rasmussen and translated by Isabel Best and David Higgins (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 516.

into, the Apostle Paul reminds Christians to use their gifts for the benefit of others. This requires them to sharpen their skills and maximize their talents in order to care for people not only in the Christian community but also beyond it.²⁹ The church needs to encourage the young people to care for each other not only in the virtual world, but also in the physical world with home visitation, fellowship over meals, and praying with each other. The church also needs to involve youth in caring for the needy beyond her community.

3. Mission and Discipleship in the Digital Age

Due to digital media being deeply entrenched and fast changing in modern youth life, traditional sermons and teachings are often perceived as dull, arid and outdated in comparison. As a result, they find the teachings in church irrelevant to their lives. The arrival of the digital age has profound implications for culture, self-identity and the gospel. To respond well demands that Christians and theologians listen to and understand the world's viewpoints, beliefs, and needs in order to faithfully contextualize the message, present the Scripture in the language of the youth, and finally, bridge the generational gaps caused by the digital culture. The starting point of this section is the traditional Christian affirmation that the content of the Christian gospel remains unchanged, as do the life-changing experiences both here on earth and the life thereafter that it describes. By implication, discipleship, as the process of leading people into this Christian gospel, entails a following of Jesus in both the physical as well as the virtual world.

The church is entrusted with the task of nurturing the growth of faith in youth. If it evades this task youth can slip into nominal or stagnant faith regardless of the numbers of Bible studies, cell group meetings, fellowships, and retreats provided. A disconnection between God and the daily lives of youth thus becomes a barrier, as youth find themselves unable to integrate the doctrine that they hear with the life they are living.

²⁹ Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Ethics: An Essential Guide* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 29-32.

Thus, part of discipling young people is to help them understand and put into practice Christian ideals of love, moral purity, concern for justice, and mercy. Discipleship and mission are closely connected. There is “no holiness but social holiness,” John Wesley insists.³⁰ The relationship between discipleship and mission, i.e. between Christians and the community at large, is vital. Thus, creating opportunities for youth to serve the society in creative and context appropriate ways is an essential part of youth formation. Additionally, young people can benefit from carrying out the task of sharing the gospel among their peers. By doing this, young people can develop their own theology based on their own reflection within the community of faith, seeking to understand and respond to what it means to be accepted, sent, and called by God into a world that is influenced and probably fragmented by digital technology.³¹

In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer asks the question of what Christianity, or who Jesus Christ actually is for Christians today.³² His question is still relevant for Christians in this digital age. The digital age brings profound changes to the culture and people's self-identities. It changes both the way people think and act, how they look at themselves, others and the world.³³ Digital communication technologies have changed our relationship with information and other people from static structures to dynamic connections.³⁴ They create new forms of social connection and information sharing and promote individual choice and freedom.³⁵ The media, with its words, sounds,

³⁰ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume XIV (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers 1991), 321.

³¹ Jack L. Seymour, and Donald E. Miller, “Openings to God: Education and Theology in Dialogue,” in *Theological Approaches to Christian Education*, ed. Jack L. Seymour & D.E. Miller (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 24.

³² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Volume 8, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, edited by John W. De Gruchy and translated by Isabel Best and Lisa E. Dahill (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 362.

³³ Fortner, “The Gospel in a Digital Age,” 7.

³⁴ Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner. *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

and visual images engulfing our lives, informs us of the way life is. Morality is redefined in accordance with the rules demanded by digital media: efficiency is the highest good; technology defines society; the fittest survive; humans are basically good; happiness consists of limitless material acquisition; happiness is the chief end of life. It turns the gift of sexuality into commodity, the value of self-respect into pride, etc.³⁶

How, then, should Christians interpret the gospel in this digital age? In the classic book *Christ and Culture*,³⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr proposes five categories of the ways that Christians have historically understood culture in relation to Christianity: Christ Against Culture, Christ of Culture, Christ Above Culture, Christ and Culture in Paradox, Christ the Transformer of Culture. The book is outdated now, to an extent, but still provides a useful lens through which to consider cultural issues as it places Christ in different positions vis-à-vis culture. Exploring the ways that Christians view digital culture in relation to Christianity, William F. Fore suggests that there are three dominant responses among contemporary Christians: understanding media, using media and reforming the media. On the basis of the Christian commitment to helping set humans free from every kind of bondage, Fore opts for the reform position: Christians need to reform the media by impregnating it with gospel values.³⁸ Christianity offers a distinctive worldview and vision of who human beings are, what they should do, and what they value. Christians are called to learn how to live in the present world and yet not be of it, to discern both the signs of the times and the signs of God's reign. Therefore, Christians have an imperative to analyse digital culture in order to better communicate the gospel in this day and age.

³⁶ William F. Fore, *Mythmakers: Gospel, Culture and the Media* (Cincinnati, OH: Friendship Press, 1990), 52-55.

³⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1951).

³⁸ Fore, *Mythmakers*, 122-123.

According to Shane A. Hipps who also takes the “reform” option, in the digital age, there is a shift from modern, individualistic, and highly rational concept of the gospel to a postmodern, communal, holistic, and experiential one. He asserts that the gospel message is no longer “an abstract, fixed idea but rather an unfolding, incarnational drama in which God is working to bring the world back into a reconciled relationship with Himself.”³⁹ Hipps observes:

Like it or not, our theology and interpretation of Scripture have a long history of mirroring our forms of media, a fact most easily seen in the way modern approaches to faith mirror the linear, rational, and abstract attributes of the printed word... I believe some of our methods, and thus our message *should* change and evolve – this is part of God's ongoing creation and relationship to God's people.⁴⁰

Every time and place/culture provides a different hermeneutical lens through which Christians read the Bible and life. Therefore, the youth of this generation are reading Scripture through the new interpretive lenses created by digital media.

Hipps proposes that Jesus saw the close relationship between the medium and the message long before Marshal McLuhan said that the medium is the message. He quotes Matthew 9:16-17 where Jesus said that new wine has to be put into fresh wineskins. And the most important thing is that Jesus is the new wine.⁴¹ The image of the fresh wineskins serves as a way to help the church go about the task of sharing the gospel in the new milieu. Hipps does not propose that the essence or the content of the gospel is changed but the way to communicate it be changed to respond to the new context. Hipps warns Christians of the dangers of boasting about their knowledge of the gospel and refusing to

³⁹ Shane A. Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2005), 88-89.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

make the effort to deliver the gospel message in a way that is relevant to youth: “When we claim the gospel message is unchanging, we risk boasting of a kind of omniscience in which we presume to know the totality of God’s inexhaustible mysteries.”⁴² Scripture stories tell about the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in revealing God to His people in ways that were relevant to them in a particular context in history. This suggests that this generation is bound to rediscover anew God’s voice in the context of the digital age, in which the faithful Christian posture is one of humbleness and faithfulness in rediscovering the mystery and wonder of God’s grace for this, which means trying new ways and repenting when failures arise.⁴³

Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner also take this “reform” approach. They observe that digital technologies prompt Christians to experiment with new forms of worship and discipleship. Many churches see the internet as an essential tool for ministry.⁴⁴ They see the need of contextualizing the gospel in the digital age: “We must learn to express our understanding of the Christian faith in a language that is intelligible and credible in that contemporary context.”⁴⁵ They suggest that Christians seek “to love God and love neighbor with all hearts, minds and bodies in a way that helps us to live well in media culture and also to shape that culture for the sake of the gospel of Christ.”⁴⁶ Jim McDonnell points out that there is a need to promote the values of the gospel which respects and celebrates humanity: identifying those elements in the media that are points of contact with the gospel values, teaching true personhood and wholeness of spirit to a generation living in fragmented societies rendered incoherent by the forces at work in digital media.⁴⁷ It is important for the gospel of wholeness or

⁴² Ibid., 90.

⁴³ Ibid., 91.

⁴⁴ Campbell, *Networked Theology*, 1-2.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁷ Jim McDonnell, “Mass Media, British Culture, and Gospel Values,” in *The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hugh Montefiore (London: Mowbray, 1992), 159-181.

“oneness” to make connection with the heart and soul in an age when people are trying to project “multiple selves” in cyber space.⁴⁸ More than ever, the youth need to be part of the community where people are welcomed into redemptive relationship and can engage one another with the hope of the gospel. The main alternative will today always be the virtual community with all its dangers of disembodied interaction and emotional promiscuity.⁴⁹ This is not, however, a dismissal of the potential that may exist for employing virtual relationships as a means of spiritual formation to help people renew their faith, or strengthen the relationship with God, and live out the Word in everyday life.⁵⁰ Indeed, because the arrival of the digital age brings about profound implications for culture, self-identity and the gospel, there is a need to communicate the gospel in the way that youth can comprehend and appreciate. To disciple youth in the digital age, the church must build a theology of discipleship which enables this generation to respond adequately to the negative impacts of digital media and to understand what it means to follow Christ.

For Bonhoeffer, the Bible plays a central role in Christian discipleship in general, and in discipling the youth in particular. In his *Eight Theses on Youth Work*, Bonhoeffer proposes that the church committed to discipling youth will need to focus on preaching the Word to youth regardless of the day and age:

It is the task of youth not to reshape the church, but rather to listen to the Word of God; it is the task of the church not to capture the youth, but to teach and proclaim the Word of God. (Thesis 1)

Church youth work is possible only on the basis of addressing young people concerning their baptism and with the exclusive goal of having them hear God’s Word. (Thesis 6)⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 103-118.

⁵⁰ Meadows, “Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture,” 173.

⁵¹ Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1932-1933*, 515-516.

In following Bonhoeffer's thoughts, the church should make youth disciples of Christ by proclaiming the Word to them in the power of the Holy Spirit rather than just attracting them with modern technology, youthful activities, programs or ideas. It is not about wielding the media as tool but rather the gospel at work in the life of the believers.⁵²

For Bonhoeffer, discipleship is in contrast to cheap grace because it requires specific actions. In his book *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer writes:

Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth; it means God's love as merely a Christian idea of God.⁵³

Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord's Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.⁵⁴

Grace is costly. It requires Christians not only to trust God but also obey Him. Bonhoeffer mentions the story of the rich young ruler, who comes to Jesus with a theological question, but is sent away with the demand for a life changing action, one of obedience:

The call to discipleship here has no other content than Jesus Christ himself, being bound to him, community with him. But the existence of a disciple does not consist in enthusiastic respect for a good master. Instead, it is obedience toward the Son of God.⁵⁵

⁵² Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker: A Theological Vision for Discipleship and Life Together* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 132.

⁵³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Volume 4, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey and translated by Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 43.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

Discipleship is the grace of encountering and following Jesus in daily life, whether it is the physical world or the virtual one. Christian responses to God's grace are repentance, the discipline of community, the confession of sin, discipleship, and bearing Jesus' cross.⁵⁶ For Bonhoeffer, the Bible is the central means of grace providing the standard for the practice of Christian spiritual formation.⁵⁷

In terms of digital media as a medium for sharing the gospel, some people argue that digital media is a different form of what has been done before, from writing the gospels, to printing devotional materials, and broadcasting worship services, and thus can be considered a neutral medium. Digital media can enhance the spiritual practices of prayer and searching the Scriptures, as personal and corporate disciplines. Many Christians who are active on digital media anecdotally report that they find that it is a contributor to their spiritual formation through the wide availability of Bible applications for reading or listening to daily devotions or sermons, walking through the Bible, or reading the interlinear English/Greek Bible. During the time I have been teaching the Sunday school class of children from 8-16 years old at a local church in the UK, I have found that most of the children own an iPhone or iPad. I encouraged the children and parents to use the Bible applications daily to read or listen to the Bible or have family devotional times. Some of them have been using these applications regularly and found them useful in learning the Bible. Although these things can be true, it is good to be mindful of pitfalls while using digital technology in discipling to youth. There is a need for Christians in ministry to be wary of an "easy" online mission or ministry with no blood, sweat, or tears, and which entails no personal relationship or personal commitment.⁵⁸ It is important to be aware of the possible repercussions associated with virtual freedom—virtual addictions and virtual idolization—all of which

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁷ Lisa E. Dahill, *Reading from the Underside of Selfhood: Bonhoeffer and Spiritual Formation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2009), 101.

⁵⁸ Meadows, "Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture," 174.

undermine the life of true discipleship.⁵⁹ These pitfalls will be discussed further as the church builds up the theology for discipleship.

Spiritual discipline can deepen Christians' communion with God and expanding their love for their neighbour. Spiritual disciplines are not only about works of such as prayer, reading the Scriptures, participating in the Lord's Supper, and fasting or abstinence. They are also the works of mercy, expressing Christians' love for God to their neighbour. True discipleship is helping the youth to become recipients of saving grace and participants in God's mission of love to the world.⁶⁰ Utilizing digital technology in discipling the youth, the church can develop virtual works of piety, through the use of internet prayer guides, online lectionary, and mobile Bible study applications. Virtual works of mercy can be focused not only on spiritual care, using digital media for mutual prayer and spiritual conversation but also on the simple act of building friendship. The Net Generation can find creative ways to do these things. Mobile technology, with applications created for listening to worship music and sermons, Bible and spiritual reading, makes it easy to craft the spiritual discipline into the routines of daily life. Social media also make it possible to enhance the works of mercy in caring for others such as online counselling or fundraising for charity.⁶¹

It is possible to use digital media as a means of spiritual formation despite its numerous pitfalls. To disciple youth in the digital age, it is necessary to build a theology of "self" which will enable and equip the youth to fight against the addiction to "virtual reality" which bring harms to their relationship with God and with other people.⁶² Addiction to online gaming, selfies, instant messaging, and other forms of immersive feedback stimulation can alienate them from others and damage the wellness of their life.⁶³ According to Philip R. Meadows, relationships

⁵⁹ Ibid., 170.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 178.

⁶¹ Ibid., 178-179.

⁶² Fortner, "The Gospel in a Digital Age," 5.

⁶³ Jana M. Bennett, *Aquinas on the Web?: Doing Theology in an Internet Age*

and community can be expressed through both digital media and face-to-face contact.⁶⁴ He suggests, "from an everyday perspective, convergence is what happens as people navigate the flow of life at the interface of embodied and virtual realities: from the development of personal identity to our participation in community."⁶⁵

Some theologians regard the internet as evil because it creates a space where we can be disembodied minds, ignoring our bodies. They claim that if we try to operate without our bodies in cyberspace, we are trying not to be human and therefore trying to be God.⁶⁶ However, it is not true since humans were created with body and soul. It is thus impossible to operate in cyberspace without our bodies. Our body, mind and soul are all at work when we use the internet. Even though we may try to project a different "self" in cyberspace, our body is still connected no matter how hard we try to hide it. From a convergent perspective, the reality of life in the physical world and cyberspace flow well into each other.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is always incarnate. It always requires the dynamic interaction with the Christian community within a concrete context.⁶⁷ Pete Ward explains the practice of the mission of God in youth ministry:

To be truly Christian, youth work must carry within it the essential dynamic of the gospel story. We are called to proclaim this gospel in both our words and our deeds in ways that the young people can understand. The gospel story is rooted in God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. This unchanging story, however, must be proclaimed

(London: T&T Clark, 2012), 148-163.

⁶⁴ Meadows, "Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture," 165.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 164.

⁶⁶ Bennett, *Aquinas on the Web?*, 17.

⁶⁷ Pete Ward, *God at the Mall: Youth Ministry That Meets Kids Where They're At* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 33-34.

Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

afresh in each generation.⁶⁸

As youth workers show care and concern for youth, they show the heart of God who desires to have relationship with humankind. Youth workers not only need to care for youth but also proclaim the gospel to them. This proclamation of the gospel is fostered by godly living of youth workers as they serve as role models or mentors to youth.⁶⁹

Ward proposes the shape of the gospel which positions the work of contextualization of the gospel for youth in concrete contexts: The incarnation and the cross, redemption and repentance, transcendence and immanence, hope of the kingdom and the work of the Holy Spirit. The incarnation of God as human being requires the church to accept youth where they are.⁷⁰ Redemption and repentance bridge the gap between youth and the gospel.⁷¹ Youth ministry is inviting youth to encounter a transcendent and mysterious God but also a God who is willing to reveal Himself to his children.⁷² The task of the youth worker is to proclaim the hope of the kingdom where sinners are set free.⁷³ These works cannot be carried out without the work of the Holy Spirit who changes a person's life through both the natural and the supernatural encounter.⁷⁴

Ward highlights the need to understand popular culture in which the youth immerse themselves. Youth workers act as bridge between youth culture and church culture.⁷⁵ The task of youth workers is providing a true contextualization of the gospel which requires “a rootedness in culture, a faithfulness to the Bible, and an openness to

⁶⁸ Ward, 35.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁷¹ Ibid., 39.

⁷² Ibid., 41-43.

⁷³ Ibid., 44.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 46-50.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 80-81.

the tradition of the church”.⁷⁶ Ward gives a valid call to contextualize the gospel to the youth in their concrete context. As Jesus was born into the cultural realities of his day, the church should pursue a convergent and holistic discipleship that weaves together the physical and virtual realms of everyday life, at the same time be cognizant of the dangers of allowing the virtual realm to hinder the authentic relationship with God and the community.⁷⁷ In the words of Meadows,

As Jesus was in the world, but not of the world, we must also adopt a critical stance towards the disembodied and compartmentalizing effects of digital culture on whole-life discipleship, as well as the danger of exchanging authenticity for hyper-reality. As Jesus was sent to be a transforming presence in the world, so whole-life disciples will intentionally extend their embodied witness into the virtual realm.⁷⁸

The idea of incarnation requires youth workers to be present in digital spaces in order to connect with them, and in turn, connect them with God.⁷⁹ However, the church should avoid the temptation of just doing an “easy” online mission or ministry.⁸⁰ Similar to the physical mission or ministry, virtual mission and ministry also aim at transforming life, which starts with the difficult work of investing in the relationship. As digital natives, the Net Generation can find creative ways to achieve this and the church can benefit much by learning from them. Virtual mission and ministry can still bring about true transformation as long as church workers partner with the Holy Spirit and the Christian community. Online mission and ministry should not be an end in itself but rather a part of the joint effort with the church in bringing people to Christ and nurturing them in the faith.

As young people become disciples, they can also be instruments in helping to make disciples out of their friends. Witnessing for Christ

⁷⁶ Ibid., 112.

⁷⁷ Meadows, “Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture,” 177.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Meadows, “Mission and Discipleship in a Digital Culture,” 173.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 174.

encourages them to strengthen their own relationship with God and the faith community. They “behave” themselves online and offline because they know that God is watching them and their non-believing friends are watching them too. In Vietnam, public proclamation of the Christian faith outside of the church is restricted, but the church there can proclaim the gospel through personal relationships and social action. Thus, young people through the online community can share faith or tag their friends for an invitation to a youth gospel event in church. Digital and visual communication have exciting potential to allow young people who have not heard the gospel before or who are not familiar with the church to explore the faith through connection with their friends without feeling preached to. Although it is a challenge to proclaim the gospel to individuals inside and outside of the church, Christians can be reassured that in their effort, there is the Holy Spirit who prompts them to act and faithfully works with and beside them.

Conclusion

The assertion of how the content is never truly divorced from its medium has never been proven truer than in this digital age. Recognizing the power that this medium has on its content prompts the church to respond with urgency to the prevailing needs of a working theology and practical guidelines for the generation affected by it. Indeed, it is the digital media which bears the greatest impact on the young people who were born in the digital age. The tension between the physical and virtual world has caused an ongoing struggle for the church in general, and for the church in their relationship with youth in particular. It is not about their world versus ours. Rather, it is seeking to embrace the reality of the culture that all are living under, one that is heavily controlled by digital media and its philosophies. It is not about catching on to the hype or even catching up with the youth’s adeptness in technology in order to make the church seem more relevant. It is about the church taking the initiative in ensuring that first, the youth feel understood and accepted in their involvement with the digital world and second, that they are equipped to engage with technology

with greater discernment and responsibility. Learning to navigate this new world is a combined effort of the church and its youth, working toward common understanding, appreciation, and cooperation.

Discipleship is encountering Jesus in the daily life in both the physical and virtual world. Online space provides opportunity for adults to know more about the youth since they are open to share their life on it, raising their voices or getting some attention. The church is called to become all things to all people, to reach out to the youth who are surrounded by digital media, to foster the community with care where youth can become disciples of Christ in both the physical and the digital world. Though the Word of God remains unchanged, Christians’ understanding and application will continue to evolve in every age, ready to adapt to the changing characteristics of the culture, the people affected by it and the progressive technology that comes with it.

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Analysis of the Malayalam Films "EE. MA. YAU" and "AMEN" on the Basis of Regional Culture and Religion in South Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to analyze the Malayalam films "Amen" and "Ee. Ma. Yau" directed by Lijo Jose Pellissery, in the cultural context of Kerala, India. It is a deeper look at how films reconstruct existing norms within various regional cultures and communities through their religious communication. Cinema can be used to shed light upon the socio-political decay present at the core of society as well as upon the lives of the people at a particular point of time. The films considered for this study are dramatic representations of inherent problems found in culture, religion, and society. The films examined in this paper have been widely screened in international film festivals, and is accessible

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to a wide audience beyond the Malayalam Community. Both have been critically acclaimed and won national and international awards. This paper attempts to analyze the following:

- *The nuances of religious feelings depicted in the films;*
- *The institutional degeneration and decay of religion and society as a result of a consumer culture, greed and thirst for power;*
- *The effect of the variety of signs, symbols, allegories, and metaphors depicted in the films;*
- *The virtually unsurmountable attempt by the oppressed and the marginalized to counter dominant power structures.*

Keywords: Malayala Cinema, Culture, Religion, Socio-Culture, Communication, Filmic Representation, Christianity, Metaphors.

Introduction

All art forms endeavour to reveal, trace, or uncover the reflective and practical facets of human life with stories and narratives. The art form of cinema uses a lot of metaphors, representations, and symbols (Russel, 1995). And this art form has the freedom to move back and forth through time, in its social and cultural contexts. Cinema can approach all aspects of society such as its cultural variants, religious features, decaying morality, evolutionary developments, social advancements, the extensions of the human imagination. The films of Sergei Eisenstein, Akira Kurosawa, and Ingmar Bergman are good examples of this, to name a few. Each film has its own cultural, societal, and regional history which is important in representational art (Turner, 2006). When analyzing a film, we can see the representations of all aspects of society as layers (Sasidharan, 2012).

More than any other form of art, cinema offers multiple possibilities to analyze the spiritual and political behaviour of a particular society, such as its manifestations, appearance, dialogues, and also its political aspects, presentation style, and music (Thompson & Bowen, 2009). In the present

social scenario, the presence of evil and violence is increasing, especially in a social environment where religious, political, and economic systems are intertwined. In the prevailing culture or system, the presence of inherent evil and injustice is extremely complex and difficult to identify. Some films are an attempt to bring these things into the discourse and narrative. In this context, these kinds of cinema need to be studied more because the art of cinematic representations is sometimes at the forefront of the commitment to the values of progress and modernity and at the same time expressing concerns about the future. Therefore, cinematic analysis helps to identify social behaviour and cultural reality (Kozlovic, 2006).

Religion as a Theme in Cinema

The theme of religion has always been relevant to the cinema. No matter what religion is portrayed in a movie, its subject is related to human life, so religion is a matter of human beings. In particular, Christianity and its various facets have often been the subject of movies all over the world, especially in recent times (Plate, 2017). Christian sentiments, images, and ideas are often found as a theme in movies as well as in literature and various art forms. This can also be seen in most of the movies in the world. There is ample evidence of this in Italian and Spanish cinemas. Plenty of movies in other languages too represent the Christian sentiment, its depictions, and ideas (Bini & Pasolini, 1964; Ekelund & Bergman, 1957). All religions have their own 'internal treasure' which is hidden in its spiritual level. All of the external settlement of religion is for keeping and transmitting this treasure to the coming generations. However, on the contrary, all external systems exist and at the same time, they lose the internal treasure, for which purpose these systems are arranged. It is a tragedy and a spiritual death. Jesus once spoke this truth and called the hypocrites as dead people. Here he describes the soulless physical journey (Luke 9: 60, NRSV). The same kind of depiction can be seen in movies such as "The Nun," which metaphorically portrays some of the dreadful realities of the current system (Safran & Hardy, 2018).

Malayalam Cinema and Christian Representations

Kerala, India has a vibrant, unique film tradition, and the movie industry here is known as Malayalam cinema. From the outset, Malayalam cinema has been interested in depicting the transformation of the caste-feudal system in the existing society (Antony, 2016). The peculiarity of Malayalam cinema is that it is a construct of many historical, social, and religious contexts (Swart, 2012). From the very beginning, Malayalam cinema tended to analyze the virtues and iniquities of ongoing social systems. It is for this reason that many things in it are worthy of study (Antony, 2016).

In this paper, two movies will be analysed, namely ‘‘Ee. Ma. Yau’’ and ‘‘Amen’’ (Pellissery, 2018). The variables discussed in these films are their performances, appearance, realization, and politics. The movies taken here are an attempt to uncover dangers and consequences when worldliness, materialism, and its attractions invade the lives of the ‘official spokespersons’ of religion (Sasidharan, 2012).

‘‘Amen’’ and the Genre of Revelation in Cinema

Storyline

The movie ‘‘Amen’’ takes its plot from Saint George Church, an ancient Syrian church, located in Kumarankari village, Kuttanad district of Kerala. The movie begins with the mythical history from 679 Malayalam eras, of the church where the saint appeared to banish the Tipu Sultan from the region. It tells the story of the people who live with diverse peculiarities around Kumarankari church. The film portrays a cultural universe of its own. Father Vincent Vattoli enters the parish as a new assistant vicar at a time when many issues are getting worse. The protagonist, Solomon, is a saxophonist who is in love with Shosanna, the daughter of a wealthy contractor. He is the son of the late but excellent saxophone player Estephan Master who prematurely died in a boat accident along with the artists of the Geevarghese church

band. When they were alive, the Geevarghese church band had won all the competitions. After their accidental deaths, the team began to lose all competitions. Now Solomon is a member of the same music band. Shosanna’s parents are against their relationship. His love for Shoshanna and the success of the music band are both formidable challenges for him. He has to surmount many obstacles to win, including the existing powers, establishment, and social systems that are always undermining him. The young and unconventional priest Vattoli, who understands the parish and empathizes with Solomon, strives to unite the romantic couple. After Shosanna’s family settles on another marriage for her, she and Solomon attempt to elope. Fr. Vattoli decides to help them, but they fail to escape as expected. Eventually, they are caught by Shosanna’s parents and Solomon is ruthlessly beaten up. Because of this incident, a riot starts between the people who are separated into two groups. It is portrayed as a conflict between the rich and the poor. The parish priest is also on the side of the rich, who supports the demolition of the parish church. The people of Kumanamkari and the neighbouring town then place a bet, where the choice is between the success of St. George’s band in an upcoming competition under Solomon’s leadership versus his opportunity to marry Shosanna. All those involved in the competition carry out intensive practice sessions. In the end, Solomon’s church band wins the competition, and he gets to marry his true love, Shosanna.

Fr. Abraham Ottaplakkan, the unvirtuous senior vicar colludes with some parishioners to demolish the old statue of St. George as well as the church. However, when the time comes for the statue to be destroyed, St. George makes his presence felt by appearing to Fr. Ottaplakkan and others during the night. Thus, they come to realize that the church and the statue of St. George are protected by divine power and must not be destroyed. Later a call comes to the church apprising that Fr. Vincent Vattoli is taking charge as new Assistant Vicar. Then the Kapyar (parish assistant) thinks, who had been here so far. At the end of the movie the villagers come to know that Father Vincent Vattoli who reached Kumarankari a few weeks ago and solved the troubles of

the villagers in a peaceful way and was none other than Saint George who was in disguise.

“Ee. Ma. Yau”: Representation of Religious Culture

Storyline

“Ee. Ma. Yau” (abbreviation for Jesus, Mary, Joseph) portrays a story related to the real life of the people of Chellanam, a coastal village in the Ernakulam district of Kerala with a significant fisherman population. The story is set around the death of a man named Vavachan who is a brilliant carpenter, spending most of his time in travel. The film begins with a quarrel between Vavachan and his neighbour Chauro. The protagonist Eeshi, Vavachan’s son, enters the scene in the movie in a liquor store queue. On arriving home, they drink together and the son comforts his father about the fight with Chauro. Eeshi is a son who genuinely loves his father. During that conversation, Vavachan says that his father’s funeral was the grandest in all of their native Chellanam. When hearing this, Eeshi promises that he will give Vavachan a classy funeral and guarantees it will be done with all the rites afforded to a Latin Christian including a solemn mass with a first-class coffin, first-class band melodies and golden crosses. He would also try to invite the bishop to preside at the liturgy. After a while, Eeshi gets a phone call and goes outside. While Eeshi talks on the phone, Vavachan drops to the floor and dies.

People in the village have different opinions about this death. A quite sincere man named Ayyappan, the Panchayat (A local assembly, a political arrangement for governance in the Indian subcontinent) member, and a friend of Eeshi, arrives and takes control over the scene. The person, who has approached the vicar to report the death, speaks as if someone had killed Vavachan. Even though the companion tries to tell the truth, the vicar, Fr. Zacharia Parapurath refuses to listen to him. This rude vicar considers and hears the case as a crime novel enthusiast, and he informs the police about the head injury in suspicious tones. Nurse

Saramma who came to confirm the death also portrays Vavachan’s death as a mysterious one in front of Vicar. The vicar approaches the house of the deceased like a detective investigating a crime. As for Eeshi, remembering his promise to his father, he buys an expensive coffin.

Simon, a gravedigger falls into that pit and dies while digging Vavachan’s grave. Meanwhile, a woman with a group of people enters Eeshi’s house, claims to be Vavachan’s wife, goes to hug his body and cry. A young boy comes forward and declares that Vavachan is his father. A big dispute ensues as they allege that Eeshi and his family has murdered Vavachan, and claim the right to the body. Ayyappan tries to put an end to the commotion. In the meantime, the vicar also comes and he has a special interest in getting to the truth. The vicar examines the body and tells everyone to wait for the police to come and decide as to what has taken place. When Eeshi says that Vavachan has fallen on the floor and injured his head, the vicar asks if the claim can be proven. When Eeshi says no, Fr. Zacharia suggests an autopsy before the burial. When Eeshi refuses, Fr. Zacharia declares that he will not allow Vavachan to be buried at his church. The Vicar then goes to the police station to ask for the help of the Circle Inspector. Inspector makes his investigation and concludes that there is no foul play. Apparently, two months prior to the incident, Dr. Gervasius has warned Vavachan about his heart and advised him to undergo bypass surgery. However, Vavachan did not heed the doctor’s advice, which results in his collapse and subsequent head injury.

Because the vicar refuses to perform the burial rites, Eeshi decides to do the funeral on his own, digging the grave by himself, all the while shouting that he has promised his father that he would get the best funeral possible. He chases everyone away and buries his father. As he carries out the ritual in the pouring rain, the people who have arrived at the scene watched from afar, all overcome with remorse for the deceased and respect for his son. The shots shown later are quite symbolic. The dead Vavachan and Simon are standing at the seashore. The two card players one is in a black cloak and the other is in a white

cloak also standing along with them. The film ends with the sight of two boats, coming ashore from the sea with little lanterns.

A Parallel Analysis of the Movies

In both films, we can observe that descriptions through the meaningful shots, the atrocities faced by the oppressed, and the helplessness of the poor communities, those who are powerless and who are unable to respond. People in power find all the means to isolate, punish, and avenge those who do not obey the authority. There are people who are not empathetic towards human problems and make things worse by their actions, yet continue to occupy positions of power and respect as divinely appointed figures. According to this notion, the parishes in both of these movies may be seen as a symbol of the religious establishment. The power used here is the establishment of the position with social and divine domination by the ruling entity. Trying to control others by rules and traditional practices has always been a feature of the power system (Torres & Young, 1992). These movies profoundly depict the prevailing cultural and religious elements through cinematic representation, which will be analysed in details in the following section.

Politics of the Religious Framework within the Power Structure

The movie ‘‘Ee. Ma. Yau’’ rejects the traditional customs of religion that attempts to bind even death within the boundaries of ritualistic power. The church cemetery, the gravedigger, and the whole process of digging the grave are all parts of the traditional rituals related to death. It is this right to be part of that tradition that the church priest is denying Vavachan. To fulfill the promise given to his father, Eeshi tries unsuccessfully to organize a grand funeral due to the rejection by the church. In the end, Eeshi is forced to dig the grave for his father in his courtyard.

The two events in which the grave-digger Simon is found dead

in the very grave he dug for Vavachan and then gets buried in that same grave encapsulate the politics of this movie. This is symbolic of the burial of the funeral customs associated with a religion, where Simon and the grave symbolize the funeral arrangements stipulated by religion. Instead, the son who digs the grave for his father and the grave itself, reveals a clear political stance. This transforms the movie as the protest and defense against the unfair approaches of the existing power structure of rituals. Though Vavachan died in the physical sense, his death did not conform to the ritualistic framework of the Christian religion and society, to which it is inextricably linked. When Vavachan gets buried without the religious and social ceremonies, in a sense he is defeating death. He is distanced from the symbols that determine the realities of the common and general discourse. It is through such ruptures that the protest against the ritualistic framework of death is portrayed as fantasy in the movie. The marquee in the courtyard getting destroyed in the heavy rain, the expensive coffin that Eeshi bought for his father breaking, the clarinet being played off-key, Vavachan being denied the right to be buried in the church cemetery – all signal individual freedom in this movie, which goes beyond the religious restrictions and the unfair interference of the representatives of the church (George, 2018).

The director has successfully portrayed an equivalent circumstance in a different mode in the movie ‘‘Amen,’’ the renovation of the church and the negotiations associated with it turns out to be one of the leading prerequisites of the movie. The populace of Kumaramkari is pictured in a very pragmatic manner devoid of much historical heredity. But the church in the name of the holy saint becomes an inevitable and most influential place in that social scenario. This church is depicted as the vicinity of celebrations, ceremonious beliefs, and extremely ritualistic activities. The prevailing myths and ideologies that are transmitted from one generation to another by the community of Kumaramkari are related to the historical and traditional lives of the folks of that locality themselves, and it has become their greatest asset. At this point, the vicar of the heritage church attempts to go in for the renovation of the

church, an action which he hopes will save him from being transferred to another church. Several prosperous members of the church also support the decision of the vicar. The vulnerable villagers, however, do not have adequate power to resist the pronouncement of the vicar. In such a situation, the holy saintly light miraculously appears before them and arises vigorously against those who try to dismantle the church, thus acting on behalf of the powerless villagers (Francis, 2019).

“Amen” - Genre of Revelation and “Ee. Ma. Yau”- Reality

It is a common motif in world cinema that a supernatural being intervenes in problems that ordinary people cannot resolve. Such films aim to demonstrate that in certain circumstances, only the presence of God or a divine power can effectively solve the problems of human beings. It is the thirst of the human heart that some supernatural power or reality would enter the mundane human world, filled with problems in economic, social, and political spheres, and defeat and destroy the existing social, political and cultural hegemony (Kozloff, 2013). The presence of the redeemer, therefore, is very significant in the movie “Amen”. Moreover, the rudeness of the priest is consistently portrayed throughout the movie until the end. “Amen” uses a fantasy world to its problematization of the established interests of the church, “Ee. Ma. Yau” resorts to realistic scenarios to portray the same. However, both aim to depict a decaying spirituality (Menon, 2018). Through revelational fiction, it unveils the reality of religion and its hollow values. The use of a beautiful world of fantasy to reveal spirituality is one of the most expertly executed aspects in the movie “Amen”. The residents of Kumaramkari village are always seen in white clothes, which conjures up an ancient Nazrani ambience. There are three priests with different personalities and attitudes. Assistant Vicar, Fr. Vattoli is presented as a revelational figure, which cannot be influenced by the authority. However, he is always treated unkindly by the senior vicar. Fr. Vattoli reflects a Christ-like figure standing firm on the side of the common people. Because of this, he is often criticized by the senior priest whose actions are governed primarily by selfish interests. In the

movie, there are many scenes that portray the rudeness and the abuse of power exhibited by the senior priest (Rameshan, 2019).

Power can have redemptive or destructive value. In the movie “Amen”, Fr. Ottapalakkan uses his power to push Solomon down, even smashing his clarinet the day before the bands were to compete. Similarly, in the movie “Ee. Ma. Yau”, the senior parish priest displays rudeness instead of mercy. Although the police who comes to investigate the incident displays compassion, when it comes to matters related to the church, it is beyond his purview to decide.

Misconstrued Expressions of Divinity

The church as an institution is never considered as a single person or some centralized power. Stressing the need for a new revolution to the struggling societies and unburdened the oppressed are the core motives of the church. In “Amen”, when Fr. Vattoli says that “Church means not Father Ottapalakkan,” then the vicar replies, “But the vicar of the Kumarakary Church is Father Ottapalakkan, and I will decide whether to break up the church or to dissolve the band.” The senior vicar wants to demolish the church so that he can stay there. He plans to devise a story in which he is told by the saint to reconstruct the church. Using his power and money, he gets documents made that verify that the church is old and fragile, in need of being rebuilt

Another priest in the movie “Amen” is always depicted in dining scenes. Although a minor character, he is notable in that he has no significant decisions or opinions, yet always in a priest’s attire. This character represents the individuals in the church who are not deeply immersed in the Christian spirituality, and therefore, only represents Christ only superficially in their outer attire. This reality is also reflected in the senior vicar’s remark about his own dress: “I have had this dress of a priest (cassock) for 40 years. So, Fr. Vattoli should not teach me what to do.” Unfortunately, the parish priest does not realize that holiness is found in the spirit, not in dress. The movie “Amen” depicts

this superficial emphasis on outer appearance also by having the vicar making sharply critical comments about people's new fashion. Upon hearing the vicar's comments, one is reminded of the words of Jesus: "So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Mathew 23: 28, NRSV).

Power Depends on Money

According to the prevailing politics, the power concentrates in the hand of the rich. The movie "Ee. Ma. Yau" shows the hardships of the death of the poor man. Even a funeral can be a huge cost to the poor. The many, such as the vicar and the nurse Saramma, who should display compassion instead shows arrogance. In the film "Amen," Fr. Ottaplackan breaks Solomon's clarinet and also tries to demolish the church, actions that are contrary to Christ's mercy. These depictions aim to portray the rampant falsehood and deceit permeating religious institutions, where money and power play extremely important roles.

The Commercialization of Devotion

In the movie "Ee. Ma. Yau," devotion, piety and rituals are intricately connected to material status. Although the dead does not need luxurious things, the living attempt to put on a grand display for the sake of their own dignity. This is the reason why Eeshi promises to buy an expensive coffin for his father, which he attempts to obtain – with some bargaining.

Using the theme of death and its circumstances, the film depicts different aspects and subtleties of society and culture. The theme of death has power over the storyline of the film (Russel, 1995), which is clearly seen in "Ee. Ma. Yau". Its cinematic narratives are symbolic and metaphorical. Death representation in this film denotes the intricate connections between death and power in society (Shashidharan, 2012). Even if it is a short version, it portrays the state of the contemporary world in which capitalism flourishes and is gaining strength. It is

quite natural that social and economic inequalities in the realities of life come into the movies. The film, through the funeral scene, reveals various characters and their sensitive and complex emotional struggles, as a satire. Each character is very meaningful in its context (Menon, 2018). Power and privilege are always opposed to marginalized people in society. Those in charge of devising laws can always make it as favourable or negative for another person as they like (Stalnaker, 2006).

The Role of Redeemer

Being a socio-economic winner is something that every person desires and unless one is capable of playing the redeeming role does he dare to be in contact with the losers (Scott, 1997). The movie "Amen" divulges a redeemer and the recovery of the human psyche. It concentrates more on recovering the human psyche that has been broken by words and attitudes. This recovery is more relevant here than other social inequalities. The hero's mind in this film represents an unorganized community. The clergyman who comes to the parish as an assistant vicar, in fact, displays the attitude of Christ. This parallels historical narrative that a redeemer actually arrives into the world in response to the strong prayer and lamentations of the suffering people. This film serves as echoes of the common human mindset which seeks a supernatural presence to deal with existential problems (Zwick, 1997).

Movie and the Role of Music

Each kind of music has its own aesthetic suggestion and resonance. Music in cinematic work is utilized for special meaning constructions and serves as a vibrating factor of empathic concern and accuracy (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). Music has a very significant role in both movies examined in this paper, especially the music of the clarinet, which is employed to express various emotions such as love, joy, success, and sometimes grief, failure, etc. The music of the clarinet is represented as a symbol of tragedy and death throughout the film "Ee. Ma. Yau". In one instance, the clarinet is played off-key at the funeral

home because it is in front of a girl who has denied love to the clarinet player. In the movie “Amen”, Solomon plays the musical instrument off-key in front of the rude vicar, which helps the spectator to more profoundly comprehend the dissonance created by the unvirtuous priest (Francison, 2019).

Conclusion

The films “Amen” and “Ee. Ma. Yau” examined in this paper depict the attitudes of individual and collective opposition to unfair and unacceptable attitudes of the authority. These movies are provocative commentaries on the ideological function of the clergy’s institutional power and its impact on the society. They also serve as critiques of the disproportionate political strength garnered by the rich, as they try to achieve their sectarian hegemony. Cinema can portray death, trauma, and punishment in various manners. It can represent how power is concentrated in certain pockets of society. The two movies discussed in this paper are representations of death, faith, and religious concepts in cinema, which stand as allegorical and metaphorical representations of real-life (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013). Malayalam cinema has always shown interest towards Christian topics which explains why Christian themes have been considerably represented in the genre of Malayalam films. These movies are undoubtedly serious attempts to address the socio-economic-political complexities and tensions observed in modern Indian society. Ultimately, they represent voices of revolt against an entrenched religious establishment that has lost or distorted important spiritual values due to the need for control and power over those who are weak and marginalized.

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BOOK NOTES

Kostelnick, Charles: *Humanizing Visual Design. The Rhetoric of Human Forms in Practical Communication. Routledge Studies in Technical Communication, Rhetoric, and Culture.* New York/London, 2019. 280 pp.

“The goal of this book has been to increase our understanding of the prevalent and long-standing rhetorical role of human forms in visualizing applied communications...” the author of this book states in the Epilogue (p. 265). For him “discovering ways to humanize designs is especially important today when practical information has become overwhelmingly prolific and complex and even intruding on our personal and professional lives.” For this present book presents ways and means of “analyzing and designing human forms” of communication.

The study explores the historical development of human forms and their communicative expressions in six chapters presenting “Foundations for picturing human forms: conventions, historical contexts, and the confluence of fine and applied arts” (Chapter 1), followed with “Figures of Action” (Chapter 2), “Narratives with Figures” (Chapter 3), “Figure Design in Cultural Context” (Chapter 4) expressing emotion in figures (Chapter 5), and finally “Humanizing Data Design” presenting “The Rhetorical and Perceptual Dynamics of Visualizing Data with Human Forms” (Chapter 6). Every chapter has an extensive list of literature.

The purpose of the book is given as to empower and enable multiple audiences and motivate them. It is also to build ethos with an audience and appeal to the emotions to help to “seeing the world through the eyes of others” (p. 4) by “humanizing information visually ‘which is determined by conventional, cultural, situational, and aesthetic interrelated forces” (p. 5).

The publication is enriched with quite some illustrations related to their respective themes and every chapter has also quite an extended list

of literature. Religion, however, which is full of “illustrations” in many ways seems to not exist at all. Often, quite some examples of ‘human’ forms of Religion could give very convincing examples for the concerns of the book. In fact, one could easily imagine even a similar study exclusively on the ‘human forms’ of Religions which play an existential role especially in Asian cultures. But this seems unfortunately not to be on the ‘horizon’ of the author of this otherwise convincing study and his view of the American ‘market.’ Are to expect another—somehow exclusive—volume related to Religion with its many ‘visual designs’ in human life and society? This would probably be very enriching especially in Asia.

BOOK REVIEWS**A Critical View of a Self-Replicating, Emotion-Based,
and Virally-Distributed Distorted System**

Kien, Grant. (2019). *Communicating with Memes. Consequences in Post-truth Civilization*. Lexington Books. 273 pages.

An early impression based on the title of the book under review here, *Communicating with Memes*, might be unclear. The statement leads readers to believe they would be exposed to a historical overview from the time the term “meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins (1976) up to date. Nevertheless, the book attempts to investigate various levels of content, medium, audience, and socio-cultural effects of memes, understood as a comprehensive system, not as communication product solely. This work goes far beyond the idea of memes as cultural units that spread from one person to another, through copying and imitation; instead, it focuses on examining a wider concept, memetic communication, considered a new phenomenon in the 21st century, touching on every manner of theoretical and research focus, producing a highly interdisciplinary text.

Based on the extensive experience of the author on qualitative research methods, the book proposes a new interpretive methodology, Memeography, in order to document and understand the experiences, ideas, and sense-making processes of human actors within this complex machinic life-form (Kien, 2014). It collects an account of media experiences that construct a sophisticated understanding of one’s place, as a participant, within the vast and confusing global network media system. The author works under the premise of Dawkin’s famous theory of memes as agents of cultural reproduction, as well as Aunger’s theory that electronic memes exist independently within the cyberspace. The goal of Memeography is, then, to challenge McLuhan’s theory of media as extensions of human beings, claiming instead that humans are now appendages of the apparatus.

The book narrates the evolution of memetic communication to the history of electronic media, in order to establish its definition, delve on its characteristics and to argue about its effects. The study begins explaining viral distribution as a crucial element in a social media environment. Then, it explores prosumer motivations, uses, and gratifications, and the resulting media patterns. Afterwards, based on the nature of virtual communities, this work approaches some critical consequences of memetic communication such as isolation, techno panic, harassment and misleading information. Within that framework, the author claims the effectiveness of irony and satire in fostering a more productive and egalitarian discourse. This in-depth analysis ends by encouraging social media users to engage in “an Ethical (R) evolution” that conceptually wrestles with the everyday experiences and consequences of memetic communication.

This work contributes with a critical, broader and more integrative perspective of previous bodies of literature, commonly included in Computer Science, Sociology and Business studies, which focus is more descriptive on the most mainstreamed meme templates, the types of gender, ethnic identity, and the emotions most represented in Internet memes. This subject has been thus comprised of multiple related instances; its creators take an item (text, image, or video) and change parts of it to input their own ideas, while keeping a consistent resemblance to the memetic group. This dynamic places Internet memes between individual and collective creation (Burgess, 2008; Wiggins & Bowers, 2014; Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017).

Building on the idea of tension between individualism and collectivism in meme creation, Kien makes a bigger effort to apply his evolutionary theory to cultural change. Although the memetic sphere is based on the concept of *autopoiesis* – that is to say continuously evolving and changing, reproducing and maintaining itself – being template-based limits the array of ideas to be communicated and thus limit those using them. In this sense, the author recommends to conceive the memetic communication as an expressive repertoire, which is

collectively authored and developed as a mean of communication:

All language is memetic. All communication, however, is not. Some communication is simple informational exchange, without self-replication nor evolution. However, some communication self-replicates and does evolve, moving from one media environment to others, taking on the appearance of organic growth (p. xi).

While this study aims to expand our understanding of the ways in which social categories are constructed by Internet memes, its scope is limited to a Western approach with an Americanized emphasis. Therefore, the question of representation has not been answered regarding memes in other cultures. In fact, the ability to understand a meme often requires knowledge of cultural conventions and memes, ultimately presenting a limited range of expressive options at any given time and place. Consequently, those who do not follow its template in a satisfactory manner are likely to be ignored or punished. This emphasizes the rhetorical pathos (feelings) over logos (logic) and ethos (credibility). It also brings prioritization of information in ways that make sense in the digital environment, which are accompanied by consequences in our offline lives.

Further than self-organizing systems and self-replicating capabilities, memetic communication is also presented as a form of repurposing images and words, rearranging and/or altering aesthetics, and/or jumping across platforms, which phenomenon would be best referred to, from the author's perspective, as simulacra. Therefore, the most visible characteristics of any new medium are the ability to create its own reality, objects being continuously elaborated within its discourse community, and institutionalized recurrent practices, maintaining a boundary between what belongs and what does not, as well as justifying the reality it constructs to other discourse communities on which it depends for material support. Accordingly, it is a process of "resemiotization" (turning some thoughts, phenomena or behavior into a semiotic artifact), "retemporalization," (fixing thoughts,

phenomena or behavior into certain configurations of time/space), and "recontextualization" (making a situation-bound thought, phenomenon or behavior lifted out of the present moment and the present activity and imported into different moments and different activities).

In spite of the strong symbolic charge attributed to the memetic communication, the author questions the popular idea that there is a virtual reality that stands apart from the real world. According to his criterion, members of online audiences share, narrate and circulate the representations of their online worlds connecting them to the material world. Digital consumer goods include media devices, plus software and other products with a digital code, all of which participate in the creation and maintenance of social connections and divisions. However, while some celebrate the empowerment of the consumer, Kien stays suspicious of being manipulated through desire and seduction because of this "over-supply of symbolic goods" and "cultural disorder and declassification," which he refers as the heart of the consumer experience.

This widespread consumerism is encouraged by the dynamic of uses and gratifications. The memetic communication is populated by free-floating signifiers, which are constantly repurposed as they are passed from one site to many others through the actions of individual users' dual agency, as media consumers and producers. The consumer is, then, driven to search out and consume experiences that find satisfaction in the primitive consumption of material goods, creating a world of constant confirmation bias for oneself. Just as a carefully nurtured ecosystem, every element of an individual's social media experience feeds back into itself to sustain what might be similar to a protracted self-fulfilling prophecy. Hence, memetic communication survives as a self-organizing system despite the pressure to keep information circulating, in motion, to fix things when they are broken, to participate, and information overload. The natural way of nurturing this system is stimulating responses through communication. Therefore, feedback is a means of controlling it, but that control resides within the system that

embodies its circularities:

In other words, feedback is a communicative act and is only purposefully relevant to the system it is intended to affect. On the other hand, feedback can also have unintended effects, especially on systems it does not realize it is communicating with, or when impacted by a system that does not recognize or does not care about its impacts on a specific portion of the network. (p.18)

This gratification anger is fed by unprecedented and uncontrollable feedback loops in the global media system. Once data has gone viral, it seems to acquire immortality, therefore it survives concerted efforts to remove it. In that context, machines act as both encoders and translators; the consequences of spectacle is reality. In this context, the term urgency is crucial to understanding memetic communication. Emotion (pathos) seems to motivate audience prosumerism more than any other rhetorical tool or gratification need. “Urgency is linked with excitation, both physically and psychologically immediate. Emotion shapes virality” (p. 57). In the rhetoric of digital media, memetic exigency is not driven much by the urgency of physical world concerns. The process is propelled by rapid reception, recoding, and redistribution.

With an enormous diversity of digital tools and tactics, social media users create a virtual world in which they inhabit as disconnected individuals. This phenomenon facilitates the formation of communities without any grounding likened to hives, silos, and echo-chambers. Such communities function as safe-havens for like-minded people who are inclined to maintain the status quo rather than risk expulsion. Online communities inevitably become self-absorbed in this self-referential situation, succumbing to a mentality of groupthink:

Conflict, discord, love, and harmony (and much more) are all part of the emotional rollercoaster of memetic communication. However, rather than uniting people across differences, it seems instead to rally divisions such that

communities become isolated and distant, even suspicious of each other. (p. 105)

Ironically, one of the key factors of social cohesion within these virtual communities is fear. This fear is shown as “technopanics”, when it refers to an intense public, political, and academic response to the emergence or use of media or technologies, and “cyberpanic”, when a new voice is given in the cyberspace. Social media form a confluence of technopanic and cyberpanic that sometimes derives in mass hysteria (dissemination of a specific behavior or symptom), invoking “technical loyalty” to describe the now-taken-for-granted assumption that truth is only accessible through technological means. Kien argues that this turns truth and reality into malleable concepts, rather than the solid facts they were once thought to be judging new information with “the wisdom of repugnance.”

Another point to be raised as an effect of an echo-chamber environment is the immortalization of misinformation. Without the possibility of deleting false information from the virtual spaces, once it has been spread, there is no proportionally corrective countermeasure to false information. On the contrary, unfortunately, distorted communication becomes breeding ground for harassers, who post defamatory falsehoods about victims. They manipulate search engines to ensure the prominence of the lies in search of victims’ names. The author found twenty-two cyberbullying tactics, from posting cruel information to damage reputations (dissing) to publicly revealing sensitive information (doxing), including different forms of intimidation (flaming, hate speech, dogpiling) and usual ways of stalking and harassing.

Memetic communication forces social media users to face the combination of speed, global reach, and simulacra signification, all elements conspiring to create a new scale of emotional appeal which is both exceptionally gratifying in digital consumer culture, and at the same time, disorienting the sense of practical judgment. This configuration system imposes a logic of what is “optically correct” versus what is

politically correct, prioritizing aesthetic representations over benefits, a sphere in which the power of voice is more important than accuracy, and the symbol value overcomes facts, making spectacle the essence of reality. Spectacle is its own justification, informing our ideas about reality. Through this process of seeing and enacting, spectacle becomes reality; it becomes the goal of all our striving. We struggle and work to make spectacles, focusing on the appearances of things and what we believe they express about ourselves rather than their function and necessity. For the situationist, this denies our actual life, since the meaning of living is given prominence and importance, rather than life.

In this hopeless scenario, the author ends with ethical concerns, which fall into two main categories: issues of the medium and issues of behavior enabled by the medium. In that framework, the book finalizes with an encouragement for an ethical R (evolution), which implies a person's competency to read the semiotic codes, as well as self-motivation and a personal commitment to interpret the text. Together these factors might configure a "counter-meme" tactic that revendicates sociopolitical irony and sarcasm to unite neo-tribal digital communities in order to disguise actual dogmatic believers in the issues being mocked. However, this could not be feasible without a strong leadership figure maintaining community cohesion. Cultural competence, then, is the key for transforming consumption from a destructive to a constructive process by using the product as a signifier, instead of ending its existence.

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