

## CHAPTER 1

### Towards a Cybertheology: Theology in the Digital Milieu

As digital technology come to permeate every aspect of human society, including people's religious and spiritual lives, a number of terms have been mentioned in theological discussions that may not sound familiar or whose meaning may not be immediately evident to the listener. These terms include "digital theology," "theology in the digital age," "cybertheology," "theology of the internet," and others. While none of them have received acceptance as the official term for what they aim to convey, they all point to an important reality that has garnered considerable interest: the nexus between theology and digital information and communication technologies (ICT). This chapter is not concerned so much with making a case for any particular terminology because a consensus will eventually come about in due time. The primary aim, however, is to reflect on some theological matters that are provoked (inspired) by the new digital milieu in which terms such as digital age and cyberspace, which once sounded like descriptions of futuristic and otherworldly phenomena, now reflect a real and pervasive reality in human life. Thus, Christian theology which deals with the deepest spiritual issues and aspirations of humanity cannot fail to consider the effects of digital technology on the important dimensions of human lives, particularly one's relationship with God and with fellow human beings.

It must be stated at the outset that the forthcoming reflections are but a modest effort to contribute to more systematic studies in this area, which continues to be a relatively new topic for investigations. However, in recent years, after the publication of Antonio Spadaro's book *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (2014),<sup>1</sup> there has been more interests in examining the intersection between theology and the digital milieu. This is an improvement over the time when Spadaro first set out to consider the topic. In his book, Spadaro himself lamented about the lack of resources and having to stare "at a blank computer screen with no idea about where to begin or what to write"<sup>2</sup> when he was asked to give a theological speech about religiosity and the internet. The Jesuit priest and writer found a wealth of information regarding the pastoral dimension of the internet—its benefits and risks, its utilization as an instrument of evangelization and so on—but systematic theological reflections

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Spadaro, *Cybertheology: Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Spadaro, *Cybertheology*, viii.

were few.<sup>3</sup> Although there is admittedly more discussions about digital theology in scholarly conversations and in academic journals in recent years, Heidi Campbell observes that until now, there are still no books solely focused on the topic of digital theology.<sup>4</sup>

It is also important to state the reasons why there needs to be a so called cybertheology and what this term fundamentally refers to. Although there is still no official definition of what cybertheology or digital theology is, the reflections here can contribute to the process of development of its final definition in the future. One of the aims of this inquiry is also to discuss cybertheology with some references to the Asian context. By situating the reflections in the Asian environment and making the relevant connections, we will see that cybertheology takes on various shapes depending on the particular context. Therefore, our task here is threefold: (1) To discuss the necessity of developing a cybertheology and exploring the possible nature of such a theology; (2) to reflect on human relationships with God and neighbor from a cybertheological perspective; and (3) to briefly situate this reflection in the Asian socio-religio-cultural context.

### **The Need for a Cybertheology**

Undergoing various theological developments is a natural process in the life of the Church – sometimes as a result of being pushed and nudged by events that take place beyond the confines of the institutional church. Paradigm shifts brought about by scientific discoveries such as those that led to the development of the Copernican astronomical model of the universe and Darwin’s theory of evolution informed the church that the Bible could not be read as a source of scientific information. Technological advances also significantly affected how theology was done. During the Old Testament period, biblical texts were written and transmitted on scrolls. However, a single scroll could only hold so much text; thus, multiple scrolls were needed for various portions of the Bible. However, by the 4<sup>th</sup> century, after the invention of the codex, the entire biblical canon could fit into a single physical codex with a specific arrangement and relationship to one another. Unlike previously where the idea of the biblical canon as a single entity was just a conceptual notion, the invention of the codex helped the reader to envision the canon as a unified whole. Although the earliest printing of a book is credited to China’s ninth century production of the *Diamond Sutra* which helped to spread Buddhism across Asia, a seismic technological paradigm shift took place with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press that gave

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<sup>3</sup> Spadaro, *Cybertheology*, ix.

<sup>4</sup> Heidi A. Campbell, “An Introduction to Digital Ecclesiology: What Does a Conversation on Digital Ecclesiology Look Like?” in *Digital Ecclesiology: A Global Conversation*, ed. Heidi A. Campbell (Digital Religion Publications, 2020), 6.

rise to the text-based culture and unprecedented dissemination of information in the last 500 years.<sup>5</sup>

The development of computer technology in the last part of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the new millennium has taken communication to even more unprecedented heights. The digitalization of information and transmission of information in this form is a unique development that has affected how information is produced, disseminated and consumed. In this new context, books and journals can be published entirely online. “Newspapers” need not make it to the newsstand or even come in printed pages for that matter. Materials for academic research can be found to a good extent on the internet, and a doctoral thesis theoretically can be completed entirely by doing research online, written on the computer or tablet, saved in a digital format, and sent to the review panel via email.<sup>6</sup>

The internet as a new and unique form of communication, however, holds a lot more ramifications for human society and for Catholic theology. In the document “The Church and the Internet,” (2002) produced by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Catholic Church already recognized the power of the internet in bringing about “revolutionary changes in commerce, education, politics, journalism, the relationship of nation to nation and culture to culture—changes not just in how people communicate but in how they understand their lives.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, with the rise of social networks, communication via the internet is not just about sharing information, but also about people engaging in relationships with both those who they know offline as well as those whom they only are acquainted with online. Pope Benedict XVI remarked that social networks signified that

People are engaged in building relationships and making friends, in looking for answers to their questions and being entertained, but also in finding intellectual stimulation and sharing knowledge and know-how. The networks are increasingly becoming part of the very fabric of society, inasmuch as they bring people together on the basis of these fundamental needs. Social networks are thus nourished by aspirations rooted in the human heart.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ched Spellman, “The Canon after Google: Implications of a Digitized and Destabilized Codex” *Princeton Theological Review* 17, no. 2 (2010): 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally, the research and writing of this article is over 90 percent done online and with the help of a laptop, a Kindle Reader, and an Ipad.

<sup>7</sup> Pontifical Council for Social Communications, “The Church and the Internet,” [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pe\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_church-internet\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pe_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html).

<sup>8</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication Day 2013,” [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20130124\\_47th-world-communications-day.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.pdf).

The fact that the internet in all its manifold forms and applications (email, chat rooms, voice streaming, video streaming, the World Wide Web, online video games, social networks, etc.) have permeated every aspect of modern human society means that this form of communication must be reflected upon not only sociologically but also spiritually and theologically. Here, it is important to make some delineation between internet and cyberspace. The internet is a system of networks connecting together billions of computers worldwide, and where information can be exchanged through various applications of the World Wide Web (WWW), electronic mail, telephony, and peer-to-peer networks for file sharing.<sup>9</sup> While it is easy enough to define internet, what exactly is cyberspace? Sometimes people use this term interchangeably with internet, but that is not correct. Oxford Languages and Google defines cyberspace as “the notional environment in which communication over computer networks occurs.”<sup>10</sup> Notice the word notional is used because cyberspace itself does not physically exist. It is a metaphorical space that exists only in our minds, especially when we are chatting with friends and feel as if we are meeting them in a particular space. According to Neil Postman, “Cyberspace is a metaphorical idea which is supposed to be the space where your consciousness is located when you’re using computer technology on the internet, for example.”<sup>11</sup> In everyday usage, cyberspace has become a generic term to refer a multitude of things taking place in the online environment – the place where one goes to for information, for entertainment, and for interaction with other internet users.

An associated but not identical concept that has arisen out of the notion of cyberspace is that of virtual reality, a term that sometimes appears in everyday conversation but not always well understood.<sup>12</sup> In the field of computer technology, virtual reality refers to a simulation or a clone of physical reality by employing 3D real-time interactive graphics and technological devices that help create environments that are immersive and interactive for the user in that environment.<sup>13</sup> An important point to be made here is that virtual reality is a very specific technology that involves various instruments in order to achieve a certain experience for the user. Whatever can be characterized as virtual reality has to be believable, interactive, computer-generated, explorable, and immersive.<sup>14</sup> However, virtual reality is often misunderstood and sometimes mistakenly used to refer to things such as the online arena and the world of social networks. In fact, virtual reality does not necessarily characterize the internet,

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<sup>9</sup> Wikipedia, “Internet,” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet>.

<sup>10</sup> Oxford Languages and Google, “Cyberspace,” <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>.

<sup>11</sup> Sunshine Recorder, “Neil Postman on Cyberspace,” <http://sunrec.tumblr.com/post/73223445766/neil-postman-on-cyberspace-1995>.

<sup>12</sup> Tomasz Mazuryk and Michael Gervautz, “Virtual Reality: History, Applications, Technology and Future,” <https://www.cg.tuwien.ac.at/research/publications/1996/mazuryk-1996-VRH/TR-186-2-96-06Paper.pdf> : 3.

<sup>13</sup> Mazuryk and Gervautz, “Virtual Reality,” 4.

<sup>14</sup> Chris Woodford, “Virtual Reality,” <http://www.explainthatstuff.com/virtualreality.html>.

digital communication or cyberspace, which in some sense is very real. As Pope Benedict XVI asserted, “The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, for some gone is the day where they speak of going online or offline as if one sets out the time to take a stroll in some sort of digital wonderland only to return to real life with all of its real world issues and responsibilities. In today’s globalized digital world, the internet is a place we keep in touch with family and friends, meet new people and form new relationships, do business and keep updated on local and international news, search for information on anything from how to tie a tie to how to make the famous Thai soup *tom yum kung*, and share photos, ideas, and feelings with others on social networks, blogs, or forums. Pope John Paul II compared cyberspace to the ancient Roman public forum “where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display.”<sup>16</sup> In Thailand where I am living and working, a comparable image is the large city or provincial markets where people congregate to work, to socialize and gossip, even to make merit to the monks who make their morning rounds with the begging bowls.<sup>17</sup> In some ways, cyberspace is symbolic of this town market with all the bustling sights, sounds, and colors fused together.

Cyberspace, therefore, is no longer a place out there but integrally connected to our life so that we are as much attached to our physical environment as to the digital one. No longer is the internet considered a novelty but part of everyday life for many people.<sup>18</sup> Armed with a smart phone or tablet with a 4/5G connection, we are able to check in and let people know where we are at any moment whether it is at the airport, at the cinema or standing in line at the supermarket checkout counter. One only needs to take a glance at the line of Bangkok office workers patiently cueing up at motorbike taxi stations every evening or how South Korean metro passengers spend their time on the train to see how prevalent the internet is in people’s lives. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the internet became alternative classrooms for students all over the world who could not go to school because of forced closures to combat the virus. Thus, according to Antonio Spadaro,

The Internet is...not at all a simple *instrument* of communication, which one can choose to use, but it has evolved into a cultural

<sup>15</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication Day 2013”.

<sup>16</sup> Pope John Paul II, “Message for World Communication Day 2002,” [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20020122\\_world-communications-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html).

<sup>17</sup> In the Theravada Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, it is not uncommon to see monks with their begging bowls making the rounds through the markets each morning.

<sup>18</sup> Sam Han and Kamaludeen Mohadmed, *Digital Culture and Religion in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2016), Kindle edition.

“environment” that determines a style of thought, creating new territories and new types of education, contributing also to the definition of a new way to stimulate the intelligence and to tighten relationships. It is a way to live in and organize our world. It is not a separate environment, but it is becoming ever more integrated into our everyday lives.<sup>19</sup>

Spadaro’s assertion, however, is not new or unexpected. Even as early as 1990, when the internet was yet widely known in non-professional circles, Pope John Paul II had already foreseen the potential for a cultural paradigm shift brought about by new information and communications technologies in the modern age. In *Redemptoris Missio*, he characterized the new communications environment as a “new culture” with “new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology.”<sup>20</sup> It is, therefore, unsurprising that Domenico Pompili argues that the internet is a place with real human presence and qualifies as an anthropological space.<sup>21</sup> This realization forces us to give credence to its existence and its role in shaping our thoughts and feelings, and ultimately our spiritual and theological sensibilities.

One must ask the question what then is digital theology or cybertheology? At Durham University in the United Kingdom, the people at the Centre for Digital Theology answer the question as follows:

Digital Theology involves reflecting on the digitalisation of society and its implications for Christian faith and practice. Technological innovations are causing a whole raft of social changes across many aspects of life in the twenty-first century. The Christian Church too, like many other religions, is changing through its engagement with social media, its communication through websites, and increasing use of digital technology in worship, in pastoral practice and in evangelism. The basic premise of Digital Theology is that this emerging digital culture is a new condition in which the church finds itself. This demands fresh theological conversations and new approaches.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Spadaro, *Cybertheology*, 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 37c, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.pdf). Incidentally, in the same year, Pope John Paul II also discussed in his “Message for World Communication Day” the importance of “computer telecommunications” and a “computer culture” for the evangelizing mission of the Church. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_24011990\\_world-communications-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_24011990_world-communications-day.html).

<sup>21</sup> Domenico Pompili, *Il nuovo ell'antico. Comunicazione e testimonianza nell'era digitale* [The New in the Old: Communication and Witnessing in the Digital Era] (San Paolo, Italy: Cinisello Balsamo, 2011): 62.

<sup>22</sup> Center for Digital Theology, “What is digital theology,” (11 May 2020), <https://www.dur.ac.uk/digitaltheology/>.

Debbie Herring administers a website on cybertheology in which she divides the contents into three categories—theology in, theology of, and theology for cyberspace.<sup>23</sup> Peter Singh asserts that “Cybertheology must be understood as the intelligence of faith in the cyber age which influences the way we think, learn, communicate and live.”<sup>24</sup> Spadaro also refers to the classic definition of theology to discuss the theological implications of the internet. He writes:

Cybertheological reflection is always a reflexive knowledge that starts from the experience of faith...Cybertheology is not, therefore, a sociological reflection on religiosity on the Internet, but is the fruit of faith that frees from itself a cognitive impulse at a time when the Web’s logic marks the way of thinking, knowing, communicating, and living.<sup>25</sup>

Cybertheology can also be distinguished from other theologies that focus on or give priority to particular sectors/groups in society, for example liberation theology (the poor and the working class), feminist theology (women), womanist theology (African American women), and Asian theology (Asian men and women). Moreover, cybertheology is not necessarily just about a brand of theology that is found *in* cyberspace, removed from actual day-to-day life. Indeed, the digital environment is becoming increasingly all-encompassing in our lives and exerts a great deal of influence on all of life’s dimensions. *Thus, cybertheology is the systematic reflection on the transformative impact of the digital age on the multiple dimensions of one’s faith life and his/her response to this ever changing milieu.* Theology in any form still takes, among other things, God and God’s relationship to human beings as its subject matters. Nonetheless, cybertheology is informed by the digital environment with all of its revelations and inspirations. The latter parts of this chapter will present reflections on the implications for the various dimensions of human lives, in particular one’s relationship with God and with fellow human beings. The aim is to see how these relationships may be perceived and maintained within the modern digital context.

### **Cybertheology as Contextual Theology**

The question for us to consider next, at least in a cursory manner, is what kind of theology is cybertheology? As already stated, there has been relatively few work that directly attempts to discuss or propose something that would be clearly called a

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<sup>23</sup> Debbie Herring, <http://www.cybertheology.net/>.

<sup>24</sup> M. Peter Singh, “An Overview of Cybertheology” (Paper presented at Seminar on Ekklesiology in Cyber Age, Bangalore, June 26-27, 2014). Kindle edition.

<sup>25</sup> Spadaro, *Cybertheology*, 17.

cybertheology. Much of the literature on the internet and religion has been on how it might impact religious belief or the pastoral opportunities that this technology might bring to the Church. Reflecting theologically on the digital age seems to still be a rather new exercise, perhaps due to the fact that most of the well-trained and seasoned theologians might not have fully grasped the implications of what the digital environment holds for us in the present as well as in the future. Some might be feeling satisfied in just being able to efficiently use email for correspondence, and can prepare a Powerpoint presentation to accompany a lecture. For others, updating one's status implies changing one's resume from "working" to "retired," and not about making new posts on one's social media account. Understandably, many of us are still trying to become acquainted and comfortable in this new environment as "digital immigrants," while the so-called "digital natives"<sup>26</sup> may not have come of age enough or equipped with the necessary tools to reflect deeply on the new social, cultural and spiritual milieu brought about by the new technology.

Based on the discussion thus far, we can affirm that cybertheology is a theology that aims to articulate an important reality—the nexus between theology and the modern age of digital communication and internet technology. It is a theology contextualized in the digital environment that reflects the nature of the globalized modern culture. While it is a form of contextual theology, cybertheology is distinguished from other theologies that focus on or give priority to particular sectors/groups in society as previously mentioned. The context of cybertheology is not ethnic and cultural reality but that of tremendous social change brought about by modern day digital technology.

The reason that cybertheology might be considered as a contextual theology is due to the nature of theology in general. Nowadays it is no longer controversial to make the claim that theology is never done in a vacuum but is necessarily situated in a particular context in time and place. Steven Bevans, a Divine Word Missionary, is one of the most well-known advocates of this perspective. In his widely consulted book *Models of Contextual Theology* and other subsequent articles, Bevans pointed out the contextual nature of theology even from the earliest days of Judaism when Biblical texts were written and edited by people with very specific experiences that affected their perception of and relationship with God. This contextual dimension of theology continued into the New Testament tradition with the theology articulated by the writers of the four Gospels as well as the epistles.<sup>27</sup> If the theologies that are articulated in the various books of the Hebrew and the New Testaments all reveal a contextual dimension, then it would not be incorrect to state that the theology which we hold to

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<sup>26</sup> The terms "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" were coined by Marc Prensky in his seminal article "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, 9.5 (2001): 1-2 to differentiate between the generation who was born and grew up after the rise of digital technologies and those who were born before the advent of digital technology.

<sup>27</sup> Steven B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 7-8.



be normative, traditionally articulated by the Church Fathers and those following them, must also contain a contextual dimension. In this case, the underlying root is that of Hellenistic philosophy and European culture.

In the modern era, various theologies have arisen in part as a response to the inadequacy of the traditional Catholic theology to address all the situations of people in different contexts including the poor in Latin America, women, Africans in the Sub-Saharan, Asians, and so on. Theologies that attempt to respond to particular contexts have sometimes been called local theologies or theology of inculturation. However, these designations imply more or less cultural or geographic boundaries while the term contextual theology has a wider scope that can encompass social realities beyond culture, ethnicity or geography. Bevens asserts that the contextual nature of all these theologies constitute a “theological imperative” because contextual theology is really the only kind of theology that one is able to do.<sup>28</sup> This theological imperative exists because religions themselves are naturally contextual. Sociologist of religion Otto Maduro observed:

No religion operates in a vacuum. All religions, any religion — whatever it is we understand to be a religion — is a reality situated within a specific human context: a geographic space, a moment in history and concrete and determined social environments. All religions, any religion — whatever it is we understand to be a religion — is always, in every concrete case, the religion of certain human beings.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, a theology finds its validity and relevance when it is articulated in such a way that reflects the reality of its time, place, and social milieu. As Lonergan asserts, theology “mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion within that matrix” (*Method in Theology*, xi).<sup>30</sup>

By pointing out that theology is necessarily contextual, it does not mean that this is a new form of doing theology. Rather, by adding the word “contextual” before the word “theology” as a modifier, the aim is to make explicit and give credence to a process that has already been in existence from the very beginning. The implication is that a particular theology does not have to be held as normative and universally applicable to everyone in all time and place. The “mainstream” theology is, in fact, a contextual theology whose context has been either intentionally or unintentionally suppressed in order to highlight its universal validity and universal applicability.

<sup>28</sup> Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Carlos Mondragon, *Like Leaven in the Dough: Protestant Social Thought in Latin America, 1920-1950* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing House, 2011), 28.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth A. Morelli and Mark D. Morelli, Ed., *The Lonergan Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 443.

Classical theology is seen as an objective science of faith that makes use of two theological sources—scripture and tradition. These two sources are seen as above history and culture. However, by asserting that theology is contextual, the theologian wishes to affirm that the present human experience, which is defined by culture, life events and notable social changes, constitutes an important source for theological reflection. In this manner, both the past as contained in the scripture and tradition as well as the present as reflected in the context are accounted for in the theologizing.<sup>31</sup> In *Evangelii Gaudium* (#117), Pope Francis affirmed the importance of the context stating:

We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous. While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought, the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural. Hence in the evangelization of new cultures, or cultures which have not received the Christian message, it is not essential to impose a specific cultural form, no matter how beautiful or ancient it may be, together with the Gospel.<sup>32</sup>

Pope Francis goes on to say that it is unreasonable to expect people everywhere to “imitate modes of expression which European nations developed at a particular moment of their history”<sup>33</sup> because no single culture can represent the full expression of the mystery of God. Therefore, when the context as found in a particular time and place is taken into account in the act of theologizing, one can begin to identify theologies inspired by cultural identity such as Asian theology and African theology, theologies that employ the experience of gender as a source as in the case of feminist theology or womanist theology, theologies that consider social location such as liberation theology and queer theology. In this inquiry, we are concerned with theology that considers the experience that results from social change, in particular, that of technological modernization that results in what has been called the information age or the digital age. I propose that in light of the experience of the modern day technological advancement, there is sufficient reason to begin to articulate a contextual theology called cybertheology.

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<sup>31</sup> Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 5-6.

<sup>32</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 117,  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 118.

## Searching for God in the Digital Environment

Any theological exercise has to begin first and foremost with reflecting on one's search for and perception of God. Traditionally Christians have located God within a temporal and spatial framework as reflected in the "Our Father Prayer" which informs the believer that God is in "heaven." God is also eternal and the supreme ruler of a kingdom that will come in a particular time. As the Psalmist proclaims, "Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens."<sup>34</sup> The way one grasps what eternity may look like is by imagining a thousand years for God is like a day in our human experience. "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day."<sup>35</sup> Thus, by imagining heaven as a particular place and eternity as a day multiplied infinitely, it is easier to imagine how and where God exists. Though theologians affirm that heaven is not a physical place, the faithful are also not discouraged from looking up beyond the stars in order to imagine that up there somewhere is God lovingly looking down upon his children and seeing all of their joys and sorrows as well as their challenges and weaknesses. This gives one a sense of direction and assurance. Lavinia Byrne writes, "Nothing makes so powerful a bid to the human heart as the promise that we will live forever, albeit in heaven. Nothing is so comforting as the sense that more time means more of the same kind of time, with regular sunrises and sunsets to measure out our days."<sup>36</sup>

Modern science, however, has done much to intrude on the previously construed notions of God and heaven, at least for those who give serious considerations to scientific development. Science declares that space is, in fact, infinite, thus displacing the possibility of heaven having its own distinctive place.<sup>37</sup> This presents a dilemma for popular spirituality because how then, can God be located in heaven if logically such a place cannot exist?<sup>38</sup> Theologians attempt to deal with this reality by proposing the existence of a spirit world that lies beyond common space or the notion of "sacramental space" within this world or within the Christian community where God's presence is real and could be felt.<sup>39</sup> The digital environment, nonetheless, has presented new opportunities to enrich one's search for God and imagine how God may be present in the world. Lavinia Byrne notes that the universe comprised of observable atoms which cluster together to form things is no longer the only kind of universe which one might hold in conception. With cyberspace comprised of nonphysical digits, we are presented with new dimensions that exist alongside the world of atoms. She asks, "If

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<sup>34</sup> Psalm 119:80 (NIV).

<sup>35</sup> 2 Peter 3:8 (NIV).

<sup>36</sup> Lavinia Byrne, "God in Cyberspace,"(2000), <http://www.ed.ac.uk/files/imports/fileManager/godpercent20inpercent20cyberspace.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Singh, "Overview of Cybertheology."

<sup>38</sup> Byrne, "God in Cyberspace."

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

this digital world is so accessible to our computers, then why not a spiritual equivalent? Suddenly God fits because there is a place for God to live. The idea that angels may indeed dance on the head of a pin gets re-instated, for there is more to space and time than can presently be seen and communicated.”<sup>40</sup> According to Singh, the digital world provides a metaphor for God’s presence and “ways of imagining things in a new sense of time and space where digits inform our situation,”<sup>41</sup> thus overcoming the challenges presented by science. This metaphor thus presents fresh insights into the question of “Master, where do you dwell?”

While the digital environment with its newfound possibility may help in overcoming former limitations imposed by science, it does not promise that one’s search for God is necessarily simpler or easier. In the past, people came to figures of authority such as priests and religious for questions related to God and spiritual matters as well as some non-spiritual issues. This is due to the fact that the priest was not only seen as an authoritative figure in such matters, but was probably one of the most educated, if not the most educated person in the town or village. In many parts of Asia, especially in the rural areas, this is probably still largely the case. However, people, especially in developed countries, are increasingly turning to the internet, television, and other media in order to look for the answers that they need.<sup>42</sup> In the digital era, the role of institutions and individuals functioning as authoritative entities are becoming less prominent.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, there is an excessive amount of information on the internet that can cause one to be overwhelmed by what comes up before their eyes. A search on Google using the keyword “God” results in over two billion and a half entries.<sup>44</sup> Searching the word “พระเจ้า” (Thai) renders nearly 17 million entries, and “Thiên Chúa” (Vietnamese) also results in excess of 41 million entries. Upon making an image search for God, pictures of the Judeo-Christian God and Jesus appear on the screen alongside deities of other world religions, but also graphics of video games. The phenomenon of being bombarded with excessive information has been called information overload. Antonio Spadaro comments, “The problem today is not to find the message that makes sense, but to decode it, to recognize it on the basis of the multiple messages that we receive.”<sup>45</sup> Consequently, despite the plethora of information, ironically, in the digital era, one’s search for God could become an experience that requires a lot of patience and sifting through all sorts of data in order to find what one needs.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Singh, “Overview of Cybertheology.”

<sup>42</sup> Philip Clayton, “Theology and the Church after Google,” *Princeton Theological Review* 17, No. 2 (2010): 8

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> This Google search result is as of 25 August 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Spadaro, *Cybertheology*, 23.

Even then one cannot be sure that what one landed upon is authentic and spiritually nourishing. As Pope Benedict remarks:

Often, as is also the case with other means of social communication, the significance and effectiveness of the various forms of expression appear to be determined more by their popularity than by their intrinsic importance and value. Popularity, for its part, is often linked to celebrity or to strategies of persuasion rather than to the logic of argumentation.<sup>46</sup>

As a result, one's perception of and relationship with God could very likely be shaped by a blog that one follows rather than the Church's officially sanctioned websites whether it be from the Vatican or of the local parish. Internet applications, however, have modeled a way for us to be more focused in the search for God. While Google is essentially what is known as a syntactic search engine, which conducts searches based on specific words within the text and can render innumerable entries, a semantic search engine works from a different logic. A semantic search engine takes into account the intent and the contextual meaning of the terms being used.<sup>47</sup> It attempts to interpret the thinking of the person requesting the search and provides the information that they might need. For example, when one types the words "Who is Jesus" in the Google search engine, the websites that appear on top are those that most match the keywords employed. However, when the same thing is done using WolframAlpha, a semantic search engine, the result that appears is not a list of websites but a picture and a series of information about Jesus, such as date of birth, place of birth, date of death, and place of death. From the information available on the Web, it also lists important events in the life of Jesus. Unfortunately, while Google often gives too much information, the semantic search engines cannot always provide the searcher with an answer at all. When entering the question "Where can I find God?", the application comes back with a notice, "Wolfram/Alpha doesn't know how to interpret your input." No answer such as "You can find God in heaven" or "You can find God in your heart" can be found. Likewise, asking the question "Does God exist?" results in the following answer: "I'm sorry, but a poor computational knowledge engine, no matter how powerful, is not capable of providing a simple answer to that question." The logic of these two types of search engines models different ways that one may go about searching for God—an effort that is either random and depends largely on happenstance or one that is intentional, concentrated, and focused. Unfortunately, in one model, there can be information overload; but in the other model, there is no information at all. The reality of the digital age, thus, reminds us that the search for

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<sup>46</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2013."

<sup>47</sup> Wikipedia, "Semantic Search," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic\\_search](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semantic_search).

God in this milieu can be exciting as it is bewildering. A fruitful journey in searching for God seems to depend on one's ability to find the balance between leaving everything up to chance and asking questions that are too narrow, thus hindering possibilities for serendipitous discoveries.

The digital age not only can help with new ways to envision how God may be present in the world, but also provides the means to search for God in ways that do not limit the seeker to simply the traditional channels (i.e. the hierarchy or the local parish priest). In context of Asia, the internet facilitates the search for God and understanding about God in richer ways beyond the local parish priest or traditional religious figures. In Asia, Christianity forms a tiny minority of the population, constituting only 4.5 per cent.<sup>48</sup> Catholics make up 3 per cent of Asia's population,<sup>49</sup> slightly over 115 million.<sup>50</sup> Over 63 per cent of all Asian Catholics live in the two countries of the Philippines and East Timor,<sup>51</sup> while in many Asian countries, Catholicism makes up less than 1 per cent of the population.<sup>52</sup> In Thailand, there are about 300,000 Catholics<sup>53</sup> out of a population of 67 million while neighboring Cambodia has a little over 20,000 Catholics<sup>54</sup> out of a population of 15 million. In Asia, searching for God and maintaining close relationship with God is not only challenged by the limited means of the local church but also greatly affected by cultural and religious milieus within which Christians find themselves.

Having access to the internet allows for this search to be facilitated and relationship with God to be nourished in new ways beyond what is immediately available. Catholics in a small remote village can find spiritually beneficial materials beyond the repetitive homilies given by their parish priest, especially the ones who take time in Mass not only to preach but also to lecture on all sorts of matters in the parish. During the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic in Vietnam, when churches were forced to close, Vietnamese Catholics of all age groups had to watch Masses online. As it turned out, in rural areas, many old Catholics, who were accustomed to attending daily Mass in their village church got the chance to watch Mass online for the very first time either on a smart phone or a smart TV. Apparently, many did not just watch Masses broadcasted by their local parish priest or local diocese, but from other parishes and dioceses as well.

Beside giving Catholics in small villages the opportunity to be exposed to more spiritual materials, the internet can also help priests, religious and seminarians with

<sup>48</sup> FABC Papers No.131, "A Glimpse at Dialogue in Asia," 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> James H. Kroeger, "An 'Asian' Dialogue Decalogue: Principles of Interreligious Dialogue from Asia's Bishops," <http://www.lst.edu/academics/landas-archives/353-an-qasianq-dialogue-decalogue-j-kroeger-mm>.

<sup>51</sup> FABC Papers No.131, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Kroeger, "An 'Asian' Dialogue Decalogue."

<sup>53</sup> Udomsarn, "How Many Thai Catholics Are There Really?" <http://www.thaicath.net/diarybible/cathsuebsiri/word/engew05.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Wikipedia, "Roman Catholicism in Cambodia," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman\\_Catholicism\\_in\\_Cambodia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholicism_in_Cambodia).

additional resources for their ministry. In the library of the major seminary in Laos, for example, there are extremely limited resources for Scriptural and theological studies either in English or in Laotian. Seminarians who need to study or prepare spiritual reflections to share with villagers in their ministry can now turn to the internet for assistance in these matters. In Thailand, many Buddhists and potential converts to Christianity turn to Facebook groups as well as a web forum set up by a layman to ask questions about matters of faith.<sup>55</sup> With the help of the internet, God potentially becomes more accessible and immediate while the images of God to which we are introduced become more rich and diverse.

Thus, how Asians search for, perceive, and maintain relationship with God may greatly be influenced by the modern digital environment which facilitates these activities. However, this does not mean that searching for God in the digital age promises easy access to the truth when a smorgasbord of information is available online, and not all leads one in the right direction or provides the necessary nourishment for one's faith life. More than ever, the search for God and maintaining relationship with God requires self-initiative, prudence, and patience. One's image of and relationship with God can no longer be dictated from above as in the past; in the digital age, one must be more responsible for this spiritual quest, and by virtue of their presence and participation in the digital environment, contributes to how God is seen and understood by fellow searchers.

### Interpersonal Relationships in the Digital Age

Ever since the creation of what has since been referred to as Web 2.0, which takes the users from experiencing the Web as passive viewers of content to being able to generate content and interact and collaborate with other users,<sup>56</sup> the focus has been not just on receiving or exchanging information through the internet but on human relationships. Unlike the traditional text-based websites, newsgroups, and mailing lists which do not highlight the relationship dimension of its users, social networks aim to put relationship at the center. In the new paradigm, the notion of *presence* has been over taken by *connection*, or some might say, *interconnection*. Unless there is interconnectedness between ourselves and others via the internet, we are but solitary entities in cyberspace. Indeed, on Facebook, one has the option to be either a "friend" of another user if the person has a profile page, or to be a "fan" of a particular user if he or she has a fan page. Although Facebook, Tiktok and WeChat are some of the

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<sup>55</sup> According to the owner of the forum "New Manna," dozens of people have converted to Christianity partly because of their participation in this webboard. <http://www.newmana.com/phpbb/index.php>.

<sup>56</sup> The term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty at the O'Reilly Media Web 2.0 Conference in 2004. Examples of Web 2.0 include social networking sites, blogs, wikis, folksonomies, video sharing sites, hosted services, Web applications, and mashups

most popular social networks currently active, there are hundreds of other social networks based on different interests, hobbies, and ethnic backgrounds, etc.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the emphasis that the new web paradigm places on relationship, relationships mediated by this environment are always necessarily limited because the full extent of the relationship will somehow be “flattened” by the nature of the technology. As a result, on Facebook, your classmate, grandmother, pastor in real life, as well as people on the other side of the world that you have never met are all collapsed into the category of “friend”. On Twitter, all the people who are connected to you are your “followers.” In some ways, these words not only ignore the true nature of the relationship between you and a particular person with whom you are connected to, but it also distorts the meaning of what it means to be “friend” or “follower.” Brett McCracken writes:

In the world of Facebook, our “friends” are almost destined to become collectible commodities and status symbols, things we collect to adorn the “walls” of our own online environs. We strategically “friend” people on Facebook or “follow” them on Twitter, and then we post things on their wall or tag them in a post to publicly consummate the relationship.<sup>58</sup>

McCracken asserts that the way people put their relationships on public display in the online world, sharing openly information that otherwise should be reserved for the “inner circle,” and micromanaging these social relationships with posts on their own walls or on someone else’s status constitute “performative” acts that cheapen relationships.<sup>59</sup> Pope Benedict warns in his Message for the 2009 World Communication Day, “True friendship has always been seen as one of the greatest goods any human person can experience. We should be careful, therefore, never to trivialize the concept or the experience of friendship.”<sup>60</sup> In the same message, Pope Benedict also warns of the dangers of investing time and energy in online relationships while failing to nurture the other relationships in one’s life:

It would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop on-line friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbours and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of

<sup>57</sup> Wikipedia provides a non-exhaustive list of active as well as defunct social networks worldwide, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_social\\_networking\\_websites](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites).

<sup>58</sup> Brett McCracken, “The Separation of Church and Status: How Online Social Networking Helps and Hurts the Church,” *Princeton Theological Review* 17, No. 2 (2010): 26

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>60</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication Day 2009,” [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20090124\\_43rd-world-communications-day.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day.pdf).



work, education and recreation. If the desire for virtual connectedness becomes obsessive, it may in fact function to isolate individuals from real social interaction while also disrupting the patterns of rest, silence and reflection that are necessary for healthy human development.<sup>61</sup>

This perspective is founded on the thinking that truly nourishing relationships require a dimension of personal and physical contact that cyberspace cannot provide. Both Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor Pope John Paul II emphasized the significance of direct human contact in one's day-to-day relationships with others in their messages for the World Communication Day during their papacies.<sup>62</sup> Pope John Paul II remarked, "Electronically mediated relationships can never take the place of the direct human contact."<sup>63</sup>

Despite the perceived limitations of the Web's mediated relationships, the reality and the prevalence of such relationships require that we not dismiss them categorically but attempt to recognize their existence as well as to see how they may help expand present parameters for what it means to be in relationship with someone or what it means to call someone a neighbor. Although both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict have been quoted above to be wary of online relationships, both leaders know full well the reality of the situation as well as the opportunities that these relationships may engender. Pope Benedict stated that this form of "spreading information and knowledge is giving birth to a new way of learning and thinking, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship."<sup>64</sup> This not only facilitates people coming together, but also helps with the work of evangelization. Pope Benedict called on priests who are standing "on the threshold of a new era as new technologies create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances, they are called to respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word."<sup>65</sup>

The online relationships do not always necessarily represent a desire to escape real life relationships but in a way symbolic of the deep human desire to communicate with others. The various internet applications that help people engage in building relationships, sharing information, exchanging ideas, creating new forms of entertainment can persuasively be said to reflect the desire for interconnectedness that are rooted deep within the human spirit.<sup>66</sup> They also manifest fundamental human

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2011," [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20110124\\_45th-world-communications-day.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110124_45th-world-communications-day.html).

<sup>63</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Message for World Communication Day 2002," [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20020122\\_world-communications-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day.html).

<sup>64</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2011."

<sup>65</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2010," [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20100124\\_44th-world-communications-day.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20100124_44th-world-communications-day.html).

<sup>66</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2013."

needs to be open to others and to seek communion with others, an act which helps to realize our own humanity.<sup>67</sup> The digital age and the type of relationships available through this environment force a re-examination and redefining of what it means to be a friend and neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan told by Jesus proposes that to consider someone as a neighbor is not based on ethnicity or social status, but on one's own disposition towards the other. In the parable, a Jewish man was violently attacked and robbed on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho. However, as he was lying half-dead on the side of the road, both the priest and the Levite who passed by ignored him and walked on. Eventually, a Samaritan man came upon the hapless victim and gave him the necessary care to rescue him from a grave situation. In Jewish society, Samaritans were looked down upon and forming relationships with them were considered taboo. On the other hand, priests and Levites were highly respected, well-educated and powerful people. Nonetheless, in the parable, they failed to come to the aid of their fellow man. The Samaritan, on the other hand, displayed mercy and compassion towards the victim far beyond anything expected of him.

The parable of the Good Samaritan presents a paradigm of relationship not restricted by artificial boundaries imposed by cultural, social, ethical, or religious norms. Moreover, it emphasizes the relational possibilities presented by a heart imbued with charity, mercy and compassion. Even though this story was told by Jesus two millennia ago, the relationship paradigm that Jesus proposed through this story has not lost any of its relevance through all the ages, including the present digital age. If anything, the digital age with its new opportunities and limitations have helped us to be able to reflect on this relationship paradigm in new ways. Cyberspace as a place where people all over the world with their diverse cultural, religious, and social contexts can come together and engage in mutual exchange, sharing, and even support reinforces the idea that human need for communion can and ought to surpass any hindrances. If relationship ought not be restricted by culture, gender, or social status, they must also not be held back by any distance, whether physical or digital.

The digital era highlights the human need for a neighbor no matter what age we live in. Some people may claim that preoccupation with online relationships hinders one from getting to know the people in their own physical neighborhood, even those living very next door. However, one needs to ask the question: Does the preoccupation with online relationships cause distance with offline neighbors or is it a reflection of a society in which it is quite common to not know a neighbor's name despite years of living next to them, and one is thus forced to find nourishment in relationships that do not depend on physical proximity? This is sort of a chicken-and-egg problem. In the latter years of the last decade, the location-based social networks Foursquare and

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<sup>67</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, "Message for World Communication Day 2009."

Gowalla were released. Foursquare is an application that through the user's own description of their interests and reporting of places frequented as well as feedback of other users gives recommendations for places to go in a current location.<sup>68</sup> Gowalla, which was born in 2007 and closed in 2012, was an application that allowed users to check-in on various locations that they were visiting.<sup>69</sup> Gowalla would eventually be acquired by Facebook,<sup>70</sup> whose check-in feature is one of its most popular functions. Checking-in on social network effectively reveals to all your "friends" of your presence in a particular place, which facilitates not only online encounters but physical ones as well.<sup>71</sup> Thus, checking-in could lead to people who would otherwise be greatly separated by physical distance or by lack of information to come together for coffee, a movie, or even a date. Antonio Spadaro raises the question, "What is encouraging people to continually violate their own personal privacy and to communicate their own movements to their digital worlds?"<sup>72</sup> Spadaro answers his own question by stating, "This, of course, expresses a need for proximity, that is, a desire to carry the world of their own relationships to a *real* level of contact" (author's italic).<sup>73</sup> Indeed, the location-based social networks and the check-in feature on various applications is a manifestation that in the contemporary culture, the deep seated need for meaningful relationship and communion with others continue to direct our technological developments. In some ways, these technological advances help us cope with and compensate for a situation in which the opportunities for stopping in the front yard to talk to a neighbor or meeting up friends and family regularly after work or on the weekends are becoming increasingly rare.

The relationship paradigm in the parable the Good Samaritan makes an important reminder, which is to be a neighbor demands that one must behave neighborly. To be neighborly obviously speaks of something more profound than physical proximity or engagement in social and physical contact. It speaks about how people treat each other, especially in times of difficulty and calamity. The digital environment not only helps us to be able to keep in touch with a much greater number of people than we could imagine in traditional society. It also helps us to be more informed about the lives of an even more vast number of people in the world. The term "viral philanthropy" and "viral charity" came into existence in the age of the internet to describe charitable initiatives, whether planned or spontaneous, that took off in the online world and raised vast sums of money for individuals and groups, sometimes much more than the initial goal set for the project. During the coronavirus pandemic,

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<sup>68</sup> Wikipedia, "Foursquare," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foursquare>.

<sup>69</sup> Wikipedia, "Gowalla," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gowalla>.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Spadaro, *Cybertheology*, 33.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 34

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

when a Starbucks customer in San Diego, California tried to shame a barista named Lenin Gutierrez on her Facebook account after he refused to serve her for not wearing a mask in accordance with company policy, her post attracted hundreds of thousands of comments, most coming to the defense of Gutierrez. In the meantime, on 22 June 2020, a netizen by the name of Matt Cowan from Irvine, California, who did not know the barista, decided to start a tip jar on GoFundMe with the title "Tips for Lenin Standing up to a San Diego Karen."<sup>74</sup> Although the initial goal for the tip jar was set at 1,000 USD, the donation has reached 105,000 USD as of 20 August 2020.<sup>75</sup> Having been on the receiving end of such outpouring of support from complete strangers, Gutierrez has been extremely grateful. In a video post online, the young barista said that he will use the contribution to help him realize his dream of becoming a dancer and to teach dancing to children. As amazing as this incident seems, in the age of social media, charity campaigns that unexpectedly go viral raising huge sums of money for individuals and organizations have been found to be quite common.

While the digital age proves the power and the possibility of neighborliness, it has yet to be able to fulfill the relationship paradigm that Jesus put forth. In the story, before the Samaritan took out his wallet to pay for the expenses of the room in the inn for the victim to recover, the story tells us that the Samaritan “saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, being neighborly is much more than being willing to shell out cash. In fact, money does not even come first in the order of things. Being neighborly, in Jesus’ paradigm, means recognizing someone’s presence and seeing his pains and suffering, and feeling compassion towards the other. Moreover, it requires a physical dimension, which in the parable, is exemplified by the acts of *going to*, *bandaging* the wound, *pouring* oil and wine, *lifting up* onto the donkey, and *taking to* the inn. These concrete, up-close and personal actions imply that real relationships require the aspect of embodiment in addition to other dimensions that may be described as emotional and spiritual. According to Pope Francis, it is indeed the image of the Samaritan tending to the injured man that communicates the true sense of neighborliness.<sup>77</sup> Pope Benedict

<sup>74</sup> According to Wikipedia, “Karen is a pejorative term used in the United States and other English-speaking countries for a woman perceived as entitled or demanding beyond the scope of what is appropriate or necessary. A common stereotype is that of a white woman who uses her privilege to demand her own way at the expense of others. Depictions also include demanding to ‘speak to the manager’, anti-vaccination beliefs, being racist, or sporting a particular bob cut hairstyle. As of 2020, the term was increasingly being used as a general-purpose term of disapproval for middle-aged white women.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen\\_\(pejorative\)#:~:text=Karenper%20isper%20aper%20pejorativeper%20term,atper%20theper%20expenseper%20ofper%20others.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_(pejorative)#:~:text=Karenper%20isper%20aper%20pejorativeper%20term,atper%20theper%20expenseper%20ofper%20others.)

<sup>75</sup> “Tips for Lenin Standing up to a San Diego Karen,” <https://www.gofundme.com/t/tips-for-lenin-standing-up-to-a-san-diego-karen>

<sup>76</sup> Luke 10:33-34 (NIV).

<sup>77</sup> Pope Francis, “Message for World Communication day 2014,” [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140124\\_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20140124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html).

reminds us that “It is important always to remember that virtual contact cannot and must not take the place of direct human contact with people at every level of our lives.”<sup>78</sup> This is so because only in direct human contact can one pour oil and wine over the wound of another as in the case of the good Samaritan and the Jewish victim, or pouring water over the feet of someone, as in the case of Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper. Thus, the emotional and spiritual connections between individuals mediated by the digital environment must be supplemented, concretized, and realized to their fullest potential in embodied manifestations in the physical world.

As we can see, despite the fact that the digital environment introduces new dimensions to interpersonal relationships, there are real limitations to how these relationships play out in our lives. Moreover, relationships that heavily depend on the development and availability of technology will always mean that there is danger of unequal access to that particular technology, thus causing a gap between the rich and the poor. In this digital era, this gap in access, known as the digital divide, is a real problem in the world as well as in Asia itself. It is estimated that as of July 2020, the number of internet users reached 4.7 billion worldwide, making up 59 percent of the global population. However, this means that there are still 41 percent of the world population who still do not have access to the internet.<sup>79</sup> Reasons for not having access to the internet include not having 4G coverage, not being able to afford the service, and not having content produced in a language that users can understand. The digital divide is conspicuous in the Asian context. While the Republic of Korea, Brunei and Japan have internet penetration at 96.0 per cent, 95.3 per cent, 93.8 per cent, respectively, ranking not only among the highest in Asia but also in the world, North Korea has internet penetration at a mere 0.1 per cent. Afghanistan and Turmenistan have 18.8 per cent and 20.9 per cent internet penetration, respectively.<sup>80</sup> While Singapore ranks second in the world in the Network Readiness Index (NRI), Yemen is at the bottom of the list. Pakistan, Nepal, Cambodia and Laos are also among the 20 countries with the lowest NRI scores.<sup>81</sup> Not only is there a digital divide in terms of the general population, there is also a large gap with respect to gender. In Asia, men outnumber women in internet access 54.6 per cent to 41.3 per cent.<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately, the gender digital divide in Asia has worsened rather than improved over the years. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), between 2013 and 2017, the gap grew from 17 per cent to 24 per cent. Indonesia, one of the ASEAN

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<sup>78</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for World Communication day 2011.”

<sup>79</sup> We Are Social, “Digital use around the world in July 2020,” <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/07/digital-use-around-the-world-in-july-2020>.

<sup>80</sup> “Internet usage in Asia, 31 May 2020” <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats3.htm>.

<sup>81</sup> “NRI 2019 countries,” <https://networkreadinessindex.org/nri-2019-countries/#complete-ranking>.

<sup>82</sup> “Working towards closing the digital gender gap in Asia,” Web Foundation (3 April 2020), <https://webfoundation.org/2020/04/working-towards-closing-the-digital-gender-gap-in-asia/>

members, has one of the widest digital gender gaps in the APEC economies.<sup>83</sup> The gender digital gap is not only caused by poverty but also due to socio-cultural and institutional attitudes and constraints that restrict women's exposure and access to the internet.

The statistics mentioned above show that interpersonal relationships formed through and maintained by digital technology have social justice implications because division in society becomes manifested in a new form—those with access to the technology versus those who cannot afford it. The digital divide is also the gap between the “information rich” and the “information poor.” Thus, if technology is the primary mediator for our interpersonal relationships, chances are we are only engaged with people who are socially and technologically similar to ourselves. The digital “have nots” become people out there that we may know something about through reports and news feeds, but do not have a chance to get to know on a deeper personal level. Consequently, the digital divide hinders the potential for the internet in bringing people of all kinds of backgrounds together, especially on the continent of Asia.

## Conclusion

This chapter delved into two fundamental dimensions of cybertheology by discussing one's relationship with God and with fellow human beings, and how these relationships are informed and transformed as a result of the digital environment. Our reflections show that the internet and cyberspace allow for the perception of God's presence in a metaphorical sense that neither confines God to time nor space. While science with its discoveries about time and space seems to have displaced any possibility for heaven as a place out there and renders ingrained popular religiosity illogical, the new technology with its nonphysical digits inform us that presence is possible even without physical qualities demanded by traditional science. The image of God for those who desire to seek God has also become enriched by the fact that how God is perceived is not necessarily handed down by any single official church document or dictated by the pedagogical method of a single local pastor, but by a myriad of sources both official and unofficial. One's perception of and relationship with God, in addition to the traditional figures, can be also influenced by the writings of professional theologians and amateur bloggers, Papal tweets as well as a friend's testimony on social media. Just as the digital age confirms the fact that God cannot be confined to any particular realm, it also makes it ever more difficult to confine God to any particular creed or set of doctrines.

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<sup>83</sup> “Digital gender divide is getting wider,” Bangkok Post (11 May 2020), <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1915812/digital-gender-divide-is-getting-wider>

Similar to how the boundaries, whether real or imaginary, placed on God are greatly done away with by the digital environment, traditional boundaries for interpersonal relationships are also transformed. While Jesus' paradigm for what it means to be neighbor is not done away with by any means, the digital age informs us that neighborliness not only transcends social, cultural, and religious conditions, it can also transcend physical space and can manifest itself in cyberspace in very real and meaningful ways. It is undeniable that truly nourishing interpersonal relationships must also include some levels of embodiment. The digital environment, as it has been proven, when poorly utilized, isolates people and facilitates a form of escapism; however, when wisely used, becomes extremely effective tools for people to live out our deepest aspirations to be in communion with one another.

In the Asian context, for the people of this continent, the digital environment has the potential to affect their relationship with God and with others in some profound ways. As part of a tiny religious minority on a vast continent of major world religions, living primarily among people of different faiths, Asians' search for God and perception of God will be enriched by what the internet can offer to them, in addition to the present conditions that form their faith and spirituality. However, Asians must struggle to overcome the challenge of the digital divide that separates the rich and the poor, men and women that threaten to diminish the potential of interpersonal relationships. Instead of facilitating the erasing of boundaries existing among individuals, the digital divide can represent a replacement of one form of separation with another.

Reflecting on the various theological dimensions inspired and pertaining to the digital age is still a rather new exercise, which will advance as the new generation of theologians who are "digital immigrants," but especially "digital natives" reflect more deeply on the theological implications of the ever changing digital milieu. Notwithstanding, this inquiry attempted to contribute to this process of systematic reflection by discussing how the digital environment created by technology has become irrevocably integrated into human life, thus calls for and legitimates the effort to create a cybertheology or something akin to it.

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