

BOOK REVIEWS

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Andrew Hemingway. *Can We Zoom into God?* Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2022. Pp. xx, 286. ISBN 9781666744309 (cloth); 9781666744293 (paperback); 9781666744316 (eBook).

Written shortly after the pandemic lockdown in the UK, Andrew Hemingway's *cri de coeur* responds negatively to the title question. Perhaps no surprise there, but his reasoning raises important considerations for religious communication.

Hemingway writes in a kind of conversational style, with topics and thoughts suggesting themselves from their context. The book does not so much present a logical step-by-step argument but a series of reflections on religious practice, theological understanding, and media affordances. His thinking draws on (Evangelical) theology and media ecology and weaves writers as diverse as William Barclay, Karl Barth, Martin Buber, John Bunyan, John Calvin, Nicholas Carr, Jacques Ellul, Abraham Kuyper, Jaron Lanier, Alistair McFadyen, Marshall McLuhan, Lewis Mumford, Neil Postman, A. W. Tozer, R. Chenevix Trench, and Kevin Vanhoozer into an ongoing conversation. The book thus has a solid grounding in a wide range of sources, but the conversational style sometimes makes it difficult to keep track of them all.

In that same sense of conversation, then, this review will briefly review Hemingway's theological and media positions, then converse with them from a different theological stance and from a wider media ecology analysis.

Firmly rooted in the Reformation's Evangelical tradition and Calvinist theology, Hemingway rebukes his own church for its quick acceptance of streaming video as a means to enable worship. Theologically, he identifies several reservations. First, the use of these screen technologies creates "a new idolatry." For a religious tradition that firmly rejected images in churches, the screens differ little from images and, like images, draw the worshipers away from the Word. As an artist, Hemingway does not oppose art and image in principle, but he does object to its growing role in the churches as something that beguiles and bedazzles. Second, the technology as a medium by its very nature takes on a mediating role, which stands

between the worshiper and the Word, an interpellation strongly rejected during the Reformation—though at that time a mediation by people (priests) rather than by technology. Mediation, he holds, remains a continuing temptation for Christianity. Third, citing Arthur C. Clarke’s comment, “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic” (p. 69), Hemingway warns against magical thinking in religion and the addictive nature of technology. The temptation, of course, substitutes the work of human hands for God. Fourth, the overall role of image and mediation calls to mind Catholic theology, and Hemingway repeats many of the Reformation objections to the Church of Rome. Well read in Evangelical theology, he rejects the cult of the “Queen of heaven,” the papacy, and anything that lets Roman theology into the worship of the church and Zoom (his synecdoche for streaming services) has hints of Roman about it.

His objections come not only from theology. Hemingway takes the work of Neil Postman and others in the media ecology tradition to heart. Screen technology bears too strong a resemblance to television to escape television’s temptations, so well described by Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.¹ As an entertainment medium, television leads us to view everything it mediates to us—news, politics, business, and even religion—as just so much more entertainment. The affordance of that medium is too strong to resist. Rehearsing the history of religious programming in the UK, Hemingway asks, “Are the people tuning into ‘Songs of Praise,’ or ‘Stars on Sunday’ actually worshipping God? Are they worshipping in Spirit and in truth? If not, in the light of this question, we must ask what are the people ‘actually’ doing?” (p. 85). In his chapter, “Seeing is not Believing,” he points out that the television lens creates a world insofar as its lens is not that of the Scriptures” “The problem is that this ‘make-believe’ world is like a matrix, and as such the truth becomes blurred, so much so that people cannot distinguish between what is real or false anymore” (p. 92). Following Susan Greenfield,² he notes that the digital technologies impact “not just the generic brain, but the individual mind, beliefs, and states of consciousness” (qtd., p, 92).

¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

² Susan Greenfield, *Mind Change: How Digital Technologies Are Leaving Their Mark on our Brains* (New York: Random House, 2015).

Some Christian traditions do not share Hemingway's worry, at least in the same ways. The U.S. evangelical tradition, with its televangelists and mega-churches have created a fairly successful blend of worship and entertainment (though Postman aimed his critique at them in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*). Hemingway does not accept their understanding of worship or evangelicalism, criticizing, among others, the Rev. Billy Graham for his public preaching campaigns based on the U.S. revival tradition, which itself may well draw on early Methodist outdoor preaching.

Other Christian traditions could frame their own critiques of streaming religious services. Catholics—following John of Damascus in the iconoclastic debates and, like him, building an argument from Colossians 1:15—accept the role of images, but could well object to streaming worship on several other grounds. First, the various streaming practices shift worship to spectatorship. In his third “law of the media,” Marshall McLuhan³ points out that new media forms retrieve past practices. During the medieval period, Christian Eucharistic devotion turned worshipping congregations into spectators, with church architecture placing congregations at a distance from the altar and with church practice encouraging benediction (the adoration of the sacrament) rather than the partaking in communion. Streaming services have revived that sense of looking at the Eucharist, with some Catholic churches even offering “virtual benediction.” An indirect consequence follows, with the religious imagination shaped not by icons, religious art, or church environments, but by the impermanent flicker of a screen.

Second, streaming worship makes the Eucharistic presider or pastor into the dominant figure. The need for the camera to focus on an individual implies that some individual person matters more than the rest of the worshipping community. To borrow another of McLuhan's laws, streaming worship reverses into clericalism, tempting both priest and congregation to exaggerate the role and power of the presider. The temptation ignores the teaching of the Second Vatican Council in its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (#7) that “Christ is present in the liturgy in four unique ways. These ways are: especially, in the Eucharist broken and shared; in the person of

³ Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (University of Toronto Press, 1988).

the minister; in the Word of God; and in the assembled people of God.”⁴ The ranging of the camera over the faces of the congregation does not really solve this problem; Hemingway objects to that as well, as it fragments the worship, distracting from the movement of prayer.

Third, as the theologian Karl Rahner, arguing against televising the Mass many years ago,⁵ stated, because one can do something does not mean that one should. Such a publicizing of the sacred mysteries “leads straight to a complete denial in principle of any *disciplina arcani* whatsoever; for having the Mass on television can only mean admitting absolutely anyone and everyone to the innermost mystery of religion. Yet up till now there has always been, in every religion, some form of this ‘discipline of the secret’” (p. 211). Rahner makes the same point here that Joshua Meyrowitz later made when he pointed out the consequences for social behavior of making everything public via television.⁶ Meyrowitz notes the harms resulting from the merging of public spheres and the blurring of public and private behaviors. Where privacy ceases to exist, people’s sense of themselves and their identities break down. Rahner recognizes this in the religious distinction between believer and unbeliever. For support, Rahner draws on a theological tradition that extends back to St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Ambrose. Televising has consequences “if we consider this event from the point of view of those celebrating the Mass. It is permissible for them to perform the objective sacramental mystery of the Mass only if they bring to it a quite definite personal participation in faith and love. A merely objective setting-up of the external cult-action without personal cooperation in it would be a sin and sacrilege” (p. 210). Even believers viewing at a distance lose something.

Fourth, the Catholic tradition could object to streaming religious services on another theological ground, what Rahner might consider a metaphysical one: the understanding of sacramental actions. The Catholic Church does not recognize sacramental action at a distance. Those

⁴ Office of Worship, Archdiocese of Santa Fe, 2003, Liturgical Catechesis - #4. Retrieved July 1, 2024 from <https://archdiosf.org/documents/2017/11/04TheFour-foldPresence.pdf>

⁵ Karl Rahner, “The Mass and Television,” in *The Christian Commitment: Essays in Pastoral Theology* (Trans., Cecily Hastings) (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 205–218.

⁶ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impace of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), Chapters 5–7.

celebrating the sacraments must be physically present to one another. While no one has argued that during a streaming Mass the presider does or could consecrate bread or wine at a viewer's home, the streaming situation does run the risk of confusing just what the participants are doing. Not surprisingly, the situation has led to people's revisiting the debates about sacramental action through technology, whether of the Eucharist⁷ or the Sacrament of Reconciliation.⁸ Is what viewers or auditors do what happens in the church building? In each situation, the answer is negative in regards to sacramental action at a distance.

Hemingway also draws on the media ecology tradition—primarily that articulated by Neil Postman—in his critique. That approach could well add more material for the consideration of consequences of streaming for worship. In a 1974 essay, McLuhan wondered about the impact of the microphone in liturgical activities.⁹ He recognized that the role of sound implied an oral culture and the vernacular. The microphone amplifies both and brings their characteristics with it. It fosters a “switch from visual to acoustic bias in daily experience. Likewise, the disturbances within the Church and the liturgy are, in a large part, to be understood in relationship to this vast reversal of form and content which occurs when a whole people is suddenly flipped from visual to auditory experience. In terms of the use of the microphone in the liturgy, it may be observed that acoustic amplification overloads our auditory sensory channel, diminishing the attention span of the visual and private experience of the liturgy, as well of the architectural space, isolating the individual in a kind of ‘sound bubble’” (p. 113). Streaming makes this process more intense and perhaps more confusing in worship. It illustrates what McLuhan elsewhere argues: that each new medium brings with it a changing ground of experience. The streaming of worship removes distance, that is, extends the place of worship—the church structure—(one can be anywhere in the world and still be part of that church) but introduces a different kind of distance. It introduces, as Hemingway points out, a new mediation. The worshiper

⁷ Judith Hahn, “Communion in an Online Mass? Sacramental Questions in Light of The Covid Crisis” *Studia canonica* 54 (2020): 457–474.

⁸ Denziger-Schoenmetzter 1088 (or DS 1994), in this case regarding the technology of writing.

⁹ Marshall McLuhan, “Liturgy and the Microphone,” in *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, ed., E. McLuhan and J. Szklarek (Toronto: Stoddart, 1999), 107–116. Originally published in *The Critic* 33, no. 1 (1974): 12–17.

remains both physically distant and divided from the place of worship, while experiencing the illusion of connection..

The camera has its affordances, bringing with it its own way of seeing (to borrow from John Berger's title and analysis¹⁰). While we could debate, with Rahner, the propriety of a camera in a holy place, we would have to admit the long association of technology with worship: the technologies of art, of music, of architecture, for example. Each of them creates their own religious aura and people use each of them to engage in theological reflection on what they believe and upon what worship means. Is the camera all that different? What does the camera bring? It brings a perspective that differs from unaided human sight; it brings a framing of what it presents; it brings an interpretation of what it shows; it brings the added features of sound and perhaps commentary; it brings reproducibility—streaming worship implies recording worship, with its own questions of the validity of that fossilized experience—it brings a value chain created by and for the entertainment industry; it brings a new environment to the worship service, taking place not in a purpose-built church building or even room, but taking place in one's home or office, complete with their non-religious trappings. The camera transforms the worship experience. As Berger, following Walter Benjamin, points out with art, the camera's ability to reproduce what it beholds transforms the experience into something else.

Such separation of sound and image from the worship environment has consequences for community. Worship typically takes place face-to-face, in person. Even if participants do not usually look at one another except at specific ritual moments, they know each other's presence. The conversations and interactions before and after worship create a deeper sense of belonging and shared purpose. Introducing the screen shifts the worship experience to a kind of parasocial interaction where people must imagine their unseen community beyond the screen. Each of these moments can add to the worship experience but, at the same time, each transforms it. As noted long ago, parasocial interactions, while real in one sense, are false in another—people engage with characters or actors as though they knew them, even though they do not. Streaming worship

¹⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972). (Based on a BBC series https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pDE4VX_9Kk&list=PLn6KyJ4PmZsPhigNqPIWGEoCgBHJbhib3&index=1)

encourages us to interact as though we were there, but only with those people whom we see or hear. Similarly, imagined communities are real but not immediate. The media ecology analysis highlights how the introduction of any new elements (here, cameras, network streams, etc.) transforms the original space and experience.

Finally, implied in all of this, comes the loss of the physical. Worship, at least in the Catholic tradition, consists of physical properties: bread, wine, water, touching, seeing physical objects. The proclamation of God's word might still exist even if disembodied, but nothing else in the Mass is. Streaming worship disallows the physical. Much like the theological objection to sacramental action at a distance, a media ecology objection also highlights what the media take away. Disembodied ritual engagement differs from the ritual engagement it represents, even as it may create its own ritual—times of viewing, family gathering, place in the home, use of worship aids, and so on. But without the physical, there is no sacrament. The media ecology analysis recognizes the loss as well as the substitution of one ritual or another.

Hemingway begins by asking about the church experience of online worship during the pandemic. He poses important objections and he will no doubt not be the last to do so. His two categories of theology and media ecology provide important grounds for this ongoing reflection on a widely shared experience among the churches, but they may not go far enough. Each of us who experienced streaming worship should reflect on their experience from as many perspectives as possible.

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