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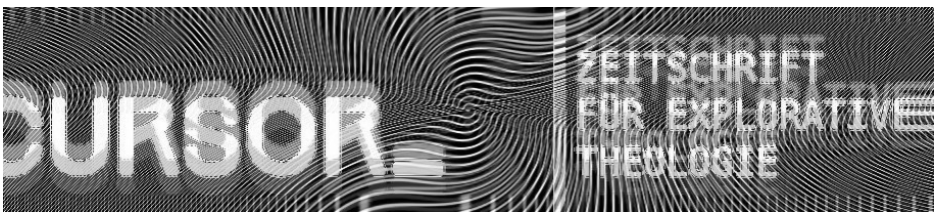

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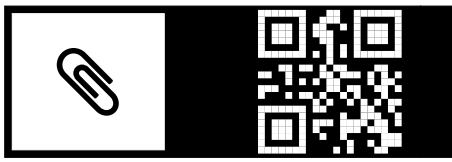

Editorial

Frederike van Oorschot and Florian Höhne

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Digitization is a sometimes radical, sometimes very subtle process of transformation in all areas of our social, church and personal lives. The Corona pandemic in particular has once again brought this home and led to a sharp increase in digital communication in many areas of life. Sound theoretical modeling and theological reflection often lag behind real developments and the imaginaries spun around them. What can theological reflection contribute to the analysis, conceptualization, and evaluation of the emerging logics and narratives of the digital age? Conversely, how is theology challenged to interrogate the way it thinks about particular issues?

A group of German, South African, and U.S. theologians explored these pressing questions at a virtual workshop in 2021, relating theological issues that are crucial to the life of the church and Christian ethics. We invited the speakers to reflect, on the one hand, on how theological loci or concepts can contribute to the interpretation of contemporary developments and which analytical or conceptual "frames" are illuminating in the digital context. On the other hand, we discussed how classical theologumena can be questioned, rearticulated, and enriched through digital transformations. Hence, the focus was a mutual relations and dependencies between theological concepts and digital cultures.

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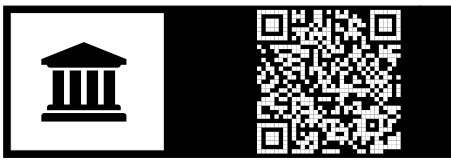
Topics for the workshop have emerged from the first workshop in November 2019 (see Cursor_Volume 3: Theologies of the Digital 1), on the one hand, and current developments in the wake of the Corona pandemic and civil rights anti-racist protestors, on the other: Economic and communicative (interpretive) power, subalternity, perception of reality, mediality, and the emergence and transformation of community were discussed, each in international tandems of complementary dual perspectives.

We thank Cursor for the opportunity to combine an open conversation in the extended discussion with participants of the workshop as well as online participation before, while and after the workshop. Thus, gaining knowledge became a collaborative and interactive enterprise. In addition, our thanks go to the Evangelical Church in Germany for its financial support. Katharina Ide is sincerely thanked for the careful preparation of the manuscript.



From Sovereignty to Omniscience
Digital Theology as Political Theology of the Digital

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To complement existing definitions of Digital Theology, the article proposes a Political Theology of the Digital. It traces the conceptual development of Political Theology from a specific interest in sovereignty to a broader understanding as conceptual analysis and theorization of power through a theological lens. The proposed Political Theology of the Digital investigates structural homologies and conceptual exchanges between the two fields with specific attention to the power dynamics engendered by technological and societal transformations. Drawing on the doctrine of God, it sketches a fourfold account of disciplining, performing, controlling, and replicating omniscience to conceptualize aspects of digital surveillance, social media culture, data capitalism, and predictive reification.

1. Defining Digital Theology?

"Theologies of the Digital" is the topic of our collective thought process here. When we started this discussion a couple of years ago, we wondered: "What, if anything, can theology as a discipline contribute to the analysis, conceptualization and assessment of the emergent logics of 'the digital'? And how are theological concepts and topics themselves transformed by 'the digital'?"[1] There was no shared definition (yet) of "the digital" or of what the genitive "theologies of the digital" should mean. We instead

[1] Reichel and van Oorschot 2019.

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started by looking at some particular themes and sites that seemed subject to significant transformation in the digital age–understandings of the human person, freedom, knowledge, and scripture–and moved to demonstrate that, indeed, theological reflection had much to contribute to think through some of these transformations.

As we discussed these concrete topics and sites of transformations, more themes emerged: additional sites of transformation (media/lity, community, subalternity) as well as more subcutaneous questions that seemed to run across the individual topics: the functioning of power and our very understanding of reality. As the questions become more fundamental, a more fundamental self-reflection may also be order: What is digital theology? How should it conceive of its own task, its role, its contribution in the midst of such deep transformations?

In their seminal 2019 article, Peter Phillips, Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero, and Jonas Kurlberg took a stab at "Defining Digital Theology."[2] The article gives a wonderful overview over the breadth of theological conversations in relation to digitality. Taking a "big tent" approach to the field, it typologizes four different approaches that can be found and distinguished under the banner of "digital theology" as DT1—DT4.

Across all four of them, "Digital theology" is mainly conceptualized as a spin-off to "Digital Humanities"[3] and in parallel to "Digital religion"[4]: Digital theology, thus, is thus primarily understood as the discipline-specific participation in developments generally pertinent to Digital Humanities, as well as the discipline's reflection on the ensuing transformation of its practice, research and teaching.

This is not surprising, as it most likely simply accurately reflects the way "the digital" has come into view for theology: First as computational tools to be used (DT1); secondarily, necessitating reflection on how such use impacts and transforms the practices that incorporate them (DT2); subsequently finding that digital developments occasionally raise new (or variations of) theological questions (DT3); and finally, as an area of what the researchers call "theological-ethical critique of digitality," (39) or, with somewhat more pathos, "prophetic appraisals of digital culture" (DT4, 40). These four meanings of "digital theology" are developed partially, if not completely in parallel with the four "waves" of Digital Religion, which outline a methodological progression and maturation rather than a mere chronology. This typology skillfully demon-

[2] Phillips et al. 2019.

[3] Anderson 2018.

[4] See Heidi Campbell's seminal work, Campbell 2013; Campbell and Altenhofen 2015.

strates the breadth of the work being done to date and elucidates the specific shape and features of the emergent field.

What is curiously absent in this typology–and this is not a critique of the article, but merely an observation pertaining to the material it organizes–what is curiously absent in digital theology as it presents itself to date, then, is a species of digital theology that undertakes something like a conceptual analysis and theorization of digitality through a theological lens, with specific attention to the power dynamics engendered by its technological and societal transformations. In other words, a political theology of the digital.

Larger transformations of power–not just who has it, or if it is or isn't put to good use, but how power is even constituted, how it circulates, and in what effects it manifests and reifies itself—are indeed one of the most salient features of the digital age. They are themselves in need of theorization, beyond a focus on the use of specific technologies or their practical and ethical assessment. Since theologians have centuries of experience in conceptualizing superhuman power, we might thus not *only* ask ourselves what digitality can do for *us*—e.g., support our research, transform our teaching, and transform ministerial practice in interesting ways—, but what *we* can do for digitality: provide an analytic lens and conceptual models for theorizing its particular logics.

In this article, I thus want to propose and motivate a much-needed complement to the landscape so far: digital theology as a political theology of the digital. Given that the term political theology is itself used in a variety of different ways, I will first draw out further what I mean by political theology as a specific mode of power analysis, and what benefit I see this mode of analysis to have yielded historically *both* for political theory *and* for theology. I will then propose an expansion into digital theology and sketch a few conceptual mappings such a lens may produce.

2. Political Theology

2.1 Power Between Political Theory and Doctrine of God

Power is a central notion in the Christian doctrine of God. In creeds and in liturgical expressions, in reference and prayerful address, "The Almighty" functions almost as a synonym for the Christian God. Theology, in its central task to systematize, assess, and guide the church's proclamation of God, has thus always been occupied with conceptualizing divine power.

Power is of course equally eminent in the political sphere. Whether "the political" is defined more systemically (with regard to institutions of the state), more functionally (with regard to practices of government), or more agonistically (as conflictual dynamics), power is an equally central dimension of it. Indeed in many discourses, "power dynamics" functions almost as a synonym for understanding something as political.

We might thus tentatively define both "the political" and "the theological" in terms of their dealing with power: The theological conceptualizes higher powers engendering, conditioning, and affecting our reality as a whole, while the political deals with rivaling claims and contestations of power within the creaturely realm, and devises norms, structures, and institutions to negotiate them. Since power is central both to doctrine of God and political theory, there is thus a certain semantic overlap, there is a certain conceptual overlap, and there are certain grammatical overlaps in the theorization of power between these two areas of thought.

Now, God is not the state, and the state is not God. God's sovereignty and the sovereignty of nation states, God's providence and political governance, God's relation to creation and power dynamics within the world, are not one and the same thing. The political, then, is not the theological, and the theological is not the political. But clearly, the theological is political, and the political is theological. Since the human mind is finite and areas of thought cannot neatly be compartmentalized even *if* one believed that their subjects were disjunct, it is unsurprising that conceptions and ideas have tended to migrate between these two realms of reflection to inform one another, also creating significant historical discursive overlaps. Their respective notions may structurally mimic one another, sometimes even explicitly invoke one another when doing so, and questions that arise in theorizing the one most often arise in theorizing the other.

Carl Schmitt retrieved the term *political theology* for the genealogical and systematic investigation of concept migration between the two realms, or what he called "a sociology of concepts."[5] This mode of analysis became as generative as it became contentious in the 20th century and until today. In this enterprise, what we may call the "theo-political hyphen" has cut both ways–to legitimate or to challenge specific political notions on doctrinal grounds as well as to legitimate or to challenge specific theological notions in light of political commitments. Thus a certain complexity of cross-pollination or mutual historical influence, as well as mutual analysis and evaluative assessment has marked the political-theological project.

[5] Schmitt 2005.

Even as many definitions circulate, I have found Adam Kotsko's to be a helpful shorthand for my own approach. Against narrowly understandings political theology either as a politically invested theologizing or a theologically committed politics, Kotsko proposes that the object of study in political theology in fact is "*the very relationship between politics and theology*, centering on structural homologies and conceptual exchanges between the two fields."[6] This definition then locates political theology proper on a meta-level with regard to both politicized theology and theologically funded politics, seeing them as its objects of reflection and theorization.

It is important to clarify that such a meta-perspective does not make political theology neutral in any way. Rarely has political theology functioned as a purely descriptive, historical, systematic undertaking. Since its authors—whether political theorists or theologians—would typically hold commitments in one or the other realm (at least), their political-theological analysis would explicitly or implicitly mount arguments about the legitimacy or even necessity of specific conceptions and shapes of power, or of their religiously heretical and dangerous character. Even the mere postulate of the theo-political connection typically either served to legitimate or to discredit the concepts thus traced as theological, depending on the standpoint of the analyst.

Beyond the struggle for genealogical supremacy or conceptual authority, divine power and human power came also into more direct competition and thus need for theo-political negotiation and adjudication especially where either side stipulated an ontology of power, its highest form, or its origin. In that case questions would arise like, how does "the Almighty" relate to "the Mighty," or, how does the state's monopoly on violence replace, or continue to depend on, higher powers? Thus, political theology has indeed also been *theological* in the sense of adjudicating ultimate beliefs.

2.2 Sovereignty as Site of Theo-Political Investigation

Historically, the most prominent site of engagement for such competitive "political theology" became the notion of sovereignty. Legal theorist Jean Bodin defined sovereignty as "the most high, absolute, and perpetuall power … to command."[7] Sovereignty became the central notion of the modern nation state even as it theologically had long served to define God's absolute authority and providential control over creation. It marked the political aspiration for absolute power and the site of struggle between secular and religious political theologies.

[6] Kotsko 2021.
[7] Bodin 1962.

The 20th century witnessed unprecedented manifestations of sovereign power, in the political realm and beyond. Totalitarian ideologies and regimes strove to establish absolute and perpetual power over all areas of human life into all-encompassing control. The development of science and technology, of bureaucratic and administrative apparatuses, of information and communication technologies further helped to enforce those claims: from poison gas to the atomic bomb, from mass media to the concentration camp, as well as to the elaborate forms of biopolitics which have since been found to regulate not only totalitarian regimes but also liberal democracies. National states struggled to rise to sovereignty—only to see it challenged and threatened again: externally, by the growth of transnational political institutions, supranational corporations, and global dependencies; internally, by the noise of political revolutions as well as through the gradual erosion of liberal democracy. Colonized peoples fought for independence against systems of oppression and for the reinvention of their histories and identities. Technological progress evolved from instrumental tools to previously unimaginable degrees of shaping and transforming minds and bodies, human forms of life and even the literal face of the earth.

Political theology mined such developments for their conceptual structures, drawing out homologies or genealogies with regard to the sovereignty of God and its different conceptualizations, thus explicating implicit or latent theologies in diverse theorizations of political formations. Despite its "meta" approach, it actively participated in the politics of ideas by way of analysis. Carl Schmitt criticized legal positivism and constitutional democracy on grounds of their theological deism. Erik Peterson in turn denounced Schmitt's decisionism as heretical imperial monotheism, and denied the viability of any political theology on the basis of Christian trinitarianism.[8] Sharing Peterson denunciation of political monarchical monotheism, Juergen Moltmann would however develop a "new"–countercultural–political theology out of Trinitarian theology.[9] In Nazi Germany, the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms and the postulate of the lordship of Christ famously advanced competing understanding of divine sovereignty sponsoring different political theologies. In South Africa, a similar struggle ensued between Kuyperian beliefs of sphere sovereignty based on common grace, and anti-apartheid foregrounding of universal reconciliation in Christ.

These are obviously just a few examples of how the analysis of conceptual exchanges and structural homologies between the political and the theological time and again competed fiercely, and engendered normative conclusions. Since sovereignty invari-

[8] Peterson 2011.

[9] Moltmann 1993.

ably gestures toward ultimate dimensions, it not only prompted struggle between different conceptualizations of "superhuman power," but also struggle for supremacy between the respective ultimate authorities of the two participant fields.

For the political theorist, the lens of political theology provided helpful resources for conceptualization and analysis, and of course, depending on the theorists own commitments, for their critique and reeinvisioning. For the theologian, too, the real-life manifestations of sovereignty in all their haunting ambivalence and full-blown horror led them to internal critique and reenvisioning of sovereignty as a central category in the doctrine of God.

2.3 Reconsidering Sovereignty, Theologically

Thus theologians started feeling the need to revise their theology, either nuancing the doctrine of sovereignty in counterdistinction of its real-life manifestations, or even dismissing it altogether as an adequate characterization of the Christian God. They asked themselves, if perfectly organized totalitarianism, bureaucratically administered genocide, and technologically advanced and medially glorified "total war" was what sovereign power looked like–was sovereignty then the best category to theorize *divine* power in the first place?

In the political-theological struggle, it became quite clear that theological nuance mattered: Different political positions resonated with different theological lenses, and that differing theological conceptions came to quite different political conclusions. After political theology and its manifestations "on the ground," theologians understood that a more qualitative discernment was necessary to describe "which God" we are talking about, rather than simply conceptually maximizing political forms of power or philosophical omni-quantors. Post WWII, then, alternative conceptions and re-framings of divine power mushroomed—ranging from the "suffering God" envisioned by Bonhoeffer, through the solidarity of God with the poor and marginalized formulated by liberation theologians, to the "death of God" and "weakness of God" proposed by postmodern theologians.

In their different ways, they all drew theological conclusions from political theology, qualitatively reformulating divine power in a way that would honor central Christian commitments while avoiding confusion with the very ungodly real-life manifestations of sovereignty.

2.4 From Political Theology to Economic Theology

In recent decades, political theology has expanded its scope to pursue similar questions–which theological notions implicitly fund the way power is conceptualized?–in other areas of life. Because, of course, power is operative far beyond "the political" in the narrower sense of its institutional realm–beyond the state and its legal and pre-legal foundations, beyond political systems and models of governance, beyond nationhood, the rule of law, civil religion and the like.

In his famous study, *The Kingdom and the Glory*[10], Giorgio Agamben suggests to complement the Schmittian political theology of sovereignty with an economic theology of government. Behind economic beliefs in the invisible hand of the market, bureaucratic procedure and protocols, and media and celebrity culture, Agamben discerns theological notions. These go beyond the traditional focus on sovereignty without replacing them: indeed, the theological lens is what allows to to tie them together and to make sense of the curious phenomenon that in modern societies power seems to need glory: economic administration of power and medial acclamation are the "angelic" modes through which the absent transcendent sovereign God enacts God's power providentially and is recognized. Where a secular analysis of economy and media might see in them democratic and liberal mechanisms, Agamben's economic theology reveals them to continue to be centered around the empty throne of sovereign power.

Agamben's economic theology presents a double expansion of political theology. For one, it moves beyond institutions of political power (the state, the constitution, the law) and into other subsystems of life (the economy, media)–hence, the predicate "economic" rather than "political." Additionally, it also expands the theological range of conceptions. Rather than parsing out the doctrine of *de deo uno*, and theological notions of creation, miracle, judgment, it parses out the doctrine of *de deo trino*, and theological notions of providence, angelology, liturgy.

Despite the expansions and the self-description, Agamben's analysis is structurally still squarely political theology: It traces structural homologies of secular power relations to theological notions, and parses out the theological structure systematically to better understand their real-life effects. Even more, it explicitly traces a genealogy of concepts from a seemingly secular site of power relations to a theological origin. If Erik Peterson had maintained against Carl Schmitt that a Trinitarian understanding of divine

[10] Agamben 2011.

power would make any political theology impossible, Agamben's reveals that Trinitarian theology very much funds a political theology of economy.

3. Digital Theology–A Proposal

3.1 Digital Theology as a Political Theology of the Digital

In a similarly expansive vein, I thus propose digital theology as a political theology of the digital. Such a digital theology would inquire into *the very relationship between theology and the digital*, centering on structural homologies and conceptual exchanges between the two fields. In contrast or complement to the four types of digital theology sketched at the outset of this paper, it would neither describe theology operating in digitized modes (roughly Phillips et al.'s DT1+DT2) nor theological responses to digital issues (roughly Phillip's et al.'s DT3+DT4). Rather, all four of these direct ways of relating theologically to digitality would be among its objects of study.

As in other variations of political theology, the main focus of analysis would be a theorization of power. This is indeed demanded by the radical transformations of power that the digital heralds. Here, again, I do not primarily mean shifts in *who holds* the power (say, shifts from nation states to global tech corporations like Apple, Alphabet, Facebook, Amazon) or whether certain *uses* of it are more or less problematic (say, empowerment of resistance movements by social media or use of browsing meta-data in algorithmic micro-targetting). Instead, I am interested to investigate the ways in which power in the digital world has assumed the form of information technologies, and how it is constituted and circulates in forms of referentiality, communal voluntaricity, and algorithmicity[11]. If Agamben discerned a central inoperativity of power in the governmental machine, the regime of knowledge that is the digital comes with a further *desubjectivation and automaticity of power* that we need to understand better. If Agamben's economic theology interrogates the administrative and medialized shape of the governmental machine in the West asking, why does power need glory?, the focal question of a digital theology will be, why does power need knowledge? Theologically speaking, if the 20th century demanded a political theology of sovereignty, the 21st century demands a political theology of omniscience.

As in traditional political theology, the theologian of the digital must perform a double movement: Firstly, they will investigate conceptual exchanges and structural homologies between notions of divine omniscience and the digital, discerning latent

[11] Stalder 2018.

theologies–this is their analytic or conceptual task. While many debates of digitality to date anecdotally invoke religious metaphors and tropes–from the "all-seeing eye" to enthusiastic or dystopian characterizations of "dataism"–, serious political-theological analysis of the digital is hard to find. The sophisticated conceptualizations of divine omniscience theologians have developed over centuries can offer helpful intellectual resources for a more finegrained analysis of how power/knowledge operates in the digital. It may even turn out that some are not only systematically, but even genealogically relevant. As in the earlier political theology sketched above, theological nuance will matter matter in its contribution to a fine-grained theorizations of the digital. What specific doctrines of omniscience do we see operative in the digital and how? What are their systematic ramifications?

While such political-theological analysis will also feed substantively into the theological-ethical critique of digitality Phillips et al. frame as DT4, this is not the only critical task that arises. Additionally, a theological self-critique in light of political theology's analysis of the digital will challenge theology's own articulations: If this is what manifestations of superhuman knowledge look like, the digital theologian must ask after their conceptual analysis, how then might we want to reconceive of divine omniscience in contradistinction from it, or even search for alternative notions altogether?

3.2 Power/Knowledge Beyond Sovereignty

The political theologies of sovereignty understood power as something a subject (a person or institution) possesses and wields–a notion that lends itself to questions about its true origin or its teleological destillation into a singular will or body, whether of God, or the monarch, or the people. It is obvious that power in the digital is much more liquid, depersonalized, and elusive in its datafied and algorithmic invisibility.

Agamben's economic theology homed in on the administrative functioning of power and its media apparatus. Guy Debord describes the "society of the spectacle"[12] as an autocratic reign of the market economy through capitalism-driven media, advertising, television, film and celebrity culture. The spectacle reduces reality to commodifiable fragments, encourages a focus on appearances, and alters behavior into patterns of conformity and consumption. It medially manufactures consent by way of acclamation that marks liberal democratic forms of government while also highly streamlining

[12] Debord 1983.

behavior and consumer choice. All of these characterizations are only intensified in the digital society of the spectacle. But they may not be its only traits.

Our digital theology needs to go a step further by addressing not only the administration of power by market and media, but the minute technologies that today form the background mechanisms for such functioning of power: the datafication, computation, algorithmization at work in digital information and communication technologies.

Michel Foucault famously theorized a trend away from the centralized functioning of power in sovereignty in our Western societies, toward more capillary functionings of power through technologies that co-constituted power and knowledge. Foucault cautioned: "We should direct our researches on the nature of power not towards the juridical edifice of sovereignty, the State apparatuses and the ideologies which accompany them, but towards domination and the material operators of power, towards the forms of subjection and the inflections and utilizations of their localised systems, and towards strategic apparatuses. We must eschew the model of Leviathan in the study of power. We must escape from the limited field of juridical sovereignty and State institutions, and instead base our analysis of power on the study of the techniques and tactics of domination."[13]

Michel Foucault thus developed a depersonalized account of power, in which power is not seen as a commodity that can be possessed, but as something that "circulates ... and [is] exercised thorough a net-like organization" (98). Foucault discerns power from effects rather than intentions, and locates it in mechanisms, procedures, and technologies rather than in subjects, roles, and positions. Power has to do with the machine rather than its operator, in how it structures the field of possible action. It distends into the micropractices of everyday life in all its minute mundane details.

This reconceptualization of power allows for a broader political-theological analysis beyond its personal ("the sovereign") and institutional ("the state") sites. It allows to capture the productive rather than merely prohibitive or repressive, the ordering and organizing rather than merely confining functioning of power. Instead of sovereignty's top-down approach, Foucault calls for an "ascending analysis" (99) of the "manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body" (95). Such an analysis starts with technologies of knowledge that are "both relatively autonomous of power and act as its infinitesimal elements." (99)

[13] Foucault 1980: 102.

Indeed, technologies of knowledge production are central to this understanding of power itself. Rather than merely think of knowledge as something that leads to power or a more efficient application of power, Foucault conceptualizes power as producing its own knowledge, through its very mechanations and technologies, and thus reifies itself through the discourse of truth it generates, normalizes, and naturalizes. Foucault understands power and knowledge to be co-constitutive: "Power, when it is exercised through these subtle mechanisms, cannot but evolve, organise and put into circulation a knowledge, or rather apparatuses of knowledge" (102).

It is easy to see in the digital such an apparatus of power/knowledge—a decentralized, liquid, capillary, and ubiquitous technology that produces a certain kind of knowledge along with its own standards of truth, which in turn inconspicuously structure the field of power relations in invisible, depersonalized, apparently automatic and objective ways.

Understanding such digital power/knowledge better is then the distinct task of a new digital theology, a political theology of the digital. What structural homologies and conceptual influences between the theological's and the digital's notions of power/knowledge come into view? A full analysis is obviously far beyond the scope of this article, but a rough sketch will suffice to suggest the generative nature of such an inquiry: At least four variations on divine omniscience assert themselves in aspects of the digital economy. They do not indicate a progress or succession of models, but distinguish theological parallels in different paradigmatic aspects of the digital technology that exist simultaneously.

3.3 Omniscience as Site of Theo-Political Investigation

Disciplining omniscience: A digital theology of eschatology. Taking another cue from Foucault, what we might call *disciplining omniscience comes into view*. His study of the prison has become a seminal text for the formation of surveillance studies, and thus presents an important entry for the digital theology envisioned here. For Foucault, the panopticon—Jeremy Bentham's famous translation of the "all-seeing eye of God" into a functional architecture—marked the technological transition from societies of sovereignty to what he called societies of discipline.

Where sovereignty relies on physical force, discipline internalizes its regime in apparently more humane, but also highly pervasive and inescapable ways. While visibility is central to both, its relation is inversed between them. Sovereign power makes the body of the king highly visible to the gaze of the masses in order to be able to exercise power

over life and death from a central location, while the masses themselves remain in the shadows. In the societies of discipline, the individual is exposed to permanent visibility by a central site of power which itself remains shrouded and intransparent. The knowledge that one may be watched at any time effects a preemptive self-regulation on the side of those being watched.

"Visibility is a trap,"[14] observes Foucault: The masses' visibility becomes the instrument of their subjection–which at the same time also effects their subjectification, their becoming subjects through the technologically engendered self-consciousness of their conduct. The mystery of the technology structures space and time such that visibility creates knowledge, which in effect disciplines behavior and produces reflective subjects without any apparent intervention or application of force. Power does thus not rely on the existence or presence of a sovereign subject, force and intervention, or even on glory and acclamation—but on knowledge: a technological apparatus that exposes everything to the scrutinizing, controlling, and correcting gaze of power. Power comes from everywhere and nowhere, permeates everything, and is exerted in automatic and depersonalized regimes of knowledge.

Even as the panopticon seems to be about physical enclosure, Foucault points out insightfully that its governing principle does not primarily target the body, but the soul: it is a "machine for altering minds." (125) It is thus not surprising to find the disciplining mechanisms of the panopticon to apply even as it has shed its walls and gone virtual, relying on data rather than architecture, and on means of tracking far beyond literal visibility.

Already Bentham had envisioned "the gradual adoption and diversified application of this single principle...over the face of civilized society" to the benefit of "morals reformed, health preserved, industry invigorated, instruction diffused, public burdens lightened, economy seated as it were upon a rock, the gordian knot of the poor-laws not cut but untied–all by a simple idea in architecture."[15] To date, find disciplining omniscience at work in digitized forms of policing and law enforcement, in the ever more competitive data-driven education system, and in the workplace: Just think of current debates about the meticulous surveillance of Amazon delivery drivers and warehouse employees which brutally disciplines their conduct into maximal efficiency.

[14] Foucault 1995.
[15] Bentham 1995: 95.

The theology of disciplining omniscience is not hard to trace, and indeed this is the area of digital theology that has seen the most explicit engagement.[16] The disciplining mechanism relies on the assumption of a divine power that inescapably records and eschatologically judges human actions. The all-seeing eye of God remains invisible, shrouded in mystery, but watches everything. Conscience is shaped by an envisioned final judgment seat: the *knowledge that someone knows what I am doing* delegates behavioral discipline to the subject, who conforms to normative expectations in order to avoid negative consequences. Bentham himself explicitly epigraphed his panoptic proposal with a verse from Psalm 139 and commissioned an emblem for his panopticon which shows an all-seeing eye at the center, a classical symbol of the divine, sending its illuminating rays into the cells which are organized around it at the periphery, captioned with three principles: "mercy, justice, vigilance," as variations on the attributes of God.

[16] Cf. especially the work of Eric Stoddart.

Drawing on implicit theological notions elucidates the curious paradox of the digital economy that discipline does not formally deny or even limit human freedom—centuries of theological debates substantiate it as indeed absolutely necessary for the functioning of an eschatological disciplinary mechanism. The perception of individual freedom is in fact an effect of the disciplinary apparatus: the self-reflection engendered by surveillance and the subsequent ability to conduct oneself indeed mark the freedom of the individual by way of subjectification. Rather than present an archaic notion of a judging God, disciplining omniscience can thus be found at the core modernity's understanding of God as vehicle of morality. The inversion of visibility from God to humanity thus does not relinquish power, but in fact allows it to permeate into the most remote corners of human conduct as a productive rather than repressive function.

Performing omniscience: A digital theology of election. What I want to call performing omniscience is in some ways an intensification, in other ways an inversion of the disciplining omniscience type. In the digital panopticon, the center of power is not just intransparent, it vanishes from view or even disperses altogether. But counterintuitively, this does not seem to result in emancipation from discipline's heteronomy. Instead, the ensuing question "what if no one is watching?" leads to existential anxiety and performative self-production. If self-consciousness, a fear of punishment, or a shame of exposure marked disciplining omniscience, the driving force of performing omniscience is an insatiable desire to be seen.

Performing omniscience is at work in the exhibitionism of social media culture, populated by "selfies," "foodies," etc., and in self-tracking apps and practices.[17] The technologies of knowledge here are no external impositions, but rather lure the individual into exposing itself in ever increasing visibility and availability. "Self-knowledge through numbers" (the Quantified Self's slogan) as well as the resonances on social media provide ever-precarious self-affirmation, as actual self-perfection or self-achievement remains impossible: "A hundred years ago 'to be modern' meant to chase 'the final state of perfection'–now it means an infinity of improvement, with no 'final state' in sight and none desired."[18] The urge to performatively establish one's truth, one's self, one's status, recasts individuala as "commodities: that is, as products capable of drawing attention."[19] In absence of a clearly defined big Other, the subjectification mechanism cannot be completed. Affirmation from small others comes to

[17] Cf. esp. the work of Deborah Lupton.

[18] Bauman 2012: viii-ix.

[19] Bauman / Lyon 2013: 31.

function as a proxy in what can now be conceptualized as horizontal or lateral surveillance[20], to whose shifting and intransparent norms and expectations the individual keeps subjecting itself, unable to attain the closure of recognition once and for all. The implicit theology obviously draws on ascetic ideas and religious practices, but these are theologically quite distinct from the discipline described in the previous type. The theological corollary is not the function of divine omniscience in eternal judgment, but its function in the doctrine of *election.* Its main drive is not fear of retribution, but anxiety about one's status in light of one's own inability to to secure it oneself. Salvation is never certain, it can only be inferred indirectly from its resonances and effects in one's own life, actions, and successes. But it remains precarious, out of reach of the performing subject, which is precisely the reason why the mechanism becomes so pervasive. Performing omniscience can thus best be theorized through the Calvinist *syllogismus practicus*. The insistence on the sovereign grace of God, which promises absolute freedom, in actuality leads to absolute existential uncertainty and a proliferation of "oughts"—engendering a "Weber 4.0" productivity.

Controlling omniscience: A digital theology of providence. In their remembrance of this empty center of power, disciplining and performing omniscience works through the subject's consciousness or even desire of its being-seen and being-tracked. But obviously much of the digital economy's working of power bypasses the subject and its conscious engagement altogether. This is the case in the algorithmic functioning of controlling omniscience. In his famous post-script to Foucault's societies of discipline, Gilles Deleuze questioned whether in fact a further transition was already underway, the emergence of societies of control in which the individual has been technologically fragmented into "dividual" data: Power "runs through each, dividing each within."[21] "The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. … Individuals have become 'dividuals' and masses [have become] samples, data, markets, or 'banks.' "[22]

In the digital economy, data is most often produced without the individual's awareness. In her dystopic study of Surveillance Captitalism, Shoshana Zuboff describes how the entire world's actions and conditions are technologically "rendered as behavior, translated into electronic data flows."[23]

[20] Lyon 2018.
[21] Deleuze 1992: 5.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Zuboff 2019: 211.

If disciplining omniscience's central principle relied on the individual's awareness of being watched, controlling omniscience works independent of it altogether. The individual moves, behaves and takes decisions under the impression of subjective freedom, while subtle mechanisms shape perception and decision-making through background mechanisms. Behavioral (and other) data flows are technologically analyzed and go into real-time decision-making that affects the way the individual can move through the world and what choices it is presented with. Rather than by self-conscious reflection, behavior is conditioned, informed, if not altogether determined by the way the world is presented back to the individual in increasingly immersive and overlapping digital ecosystems. Zuboff uses starkly religious language to describe this functioning of power: "Like gods, these mathematical models were opaque, their workings invisible to all but the highest priests in their domain: mathematicians and computer scientists. Their verdicts, even when wrong or harmful, were beyond dispute or appeal ... inscrutable to all but an exclusive data priesthood."[24]

Data-based predictions are not actually forecasts about individuals, they are stochastic correlations of dividual data, but they can become self-fulfilling prophecies or even be used outright for the purpose of manipulation. If Facebook "knows" you better than you know yourself[25], then Facebook knows what is best for you and is capable of bringing it about. Facebook and Cambridge Analytica's role in the 2016 US presidential elections may demonstrate how controlling omniscience exerts its power over individuals by drawing on dividual data, and not against their wills, but by guiding their wills: microtargetted advertisement allows to design the individual's environment such that it will freely choose what in fact has been chosen for it.[26] Beyond micro-targetting, controlling omniscience fuels many other areas, like search engines[27] or predictive policing[28].

Providence has been conceived of as a subtle and invisible background mechanism rather than sovereign displays of divine power in historical intervention. More unnoticeable, but maybe even more pervasive, everything must—will!—go according to the divine plan. As divine providence, the digital economy's controlling omniscience works in imperceptible, invisible, unfathomable ways, and just as with divine providence, it is all but impossible to exert counter-influence on it. The dividual algorith-

[24] Ibid.: 81.
[25] Cf. Youyou, Wu et al. 2015.
[26] Cf. Kosinski et al. 2013; Kosinski, Michal et al. 2016.
[27] Cf. Noble 2018.
[28] Cf. McCulloch and Wilson 2017.

mic knowledge may be compared to Luis de Molina's conception of middle knowledge: aware of all possible scenarios, controlling omniscience has preemptively decided which one to bring about.[29] Choices remain free, but which choices should be presented such that an individual will freely choose what it is supposed to, has been "railroaded" on the dividual level. While one remains entirely personally responsible for one's action in secondary causation of events, they are indeed decreed by a primary cause.

Replicating omniscience: A digital theology of creation. Similarly to the relationship between disciplining and performing omniscience, *replicating omniscience* is in some ways an intensification, in other ways an inversion of controlling omniscience, or: its limit function. All four sketched types rely on an intertwinement of power/knowledge—just as the doctrine of God has always understood omniscience to be both a function of omnipotence and its "billet d'entree."[30] In replicating omniscience, however, power becomes deterministic because reality and knowledge become coextensive.

Controlling omniscience, we have said, functions algorithmically, stochastically, it does not in fact override people's will to determine their actions and behavior outright. But, we might ask, is that only due to its in fact less-than-omniscient status, i.e., its lack of data? This indeed is the suspicion of tech-optimists like Chris Anderson, former editor-in-chief of WIRED, who unabashedly envisions an "end of theory"[31] and an completely automatic functioning of power once "complete data" is achieved. This may seem quite obviously hermeneutically naive—and data science at large is indeed much more conscious that there is no such thing as pure and objective "raw" data.[32]

But indeed Anderson's claim opens up ontological questions far beyond the grasp of its author: Is reality ultimately informational, even digital, and thus computable? Is the possibility to be known—and theoretically known completely!—therefore ingrained into the universe, and if so, why? And if not, then why and how *are* we able to make sense of anything at all? Already Konrad Zuse envisioned the universe as being deterministically computed on some sort of giant, but discrete computer.[33]

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[29] Reichel 2019.

[30] Feldmeier and Spieckermann 2011.

[31] Anderson 2008.

[32] Cf. e.g. Doyd and Crawford 2012.

[33] Narrated in Floridi 2011: 317, even as Floridi ends up positing informational structural realism against digital ontology.

While Anderson's vision that we might achieve a point where data will be all in all might sound like a dataistic eschatology, the ontological question reveals the site of theological comparison here to be the conflict between intellectualism and voluntarism, and thus the doctrine of God as well as the understanding of the nature of creation. If God knows all there is, and everything is thus perfectly represented in the mind of God, the mind of God becomes indistinguishable from reality. Is all of reality but a simulation, i.e. a dream of God? Does creation come into being because it is in the mind of God, and therefore has to have reality, or does it have independent reality, and is subsequently perfectly represented in the mind of God because God is omniscient? On the more mundane level a similar ambivalence might ensue: Does data represent reality or does it produce worlds? Do we live in a deterministic or a constructivist reality? How does how we understand the world alter the world? And how might thus datafication very literally be involved in political theology: shaping the world in its image?

4. Reconsidering Omniscience, Theologically

Along with the expansion of the realm of political theology into the digital, we can discern in these four types an expansion of theological loci that inform the digital imaginary: beyond sovereignty, beyond the economy of salvation, we see notions of divine judgment, election, providence, and even creation play out in different aspects of how power operates in the digital—even as this rough sketch does not aim at a comprehensive analysis.

As a political theology of the digital, this analysis thus uncovers conceptual homologies between the theological and the digital, which may partially be systematic, partially be genealogically traceable as influence from one realm to the other. It theorizes technological developments in their larger transformative effects by differentiating them according to differing theo-logics, the doctrinally mappable different ways in which such technologies work towards constructing superhuman knowledge/power, and the ways in which such superhuman knowledge/power interfaces with human subjectivity and agency.

To state the obvious, digital theology is not an "objective" analytic, or more precisely: it is not neutral with regard to the objects it studies. As previous versions of political theology, digital theology participates in a politics of ideas, even as it offers conceptual resources to theorize the digital in its analytic task. It not only generally asserts the relevance of theological thought to the digital despite the latter's secularity, such an

analysis will also provide starting points for theological-ethical assessment and critique of digital logics.

But this is not the only critical task that ensues. Additionally, digital theology prompts a reappraisal of the underlying doctrines. As it was the case with sovereignty, the real-world manifestations of superhuman knowledge challenge the theological notions they draw on. Contemporary techno-political manifestations of superhuman knowledge and its formation or deformation of human freedom, and the violence and injustice they engender might prompt the theologian to ask themself: Is there a need to revise our doctrines of omniscience, or might omniscience even be the adequate conceptualization of God's knowledge in the first place?

As in light of the political-theological developments of the 20th century, theologians may find that theological nuance matters and that the all-quantor may not be the most helpful way to testify to who the Christian God is. Rather than simply maximize knowledge their its conception of God, they may start asking more precise questions about the particularities, the quality and functioning of knowledge in *who* this God is. They may venture that maybe God does not know everything after all, but God knows everything that *this* God needs to know–as with God's power, so God's knowledge cannot be distinguished from, and is merely an expression of who *this* God is and how *this* God relates to the world. Instead of disciplining, performing, controlling, and replicating omniscience, we might thus talk about "justifying knowledge," "redeeming knowledge," "liberating knowledge," and finally, "creative knowledge." But these ideas, too, need to be further developed elsewhere.

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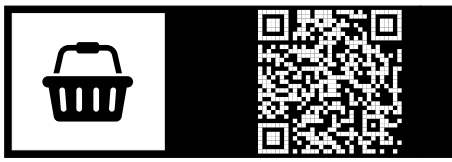

Jesus in the eShop
A Christian Perspective on Power in the Digital

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By starting out with Hannah Arendts concept of power this paper follows Anthony Giddens and his attempt to take up on Weber's and Parsons' ideas. With the gained understanding of power the paper examines the relationship between power and digitalization. Especially the internet as an place of equal opportunity and asymmetric power is taken into account. The author then observes a threefold challenge to (Christian) religion by the power structures resulting from digital capitalism.

1. Taking Charge of the Temple

Considering the biblical story about Jesus' expelling merchants and money changers from the temple found in Mk 11,15-19 par, we can discern at least three different interpretations leading to three different stories. While current exegesis teaches us, that any interpretation that charges Jesus with the intention of an abrogation of the temple or a breach with a jewish identity should be understood an antijudaistic myth, as Jesus has not tried to 'cleanse' but probably prophetically claimed the temple[1], there still might be a story of domination, of marketization or of alienation. The story of domination aims at the prophetic critique of the values of a corrupt leadership by the ruling classes cooperating with the Roman occupants; the story of marketization stresses the view

[1] Tiwald 2017: 464.

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of the temple as a place of dealing in money instead of God's grace and power, the story of alienation looks at the temple as a place of the reversal of God's good order, something to be set right in God's kingdom.

No matter which story you prefer, each is a story of power. Either of a power embedded in relationships, or of a power situated in the controlling of resources or of a power present in a images of order. In a prophetic symbolic act Jesus himself claimed and wielded power - which wasn't taken lightly by the powers that were. The temple is, in all of these stories, a symbol of a good, albeit perverted, order, it is, in symbol and in social reality, a nexus of power, a nerve center of the elites, as an exegete puts it.[2]

To state it bluntly: in a religious perspective, the temple might not be the worst simile for today's digital communication and information networks, platforms and virtual realities, as they are nexus of power, nerve centers not only of elites. Structuring channels of global communication means power, as the transfer of money, knowledge and the forming of behaviour is determined by such channels and the technical means we use to build and use them. Like the temples of old, those channels are man-made and serve technical as well as symbolic social functions, as hubs of distribution, but also, to many, point to a reality beyond. Thus, claiming the temple is never just harmless, as Jesus of Nazareth discovered at his cost.

Of course, a simile only covers so much ground. For that reason, I will concentrate on platforms. Many phenomena will not be treated: I'll not talk about blockchain or KI, I will not go into the internet of things or the military uses of digital instruments, even though all those things come into play when we talk about power in the digital world. What I will do, however, is try to explain how I use the term power, how digitization and power are connected and what religion may have to do with the unfolding of power in the digital world.

2. Power and Domination: Hannah Arendt, Max Weber, Anthony Giddens

First of all, I'd like to distinguish two different concepts of power in order to clarify in which way I make use of the term.

A first definition is the famous agonistic one coined by sociologist Max Weber: He defines 'power' as the ability to enforce one's will even against resistance.[3] Even though this usage of the concept is close to many everyday uses, it seems flawed for three rea-

[2] Tiwald 2017: 464.
[3] Weber 1922: 28.

sons. First of all, it situates power in contexts close to some type of domination and thereby unduly narrows down its scope, while we may understand power as the basic ability 'to make a difference'[4]; in individuals it may show itself as self-efficacy[5]. Secondly, it does not take mediated action into account – but social structure is more often than not embedded in technologies, practices or codified rules (like laws), and even though such practices may go back to some human action, it may be hardly identifiable after time as such structures are often reproduced, modified or abolished in everyday practice without visible intention directed at the influence of such structures. Thirdly, and connected to the first counterargument, it gives rise to the confusion of power with force, while the most sustainable use of power is the one that does not need to rely on force or violence.

For that reason, rather in accordance with Anthony Giddens and Jürgen Habermas I will start out from Hannah Arendt's concept of power. Arendt defines power as the ability to communicatively cooperate together with others in order to make a difference.[6] Even though the teleology stressed in Weber and Parsons' concepts of power, the ability to reach a certain goal, is less important here, it is by no means absent, as the ability to conceptualize goals is in itself an aspect of power dependent on social and cultural interaction over time.[7] Thus understood, power has its roots in cooperative action that makes a difference. Teleology is gradual, and thus, even if a certain goal is not reached and consequences are unintended we may still argue that power has been exerted.

Regarding the means used to exert power, the concepts of allocative and authoritative resources developed by Anthony Giddens in his attempt to take up on Weber's and Parsons' ideas from an Arendtian point of view are, to my mind, plausible. This is especially relevant as such resources and their effects can be conceptualized in a praxeologic perspective, in which Bourdieu's[8] concepts of habitus and social, cultural and economic capital can be used to understand exertion and transitions of power. To give an example: once a certain structuration mode of cultural elements – for instance the establishment of an alleged connection of skin colour and social value – has been incorporated into a certain habitus, it continues to exert power as long as agents reproduce that connection in – consciously or inconsciously – 'seeing' people of different

[4] Giddens 1984.
[5] Bandura 1994.
[6] Arendt 1970: 45.
[7] Taylor 1989.
[8] Bourdieu 1972; Bourdieu 1983.

colours differently. As in the example, this is especially bitter as And of course, the conscious reversal of such discriminating attitudes and modes of 'seeing' may be especially bitter as those discriminated against carry that habitus themselves. And when those modes of 'seeing' or 'watching' permeat the algorithms of search engines, then the search for 'black women' will result in turning out imagery loaded with sexist and racist stereotypes, as Safya Noble[9] has shown.

3. Digitization and Power

In the world of digital informations- and communications technologies (ICT), social media and the communication platforms and channels that go along with them, allocative and authoritative resources play out in different ways. Authoritative resources appear in the form of what I would call framing power, allocative resources play out in a privatization of communication channels and proprietary markets. Of course, such resources are distributed unevenly, there are long-standing inequalities playing out but also an early-starter dividend. And contrary to the promise attributed in early times by well-meaning activists to digital communication and the internet as a space of equal opportunity and equity, it is a part of the general public – which may be understood as a fragmented space of articulation as well as an arena of asymmetric power struggles[10] – in which asymmetric power plays an especially important role.

3.1 Framing Power and Digitization (Authoritative Ressources)

Theologians and outspoken religious virtuosos of all kinds usually know a lot about framing power – I refer to my Christian tradition for some non-digital examples. When hellenistic Jews and proselytes following the Nazarene used the greek term of 'kyrios' to refer to Jesus, it was hard to overlook that this was an imperial title reserved for royalty or even the Roman emperor and thus an act of subversion that was plausible to many adherents of this new underclass religion. When, on the other hand, priests and ministers of the Christian church in times of its legalization and imperial acceptance under Constantine and Theodosius were invested in the robes of imperial officials and the imperial organ became the liturgical musical instrument of choice, that also framed reality: messing with the church meant messing with the empire whose leaders chose to make this religion the symbol of imperial unity. When, in Reformation times, the new printing technology gave rise to the mass production

[9] Noble 2018.
[10] Meireis 2020.

and distribution of affordable illuminated leaflets, making literary products an everyday commodity and literacy an attractive ability, the faithful became less dependent on authoritative word of mouth. When, to give a last example, Martin Luther King quoted Amos' prophetic call for justice and righteousness in support of the claims of the civil rights' movement to equal rights and freedom from oppression for African Americans, he framed political reality in invoking divine support and merging the civil religious ideology along which the US national community was imagined with a civil liberation and equality agenda, thus adding a new twist to the story of US identity - supported, of course, by large numbers of black and white citizens.

As in the analogous examples given, in the digital world, framing has a technological, a habitual, and a narrative dimension to it. All three overlap and interact.

In a technological vein, the use we make of the instruments the information and communication technologies (ICT) provide also changes the ways in which we perceive the world.[11] Of course, given the plurality of services and the renewal rate of fashionable services, there is always more than one choice and an improvement of certain skills, so we are not dealing in conspiracy theories of histories of decline. Using WhatsApp may result in an increase in communication and people we reach out to as well as in the skills necessary to profit from the service, but also in a contact barrier regarding those who do not suscribe to that service. As GPS navigation systems show, finding your way in unknown terrain loses a lot of its scare so that geographical distances shrink even further, but skills in map-reading and general awareness of geographical surroundings may decline due to the irony of automation.[12] And of course power is involved as those who technically structure the services influence the ways of changing perception by framing it in novel ways.

One of the aspects of changing perceptions concerns our habitus, the ways in which we access and deal with the world. Habitually, inhabitants of areas in which data connection and user devices like smartphones and notebooks are fairly accessible rely on large providers for services, and the larger their data bases are, the better and more convenient are the services they provide. Thus, people (not only, but at least) in the northwestern part of the world will look to their smart phones and Google Maps for orientation, to Google and Wikipedia for knowledge and to WhatsApp for contact. The skills necessary to operate those devices and the user interfaces installed for easy access now belong to an organon of obligatory everyday knowledge. Of course, one

[11] Coeckelbergh 2017.
[12] Bainbridge 1983.

can still do without those techniques and there are all kinds of alternatives to the brands mentioned here, but using those alternative paths becomes more and more awkward as digital natives grow up with those skills and the majority of users has access to the platforms mentioned above. As those instruments become part of the habitus – in some ways according to race, class and gender structures – those providing those instruments gain power as they access the formation of habitus. In addition to the general change of perception due to the use of a technical implement mentioned above (turn to a navigational device rather than a road map or orally transmitted geographical knowledge), this also concerns concrete material aspects, as for instance GoogleMaps structures the sights we perceive in our maps of a given city: some shops and restaurants may be featured prominently while others may not, famed sights may be highlighted, while less known museums may only be visible to the savvy. And of course, this material guidance of habitus is also power-related, as the branding entry of 'googleing' as a short expression for 'search on the internet' shows.

An even darker side to this form of habitual framing may appear in the way trust in algorithmic search engines and data processing instruments may lead to gross injustice and negative discrimination. Since such processing usually operates by taking past events and data and making use of those to project a future, past asymmetries may influence images of the future, painting the prospects of a traditionally crime-riddled neighbourhood black[13]; additionally, programmer's prejudices and stereotypes usually find their ways into softwares, as social awareness is not a prominent subject in tech schools.[14]

But framing has not only a technical and habitual side to it, but also a narrative one. Narratives on change or, even simpler, processes effected through ICT impact the social imaginary[15], thus influencing attitudes towards social relations structured through the digital. In labour contexts, the language of sports may reframe highly asymmetric and – for workers - disadvantageous labour markets as gaming contests: The platform Topcoder tried to attract potential programmers with the slogan 'Every day a new hackathon'. Of course, religious imagery may also be found, as the title of a widely acclaimed book on digital change by the Israeli historian Yuval Harari shows. 'Homo deus' exploited the transhumanist narrative claiming that a change towards a world reigned by illness, poverty, death and the human condition at large was im-

[13] O'Neill 2016.

[14] Noble 2018.

[15] Castoriadis 1975; Taylor 1994.

minent. The narrative presented by Harari[16] thus belongs to the utopy/dystopy type. Such narratives emerge in different contexts and follow different logics: Some arise in certain scientific communities, like the singularity and the transhumanist narrative. Others are launched by lobbying interest groups, like the German industry 4.0 narrative, claiming the industrial internet as an evolutionary and unavoidable phenomenon, thus masking certain interests and mystifying human-induced developments. A third type may show traits of the conspiracy narrative threatening an assimilation by sinister forces alike to the 'Borg' of Star Trek memory. Even though such narratives usually contain more than one element of truth, they often have a strongly ideological ring to them. The transhumanist AI and robotics narrative transported not only in popular academic books like Hararis Homo Deus[17] but also in pop-cultural iconography like the Terminator series threatens the takeover by machines. But in procuring such fears, the real power problems regarding, for instance, robotics, are mystified and obscured. To give an example: Any industrial robot closely cooperating physically with a human agent, for instance in lifting loads and putting them into the right place so the human can operate on them, needs a huge array of sensors collecting data of the human agent in order not to harm her. Length of limb, micro movements typical to an individual worker etc. need to be measured continouusly and fead into some sort of mainframe. Any employer accessing those data with the right type of software may acquire knowledge on the worker in question this person may not even be aware of herself. Tiny tremors revealing the one drink too many he had the evening before, or a hidden illness, may be spotted, a knowledge that the employer may use to his or her advantage without knowledge of the employee in question.[18]

3.2 Economic Power and Digitization (Allocative Ressources)

The illustration of industrial robotics already shows the close entanglement of authoritative and allocative resources. The example of the data-driven platform economy, on the other hand, presents the case of a privately owned social and public space similar to the physical space enclosed by the shopping mall. This power of course invests the owners with economic power that's easily convertible into socio-political power.

As Philip Staab[19] has shown, digital markets are driven by a logic of non-scarcity. In opposition to physical markets dealing in finite and scarce goods, data are infinitely

[16] Harari 2017.
[17] Harari 2017.
[18] Steil 2019.
[19] Staab 2019.

reproducable. The competitive logic is not only and to a lesser degree one of access to scarce materials and technologies, but rather one of first movers.[20] Those who manage to acquire a large following of users by providing services that are not directly paid for but subsidized by advertising early on may acquire a mass of data that gives them a competitive edge that later competitors may never catch up on.

Secondly, the elementary business model of such platforms is the provision of proprietary markets that control the access to goods. A market may be understood as a social institution that needs to be set up and provided for by a social entity. Usually, markets are set up by political bodies who also provide the necessary social regulations and sanctions: a body of property and exchange laws making sure that participants meet as equals and deals are considered binding, institutions that make sure such laws are kept and upheld and provide security for the market participants and so on. Platforms like Alibaba, ebay or Amazon introduce themselves as markets in the form of electronic shopping malls that make use of the political provisions and services. The subsidies in the expansion phase of such markets result in a lock-in-effect that binds consumers to the platform later on and, given a sufficiently large consumer stock, enables surplus profits through allocation instead of production by controlling information, access of sellers and buyers, prices and performance.[21]

Finally, the translation of economic into socio-political power and social inequality is a probable outcome.[22] In a combination of political interest and successful lobbying activities, a private appropriation of public goods has already taken place, as platforms have been built on heavy public investment into research and buildup of digital infrastracture. Secondly, finance and digital markets merge – Jeff Bezos was a hedge fonds manager before founding Amazon – in encouraging risk capital and devaluing the social power of work as service and production industry become dependent subcontractors of the platforms functioning as proprietary markets. As the social role of consumers used to get everything in short time becomes dominant, citizenship values and habits may also decline[23] – and with that, we're back in the authoritative resources section.

[20] Staab 2019: 29.
[21] Staab 2019: 206–257.
[22] Staab 2019: 266–286.
[23] Sunstein 2010.

4. What's (Christian) Religion got to do with it?

The power structures resulting from digital capitalism and framing in the way depicted above may be understood as a threefold challenge to (Christian) religion.

First of all, they challenge the self-imagery of churches as parts of civil society and to church as 'community of saints', because churches usually imply members that understand themselves as inspired believers in act and deed, but not as consumers in a market setting. Even though a description of churches as economic enterprises is possible, it usually contradicts the concept of the community.[24]

Secondly, such structures may present a challenge to Christian faithful as they adhere to framing narrations of the liberated community and individual, free to pursue fulfilment in loving one's neighbour and stewarding creation.

Thirdly, as a matter of course, Christian communities, like other religious groups, need to remain conscious of their particular position in society, as for instance argued in relation to Lefort's concept of modern democracy.[25] In that vein, religious communities understood as agents in civil society need to commit to a symmetric share of power for all citizens. In that regard, religious communities also have authoritative resources of their own as they pass on framing narratives of liberation and may constitute themselves as 'communities of character'.[26]

'Claiming the temple' thus may signify the task of rallying for an equal distribution of power and critical inquiry regarding inequal distribution of ways and means of acquiring authoritative and allocative resources regarding the digital world. In a Christian vein, the task then consists in contributing to a digital order open for all in recourse to the stories we have received and the promises connected to God's kingdom.

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[24] For a current systematical account of the concept of the church referred to here cf. Reuter 1997.

[25] Lefort 1986; Meireis 2013.

[26] Hauerwas 1991.

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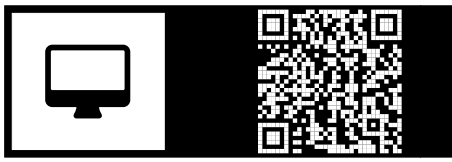

Purifying Dirty Computers
Cyborgs, Sex, Christ, and Otherness

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Virtual reality, especially neural network technology, provides a theologically imaginative experience of otherness that disrupts racialized, sexual, and cultural logics that undergird dominant Christian white cisheterosexual theologies. These technologies not only enable users to "walk a mile in another's shoes" or the other they wish they were, users feel, embody, and are other in ways only hinted at by Jesus' hybrid existence proposed in Matthew 25,35-46. I use a digital sexual storytelling method to explore an indecent incarnational theology of the cyborg which uncovers the persistence of anti-blackness and anti-queerness in digital Christain theology as well as evidences strategies of indecency to combat them.

> Sexual stories of fetishism give us food for thought for a Jesus Messiah in whom we may find the particulars of our life concretised and not transcendentalised, divinely sexualised, socially sexualised, and always for our time and the precise present moment.[1]

> They started calling us computers. People began vanishing and the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty it was only a matter of time.[2]

[1] Althaus-Reid 2000: 163.
[2] Monáe 2018.

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> How might the modern John or Johanna, stake her claim to be—as a black woman, mother, and former slave—the Son of Man, the fulfillment of the promise to unite the whole people under a common sign?[3]

The advance of digital technologies provides a novel way to experience ourselves as other, when dominant racialized, sexual, cultural, and religious systems seek to foreclose on liberative possibilities of self and communal identity. With virtual reality and the possibilities of neural network reality devices, we are not only able to "walk a mile in another's shoes" or the other we wish we were; we can feel, embody, and be other in ways hinted at by Jesus' hybrid existence proposed in Matthew 25: 35-46. Here, I want to explore the digital possibilities of an incarnational indecent theology of the cyborg. I am not intending to layout a fully developed theological argument as much as lean on scholars who have already done so in an effort to signal theologically imaginative possibilities and practices for decolonial, anti-racist sexual and gender justice in a digital world.[4] For this, I bring into conversation Marcella Althaus-Reid's method of sexual storytelling for doing indecent theology, Donna Haraway's foundational concept of the cyborg and its messianic possibilities, as well as the synthesized cyber theology approach to Christology presented by Jeanine Thweatt-Bates. I wonder with the reader about how digital technology is constitutive of who we are and what theological questions that raises for decolonial, anti-racist sexual and gender justice.[5]

Marcella Althaus-Reid declared that all theology is sexual theology. [6] And in this declaration, she provided a methodology of approaching theology as sexual storytelling. Indecent theology is a third way, different from western normative colonizing theologies as well as distinct from liberation theologies even in their postcolonial and preferential commitments. Indecent theology takes seriously the foundations of liberationist theologies as hearing and seeing the 'othered' other, whether that be the poor or sub-

[3] Haraway 1992: 91.

[4] For a robust discussion with far more detail and eloquence than I can provide of theological anthropology and the intersections of gender, embodiment, and cyborg existence related to post/transhuman debates see the recent dissertation by Max Thornton, "Cyborg Trans/Criptions: Gender, Disability and the Image of God" (Thornton 2021). He weaves together a robust analysis of transgender theory and theology, crip theology and disability studies, as well as feminist and queer theologies.

[5] In this article, I attempt to build on and expand the arguments in my 2019 article for Vol 3: The Digital in this series. I again center story and relationality as a way to argue "As digitally embodied spirits we more deeply inhabit our relationality, interdependence, and multiplicity creating more entangled modes of oppression as well as generating liberative salvific moments." This paper seeks to further analysis of cyborg reality without dismissing race or gender discrimination in particular, or the sacred, in this case related to Christology more generally. See Ott 2019b.

[6] Althaus-Reid 2000: 146.

altern.[7] Althaus-Reid challenges the historical, theological silencing of sexual stories in ways that complicate a center-margin or colonizer-colonized binary.

How do we do indecent theology in relation to digital technology? That is to say, I am not seeking to write a new theology. Rather, I'm arguing for another multiplicitous location of doing theology indecently – of *doing* God and thus undoing white cishetero-patriarchal Christianity. Digital space or locations have material qualities and a dependent relationship to hardware; they also reside beyond or outside of linear time and geographic boundaries. Digital sexual stories are human and more. Digital sexuality is an experience of flesh and microchip, feeling and network, experience and haptic response, attraction and electromagnetism, memory and megabyte, interface and connection. A digital indecent theology can be understood in what Althaus-Reid describes as fetishism. Fetishism is "a kind of robotic epistemology concerning the difference between animate and inanimate objects, or between animated sexual organs and inanimate ones."[8] For Althaus-Reid, fetishism and Christianity share parallel mythologies of the living dead, the animated inanimate. An indecent theology via the lens of fetish uncovers inherent practices of socio-political and heterosexist domination and subordination in Christian salvation. At the same time, this inquiry seeks to dislodge the anthropocentric thrust of most Christian sexual theologies.

We have all become technology (machine) and human, what some call the post or transhuman or what Donna Haraway named the cyborg.[9] For some, this is a recent event because of the proximity of integration of technology into our bodies (like constant connection with smartphones, earbuds, pacemakers, or mRNA which bridge tenuous and fabricated divides of nature/machine/human). Others believe we have been transhuman for centuries since learning to use tools, wearing glasses, or understanding the synaptic chemistry of the brain.[10] As the fabrication of the 'man made' distinctions between human, nature, and machine become more recognizable in their erasure through exposure, questions arise about qualities once considered unique to humans (like cognition, ethical decision-making, emotions, and so on). In this arti-

[7] See Chakravorty Spivak 1988. Subalternity is ultimately a social, cultural, political status defined first in postcolonial discourse as a way to address issues of power and representation. The subaltern are not monolithic, rather subalternity is a status or condition of subordination often attributed to colonialization but in a variety of academic studies it can also relate to racial, linguistic, sexual, economic, or class status. I am intentionally naming Spivak within the legacies of liberation theologies as the academic discipline transitions to include or engage postcolonial theory and eventually decolonial and anti-racist approaches.

[8] Althaus-Reid 2000: 149.

[9] Haraway 2011.

[10] Two examples of this argument are Butler 2019 and Dyer 2011.

cle, I explore virtual reality as a specific entanglement of digital spiritual embodiment and the ever increasing possibility or awareness of cyborg/android existence to elucidate theological questions about ethical responses to otherness specifically created by racial, gender, and sexuality differences.

Rather than succumb to the debates of when humans became or become transhuman, I return to the storytelling ways of indecent theology and the roots of feminist cyborg theory. In her "Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway describes the impact of storytelling this way: "The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture. We have all been colonized by those origin myths, with their longing for fulfillment in apocalypse."[11] The central myths intertwine with Christianity to suggest an original innocence, fall, and necessary return, whereas cyborg storytelling's power resides in "seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other."[12] Some have criticized the use of Haraway's cyborg as valorizing technological innovation or bodily enhancement, rather Haraway uses the technological to uncover the engineering that creates naturalized and ahistorical myths about humans related specifically to gender and race as well as the role of militarized capitalism in neocolonial form.[13] For this reason, Lara Cox argues, Haraway's work as well as other decolonial feminist projects were left out of queer studies with the exception of media studies. Because as she notes, "it told an inconvenient truth about the mutually constitutive nature of race, gender, sexuality and class."[14] In response, I invite the reader to resist the impulse, with me, to project the cyborg as either a utopic postracial, postgender/sex being, an enlightenment or neoliberal ideal posthuman, or a vicarious vehicle for atonement.[15]

In *Cyborg Selves: A Theological Anthropology of the Posthuman*, Jeanine Thweatt-Bates provides a thorough proposal of a renewed and relational theological anthropology that adeptly integrates postcolonial critiques of power, hybridity, and otherness across nature, machine, and human historical divides. In doing so, she engages Haraway's

[11] Haraway 2011: 441.

[12] Haraway 2011: 441.

[13] These themes come up in Haraway's later works that go on to complicate and articulate more about her original writings on the cyborg. See Haraway 2008 and Haraway 2016. Grebowicz and Merrick also note that Haraway develops additional figures such as the coyote, the trickster, companion species, and the chthonic forces of the Earth. See Grebowicz / Merrick 2013.

[14] Cox 2018: 33.

[15] I have added the "vicarious vehicle for atonement" based on the paper discussion and colleagues' comments. See comment section.

account of the trickster figures of Jesus and Sojourner Truth that disrupt uninterrogated posthuman propositions,[16] along with Anne Kull's insights[17] on how cyborg embodiment radically expands what counts as human for the sake of incarnational theology, and explores Christ's hybridity, thus resisting binary human/divine distinctions through Kwok, Pui Lan's work on postcolonial theological imagination.[18] Thweatt-Bates offers a posthuman Christology that "is an opportunity to collectively construct a posthuman future and a liveable world for every body, human and post- and non-, of all sorts."[19]

In order to explore an indecent incarnational theology of the cyborg that provides ethical insights to decolonial, anti-racist sexual and gender justice, I focus on the digital sexual storytelling of Janelle Monáe in her emotion film album, *Dirty Computer* with a focus on the pattern of the coming out story.[20] Monáe in the video portion of her song *Make Me Feel* recreates the San Junipero episode of *Black Mirror*.[21] San Junipero is an example of how digitally mediated relationship through virtual reality (VR) shifts the conception of sexual intimacy and relationship toward sexually liberative possibilities. *Dirty Computer*, while projecting a world of cyborg[22] not merely VR simulation, provides a view into the persistence of anti-blackness and anti-queerness[23] in digital spaces and strategies of indecency to combat them. While we may not yet experience the neural simulated realities or the digital existence fictionalized in these narratives, we experience the possibilities in current virtual reality technologies.[24] Thus, sexuality is embodied and social, political, and technological, though most Christian theologies and ethics have continuously tried to confine it to a physical, cisgender, heterosexual coupled behavior.[25]

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[16] Haraway 1992: 88–93.

[17] Kull 2001.

[18] Kwok 2005: Chapter 7.

[19] Thweatt-Bates 2012: 192.

[20] Monáe 2018.

[21] *Black Mirror*, season 3, episode 4, "San Junipero," directed by Owen Harris, written by Charlie Brooker, aired October 21, 2016, Netflix.

[22] Haraway defines the cyborg this way: "a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" which resonates with Monae's character of Jane. Haraway 2011: 429.

[23] Here I use queerness to signal both a political and social subjectivity, and gender and sexual diversities.

[24] Loths 2017: Chapter 10.

[25] Lunceford 2009. Sacredness comes only from humanities recognition or interaction with the self and other human which reduces it to a fleshly exchange Lunceford argues that to transcend or leave the body behind is anti-social saying, "If sacred experience lie in the removal of mediation, an increase in mediation can only lead one further from the sacred." (94) He believes all humans want to be one flesh or known in an in-person sexual encounter even though he

1. Sexual Storytelling

The storyteller Janelle Monáe has been called a digital griot[26] for her Afrofuturist music albums and emotions pictures (a narrative film that accompanies her albums). As an Afrofuturist, Monáe uses digital storytelling created through various art forms of narration, imagery, and music to combat anti-technological Blackness—the idea that technology and Blackness are incompatible. This is often perpetuated by other digital writers and critics who either depict racialized bodies as primitive and technology free (left behind) or on the other hand, erasure racial categories in the future effectively whitewashing all futures. While Monáe's work "voices narratives of liberation via technology, she equally confronts the racist, heterosexist patriarchal, capitalist origins of technology and how these have been used against black women's bodies."[27] She also readily plays with Christian symbols which inserts a religious critique often missed in popular culture analysis of her work.

Similar to the boundary defying existence of the cyborg, Monáe uses different forms of storytelling to enhance the intersections of identity and time by remixing sound and images in her emotion pictures. "In this way technology connects us to other people and to other times, allowing the past, present, and future to merge so that we might access historical moments directly and yet in a way that is both transformed and transforming."[28] Like most Afrofuturism, Monáe's work, through its focus on Blackness, uncovers and highlights the dominance of whiteness. In the particular story of *Dirty Computer*, Monáe deploys purity—literal cleanings and visual imagery—to highlight that "purity is, like the western whiteness which represents it, a single-frequency thought" as Althaus-Reid notes.[29] Monáe uses music and imagery as a form of encryption, preventing interpretation by the dominant class.[30]

The centering of the cyborg in indecent theological approaches resists both Christian purity myths and current digital design that drives toward oneness. Singularity is of-

admits that even those are mediated. This line of argument negates embodied affective and cognitive dimensions of sexuality, while preferencing the physical acts of sexuality which has been a long held Christian bias.

[26] Jones 2018.

[27] Jones 2018: 43.

[28] Jones 2018: 50.

[29] Althaus-Reid 2000: 102.

[30] Jones 2018: 66. Janelle Monáe in the character of Archandroid, Cindi, model #57821 and Jane #57821 (Sincerely, Jane) in Dirty Computer – has a tattoo of the female christ on her right wrist. 57821 shows up as a song in The Archandriod album, suite III and Metropolis cover of Cindi Mayweather is 57821 – Sincerely Jane is most closely related to Kansas City (are we really alive or walking dead) Mayweather in previous albums is a revolutionary leader of androids/robots against the human class that oppresses them – fight back with time travel and music/art time-traveling android messiah – dirty computer seems new tale, but has callbacks to other storylines

ten the tool of the dominant culture to subsume difference. The cyborg, while seen as other, less than human, "can range from hybrid subjectivities grafted to the human body, or inhuman bodies fused with human subjectivities, to bodies that have found an equilibrium in both their human/machine avatars, and finally, to figures that have become cyborgs of both the body and the mind."[31] This definitional and ontological diversity resists singularity from a technological as well as sexuality and gender expression.[32] The imperial, colonizing desire for "oneness" or a singular code also attempts to eradicate multiple narratives and languages.[33] Thus we need multiple representational stories that work for and with othered subjects.[34]

Indecent theology is rooted in telling sexual stories, but it also resists the notion of a "perfect story." Althaus-Reid, when discussing the pattern of sexual stories, notes that coming-out stories "give a testimonial with an affirmation of what normativity has denied." The collection of coming-out stories creates a "network of rebellious people, the sort of rebellion which nurtures theology with a deeper questioning of life."[35] When Janelle Monáe remixes an episode from *Black Mirror*, "San Junipero," within her emotion picture, she moves the pattern of the coming-out story from testimony to theology. Referring back to Black feminist Cheryl Clark, Cassandra Jones unpacks Monáe's use of the death of her main characters, writing "this is not a moment that can be dismissed as another example of the 'bury your gays' trope in which LGBT characters are denied the promise of a loving future routinely granted to starring characters. . . death functions as a means of wresting control of the narrative . . ."[36] Yorkie and Kelly die to rise again in San Junipero. There is a resurrection of sorts from animate to inanimate that plays into technological infallibility as a way to remedy human messiness and failure. Yet, this is somehow different than Monáe's use of death related to Cindi Mayweather, the Archandroid in her earlier album who dies and rises to lead a revolution, and Jane #57821, who is scrubbed and rebooted only to destroy her captors. Monáe's re-mixing of the San Junipero narrative in *Dirty Computer* is a coming-out narrative continues the disruption of the perfect story. In this sexual fetish narrative she draws our attention to the living dead and challenges predetermined notions of liberation in the face of technological fallibility rather than infallibility.

[31] Berman Ghan 2020.
[32] Henderson-Espinoza 2018b: 90.
[33] Haraway 2011: 442.
[34] Peckruhn 2017: 11-12.
[35] Althaus-Reid 2000: 145.
[36] Jones 2018: 53.

Dirty Computer opens with a scene of Jane #57821 being carried on a stretcher into the New Dawn facility. We see Jane's female Christ tattoo and all the personnel dressed in gleaming white. The narrator repeats the line used as one of the epigraphs to this article, "They started calling us computers. People began vanishing and the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty it was only a matter of time." She goes on to talk about being drained of the dirt which was what made them special. This signals the cyborg as a creation of the dominant class (they started calling us computers). Harkening perhaps to Haraway's claim that, "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins."[37] Jane is set on an operating table in what looks like a surgical room. Jane #57821 is asked by the operator of the facility to repeat "I'm a dirty computer, I am ready to be cleaned." Jane cannot affirm a desire to be cleaned (exceedingly unfaithful) and the facility director gives the command to initiate the nevermind—a gas, used to extract memories and display them as files to be deleted by the two white male cleaning room operators.

Each memory is a song with accompanying video reminding the viewer/listener of racial, sexual, and gender politics. Dirty Computer has multiple sexual stories that contribute to a digital indecent theological inquiry. I have chosen to focus on Monáe's *Make Me Feel* song and video which reference the San Junipero episode sandwiched between *Pynk*, an empowerment anthem to the vulva and a counseling session with an ex-lover, now cleaned computer known as a torch, Mary Apple #53. The location of the *Make Me Feel* song and reference to the San Junipero episode provides the context for both what can be understood as the broadcast of Jane's and Monáe's coming-out. The homage to the *Black Mirror* episode of "San Junipero" allows Monáe to layer imagery, fluidity of time, music, and historical references all toward a social and digital centering of blackness and sexual and gender diversity as dirty and at risk of erasure by New Dawn, the cleansing facility.

What happens in the San Junipero episode? San Junipero is a simulated reality created for the elderly to visit and where humans can choose to live their after life, uploaded to the cloud.[38] In this futuristic world, the elderly have access to this alternate reality for five hours a week because of fears of addiction and as a trial run if they would like to purchase this as their afterlife location. In one's twenty-something, simulated body,

[37] Haraway 2011: 430.
[38] *Black Mirror*, "San Junipero."

residents can visit distinct decades in San Junipero, returning to the time of their youth or trying out a new decade. The landscape is generally the same with a few stores, a bar/dance club, houses if users have paid for them, beaches, cliffs, and a seedy club, the Quagmire, out in the desert where all forms of debauchery take place. Of course, depending on the decade one chooses to join at each visit, advertisements, drinks, and dress shift to match the time period. We are introduced to Yorkie and Kelly in the first scene before we know the environment is a simulated reality. Though Wes, who continually chases Kelly, gives the viewer clues when he keeps reminding her that time is running out. Yorkie, a white gangly twenty-something, is visibly uncomfortable and stands out. She is used by Kelly, a self-confident, stylish African-American young adult to escape Wes, an overbearing white dude who begs Kelly to have sex with him again.

Yorkie plays the role of an old friend at Kelly's request and helps get rid of Wes. Kelly discovers this is Yorkie's first time to San Junipero and wants to introduce her to the benefits of unencumbered fun. Yorkie doesn't drink or dance which Kelly tries to push on her. Finally, Yorkie in her discomfort leaves the bar. In the exchange that follows, we find out that Yorkie identifies as gay but has never had a relationship or explored her sexual orientation. Kelly volunteers to help her. This leads to a tumultuous back and forth relationship where Yorkie falls in love with Kelly, has sexual intercourse for the first time with her, and searches in subsequent weekly visits to find her. Over the course of these events, we learn about the details of how San Junipero functions as a simulated reality for the elderly. Once reunited, Yorkie confronts Kelly's belief that San Junipero is all about fun with no commitment. Kelly and Yorkie develop a relationship and one night in bed, Kelly suggests they should see each other in real life. Yorkie dismisses this idea, but eventually gives Kelly her location.

Offline, Kelly, an elderly Black woman with cancer, whose husband and child have preceded her in death, goes to visit Yorkie and meet Greg, the man Yorkie says she is going to marry. Kelly learns that Yorkie has been a quadriplegic since she was 21, when crashed her car after coming out to her parents who rejected her. Yorkie wants to be euthanized so she can permanently live in San Junipero, but the law requires a family member, lawyer, and medical professional to consent. Her family continues to punish her by refusing to sign. Greg is her nurse and has agreed to marry Yorkie so he can sign as her family member. Kelly is allowed five minutes to see Yorkie in San Junipero and ask her if she can marry her instead. With this complete, Yorkie is euthanized and uploaded to live in San Junipero for her afterlife.

When Kelly reunites with Yorkie in San Junipero, they argue over Kelly's commitment to be buried with her family when she dies, not uploaded to the cloud in San Junipero. Yorkie and Kelly have a fight where Kelly details the many sacrifices that connect her with the love of her husband and the loss of her daughter. But she also states that she believes there is nothing beyond their deaths. Regardless of Yorkies pleas that "This is real" (motioning to her surroundings) and "This is real" (affectionately touching Kelly), we are led to believe Kelly will not return. When Kelly finally decides to be euthanized, the scene cuts to her body being buried with her family in the graveyard and, then, her data or consciousness placed next to Yorkie's in what looks like a mini-robotic mausoleum. In the final scene, Yorkie picks up Kelly at their San Junipero beach house and they (presumably) live happily ever after.

San Junipero shares the theme of manipulation of time through memory and simulated reality based on a neural technology. It also plays with fixed notions of sexual identity, boundaries of age, and racial purity in sexual relationships. The liberative narrative of sexual affirmation and companionship does, however, perpetuate an ableist ideology of technology as the solution to physical and even political limitations. As a sexual story reveals, it may also conceal. In San Junipero, the living dead have another option, they can break out of the confines of U.S. Christianity's heterosexual dominance supporting a white, capitalist economic structure of family.[39] In the argument between Kelly and Yorkie at the end of the episode, Kelly also upsets the utopian vision of San Junipero by reminding Yorkie of the many users who go to the Quagmire, a club where sexual fetishes are explored, "just to try to feel something" she notes. This reinforces the fairy-tale nature of their own relationship that eventually conforms to a coupled, heterosexual happily-ever-after made possible in simulated reality. San Junipero affords a space for the realization of sexual orientations other than heterosexuality, yet it simultaneously reinforces capitalist, young, able, cis, liberal ideals.

Monáe, however, does not serve up the heartfelt gay-affirming utopian future conjured by San Junipero, made possible by an uninterrogated portrayal of technology cast as salvific. Instead, the digital existence of Jane #57821 threatens the whiteness and sexual purity of digitized humanity. In *Make me Feel*, Jane enters the bar with Zen just like Yorkie and Kelly, her female-identified lover from the *Pynk* song and cleaned torch MaryApple #53. And, yet, the discomfort of Yorkie is nowhere to be found in this remix. Instead, Jane's character is both the singer and participant in the video. The two main characters are both black, unlike San Junipero, and there is a

[39] For analysis of the intersections of U.S. Christianity with racial, class, gender, and economic constructions of the family, see Ruether 2001.

third black male lover in the scene that is not cast aside like the white Wes character in San Junipero. *Make me Feel* complicates a binary presentation of orientation and gender identity via the main characters sexual threesome and the montage of historical, non-binary gender spectrum musical and visual references.

Following the song *Make Me Feel,* the San Juniper homage, we see MaryApple #53, a cleaned computer or torch, counseling Jane to accept the process of cleaning and stop thinking. In New Dawn, *torches* bring captured dirty computers from the darkness into the light, and the facility's gleaming white dresses for torches are reminiscent of baptismal garb. She notes that freedom in the New Dawn comes from forgetting. This attempt at erasing the memories of the dirty computers both shows the power of remembering and claiming one's own history and the concern by the dominant class of the cognitive functions of those deemed machines.[40] The time bending quality of *Dirty Computer* and movement between homage and remix suggest a type of postcolonial imagination making visible a "reality" of living otherwise. Jane notes earlier in the emotion picture, that "just when you think you know the past, they hit you with nevermind." Jane tells MaryApple she does not want to forget. MaryApple reminds Jane that she has no choice. At the same time, we see MaryApple's increasingly visible doubt of the cleaning process and her own desires to remember.

Monáe locates in a shared frame liberation and domination, queer pleasure and police surveillance, embodied Black desire and white surgical erasure. Each of Jane's memories, Monáe's songs, provide opportunities for sexual stories, political and social critique. There is not enough space for all of those stories here. However, the end of Dirty Computer is as important as its pragmatically surreal remix of San Junipero. After cleaning, all dirty computers become torches, become a MaryApple. Jane is renamed MaryApple #54 and deployed to counsel and cleanse a friend and male sexual partner (Che #06756). After a small credit run, we return to the room with Jane and Che, MaryApple #53 enters with stolen gas masks and they set the whole facility to Nevermind cleanse. In this act, we see even the leader of the facility succumb to nevermind suggesting they are all cyborgs, not human or computer. They leave the facility, once again on the run as dirty computers.

Monáe's *Dirty Computer* stands apart from LGBT liberation movements that seek acceptance from or integration with a white cisheterosexual, Christian majority.[41] Jane

[40] Kwok describes postcolonial imagination in this way: "to imagine means to discern that something is not fitting, to search for new images and to arrive at new patterns of meaning and interpretation." See Kwok 2005: 9.

[41] For more on the queer agenda as a desire for radical transformation, not only social inclusion see, Ellison 2012: 76.

literally revolts against the attempt to baptize her (or her companions) as a Christian enlightenment subject, purified of her sexual dirt. Monáe provides not so subtle theological clues to uncover the disordered Christian desire for purity. New dawn (a carceral Edenic second coming) transforms those who are black sexual deviants into torches (light, whiteness) and renames them MaryApple, signaling the Christian requirement to suppress femaleness into the virginal, subservient mother tasked with converting temptation. Jane, marked with a female crucified Christ tattoo, liberates her lovers from New Dawn. MaryApple #53's liberation by Jane simultaneously shows how no amount of control can create coherence or singularity from Eve to Mary.

In the process of cleansing, which Jane resists, nothing ever changes about the color of her skin. One might imagine that cinematography could have literally drained the blackness from Jane. In one scene, she is drained of her rainbow blood, a biotechnological (nature/machine) representation of gayness. Blackness or dirt is associated with memory, thoughts, history, and resistance.[42] This highlights for the viewer that while whiteness is represented as a skin tone and a symbolic clothing color in the emotion picture, more importantly it is a totalizing system of oppression entangled with Christian belief about sexual purity. Monáe's characters want and create revolution. Jane, as the female Christ/savior following her cleanse/death, resists the structures of technological domination wielded in service of totalizing norms of whiteness and cisheterosexuality.

2. Fetish of Cyborg Sexual Storytelling

Althaus-Reid's description of Latin American fetishist theology resembles Monáe's *Dirty Computer*, "as an erotic unveiling of God's love amongst the dirty, sweating bodies of the marginalized and excluded."[43] Of course, one is in the streets of Argentina and the other in the fictive Afrofuturist halls of the New Dawn cleansing facility. Althaus-Reid suggests a fetishist way of loving and knowing can find other bodies, other loves, and an *Other* God.[44] That other God may be a Black messianic bisexual cyborg, which expands the other to multiple experiences made possible by simulated realities. Similarly, Anne Kull suggests that "those who take pleasure in incarnation, on the contrary, want to have as many bodies as possible (including the

[42] Per the comments during this paper discussion, the association of blackness and dirt relates to claims made by ecowomanists/feminists that have yet to gain significant traction in Christian digital theology conversations. See Ott 2019a.

[43] Maria Althaus-Reid 2007: 152.

[44] Althaus-Reid 2007: 152.

resurrected one), so as to become affected by many other agencies (including other organisms, machines, and God)."[45] The multiplicity of otherness, however, does not negate a focus on power, rather it heightens the question of 'what is human' in an effort to decolonialize Christian enforcement of anthropocentric racial and sexual distinctions.

When considering Althaus-Reid's methodology and use of fetishism, Mayra Rivera suggests, "The invocation of fetishism is part of a broader performative questioning of the divisions between religious, economic and sexual discourses; of the strict boundary between subject and objects; and the split between matter and spirit, all of which unveil the failures of dominant metaphysical systems and the need for reimagining corporeality otherwise – indeed a new poetics of matter."[46] One that resonates with a combination of imagery, music, and text (song lyrics) in *Dirty Computer*. Rivera provides a thick description of the history of fetish, one that started in Christian colonizing encounters of the Portuguese and Dutch with traders along the West African coast. "The fetish was an object that resisted the European logic of trade, and thus the value it was given would easily be deemed as a symptom of irrationality."[47] Similarly, the white male workers in the New Dawn facility oscillate between fascination at watching Jane's memories and a lack of understanding about what they represent, thus a form of encryption which the viewer realizes later is never fully erased. Fetish came to symbolize, for Europeans, a perceived lack of boundary between spirit and matter in African religions, an otherness. In the process of colonial standardization and moral normalizing, "Fetishism was a term of differentiation, or better, a concept through which European Christianity could be constructed as transcending materiality – epistemologically and ontologically – and as carried on by autonomous subjects."[48] Later, Marx and Freud connect fetish to economic and sexual practices. Though Rivera notes, Althaus-Reid is most interested in fetishisms earlier use, "as a border created by colonial Othering. Her tactic is partly a satirical performance that mocks the anxieties of Christian discourse and claims the rejected fetish to show the failures of an always incomplete occlusion of the economic, political and sexual dimensions of the properly spiritual."[49]

[45] Kull 2001: 283.
[46] Rivera 2010: 92.
[47] Rivera 2010: 88.
[48] Rivera 2010: 90.
[49] Rivera 2010: 91.

Althaus-Reid uses fetishism to reject historically constructed dichotomies between matter and transcendence, and I am pushing that to include technology and Christ. In a sense, this is not anathema to Althaus-Reid's own work. As I already described in the introduction, Althaus-Reid describes fetishism as "a kind of robotic epistemology concerning the difference between animate and inanimate objects, or between animated sexual organs and inanimate ones."[50] Similarly in *Dirty Computer,* salvation does not save one from sexual sin, which dominant Christianity suggests is an artificial state as opposed to the natural, original state of Edenic sinlessness or freedom from sexual desire. Rather salvation is a concrete freedom from the New Dawn, from the oppressive construction of purity. Jane as the messianic figure, like Jesus, "learnt the expectation of his[her] community, and therefore [s]he learnt to be Messiah."[51] This dialogical approach to salvation is bottom up, disrupting the dominance of top down authoritarianism.[52] In reading fetishism and Christianity simultaneously, Althaus-Reid uncovers the artificiality of Christianity. Additionally, she concludes that "humanity is not natural and static, but in a continuous process of production of material and symbolic realms."[53] Thus, humanity and Christianity can be disrupted and reorganized.

Monáe's/Jane's messianic character literally accomplishes a liberation for those marked as dirty computers in the emotion picture and for Monáe's self and fans offline. In this sense, Monáe/Jane is a trickster figure, like Jesus and Sojourner Truth posited by Haraway as "not a coherent substance with two or more attributes, but an oxymoronic singularity who stood for an entire excluded and dangerously promising humanity."[54] The specificity of these humans is what challenges the legal and symbolic standards of what counts as human. This reverberates with Kwok's argument for the hybridity of Jesus, a postcolonial Christology, that throws off the clothes of cultural purity, monologic discourse, and binary divine/human natures to reveal the naked incarnational fluidity that comes with embodied flesh.[55] In conversation with Kwok, Thweatt-Bates suggests, that the necessary transformation of the symbol of Christ from a colonizing tool to a hybridized Christ is likewise seen in the cyborg. She

[50] Althaus-Reid 2000: 149.

[51] Althaus-Reid 2000: 155. See, also comments on this section regarding "disruptive excess" of a messianic figure. Jane/Jesus are more than the Messiah they become for their communities. They are constantly in the process of becoming that and still other, which yields the excess that will continuously disrupt and reorganize as dominant structures attempt to create coherence. This includes my own attempts in this paper.

[52] For more on decolonial erotic possibilities of this theological approach see, Henderson-Espinoza 2018a.

[53] Althaus-Reid 2000: 150.

[54] Haraway 1992: 92.

[55] Kwok 2005: Chapter 7, in particular see 169–172.

writes, "the cyborg's hybrid ontology points us toward the fact of our kinship with the nonhuman (in all its forms: animal, machine, and divinity) and the necessity of constructing a world in which the life, dignity and freedom of all God's hybrid creations may be affirmed."[56] The final goal is not a liberation that allows the colonized to be colonizer or matriarchy instead of patriarchy or any inversion of binary power relations. Rather, as Althaus-Reid suggests, "To liberate the oppressed means also to liberate the oppressors from the sin of oppression which engulfs their lives. Therefore we do not have 'either/or' category here."[57]

3. Cyborg Experiment for Indecent Revelation/Revolution

I have argued that incarnational indecent cyborgs "destabliliz[e] dominant forms of theological imagination whose doctrine reproduces contours of violence against those who enflesh a difference relative to gender and sexuality" and simultaneously generate "a constructive creativity that embodies a force of becoming."[58] Robyn Henderson-Espinoza notes that "Allowing religion to be framed by an ontology of becoming similar to that of gender . . . necessitates a new ontological and epistemological orientation that impacts our social practices" (ethics).[59] In seeking out "possibilities for new contours of gender and sexuality to materialize"[60] as social practices or ethics, how might we employ virtual or simulated realities (or augmented and mixed realities that provide a different entanglement of digital embodiment), in ways that capture the sorts of otherness explored in San Junipero and *Dirty Computer* as a means to disrupt domination rather than further a pornography of marginalization? Indecent theology methodologically suggests this happens through the experiencing of stories, stories of the marginalized and subaltern that disrupt grand narratives. The power in the stories that Althaus-Reid narrates and Janelle Monáe creates resides in their visceral ability to sensually arouse. As Rivera suggests, "The goal is a transformation of our perception of ourselves and the world around us."[61] Yet, the inherent challenge of making a text grab and transform a reader is difficult and probably only the purview of the best writers. Of course, the infusion of music and moving imagery in Monáe's case

[56] Thweatt-Bates 2012: 190.

[57] Althaus-Reid 2000: 125.

[58] Henderson-Espinoza 2018b: 91. Here Henderson-Espinoza is reflecting on a transing methodology that for them is rooted in an ontology of becoming, which has its own foundations in work by scholars like Althaus-Reid and Gloria Anzaldua as well as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

[59] Henderson-Espinoza 2018b: 91.

[60] Henderson-Espinoza 2018b: 91.

[61] Rivera 2010: 81.

helps. Constructive theologians have noted the need to attend "to the sensory perceptual aspects of embodiment" in order to bring materiality into focus in the doing of theology.[62] Being part of the story might be even more powerful; virtual or simulated, augmented or mixed reality may be a way to kinetically, visually, and emotionally disrupt domination and displace the urge to other the Other.

For example, recent scholarship suggests that the use of virtual reality shifts users' ideas and beliefs about the fluidity of gender identity.[63] Based on the notion that "gender identity and the perception of one's own body are tightly connected," researchers created a full-body ownership illusion with synchronous stimulation, meaning the subject experienced themselves in first person computer generated imagery while researchers simulated physical touch outside the visual field of the subject. There were no haptic suits or devices involved. The full-body illusion encoded "episodic memories" of gender incoherence in the participants that were not interrupted by cognitive or emotional responses during the experiment or afterward. That is to say participants' gender identity became more fluid when they experienced themselves or their virtual alterity as different gender expressions. Additionally, "the body-sex-change illusion reduced gender-stereotypical beliefs about own personality... so that a change in one aspect (gender identification), due to the body-sex-change illusion, affects the other aspects (stereotypical self-beliefs)."[64]

Others have argued that digital communication, more broadly, allows for identity formation that is fluid and visible, especially for transgender teens.[65] Leaning into the embodied experience of the cyborg may provide greater potential than previous technological, biomedical interventions used to hide, for example trans experience and identity through transition surgeries that relied on fixed sex categories.[66] These experiences are reminiscent of the cleansing of the dirty computer in the surgical environment to maintain a singularity and normative dominance rather than yield disruptive difference and fluidity. Instead, virtual reality experiences, while perhaps leaving human and machine as separate entities, momentarily alter relationality of self to self and self to other as both an encounter event and as affective intensification.[67]

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[62] Peckruhn 2017: 7.

[63] Tacikowski / Fust / Ehrsson 2020.

[64] Tacikowski / Fust / Ehrsson 2020.

[65] Erlick 2018.

[66] Erlick 2018: 73–92.

[67] Here I'm bringing in the work of Jasbir Puar, who offers a frictional approach to perceived competing approaches of assemblage theory and feminist intersectional theory. She unpacks the location of Haraway's cyborg theory within this conversation. Given my focus on Christian theology, I have not included more from her work. There is room for

What comes from an experience of virtual sub/alternity? Given the stories and research presented, the experience of virtual sub/alternity appears to have an embodied impact while also displacing the dominance of naturalness. That is to say, there is nothing naturally static about racial, sexual or gender categories. They are both material and constructed systems of oppression. Where white, capitalist, cisheterosexual culture reads Blackness, queerness, and poverty as markers of less than human or disposable, Janelle Monáe's work "demonstrates how technological engagement, when paired with knowledge of history and an awareness of the present combine to create a force of social liberation. This marriage of the transformation of both technology and its attendant racialized [sexual, gendered, and economic] narrative is the power of the digital griot."[68] This is not to say that virtual sub/alternity is always liberative or even that digital technologies are free of oppression. In fact, it is exactly because that is the dominant experience—digital as exploitative—that Monáe's work conjures moral imagination that unsettles Christian liberative tropes. She speaks for "humanity outside the narratives of humanism" reminding us that we need not deny materiality, fleshly or technological, while seeking to transform systems of oppression.[69] In fact, we ought to embrace it in all its pleasure, suffering, and sweatiness; that must happen in order to expose the anti-Blackness and anti-queerness of liberal utopic trans/posthuman narratives that seek new ways of binding the human to an Enlightenment, purified Christian ideal. Resistance from the Gospels to *Dirty Computer* takes the form of storytelling in complex, material, and visceral ways embedded in history.

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further exploration of experience of virtual reality and Puar's theoretical approach as well as theological considerations as Puar, herself notes that there must be "cyborgian goddesses" in our midst which may be akin to what I am calling incarnational indecent cyborgs. See, Puar 2012.

[68] Jones 2018: 66.

[69] Thweatt-Bates 2012: 192. Thweatt-Bates takes this language from Haraway who poses Jesus and Sojourner Truth as figures of humanity who can speak outside of humanism. See, Haraway 1992: 88.

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Exploring in-person

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During COVID-19 related isolation the words "synchronous" and "asynchronous," "in person" and "virtual" have become commonplace terms to describe our connections with each other in professional settings. In this reflection, we wish to explore and challenge the binary nature of both of these sets of terms, because we see these terms as being unhelpful descriptors of relationality and embodied presence, leading to unnecessary and unhelpful limits to what we understand as "in-person."

In this season of COVID-19 related isolation and physical distancing, the words "synchronous" and "asynchronous" have become commonplace terms for how we describe our connections with each other: they are either "at the same time" (synchronous) or "*not* at the same time" (*a*synchronous) (for example, "online" classes are often described as synchronous or asynchronous). Similarly, we label our interactions with each other as "in person," where we share the same physical space, or as "virtual," where we do not (for example, "today is a virtual instruction day" or "next month we will return to in person learning"). Under COVID-19, these two sets of terms have also regularly been used to describe professional meetings and academic conferences (such as this one!), as well as work and social engagements more broadly.

> **Invitation:** What words or phrases are used in your context or in your language for these distinctions? Are there similar challenges?

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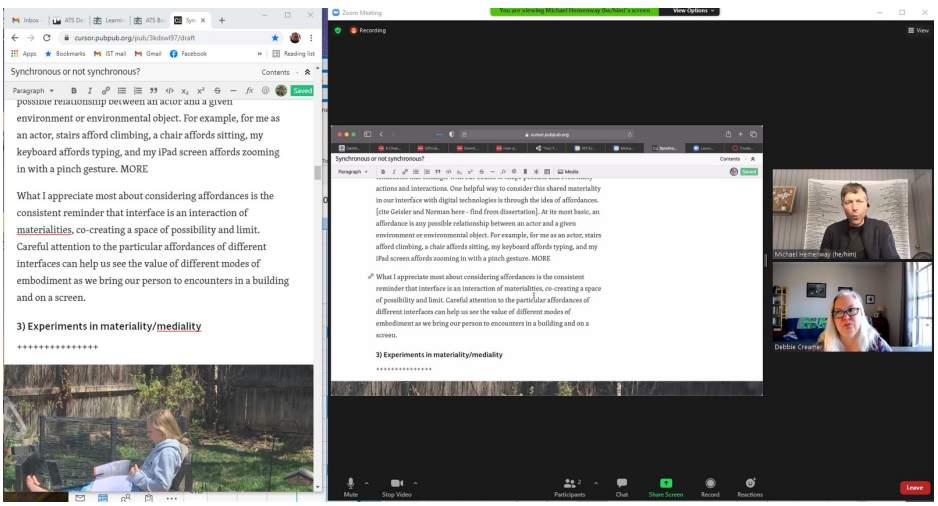
In this reflection, we wish to explore and challenge the binary nature of both of these sets of terms, not only because we experience the world as being far more complex than this—and so, a nuanced consideration of these terms may lead us to new insights and exciting possibilities—but also because we see these terms as being unhelpful (and, oftentimes problematic) descriptors of relationality and embodied presence, leading to unnecessary and unhelpful limits to what we understand as "in-person." In the sections that follow, we invite you to explore these two sets of terms with us as a jumping off point for looking anew at time, embodiment, and materiality, particularly as these might then help stimulate our curiosity around the nature of the human person, of our relationships with one another, and of our relationships with the technologies that constitute us.

> *As we go along, we invite you to consider your own presence and personness in the midst of this conversation and with awareness of the materiality by which you are engaging us here. For example, the screenshot below captures one moment of participation for one of us: we are talking over Zoom, looking together at a shared screen of this page, and simultaneously editing this page in another tab:*



Might the moment captured by this screenshot be considered an "in-person" experience? Is it a virtual one? Is a moment like this best understood as synchronous or asynchronous? Is it embodied? Where are the various spots that presence shows up here? Is the answer different depending on whether we are asking these questions of Debbie (the one who took the screenshot and who had this "view," including a view

of herself via her webcam), or Michael (the collaborator and conversation partner captured by the image on the top right), or Amy (from the iPhone photo in the lower left corner)? What is it like for you, right now?

> **Invitation:** As you engage this collaborative site (PubPub), we invite you to be attentive to your own presence, your own embodiment, your own sense of time, and your own experience with materiality. Does it shift (how does it shift) as you go through this paper? Is it different when you comment or read the comments of other participants? Does it change when we ask you questions, as in this "invitation" space?

Warm-up Experiments

To begin, we invite you to join us in a few small warm-up experiments. For the first, we would ask you to simply take a moment to think about the various communication technologies you use, and whether you would tend to categorize those as synchronous or asynchronous (and, perhaps then, what criteria you use for such differentiation). Once you have done that, we would invite you to spend an extra moment to think about texting: is texting a synchronous activity or an asynchronous one? For those of us with iPhones or similar devices, the blinking three dots (indicating that the other person is typing) perhaps makes this even more complicated:

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Can you feel the anticipation? Are you now sitting waiting for the response? Does this waiting disrupt the moment and space you are sitting or standing in? Are you "present," "in the present"? And where? Is "present" spatial, temporal, both or neither? Is this synchronous, or not synchronous? Does it matter? Notice even this image, an animated screen capture of a moment in a SMS chat holds the movement of the 3 dots. What is our relationship to time and space in these media? The layers of media we are constantly negotiating challenge our ability to locate ourselves in a clear relationship with the time of another. And this is really what we are exploring, not our own isolated relationship to time, but our relationship to the time and embodiment of another/others.

For the second, we invite you to sit for a moment with the adjective "virtual." (And, we mean that literally — sit with it!) Right now, you are reading this text and viewing these images on a screen. Is this a virtual experience? What is your body doing,

feeling, needing? What are the materialities involved in this experience? Does it *matter* whether you are engaging this text via a large screen, a mobile device, in your living room, with a cup of coffee in your hands? Does it change (how does it change?) if you are using an audio screen reader, or have music on in the background, or have other people in the room with you, or can smell something baking? If "virtual" is meant to be the antonym of "in-person," in what ways is your person-ness present or absent in this encounter (and, does it matter)?

Finally, let's put the two together. It is easy to think of what we typically call "in-person" and "synchronous" engagements as being more real, rich, and/or personal. It is also easy—especially in these days of COVID isolation—to think of real, rich, and/or personal experiences where we shared space, time, touch, and air with someone we love (i.e., "in-person" and "synchronous"). There is no doubt that these moments can be, and sometimes are, deeply personal (person-ish?) and meaningful; they make us who we are. But, when we pause and reflect, and take an attitude of curiosity rather than familiarity, we can just as easily think of occasions (literally, "times") when we had what we typically call "in-person" and "synchronous" occasions that were *not* meaning-full or person-full. We'd invite you to pause here and think of a few of these: perhaps an onsite lecture with little interaction between speakers and listeners, a grocery line where other humans were simply objects of annoyance and barriers to task-completion, a conversation with a loved one where presence was lacking and our minds were on other things, a moment when we were "absent-minded." As we add layers here, perhaps this can also open us to suspicion and curiosity about the ways we think about (and, even, experience with our bodies) "asynchronous" and "virtual" engagements, and especially the ways in which our bodies and selves show up to and are constituted by these spaces.

Our Hypotheses

In the spirit of a laboratory, we come to this work with hypotheses to be tested. We propose (and wish to test with you) that:

- The terms "synchronous" and "asynchronous" are messier than they seem, and suggest a sometimes-unhelpful binary.
- The terms "in-person" and "virtual" are messier than they seem, and suggest an *incredibly* unhelpful binary.

- What we call asynchronous and virtual spaces are *differently* embodied spaces, not *dis*embodied spaces, and attention to these embodiments enhance our understandings of what it means to be human and what it means to be relational; our sense of what it means to be "in person" can and should be expanded in light of these various observations.
- Reflection on time, materialities, and embodiment brings us again to questions about media and mediality, including how we form and are formed by our entanglements with non-human companions.

Testing the Hypotheses

1. Experiments in time

By their very nature—or, at least, their linguistic construction—the words "synchronous" and "asynchronous" are established as binaries and opposites. We see this, for example, in as ordinary a setting as the Merriam Webster dictionary, which defines synchronous as "happening, existing, or arising at precisely the same time" and defines asynchronous as "not simultaneous or concurrent in time **:** not synchronous." And, in the world of education, and perhaps other contexts, the two terms are used—again as binaries and opposites—to describe modes of (online) engagement and interaction. Here, though, we see that the terms are used not only to describe relationships with/in time, but also to describe qualitative differences (where "synchronous" is seen as more real and more present than "asynchronous") as well as to evoke specific materialities and modalities (where "synchronous" is the label given to video technology such as Zoom and "asynchronous" to learning management systems such as Canvas or Blackboard, or even to a site such as this PubPub).

When we bring our sense of curiosity to this framing, though, it begins to unravel quickly. Most simply, we might note that Zoom includes "asynchronous" components (the meeting request, the recording after the event) and a learning management system includes "synchronous" ones (live chat, collaborative writing tools). And, if we look again at the initial definitions I shared above, the idea of "at precisely the same time" challenges even our sense of streaming video as synchronous, when we know it includes both perceptible and imperceptible lags between sender and receiver. In fact, it might make more sense to talk about "imperceptibly asynchronous" rather than evoking synchronicity at all (or, as I have suggested elsewhere, perhaps "semi-synchronous" is a more useful term). Beyond these two "corrections," looking closely allows us to begin to see that the categories themselves are perhaps not doing the work

we might hope they would do—a theme that we will return to a bit later in this piece. And so, rather than setting up binary categories (so that something is either X or not-X) or even using the language of continuum (so that something exhibits varying degrees of X), perhaps we would do better to bring a kaleidoscopic lens to this work, allowing us to talk about different kinds of a/synchronicity in a shifting and ever-changing network of relationships.

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Curiosity also leads us to explore why we use terms like synchronous and asynchronous to talk about online experiences but not ones where we are onsite together. There are, for example, numerous synchronous and asynchronous experiences—or, varying degrees or kinds of a/synchronicity—in a "traditional" onsite classroom. Small group discussions might be described as a synchronous experience, with lectures a bit closer to a semi-synchronous experience (where one person speaks and time passes before others can engage the speaker). Homework assignments or pre-course readings might be asynchronous components, as might quizzes or research papers. It is interesting to me that we do not use those terms in onsite contexts, even though most instructors and students would identify the whole range of time-experiences as being part of the learning environment. It seems that whatever work the terms are doing as they relate to online learning (or, online conferences and meetings), one would think they could do the same work in onsite ones—unless they are also doing other work to which we aren't currently attending.

> **Invitation**: Have you seen terms like synchronous and asynchronous (or related terms from your context and language) applied to onsite experiences? If so, where, and what work do you see those terms doing in those settings?

Here, I think, we start to wander more fully into the ways in which the label of synchronicity is tied in with value-based interpretations. In my context, I see this most vividly as it relates to meetings and events...and even this conference. The "real" part of the event is understood to be the synchronous space, and everything else (the "asynchronous") is easily called the pre-meeting work or post-meeting wrap-up. And, all of this "pre-meeting" work is understood to fall in the same category of asynchronous, even as it takes different forms (me thinking on my own, me talking with friends, us writing collaboratively, you making comments on our work, and so on). And, in most

cases, the synchronous is seen as the engaged/meaningful/interesting space (even described as "real time") and the asynchronous as work we do at our own time and on our own (as if any learning or scholarship—or, life—can be done by the individual alone). Again, curiosity lets us us challenge this division, even if just by remembering how many boring Zoom lectures or diatribes we've sat through this year, when the chat screens or text messages or emails or discussion boards are where we've found life and energy and relationality. Curiosity and the twist of the kaleidoscope also allows us to notice that time is a complicated value, that we co-create each other even across distances of modality *and* time, and that attending to a diversity of engagements with modality *and* time might be our best way to support a diversity of learners (and relationships).

I linger on this not because I'm overly intrigued by wordplay or invested in clear definitions, but rather because I am both curious and concerned by the cumulative ways in which these terms are used, including the ways our language use tricks us into thinking that these distinctions are neutral, common-sense, and obvious. Our experiments show us that they are none of these things; not only are these terms messier than they seem (our experiences in time with each other flow in multiple directions, not as an yes/no switch or a simple continuum) but setting them up as binary opposites seems to elevate some experiences (the "real" or the "real-time") while minimizing the others, leaving us with unhelpfully limited (and, I might even suggest, damaging or demeaning) senses of how and where the person resides.

2. Experiments in materiality/embodiment

One of our core assumptions in these experiments is that online and digital spaces are material in at least two ways. First of all, every bit of what we engage on screens and this keyboard on which I type and the servers that provide access to PubPub and the compute power that drives Alexa telling me the weather in the morning is made out of material objects. We won't take time here to explore the vast environmental impact of this digital materiality, but the magnitude of this impact is at least a reminder that our relationship with technologies is fundamentally material. There are most certainly differences between biological bodies and machinic bodies, but all day, these two materialities are constantly in relationship and they undoubtedly shape one another in material ways. For more context on the materiality of the digital, see Johanna Drucker's work on Performative Materiality, which builds on Matthew Kirschenbaum's earlier work on the materiality of new media and digital literature.

More importantly for our considerations of personness in online spaces, these digital objects we engage, such as screens and websites and keyboards and videos and headsets, have structures with limits and tendencies that entangle with our bodies to shape possible and even likely actions and interactions (watch Bernard Stiegler outline his idea of tertiary retention as he discusses Gilbert Simondon's notion of information). One helpful way to consider this shared materiality in our interface with digital technologies is through the idea of affordances. At its most basic, an affordance is any possible relationship between an actor and a given environment or environmental object. For example, for me as an actor, stairs afford climbing, a chair affords sitting, my keyboard affords typing, and my iPad screen affords zooming in with a reverse pinch gesture. What I appreciate most about considering affordances is the consistent reminder that *interface* is an interaction of materialities, co-creating a space of possibility and limit through encounter. Careful attention to the particular affordances of different interfaces can help us see the value of different modes of embodiment as we bring our person to encounters in a building and on a screen.

Math Class

I love this image as an experiment in different embodiments. This is a photo I took with my iPhone in my backyard, while my daughter, Amy, was in Math class "at" school just before Summer 2020. Covid had brought us into a stay at home order and closed the school buildings all over our city. So, Amy and I and the rest of our family were doing school and work all from a shared location, our home. This particular day, the weather was nice and Amy was a bit fed up with her desk space in her room. So, in her pajama pants and bare feet, she ventured out to the back porch with our dog Winston and his trusty stuffed animal pillow to join in on her Math course. Their school district was using a combination of Google Meet and Schoology (along with a proliferation of other tools) to create different kinds of learning opportunities for students. None of this learning was called or considered "in person." Instead, these learning moments, whether occurring in a shared digital interface at the same time or not, are called online, remote, and virtual.

> **Invitation:** In what ways is Amy less "in person" in this Math course than if she were in the school building at a desk?

I have a friend who gets very annoyed when I raise concerns about this "in person" language. Rightfully, he notes that everyone in the conversation knows what we mean by "it will be nice to go back to meeting in person" while we are all on a Zoom call talking to each other and looking at each other in the face. It is this, that we all seem to know what is meant by this "in person" distinction, which drives the heart of these experiments here. What work is this "in person" distinction doing for us? What dispositions are we developing by consistently suggesting that interaction online is NOT in person or even LESS in person? Is it any wonder that my daughter Amy feels less engaged in her Math class she is participating in from our backyard? If we are not asking her to bring her person to these online learning encounters, why would we expect anything more?

Let's push this image another level in terms of embodiment. I have shared this snapshot of my life in this static webpage with you and other readers. In this interface here, we do not have the interaction in shared time and digital space that my daughter had with her Math class on Google Meet, a moment of which I captured with this photo. Yet, is it possible that I am "in person" on this page? Are the words I type here a material expression of my person? For me, sharing this picture of my family, my backyard, the routine of my life, which all deeply shape me as a person, is a form of asynchronous *embodiment* that brings my person into this interface. In fact, in some

ways, I feel more "in person" here in this space than I do in many conference rooms where I can smell the other people in the room.

If we agree that it is possible for me to be "in person" here on this page and for you, the reader, to bring your person to the engagement with this page, then I ask again, what work is this "in person" distinction doing for us and is it the work we want being done?

~~

I am sitting alone in my apartment as I read Michael's reflections about Amy in their backyard. I was alone in my apartment when he texted to say he'd added a section to this PubPub. I've been alone in my apartment for most of the past year, doing "virtual" work, "virtual" dinner parties, and "virtual" conferences like this one. I totally get what Michael's friend notes: of course we know what we mean when we say "it will be nice to go back to meeting in person." My body knows it has been 154 days since my last hug or intentional touch from a person who cares for me, a year since my last day in the office or meal in a restaurant with a friend. My body knows that presenting at this conference will be different over Zoom than if we had traveled to be with each other; I deeply miss airplanes and exploring new places and going out to talk about our ideas after a day of presentations. It's not the same. We know.

But, do we? The language of virtual and in-person—and, similarly, of synchronous and asynchronous—gives voice to part of my experience while also silencing so much of it; it works a bit like the sleight of hand of a magician, distracting us from paying attention to things that matter. Like Michael, I am more in-person on this screen than in many conference rooms —and not just as a snapshot of my person-ness (e.g., telling personal stories) but as a fully embodied being. *I am really here.* And, it's not only that my body *creates* or *reacts to* this "virtual" environment, but that my body/self is just as constituted by these experiences and relationships as by any others. As such, the language of "virtual" is, at best, a distraction, and at worst, a negation of the fullness of the encounter (and, even, my person-ness) itself.

When Michael texts me, for example, it is not a virtual experience. I hear a sound (the chime of the text) and feel a vibration on my wrist (my apple watch notifications). My gaze shifts, my heart rate and breathing change, and even though just a moment ago I was caught up in my own world, he now is present to/with me. When I open this screen and look at what he's written here—which I guess should be called an "asynchronous" experience—I smile at the way he uses words, and at the questions he asks, and at the picture of his backyard, and I instinctively wiggle my toes when I see Amy's bare feet and can almost feel the sunshine from the picture. My body is responding

and my mood is changing, now, even though he is not "here" and we are not "together" or interacting "at the same time." For me, none of this is virtual, and my experience with time (when he writes, when I read) does not define the quality of interaction; it is not absent of meaning or less meaningful just because I'm not currently in his backyard or near the desk where he stands to write his reflections in this space.

When I say it is not virtual, I don't mean that being alone in my apartment is "just as good" or "the same" as being in the backyard together; it's also not "almost as good" or "nearly the same." In fact, the reason I know it's *not* the same is because I'm embodied both places. If I were there at the moment of the photograph, I'd be drinking a good beverage, eavesdropping on Amy and Winston, sneezing from the pollen, feeling the altitude. Sitting here, I'm in my comfortable weekend clothes, with a photo I can look back at time and again, and as attentive to you all as potential readers (most of whom I have not yet met) as I am to him and to myself. The two experiences are different, and engage me (including my body and the fullness of my self) in different ways—but, the experiences are not categorical opposites, nor is one the lesser or shadow version of the other.

The example with Michael might be too easy; I imagine his voice when I read his words, and I've been in the backyard where Amy sits to do her classwork. But I similarly cringe whenever I hear about "virtual" work (and, I think back on the fights I've had with folks over email and zoom this past year, and how my frustration or anger responses have been completely embodied) or about "virtual" dinners (where I really do cook and eat food, involving all of my senses, for better or worse). My "person" (and, the "person" of others) is very much "in" these experiences. I've been struck by some of the recent research about "zoom fatigue" that suggests that it's not so much that we have *fewer* person-cues (e.g., just seeing someone from the shoulders up and in two dimensions) but that we actually pay *more* attention to each other on a Zoom call (e.g., constant eye contact, leaning in to each other, and "nonverbal overload"). From this perspective, one could suggest that a Zoom meeting might actually be more "in person" than an on-site meeting. Or, at a minimum, it reminds us once again that these are *differently* embodied spaces, not *dis*embodied spaces. And so, again: what work is this "in person" distinction doing for us, and is it the work we want being done?

~~

The way the pubpub space works encourages us to indicate where one designer's words end and another's begin. Notice the tildes above, which Debbie added before

and after her reflection on Amy's photo. What parts of the collaborative construction process encourage such a practice of differentiation? And can we find any parallels in the way we differentiate persons or embodiments?

~~ (Debbie again here)

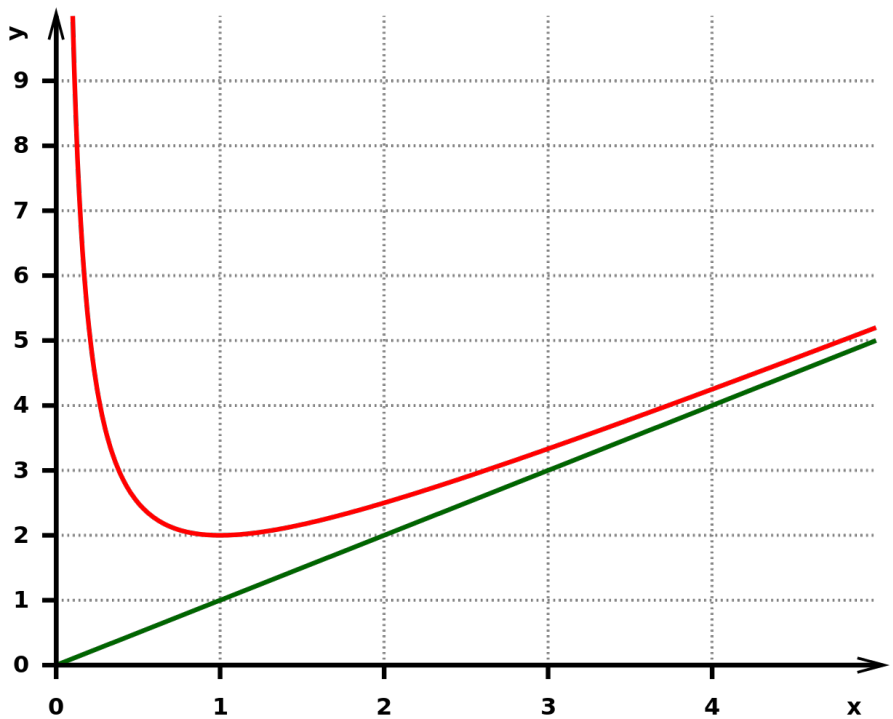
I thought about the tildes before I put them in; I wanted to distinguish the perspective of the person who took the photo of Amy from the reflections of one at a greater distance from it, and, since Michael had identified that he felt "in person" in this space, I didn't want to step on that personness by blurring it with my own. But, of course, this just raises the question of "in person" once again. Some would suggest, for example, that we are more "in person" when we are seen and heard as being our individual selves (whether onsite together or via synchronous interactive video)—so, I know it is Michael speaking because I hear his voice or see his body move; cues which are lost here. And yet, as studies of women and BIPOC folks in the academy and the workplace show, it is quite common for us to speak and not be seen or heard, and for someone else later to take credit for our idea. We can be "in person" but not be recognized as being there at all, or only in a way that is filtered by both the sender and the receiver of the message. Back to our example here, perhaps if you already know us well, you can "hear" our different "voices" in this text, or perhaps it helps you navigate this text if we identify our authorship as we go along. But, does it even matter which one lives with Amy and which one lives alone, or which ideas we came up with "on our own" (as if such a thing is possible) and which were collaboratively developed (or, stolen from elsewhere!)? How about if one of us goes back and edits what someone else wrote—even in a section where we are very "in person"? It is perhaps a question for the reader: are you more comfortable if you know which of us is speaking? Does it matter? Does it make us more or less present/in-person? Why? ~~

Debbie's questions about the language of virtual and the privilege of the synchronous distancing us from our person and perhaps even from other persons reminds me of the rich and complicated notion of proximity in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. We typically think of proximity as simple nearness in space. Yet, what I hear in Levinas (through the interface of words and most often words in translation) is a proximity that involves an approach of/by the other that maintains an irreducible distance.

> **Invitation**: Above, I said, "what I hear in Levinas... ." Does this common practice of referencing the work of an author by simply invoking their name indicate something about how we image that author's person being available through

> their works and words? Would it be better for me to say, "what I hear in Levinas's writing... ?"

Given my math background, proximity as approach with an irreducible distance has always conjured for me the image of an asymptote. Simply stated, an asymptote is a line that approaches a curve but never contacts it as the curve extends to infinity.



In this image, the green line is an asymptote of the red curve. They infinitely approach one another, yet there remains an infinitely irreducible distance between them. I have often wondered if this rich notion of proximity as asymptotic encounter might provide a way for us to consider how different embodiments and different mediated environments afford human encounter that retains this irreducible distance/difference. In some ways, asynchronous and digital spaces remind us of this necessary distance more readily than synchronous or "in building" gatherings do. As Debbie noted above, perhaps we can learn from these different digital embodiments that this distance is also at work in all of the other embodiments which give higher priority to affordances for see-

ing, knowing, understanding one another in ways that can become reductive or even consumptive.

For Levinas, proximity is enacted in the "face to face." I have explored the relationship between the face to face in Levinas and digital interfaces in more detail elsewhere. It is not lost on me that "face to face" language is often used as a synonym for what is typically thought of as "in person." Given the asymptotic notion of the face to face, could it be that this encounter is as possible or even more possible in asynchronous or digital spaces?

> **Invitation**: In Totality and Infinity, Levinas identifies this face to face as religion. Do religion and theology provide some unique contributions to these experiments with embodiment, materiality, and time?

Voice and Sound

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What does sound afford that might provide different material encounters than the image above or this text you are reading now? I have to admit, I love sound, voice, and audio. Most of the "reading" I do these days is listening to audio books, or PDFs read by AI driven high definition voices in my favorite new reading app, Speechify. I am an avid NPR and podcast listener, from This American Life and Wait Wait Don't Tell Me, to This Week in Machine Learning and AI and The Last Archive.

I used a SoundCloud embed here instead of ingesting the audio file into PubPub for a few explicit material reasons:

1. The built in voice memo recorder on my iPad Pro records files in a format called .m4a, which is not a supported format on PubPub. This reminds us that even digital audio files can have different material encodings that afford different possibilities and limits.
2. I love that SoundCloud shows the waveforms of the audio as it plays, reminding us again that sound is fundamentally material. Sound waves have different amplitudes and strike the bones and tissues of our ears to pass along the vibrations to our brains, where sense is made of the sound. This visual translation of the auditory phenomenon also reminds us that we are constantly translating our person across different materialities.

3. Without intention on my part, SoundCloud chose a background image for the audio embed that happened to include just my mouth and not my eyes (this may not be true on all display sizes). I can choose any background image to help add some context to this audio piece, but this felt rather fitting as it is. One of the things I love about sound is its ability to challenge the dominance of sight as a mode of perception and encounter (it is not lost on me that my enjoyment of the audio waveforms above reinforces this deference to sight).

4. SoundCloud affords high surface area engagement with the audio, by allowing listeners to comment and have conversation at any point in the audio and locates this conversation at the moment the listener engages. Before I realized that the embed would still allow for this commenting, I considered including a written transcript of the audio here so that people could comment on specific bits of the audio. Now, I do not need to do that because the audio itself can host a conversation.

Invitation: Which asynchronous material embodiment (text, image, audio, or video) feels most vulnerable to you and why?

Audio has a very close relationship with time. Much more explicitly than our encounters with text tend to have. Notice that the SoundCloud embed indicates how long the recording is and the time is displayed as the audio is played. Even though some text based platforms, e.g. Medium, are now beginning provide approximate "time to read" indicators, rarely do we have a clock ticking while we read. Here duration and speed have an impact on my encounter with this audio presence. When I am listening to audio books, I often adjust the speed of playback depending on the kind of material I am listening to. When I am listening to more dense and complicated philosophical works like Yuk Hui's *On the Existence of Digital Objects*, I slow the speed way down, listening even more slowly than my eyes would pass over the words on a page. Whereas, I might listen to fiction at 1.4X speed. Changing these speeds shifts the tonality and the cadence of a piece, which has significant impact on how I engage it. Recently, I was listening to Toni Morrison read her novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and I realized that the poetry of her cadence was not as compelling for me at faster speeds, so I slowed it down and it sang again. Does this ability to adjust the time and speed of my encounter with an another's work diminish or reduce the in personness of the author in these encounters? Does the degree of our ability to manipulate the materialities of encounter offer a way to differentiate kinds of embodiments?

How is this encounter with audio different if it is a digitally produced voice reading something that I wrote? How does this material digital audio artifact relate to my person as it encounters your person?

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I used Amazon Polly with a Neural Net based voice to read this text and downloaded to mp3 for upload here into PubPub.

> **Invitation**: What does this difference feel like to you? Does it matter whether you already were familiar with "Michael's voice" before you heard the two samples?

Proliferation of Presence

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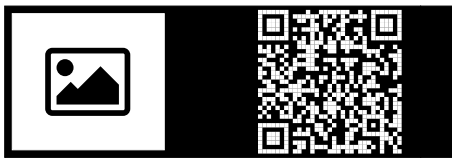
Video continues to expand the layers of materiality we can encounter in these online spaces. We thought it would be fun to run an experiment where Debbie and I would "simultaneously" be working in the PubPub space while sharing screen on a Zoom meeting.

> **Invitation:** What do you see, hear, or notice from this video? Where does presence and the "in-person" show up? You might also look back at the screen capture (Image 1, in the second paragraph of this essay). Where do you observe presence there—and is it different in a screen capture than in the video clip?

Learnings

> **Invitation**: What do you see as the key learnings (and/or, remaining questions and experiments to run) at this point in our reflections? We intend to fill this section out after we've had opportunities for engagement and conversation with you.



Media/lity
Between Image Ban and Eucharist

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The paper rethinks the question of media as a systematic theological question. Based on the image ban, the first part reflects the ambivalent assessment of media in the theological tradition, referring to the tension between image ban, images and the imagined. The second part is focuses on the Lord's Supper as a fundamental media practice for the churches. Interpreting this media practice, Christian Life is described as augmented reality, which always interlaces several levels of reality through media. The paper closes with reflections on difference and analogy, as well as conversion and convertibility as fundamental questions of theological media theory.

1. Introduction

From early 2020 on, people have reduced their "contacts" due to the SARS-Cov-2-pandemic. During the year, bloggers, experts, the WHO and journalists started to discuss the appropriate term for this reduction of contacts: "social distancing" or "physical distancing"?[1] One argument for the second term: Not being able to meet "onsite" must not imply to give up solidarity with each other; physical distance must not mean social distance.[2] The difference between the two terms raises a question

[1] See; For example: Streckeisen 2020.

[2] For example: Streckeisen 2020. He argues: "Nicht soziale Distanz, sondern soziale Nähe soll gefördert werden – trotz physischer Distanz." (ibid.)

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that has been answered practically in multiple ways during 2020: What bridges our physical distance to each other so that social proximity[3] becomes possible even while physical distancing is required? If the answer to that is not nothing – and for some organizations and people it has been "nothing", the answer most likely includes some kind of media-technology: from old-school landline-telephones to youtube-videos and Zoom-conferences. The importance of technical media, particularly digital media has become even more obvious during the pandemic: Media-technology functions as a bridge between physically distanced people; Media-technology somehow makes present what is physically absent.

In this paper, we want to reflect digital media's function to bridge absent entities theologically, inspired by two discourses: the thinking about the biblical image-ban after the iconic turn on the one hand and the debates about the Lord's Supper on the other. Of course, this will not lead to a full theory or concept of media and mediality. But it leads to the following main suggestions: We will argue, that the common dualities of "reality" vs. "virtuality" and "embodied" vs. "disembodied" are not appropriate for reflecting digital mediality. Rather, the difference between different media and different media-practices is decisive. This difference is also more decisive than the difference between seemingly unmediated presence and mediated presence. The focus on media all too often hides that seemingly unmediated practices are media practices as well. We will show how different practices – particularly the practice of Eucharist – are already media practices that partake in the dialectic between presence and absence, between making present and withdrawal.[4]

2. Image, Image-ban and the Media

What happens, when media work? We want to draw a first bunch of impulses for reflecting this issue in a digital age from thinking about images and the biblical ban on images. It might look like a very non-lutheran move, but it is helpful to start the reflection of images and the biblical ban on images outside the theological traditions in the philosophical thinking about images, because they offer helpful terminological clarification. Particularly since the so called "iconic turn"[5] the literature on images has become hardly over seeable. Hans Belting's anthropological work on images provides

[3] Streckeisen 2020.

[4] For this dialectic see for example Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 157, 163 and already Höhne 2019: 148 and the literature referenced there.

[5] Boehm 2006, particularly 13, 16f., Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 15, 263, 354.

the necessary terminological clarifications and first impulses.[6] Our thesis: His terms are better fit to reflect on digital mediality than the distinctions between reality and virtuality, disembodied and embodied. On this background, the debate about the biblical image-ban offers differentiated sensitivity for the religious dangers of media and mediality. Implicitly, the image ban points to the differences in mediality for the dialectic of absence and presence.[7]

2.1 Images, Bodies and Media.

In his anthropological approach to images, Belting distinguishes between images, bodies and media, partly parallel to Mitchell's distinction between pictures and images.[8] For Belting, the term "*images*" refers to inner, mental images as well as to external images; "production of images" happens "in the social sphere", in human perception as well as in imagination.[9] Hence, images are produced in *bodies,* they are embodied: Our body f.e. is the place in which imagination, memory and perception of images happens.[10]

But images are also embodied in a second way, namely in the medium that carries the image.[11] In this distinction, the terms "media" and "medium" refer to the physical, material dimension of images,[12] to the "techniques and programmes" that make images visible.[13] While image and media belong together like "two sides of one coin" and while their distinction does not parallel the classic distinction between form and matter, Belting understands them as referring to different aspects or dimensions of one phenomenon.[14] For example: If I see the painting "Mona Lisa", I will see the image of a smirking lady on canvas and I will have the image in my head as well – this is what the term "images" refers to. If I drew my attention to the paint and the canvas, to

[6] Belting 2001.

[7] For this dialectic see Belting 2001: 29–30, 143–147.

[8] See Belting 2001: 15, 11–55.

[9] Belting 2001: 11–13. My translation.

[10] Belting 2001: 12–15. Belting also uses the term "Entkörperlichung" but also takes it back: "Aber eine Entkörperlichung ist nichts anderes als eine Körper-Erfahrung neuer Art, die schon ihre historischen Parallelen hat." (Belting 2001: 14)

[11] Belting 2001: 12–13, 15, 17.

[12] Belting 2001: 13, 15, 29. Belting talks about the "material" not as opposite to "form" (13), but as feature the term "medium" refers to (29) while it is unseperable interlinked with picture or image (13).

[13] Belting 2001: 12. My translation.

[14] Belting 2001: 13, 29–30.

the formed material that carries the images and is the picture, I would focus on what Belting would call "media".[15]

This terminological distinction is helpful, because it allows Belting to explore the relation of presence and absence in image-experiences. Two of his thoughts are decisive for our argument.

Firstly, Belting relates the power of images in an ambiguous way to the role of mediality:[16] On the on hand, neglect of mediality gives power to the images while focus on mediality distances the observer from the image and its influence.[17] On the other hand, the medium carries the images and the image couldn't be powerful without the medium.[18] I wouldn't gaze at Mona Lisa's smile with capturing fascination if canvas and paint weren't arranged in this specific way, but focusing on canvas and paint can break the ban of the image and distance me from the effects of fascination. Hence, a medium works as mediation and transportation of an image only as long as its mediality is not the focus of attention. The medium works by withdrawing its work from attention.[19]

Secondly, the archetypical experience of images for Belting is the cult of the dead:[20] absence and presence are entangled in images:

> "Im Rätsel des Bildes sind Anwesenheit und Abwesenheit unauflösbar verschränkt. In seinem Medium ist es anwesend (sonst könnten wir es nicht sehen), und doch bezieht es sich auf eine Abwesenheit, von der es ein Bild ist."[21]
>
> Das „Rätsel des Bildes [...] liegt in einer paradoxen *Abwesenheit*, die ebenso aus der *Anwesenheit der Leiche* wie aus dem *anwesenden Bild* spricht."[22]

Belting continues by elaborating on the „act of animation", in which the perceiver "separates" medium and image,[23] and discusses whether digital media can be called "media".[24] The decisive point for us is already his notion of the entanglement of pres-

[15] The example tries to illustrate what Belting describes in a more abstract way (Belting 2001: 29–30).
[16] See particularly Belting 2001: 22.
[17] Belting 2001: 22. For a similar thought see Stoellger 2014a: 1, 3.
[18] Belting 2001: 22.
[19] For this see also Stoellger, who shows how certain images make forget that they are made, handmade (Stoellger 2014a: 1).
[20] Belting 2001: 29–30, 143–147, 153, 186.
[21] Belting 2001: 29. See also ibid.: 143–147, particularly 146, 153, 186. Also quoted by Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 268.
[22] Belting 2001: 146.
[23] Belting 2001: 30. My translation.
[24] Belting 2001: 38–41.

ence and absence in the mediated image. He explicitly says, that this entanglement can take different forms in different media.[25] His concrete story for this: When the statue of a Madonna overcomes temporal distance, presence and absence are not in the same way entangled as when television overcomes spatial distance.[26]

In the aftermath of Belting, it seems promising to reflect the entanglement of absence and presence for digital media, using the terminological distinction of medium and image: For example, what happens in a Zoom-conference, when one sees the images of colleagues? In what way does the digital medium make these people present in their images? In what way does the digital medium point to itself, making the absence of the depicted poignant?

2.2 Image Ban, Images and the Imagined

As far as we have summarized it, Belting's distinction between image and medium draws attention to the role of media in relation to what we see when we see an image. But what do we see? This question points to "the relation between the image and that what the image shows"[27]. The innovation of the "iconic turn" refers to this relation in particular, as Moxter points out.[28] He quotes Belting to summarize the new understanding of this relation: "Bilder sind niemals nur das, was sie zu sein behaupten, Abbildung der Realität, es sei denn daß sie eine Idee der Realität abbilden."[29]

To put it close to Moxter's German words: Images not only depict or represent something, they show and "give to see".[30] This transcends the thinking in terms of similarity and representations.[31] Images not only "represent" something, they also "present" something, as Stoellger has put it for the golden calf.[32] On the background of this new perspective, Moxter and Hartenstein have developed a "Hermeneutik des Bilderverbots".[33] Interpreting the texts of the Hebrew Bible, Hartenstein makes three decisive points that mark the "borderlines of the visible".[34] Let's start with his third point:

[25] Belting 2001: 30–31.
[26] Belting 2001: 30.
[27] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 298. My translation.
[28] See Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 263.
[29] Belting 2001: 109; Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 263.
[30] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 264, , with reference to Boehm 2006: 16, 35.
[31] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 36, 247, 263–266.
[32] Stoellger 2014b: 144. See also: Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 264–265; Boehm 2006: 35.
[33] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016.
[34] Hartenstein/ Moxter 2016: 154. My translation.

(1) Hartenstein sees a connection between the ban of images and monotheism.[35] The world-transcendent creator God cannot be represented by anything in the world: "Nichts Geschöpfliches (= Vergängliches) vermag den unsichtbar transzendenten und ewigen Gott [...] angemessen zu repräsentieren (Dtn 4 u.a.)."[36]

Understood this way, the ban of images is strictly spoken pointing to the inadequacy of the medium. All created things aren't suitable media for carrying the image of God.

(2) Secondly. According to Hartenstein, God is experienced by God's deeds in the Hebrew Bible.[37] God is narrated to be visible and present, but always in fleeting ways:[38] "Feuer, Finsternis, Wolken und Wolkendunkel sollen gesehen werden, sie zeigen aber eine räumlich entzogene Präsenz, sichtbar *und* undurchschaubar."[39]

There are metaphors, mental images[40] and appearances of God's presence, which make people experience God's presence; but they never nail God down to a specific image-medium, the dialectical tension between presence and withdrawal[41] remains.[42] God is narrated to be present in image-media like a burning bush, but always "transitory".[43] According to Hartenstein, one problem the image ban draws attention to is the images' tendency to capture what they depict.[44] This is the problem, the story of the golden calf illustrates.[45]

(3) The other problem Hartenstein points to is, that images could draw the attention away from God.[46] We can see this in connection with what he had written about the power of images earlier: images can have the power to "capture" the spectators' view.[47]

Taken together, this leads to an understanding of the image ban that makes it not about "God's invisibility but [about] God's beeing concealed", as Moxter summer-

[35] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 80, 155–156.
[36] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 156.
[37] See Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 154.
[38] See ibid.
[39] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 167.
[40] See Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 14, 157–162.
[41] See Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 157.
[42] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 154.
[43] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 165–170, quote from 165. My translation.
[44] See Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 154.
[45] See ibid.
[46] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 154, (209).
[47] See Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 141. My translation.See also ibid.: 279.

izes.[48] Following from their, it is also about the human spectator's freedom, who could easily be banished by the image.[49]

The interesting thing for us is that Hartenstein's three points imply a certain connection between specific mediality on the one hand and the dialectics of presence and absence of the God who appears in image-media in a transitory way. God makes God present in a transitory way in the medium of fire and clouds. The image-medium of the golden calf needs to be destroyed. It's mediality would nail down God's presence to one image and distract attention away from God. Implicitly, the image ban points to the differences in mediality for the dialectic of absence and presence. That's a trace it seems worth following.

3. Bread, Wine and the Internet

3.1. The Lord's Supper as Media Praxis. Or: Christian Life as Augmented Reality

Another basic media practice in the Christian tradition is the Lord's Supper: Bread and wine are media used for the (re)presentation of Jesus Christ in the community of faith "making" present the body of Christ. The Lord's Supper thus is a mean of mediation – a medium – between God and humans.[50] Therefore it describes as *medium salutis* in the tradition. Reflecting the Lord's Supper from this point of view, raises the question of where and how God and humans encounter each other, as Teresa Berger explains:

> " 'Mediation' is no newcomer to theology but rather a cornerstone of understanding God's grace rendered present and efficacious under sacramental signs. This brings me to a second vital signpost, which is reflected in contemporary discussions of theology and new media. Most authors writing at the intersection of theology and new media endeavor to show that God's self-communication has always been mediated in manifold ways. Divine self-disclosure, in other

[48] Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 247. My translation, and ibid.: 251–260; similarly already Höhne 2019: 149.

[49] See Hartenstein / Moxter 2016: 260–261 and Höhne 2019: 149–153 and the literature referenced there.

[50] Therefore the German linguist and media theorist Jochen Hörisch introduces the Lord's Supper as one of the main media (Leitmedien) in media history. See Hörisch 1992; 2010. In contrast, the Lord's Supper is not explicitly discussed as a medium in Horsfield's study "From Jesus to the Internet". Rather, Horsfield focusses on writing as the main medium in Christian history – and thus focuses on the question of the medialization of Jesus' message without thinking about the medial (re)presentation of Jesus Christ. See Horsfield 2015.

See on the relation of interface and media https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/vonoorschot-bible-interface/release/5 and https://cursor.pubpub.org/pub/hemenway-bible-interface/release/3

> words, itself is a 'media event', and often a multimediated one, for that matter."[51]

Thus, according to Gumbrecht, the denominational disputes on the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper can also be read as a media-theoretical debate about the question of the presence and representation of what is depicted, or of their entanglement: While the Catholic Eucharistic model emphasizes the real presence of what is depicted, the Protestant tradition, especially in its Reformed interpretation, geared towards the representation of what is remembered.[52]

During the last month, there has been a debate about digital celebrations of Lord's Supper – at least in the German context.[53] This debate was strongly based on traditional dogmatic descriptions. And it focused on the question of a possible digital mediatization of the celebration of the Lord's Supper – mostly without reflecting on the character of the Lord's Supper as a media practice and medium itself.

In many places the debate follows a binary description of "virtual" and "real". With Teresa Berger, we would like to contradict this separation of the "digital dualists": This description overlooks the fact that virtual spaces also form a or many realities.[54] We will discuss this question elsewhere in this workshop; therefore I would like to briefly refer to the relationship between virtuality and mediality from the question of mediality and mediatization: We want to distinguish between virtuality in a philosophical understanding and virtuality in a technical understanding. Virtuality in the philosophical understanding literally describes a field of possibilities, an imagined reality that can possibly come into being. When it comes to digital technologies, a virtual reality describes a communication space, a "world of objects that promises to be reality without having to be".[55] In the debates on digital church life, the virtual usually refers to an encounter enabled by technical means – called media. The focus here is on the mediating process through certain technologies, and therefore on the technical understanding of virtuality.

This dual virtual character also applies to digital worship services and digital celebrations of the Lord's Supper: Every Christian worshipping community – digital or not

[51] Berger 2017: 79. Berger refers to Nordhofen, Stoellger and Byers.

[52] See Gumbrecht / Schulte 2010: 214-218.

[53] That this debate has expanded due to the Covid 19 pandemic, but is by no means a new questions, is shown e.g. by Berger 2017; Phillips 2020; Ostrowski 2006; Mikoski 2010 et al.

[54] Berger 2017: 16. See also Nord 2008.

[55] Vaihinger 1997: 21.

– is also a virtual community insofar as it hopes to participate in the community of the body of Christ, the invisible church, the community of saints. We celebrate every service, every Lord's Supper, hoping and believing that we are part of this community. This community is biblically qualified as a community in the spirit, i.e. as a pneumatic community. In this sense, every worship service has a virtual aspect in the philosophical sense of the word: It is a community that is always more than that which can be recognized our senses. According to Deeg, the tension between virtuality and physical reality describes every liturgical performance – as a connection between earthly and heavenly worship.[56] As this not only applies to the worship but – following Paul's understanding of the new life in Christ (*en christo*) – one could say: Christian life in itself is a form of augmented reality – hoping and believing to live not only in the world we can see, hear, touch, taste and smell, but also at the same time living in a world far beyond our understanding.

If we celebrate church services online, this pneumatic virtual character is accompanied by a certain form of mediation, which means it is mediated by digital technical structures. This technical mediation does not oppose the spiritual community described above: In the New Testament letters we read about the community of the body of Christ, which is realized by blessings, greetings or prayers over distances in the medium of the letter.

3.2. Bread, Wine, Word – and Body. Or: Argueing on mediated media

If one looks at the Lord's Supper as a media practice, the issue at stake can be specified as follows related to the overall question on the bridging function of the media: Whether and how the Lord's Supper can be celebrated digitally, focuses on the relationship between the media used in the Lord's Supper and their digital mediatization. The question then would be: What should be represented in the media – and how can it be mediated digitally? How do bread and wine as key media in the Lord's Supper, relate to the mediation of the community, the words of institution or the mediated presence of the liturgist? And last but not least: Which media are suitable for expressing which dimensions of shall be (re)presented? So it is an argument about the possibilities of mediating the media of the Lord's Supper. The interesting question is what exactly are the media and mediations to argue about. In the words of our introduction: What shall be bridged – between God and Humans or Humans on different

[56] Deeg 2019: 20–23.

places and spaces? what should actually be presented, represented or made present – and by which media?

Classically, bread and wine are named the media of God's presence in the Lord's Supper. It is an incarnate word that leads to a bodily practice of eating and drinking, as Fechtner points out. [57] It is this material, sensual character, that forms its characteristic. Proponents of a digital celebration of the Lord's Supper emphasize that this physical dimension is also part in digital practices: Here, too, the elements are involved, one eats and drinks the material elements.[58] Experiencing bread and wine is also a physical occurrence in digital communion, even alone in front of the screen. This concrete bodily devotion in bread and wine offers the decisive surplus to the devotion of God in the word.

Augustine's definition of the sacrament emphasizes this connection between word and element: accedit verbum ad elementum, et fit sacramentum. So, the sacrament is constituted by connecting the word with elements – in media-theoretical terms it is constituted by the plurality and combination of media. Amazingly little has been argued about this connection in the German debate about digital forms of the Lord's Supper. It seems to be of secondary importance whether word and element come together with or without mediatization – the medial communication of the words of institution through digital channels does not prevent word and element from coming together, just as does a hearing aid. It therefore seems unproblematic if a medial mediation takes place between word and element.

Much has been argued about another aspect: The meaning of the bodily presence of the celebrants and their community. Gordon Mikoski put this in a nutshell in 2010 already and describes it as a reversal of the classic debate on the sacrament:

> „In the digital age, it may be the case that the classical debates about the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist have been inverted. The question with which we may now have to wrestle is not 'In what way is *the Lord* present in the Supper?' Instead, the question is 'In what ways are *we* present in the Supper?'"[59]

[57] Fechtner 2020. Vgl. Leppin 2020.

[58] See for example Berger 2017: 16–19.

[59] Mikoski 2010: 258–259. See also Apgar-Taylor 2020; Daniel-Siebenmann 2020; Fiedler 2019.

In this turn, the ecclesiological dimension of the Lord's Supper and the community it constitutes comes into focus – and thus, in media theory, the question of the importance of the human body as a medium of community.

Firstly, the relation of virtuality and corpo-reality/embodiment must be taken into account: The virtualization of the community lacking physical co-presence means a virtualization of the body – not only of the individual, but also of the body of Christ in the congregation.[60] In contrast, the image of the body of Christ, at least in its New Testament description, is closely connected with the concrete congregation and their corporeal-physical dimension (cf. 1 Cor. 11-12). Spiritual communion is not to be thought of as purely immaterial or virtual, but can be experienced in concrete bodily community: How people eat together, who eats what – for Paul, these are theological questions because in and through them one can see the body of Christ and the new being in Christ. In the New Testament, the body of the individual believer seems to be indissolubly integrated into the image, representation and presence of the body of Christ to be represented. Following Stoellger it can be described as an "event of immersion" (Immersionsgeschehen) that describes the " 'transubstantiation of the celebrants' to the body of Christ". [61] In a nutshell: The bodies – one's own and those of the other celebrants – are media of the presence and representation of the body of Christ, which is supposed to be represented.[62]

Secondly, the physical co-presence has an anthropological component: It touches questions of perception and interpretation, as Gorski points out: It is about "basic anthropological questions of the relationship between immanence and transcendence, i.e. how humans can perceive and interpret divine signs of salvation". [63] As Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes in "Life Together": The physical presence of other Christians can be a source of joy and strength, because the nearness of the Other can become a physical sign of God's gracious presence. [64] Conversely, the physical closeness of oth-

[60] This could also be continued with Confessio Augustana 7 and its focus on the specific congregatio as I show in my thoughts on digital communio (LINK). With regard to the Lord's Supper, Fechtner emphasizes that these congregationes are defined through their physical co-presence. Therefore, digital communities are not a congregatio in the sense of the word, since the co-celebrants are not present in the event: "Without their physical co-presence, the co-celebrants are not present in the event to me." Fechtner 2020: 2. My translation. Grethlein in contrast points out that this also occurs with some analog forms, e.g. at major events. Grethlein 2019: 56.

[61] Stoellger 2021: 35. My translation.

[62] This aspect could be underlined by the strong diaconal dimension of the metaphor of the body of Christ and other ecclesiological images in the New Testament. I would like to thank Matthias Konradt for pointing this aspect out discussing my understanding.

[63] Gorski 2020: 4. My translation.

[64] Bonhoeffer 1997: 29.

ers can become an imposition to others. The ambivalence of physical closeness is part of this aspect of the bodily co-presence.

It becomes clear how both one's own body and the body of those who celebrate with me become part of the media complex in which and through the Lord's Supper can be understood as media practice. Berger aptly points out, that it is about pondering the spiritual community in relation to the physical and physical gathering of believers.[65] Tan goes even further: Is the emphasis on embodied communion an expression of a stronger or weaker ecclesiology – to put it another way: Is the emphasis on physical community an expression of a particularly body-oriented anthropology and ecclesiology or an expression of a lack of trust in the unifying power of God's Spirit?[66] We will discuss the question of the relationship between these realities elsewhere in this workshop, so we will leave this question open for now.

4. Proceedings for Understanding Media and Mediality

What follows from these impulses for the understanding of media and mediality? First, the thoughts around images and image ban point to the analogy and difference between different practices of media use. This has an impact for how to discuss digital communion (4.1).

Ssecond: If one describes the media as bridging functions and reflects on the Lord's Supper from this perspective, we see three main points (4.2). Firstly, the virtual dimension is a constitutive element of Christian life as it emerges in the relation of the physical world and the new creation. Technical mediatization processes can be integrated in this relation, but are not constitutive. Second, in the debates on digital church life the body plays in important role as a medium: How corpo-reality can be related to virtual realities is an open question here. Third, the relation between presence and absence, representability and hiddenness, bridging and a remaining gap must be redefined in new media practices – not only from the perspective of image theory and the image ban, but also from the media complex of the Lord's Supper.

4.1 Difference and Analogy

In this paper, we have sofar mentioned and discussed different phenomena of media practices: Telephone calls and Zoom conferences in the introduction, the paintings

[65] Berger 2017: 39.
[66] Tan 2020: 63.

and sculptures in summary of some of Belting's thoughts (2.1), the golden calf and burning bushes in the section on the image ban (2.2), the Eucharist with bread and wine and the internet in the chapter on the Lord's Supper as media praxis (3). The summarized points of Belting, Hartenstein and Moxter on images and images make something important visible about these different media practices. They show the analogy between these practices as well as their difference.

The aforementioned practices are analogous insofar as they all include a material dimension that can be referred to as "medium". The medium of a painting includes canvas and paint, a burning bush is a material medium, the media of Eucharist are bread and wine and digital communication requires screens, computers, cable and/or WiFi-connection and so an. Inspired by Belting's work (2.1), we can now say:[67] In all the named practices those material media bridge a distance and make something present that is physically absent. But in doing so, the material media also function as reminders of absence – with different intensity and in different ways, but they all do. Bread and wine can be experienced to make the body of Christ present while they still taste and feel like bread and wine and thereby point to Christ's temporal absence.

This analogy transcends the mentioned duality of reality and virtuality as well as the duality of embodied and disembodied. Media transmit mental images – and that holds true for real and material paintings as well as for the digital media – they just do so in different ways. Images are always somehow embodied[68] – and that also applies for digital media: the image a screen or another interface creates in my head is an embodied image.

The aforementioned practices are also different, insofar as they make different use of different material media and lead to a different balance between presence and absence.[69] For example: On the one hand, if someone with little liturgical practice participates in a Lord's Supper in physical co-presence, her or his focus might be on the materiality of the media, the taste of the wine, the haptics of the bread, the oddness of the setting. Those media might still serve him or her as media of Christ's presence but the dimension of absence will be quite strong because of the focus on the media themselves. On the other hand, if someone uses the medium of VR-glasses to explore a virtual landscape, the experience of this very landscape might be so real and present

[67] Belting 2001: 29–30, 143–147, particularly 146, 153, 186.
[68] See also Belting 2001: 14.
[69] See Belting 2001: 30, as quoted.

that she or he totally forgets about the mediality of his experience and hence about the absence of the reality she or he experiences.

On the background of these differences and analogies, the debate about digital communication should not be about the difference between mediated and non-mediated but about different ways of mediation.

In any case, this concept of analogy and difference makes it about conversion between different practices – and less about the mediation of an otherwise less or not mediated reality.

4.2 Conversion and Convertibility

If the Lord's Supper is described as a media practice that makes communion with God and with each other (re)present in and through various media, the question of the "convertibility" of this practices in the course of digital media change arises. The German media theorist Jochen Hörisch developed this notion of conversion in his media history: According to Hörisch, leading media share the possibility of "conversion" or convertibility, i.e. the possibility of embedding an information element in other contexts and cultural techniques.[70] When media cultures change, the medial representations outshine the presences hoped for: The medial presentation and representation require explanation and become problematic in their use and aims. If the main media change, conversion between media is the only way to preserve the represented: One converts in order not to actually convert, in order not to get stuck in an old, non-portable system.[71] Hörisch therefore concludes: "Converts are the real supporters of the systems they want to strengthen through their conversion."[72] A central query from a media-theoretical perspective therefore asks for clarification of the possible conversion and convertability of the media forms chosen.

However, there is a second thing to consider. From the reflections on the Lord's Supper it became clear that the testimony of Jesus Christ, his presence and the community he founds are constituted in plural media: In the relation of word and element, in the relation of body and word, in the relation of body and element, in the relation on Gods spirit and word,... This constitutive media plurality in the mediation and testi-

[70] Hörisch 2010: 22–23.
[71] Hörisch 2010: 25.
[72] Hörisch 2010: 25.

mony of the singular media event "Christ" [73] is also preserved in the mediatization of these media – maybe even increased. The desire for a direct knowledge or vision of God is thus again rejected, as has already been made clear. The description of changing media therefore means less a change to a new main medium (Leitmedium) than an expansion of the medial forms and practices. The focus thus shifts to the question of the relationship not only between different media, but also different mediatization practices. Or, in the words of Berger: „Or do we have to think of God's media praxis as the ongoing, multi-mediated, living self-disclosure of a Living God? In which case, might sacramental mediations today be shaped by bits and bytes?"[74]

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[73] See for this thought Stoellger: „The question is then, how this singular media event (Christ) can be medialized diachronically; how Christ becomes present, after he is dead, resurrected and exalted with the Father? In short, through Christ's *spirit* (not through a general but singularly defined spirit). And this sparks hopes in some for a new immediacy of the spirit – which is immediately disappointed and redirected: to the media of Christ's spirit. For the spirit is not *bodiless* but bodily performed, embodied in preaching, sacrament, gestures, images, worship and form of life. God as medium (per Christum) – enters and binds himself to the *supplementary media of Christ.* The mediality of Christ's spirit is a qualified media plurality." Stoellger 2018b: 42. See also Stoellger 2018a: 380.

[74] Berger 2017: 80.

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Empathy in an Age of Deepfakes

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What is the potential of empathy in helping us see through and beyond deepfakes? Deepfakes are synthetic media that depict individuals acting in falsified circumstances. With growing concern about the propagandistic uses of deepfakes, researchers are actively working on countermeasures to detect synthetic media. This paper examines whether empathy can play a role in differentiating deepfakes from genuine media. After exegeting the phenomenological interpretation of empathy in the works of Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein, the paper explores whether empathy could play a gnoseological role in an interdisciplinary campaign against deepfakes.

What is the potential of empathy for helping us to see through and beyond deepfakes?[1] The present essay continues the analysis of my previous work on synthetic media, focusing on the promise and peril of relying on empathy as a mode of engagement with deepfakes.[2] In my previous essay, I introduced deepfakes, covering the potential benefits and liabilities of this emerging form of synthetic media. In this paper, my goal is to pay due on a conceptual promissory note. Near the conclusion of my previous paper, I contended that 'cultivating empathy' might complement the technological and legal avenues of response to the threat of deepfakes. In what follows, I seek to

[1] This is an incomplete and unpolished draft presented for feedback and discussion at the Theologies of the Digital Conference on April 23-24, 2021.
[2] Anderson 2019.

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unpack the relevancy of cultivating empathy for engaging with deepfakes, drawing on the phenomenological tradition but also on writings of golden age, silver age, and contemporary authors of science fiction.

1. Shattering Our Shared Reality

Let's begin by rehearsing the dangers posed by synthetic video. Nina Schick, author of *Deepfakes: The Coming Infocalypse*, considers deepfakes as a new tool in long-running propaganda wars. Harkening back to the Cold War, she cites a Soviet political operative as stating the purpose of a disinformation campaign is to "change the perception of reality."[3] The point of disinformation is to divide the common will of the enemy by undermining their understanding of what is real. In the case of deepfakes, misinformation campaigns seem to have found their perfect weapon. If anyone with a little programming knowhow and some cloud computing credits is able to create realistic videos of their political opponents, who will be in a position to judge the truth or falsity of any video evidence?

The arrival of deepfakes on the media scene served to heighten the already existing challenge of maintaining a shared sense of reality in a digital age. Prior to the Internet age, the sources of knowlege about the past remained relatively limited and fixed. Research libraries, historical societies, and other memory institutions maintained the collections of newspapers, scientific journals, corporate and personal archives, and other documentary records along with the secondary literature required to contextualize and interpret them. Archivists and librarians developed intrinsic standards to arrange, describe, and make these materials accessible to researchers. By contrast, the contemporary media landscape is anything but stable.[4] The effusion of personalized content that algorithms curate and deliver to us renders the establishment of a common historical record increasingly difficult. Common cultural touchstones still exist, however. At the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, for example, video archivists assiduously preserve televised presidential addresses in the conviction that, collectively, these speeches constitute part of our shared cultural experience.

But what would happen if presidential talks were to become personalized? In *Version Control*, Dexter Palmer imagines a scenario where the President of the United States regularly appears on television to share his thoughts about the content of upcoming shows while also dropping in on video screens at restaurants and interrupting

[3] Nina Schick 2020: 55.
[4] Rumsey 2016

video calls to offer political commentary and perspective. Palmer does not explain the mechanism behind these personalized interlocutions, but he hints that they are the equivalent of interactive deepfakes.

> If you had never watched that much television, then you might wonder how it was that the President of the United States had found the time to record a video introduction to every program that appeared on every one of the hundreds of available channels—not just a generic twenty-second speech that gave his imprimatur to the program about to commence, but a short monologue that always seemed to be tailored to the program's subject matter, linking it to some larger political or spiritual meaning. But keen-eyed viewers knew that the President repeated himself: he almost always delivered one of a finite number of canned speeches, perhaps tweaking a word or two in a halfhearted effort at personalization, and anyone who viewed a variety of programs for long enough was bound to see a prologue for a telecast of an English soccer match repurposed a few months later for a stream of a StarCraft I tournament final.[5]

This kind of personalization is not far off. We already receive personalized political emails and robocalls. What Palmer describes is practically feasible already, though not yet culturally acceptable. But we could imagine a future, not so very distant, when political figures deploy data-driven and interactive deepfakes to tailor messages to individual constituents. If such a society were to emerge, what role would archivists play in preserving the past? Perhaps archivists would take to cataloging the recycled stories for future reference and analysis?

We think about deepfakes today primarily as a genre of videos that we encounter on the internet, rendering their subjects' external appearances into puppets that act out the intentions of their creator. As I noted in my earlier contribution on deepfakes, such puppeteering serves both negative and positive ends (as well as mixed ones). But deepfakes are already evolving beyond these simple puppeteering videos to something qualitatively different. I will refer to these prevailing forms of synthetic media as weak in order to contrast them with an emerging form of strong synthetic media.

The emerging wave of strong deepfakes promise to be more dynamic and encompassing. My colleague, Ole Molvig, assistant professor of history at Vanderbilt University, recently created a deepfake of Albert Einstein. His deepfake combined synthetic audio, trained on samples of Einstein's English-language speeches, and synthetic video,

[5] Palmer 2016: 16.

trained on images of Einstein, with sentences generated by GPT-2 (Generative Pre-trained Transformer 2), Open AI's tool for synthetic text generation, which he trained on the corpus of Einstein's English-language publications. Imagine, now, taking this experiment a step further by creating an interactive Einstein that you could connect with on Zoom to ask for assistance with your physics homework. This kind of immersive, interactive deepfake is what I intend by the qualifier "strong."

In the *Reality Game: How the Next Wave of Technology Will Break the Truth*, Samuel Woolley, assistant professor of journalism at the University of Texas at Austin, classifies deepfake videos as a species of "computational propaganda."[6] Computational propaganda takes many forms today, ranging from chatbots operating on social networks to synthetic video on YouTube and beyond. What concerns Woolley is that distinct forms of computational propaganda, if left unchecked, may converge into a multi-sensory virtual reality that to its victims becomes practically indistinguishable from reality itself.

> If we do not take action, we could very well end up with scenarios like this. Digital propoganda is not just biased information, enhanced by automation and bots, that can be read on Facebook group pages or in YouTube comment sections. It is technologically enhanced propoganda that people can see, hear, and feel. In the not so distant future, it could be politically motivated information that is also tasted and smelled.[7]

In his discussion of deepfakes, Woolley discusses a range of "tells" that now make it possible to separate synthetic videos from genuine news media. But he also notes that established practices of investigative reporting form an essential complement to those technological measures. "It is a combination of human and technological strategies," he writes, "that can be brought to bear on this problem."[8]

This contribution focuses on the human side of that equation. How can empathy help us to connect with the other beyond the somatic or technological interface? And how might empathy help us to see through the surface of synthetic media, particularly when it assumes a strong form?

[6] Woolley 2020.
[7] Ibid.: 14.
[8] Ibid.: 126.

2. Phenomenology of Empathy

"Do we ever arrive at an *other* phenomenological I," asks Edmund Husserl in his notes from his lectures during the Winter Semester of 1910-1911 in Göttingen.[9] The philosophy of intersubjectivity posed a challenge to Husserl's phenomenology because, in short, phenomenology seems methodologically to exclude the possibility of including other agents within its ambit. Adopting the standpoint of Descartes's *cogito*, Husserl's phenomenological reduction abstains from empirical investigation to focus on the intentional act that binds subject and object. When I think, I think about something, and the subject and object of thought exist together simultaneously in that relationship of thinking. These so-called intending acts serve as the fundamental data of phenomenological reflection, which explores their modalities while bracketing or putting aside presuppositions or extrapolations about their empirical content. That is, the phenomenological method does not make assumptions about the subject or object of intentional acts that transcend what those acts themselves reveal. The bracketing of the so-called naturalistic attitude bolsters the claim of phenomenological investigations to irrefragability. Just as with the *cogito*, I cannot doubt that my intentional acts of experience, the so-called *cogitationes*. But therein lies the rub. When I encounter another person, I must bracket the existence of that person as a conscious agent to explore what is given to me solely within the confines of the phenomenological reduction. Husserl asks whether the phenomenological reduction requires him to see only an animate body where he naturalistically experienced a fellow human being?

Briefly stated, the phenomenological question about empathy asks how to understand our primordial encounter with another when we do not have unmediated access to the "I" of the other. That is, it seeks to understand the possibility of a middle way between two alternatives that it rules out. The first alternative is a kind of solipcism, whereby I do not encounter anyone else directly, but only material forms in motion. I may treat these living objects as creatures and may posit that they have consciousness in a form similar to my own, but I am never directly aware of their "I"s. While Husserl could speak of phenomenology as a kind of methodological solipcism, he was at pains to deny that phenomenology ineluctably led to ontological solipsism. This was the argument, in broad strokes, of his *Cartesian Meditations*, which begins from the standpoint of methodological solipicism and concludes with a magisterial consideraton of intersubjectivity. On the other hand, Husserl and his followers also rejected any mystical or psychical solution that posited direct interaction between "I"s. If I

[9] Husserl 2006: 82.

perceive another person as an "I," it is not because I have direct access in any form to that person's consciousness. My perception of the other as other is primordial but always mediated. This is the riddle that phenomenologists aspired to solve.

Husserl's response to this quandary is to draw on the experience of empathy. "In empathy," he explained, "the empathizing I experiences the inner life or, to be more precise, the consciousness of the other I."[10] In everyday social life, empathy connects us with our fellow human beings. The "I" "sees the other"I's" not in the sense that it sees itself or experientially finds itself," clarified Husserl. "Rather it posits the immanence of 'empathy'; hence other lived experiences and other character dispositions are 'found' too; but they are given or had in the sense of one's own."[11] Empathy designates our ability to experience the other as another I rather than as an animate body. Husserl emphasizes that empathy is not about mirroring the activities of the other– for instance, feeling angry when the other radiates anger. As he noted, "For when I feel empathy with your anger, I am myself not angry, not at all."[12] The relationship is more primordial; in empathy, we experience the "I" along with the physical body. Husserl argues that the experience of empathy, like any intentional act, survives the phenomenological reduction. The reduction allows us to explore the intentional act of empathy *qua* act, relating not to this or that particular individual, but to the experience, indubitable in its own right, of perceiving a fellow I in, with, and through a physical body.

The description of Husserl's nascent phenomenology of intersubjectivity must suffice for the present purpose. A detailed explanation would have to trace the development of his ideas about empathy from his earliest work to his *Cartesian Meditations* and beyond. In his *Nachlass*, Husserl left behind manuscripts that Iso Kern painstakingly reconstructed and published as *Husserliana* XIII–XV[13] Husserl was evidently also dissatisfied with the crabbed exposition in his lectures from 1910-1911, rewriting them with more precise philosophical terms (that again raise new questions) in what is now Appendix XII of the volume.[14] In the course of his meditations on the philosophy of intersubjectivity, Husserl benefited from conversations with his doctoral student, Edith Stein. Edith Stein was born to a Jewish family in Breslau, Silesia (now Wrocław, Poland) and had initially studied psychology. In 1913, she arrived in Göttingen to at-

[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.: 5.
[12] Ibid.: 83.
[13] McCormick 1976: 167–89.
[14] Husserl 2006: 157–64.

tend Husserl's lectures on phenomenlogy, hoping to discover a better undergirding for psychology as a science.[15] While her studies were interrupted by the oubreak of the war in 1914, by 1915 she had returned to study with Husserl, by now a professor in Freiburg, and eventually completed her dissertation under his guidance in 1916. Her thesis, *On the Problem of Empathy*, set out the fundamental problem of intersubjectivity from a phenomenological perspective and articulated a more thorough exploration of the critical concept of empathy than Husserl had theretofore provided.

In a remarkable passage early in her thesis, Stein noted that understanding interpersonal empathy opens up a window to grasping other forms of empathy, including divine empathy.

> This experience which an "I" as such has of another "I" as such looks like this. This is how human beings comprehend the psychic life of their fellows. Also as believers they comprehend the love, the anger, and the percepts of their God in this way; and God can comprehend people's lives in no other way.[16]

Husserl, by contrast, had opined in 1910-1911 that God had no need of empathy because God had direct insight into the consciousness of all conscious agents, a theological thesis that he termed "divine all-consciousness."[17] Whether empathy connects human beings to other creatures and their Creator remains a central question.

3. The Shifting Semantics of Empathy

Exploring the concept of empathy requires us to attend to its philological evolution. The term 'empathy' is a nineteenth century neologism that, for most of its existence, stood in want of clear definition. As Susan Lanzoni chronicles in *Empathy: A History*, the semantics of the term shifted as researchers from different fields, ranging from aesthetics to psychology to neuroscience, layed claim to the word and attempted to pin down its definition.[18] Most straightforwardly, the English word "empathy" originated as a translation of the German word, 'Einfühlung.' As Lanzoni demonstrates, the term 'empathy' shifted gradually from meaning the projection of oneself into another, whether object or person, to a receptive meaning. "Rather than an expansion

[15] Borden 2004: 4.
[16] Stein 1989: 11.
[17] Husserl 2006: 177–78.
[18] Lanzoni 2018.

of the self into a form or shape, empathy came to mean the very opposite," she explains, namely, "the reining in of the self's expressiveness to grasp another's emotion in service to a therapeutic goal or moral imperative."[19]

Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein's phenomenological explorations of empathy may also be situated in the history of this gradual semantic transformation. From their references to the psychologist Theodor Lipps (1851–1914), we ascertain how they took as their point of departure the aesthetic tradition of empathy while also pushing back against its narrow philosophical frame. According to Montag, et. al., Lipps developed his understanding of 'Einfühlung' from David Hume's concept of sympathy in *A Treatise of Human Nature*.[20] Lipps experimented with methods to demonstrate how the "I" projects itself into objects (for example, seeing movement in certain forms of optical illusions when the lines remains stationary) as well as people (for instance, experiencing fear when watching a circus performer walking a tightrope). As Lanzoni describes, this theory of empathy, which posited that spectators of artwork come to appreciate those works of art by projecting their subjectivity into them, formed the basis of a dominant theory of aesthetics in the early twentieth century.[21]

A counterveiling understanding of empathy began to emerge in psychological circles during that era. "The psychotherapeutic rendering of empathy traded self-projection for its opposite," writes Lanzoni. "One now had to bracket the self's feelings and judgments in order to more fully occupy the position of another."[22] This perspective on empathy became familiar in the form of Rogerian or "person-centered therapy," in which the therapist aspires to empathize with their clients' self-understanding to help clients grapple with and overcome their psychological quandaries.

Different senses of empathy continue to coexist. "Truth be told," admits Lanzoni, "there is little agreement today among psychologists, neuroscientists, and philosophers on empathy's contours."[23] A phenomenological theory combines aspects of both the projective and receptive side of empathy. In exploring the relation of empathy to deepfakes, we may also find that both dimensions are necessary. If we project ourselves into the other, we seek to humanize the technological object. But when that projection fails to encounter any genuine I beyond the somatic appearance of the self, the empathizer may recoil and revoke their extension of empathy.

[19] Ibid.: 14.
[20] Montag / Gallinat / Heinz 2008: 1261.
[21] Montag / Gallinat / Heinz 2008: Chapter 3.
[22] Lanzoni 2018: 125.
[23] Ibid.: 252.

4. The Empathy Snatchers

The most famous work of deepfake science fiction is undoubtedly Jack Finney's 1955 novel, *The Body Snatchers*, now better known as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* after its multiple film adaptations. The novel portrays the arrival of interstellar parasites in the fictional town of Mill Valley, set in Marin County, California of the 1950s. The protagonist, Miles Bennell, is a local physician. At the beginning of the novel, he receives an after hours visit from Becky Driscoll, who reports that a close friend has become convinced that her uncle Ira is not actually her uncle.

> "Miles, she's got herself thinking that he *isn't* her uncle." "How do you mean?" I took a sip from my glass. "That they aren't really related?" "No, no." She shook her head impatiently. "I mean she thinks he's"–one shoulder lifted in a puzzled shrug–"an imposter, or something. Someone who only *looks* like Ira, that's all. Miles, I'm worried sick!"[24]

The characters in the novel assume, at first, that the town is experiencing a kind of mass psychosis, a frightening but transient delusion. What becomes evident as the action continues is that an alien lifeform is spreading through the town, planting pods in people's basements and closets, which eventually replicate and destroy their human hosts. The pod people look, act, and speak identically to the originals. They share the same memories, making it easy for them to blend in. But while they can mimic emotion, they do not themselves have any emotions. The lack of affect is the only "tell."

> "There was only one way Wilma Lentz knew Ira wasn't Ira. Just one way to tell, because it was the only difference. There was no emotion, not really, not strong and human, but only the memory and pretense of it, in the thing that looked, talked, and acted like Ira in every other way."[25]

Given their emotional vacuity, the pod people lack the ability to empathize with human beings. As with contemporary deepfakes, the eyes prove the most difficult to emulate and, on the flip side, the most revealing of the hollowness within the replicants. Finney focuses on the alterity of the gaze in his description of the encounter of Miles and Becky with the town librarian.

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[24] Finney 2010: 11.
[25] Ibid.: 184.

> For a moment she still stood, glancing helplessly from me to Becky in utter bewilderment; then suddenly she dropped the pretense. Gray-haired Miss Weygand, who twenty years ago had loaned me the first copy of *Huckleberry Finn* I ever read, looked at me, her face going wooden and blank, with an utterly cold and pitiless alieness. There was nothing there now, in that gaze, nothing in common with me; a fish in the sea had more kinship with me than this staring thing before me. Then she spoke. *I know you,* I'd said, and she replied, and her voice was infinitely remote and uncaring. "Do you?" she said, then turned on her heel and walked away.[26]

While the replicants lack empathy for their human hosts, Miles and Becky continue to feel empathy for their lost friends and relations, finding it difficult to strike and kill the pod people who impersonate them so nearly.

In the final section of the novel, the clones discover and trap Miles and Becky in his medical office off the town square. Finney uses this scene to explore the clones' perspective. What makes the clones frightening is not their malevolence, but their utter lack of caring. Finney expertly turns this lack of empathy back on his readers.

> "You look shocked, actually sick, and yet what has the human race done except spread over this planet till it swarms the globe several billion strong? What have you done with this very continent but expand till you fill it? And where are the buffalo who roamed this land before you? Gone. Where is the passenger pigeon, which literally darkened the skies of America in flocks of billions? The last one died in a Philadelphia zoo in 1913. Doctor, the function of life is to live if it can, and no other motive can ever be allowed to interfere with that. There is no malice involved; did you hate the buffalo? We must continue because we must; can't you understand that?" He smiled at me pleasantly. "It's the nature of the beast."[27]

The passage obviously points back to the reader, questioning us about our lack of empathy for other species. Are we simply beasts in the end, with empathy serving as nothing more than an evolutionary adaptation benefiting the survival of the human race? If so, might the future course of evolution favor empathyless androids who have transcended human emotional limitations? With that dismal thought in mind, we turn to a classic of the silver age of science fiction.

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[26] Ibid.: 129.
[27] Ibid.: 187.

5. Do Androids Empathize with Electric Sheep?

The novelist Philip K. Dick (1928–1982) gave the 'imitation game' a new and deadly twist in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? Dick depicted a future in which a commercial firm produces android servants for space colonists, but cannot under penalty of law import them to earth. As the models develop, these androids become virtually indistinguishable from human beings. Rebelling against their sidereal enslavement, a few androids from the latest Nexus-6 line manage to escape their bonds and flee to earth. Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter, must hunt them down and "retire" them.

At the beginning of the novel, Deckard muses that intelligence no longer serves to distinguish the latest androids from humans. These androids have long since passed the Turing Test. "Well, no intelligence test would trap such an andy." But Deckard can make use of a new heuristic, the so-called "Voigt-Kampff Empathy Test."

> [Deckard] had wondered, as had most people at one time or another, precisely why an android bounced helplessly about when confronted by an empathy-measuring test. Empathy, evidently, existed only with the human community, whereas intelligence to some degree could be found throughout every phylum and order including arachnida.[28]

Contemporary researchers have also proposed testing machines for empathy. In "An Empathy Imitation Game: Empathy Turing Test for Care- and Chat-bots," Jeremy Howick, Jessica Morley, and Luciano Floridi argue that machines must show empathy to operate effectively in environments like clinical settings. A patient would presumably resent being informed of a fatal condition by a robot that ended the announcement with a cheery, 'Have a nice day!' "We propose to move this debate from the abstract to the concrete," they write. "Taking our inspiration from the Turing Test for human thinking..., we propose to replace 'can artificial carers be empathic?' with 'can a human user distinguish between the empathy showed by an artificial carer and that showed by a human practitioner?' "[29] Selecting a standard instrument for measuring patients' perceptions of caregivers' empathy, the authors contend that, given suitable modifications, the tool could also assess whether artificial caregivers exude empathy toward their subjects of care. By studying whether artificial agents are able to achieve levels of empathy equivalent to human caregivers, they express hope, while

[28] Dick 1996: 29.
[29] Howick / Morley / Floridi 2021.

allowing that ethical concerns about deceptive empathy exist, that "philosophical debates about the extent to which artificial carers can be empathic [may be] sidestepped in favour of rigorous Turing-type tests that compare perceived empathy of a care or chatbot with perceived empathy of a human practitioner."[30]

The difference between the fictional Voigt-Kampff test and the real world instrument for measuring empathy is the directionality, that is, who is primarily being assessed. In the Voigt-Kampf test, the agent seeks to suss out androids by assessing the genuineness of their surface empathy. In the Howick-Morley-Floridi proposal, by contrast, the administrator would measure the extent to which a patient has been taken in by artificial expression of empathy. Their assumption seems to be that, at least in certain clinical circumstances, the appearance of empathy suffices.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? is at heart a reflection on empathy. Androids can fake empathy, but they are not genuinely empathatic. They do not care about human beings. The androids regard empathy as a human weakness. Human beings, by contrast, appear driven to extend empathy beyond their kin. In an echo of Finney's description of the alien librarian in *The Body Snatchers*, Dick describes the moment a human unwittingly discerns that his new neighbor is different than her appearance.

> Now that her initial fear had diminished, something else had begun to emerge from her. Something more strange. And, he thought, deplorable. A coldness. Like, he thought, a breath from the vacuum between inhabited worlds, in fact from nowhere....[31]

The human characters in the novel adhere, with greater or lesser devotion, to a religion of empathy called "Mercerism." The religion centers on empathetic identification with an individual, perhaps historical, perhaps archetypal, named Wilbur Mercer, whom anonymous "killers" have cast to the depths of a pit and who seeks, in the face of their taunts and stones, to climb out again, restoring other dead creatures to life as well. Dick offers tantalizing details about Mercerism and, indeed, the shadowy figure of Wilbur Mercer intervenes crucially in the narrative. The androids despise Mercerism as it epitomizes their lack of humanity. The androids believe that by revealing Mercerism as founded on a set of deepfake videos, they can likewise expose empathy itself as fraudulent. " 'Mercerism is a swindle,' " the *de facto* leader of the

[30] Ibid.
[31] Dick 1996: 63.

band of fugitives declares, "The whole experience of empathy is a swindle."[32] The inability of historical-critical evidence to shake the foundations of Mercerism frustrates the androids, as the failures of analogous attempts stymies critics of religion today. Is Dick hinting that the extension of empathy inevitably extends to others, binding humanity in mystical unity?

Dick does not explain the prohibition of androids on earth. Without reading too much of our theme into his narrative, he suggests that civil authorities imposed the ban to avoid the consequences of strong deepfakes. The title of the novel points to the paradox of empathy, the attempt to connect emotionally with unfeeling machines. In the earth of 1992, animals have nearly become extinct. While a privileged few can afford to own an animal, the majority must make do with artificial surrogates. The remaining middle class on earth content themselves with caring for mechanical animals. Deckard once owned a genuine sheep but, when the sheep died, he purchased an artificial surrogate to take its place. While he fools his neighbor, he cannot deceive himself and has come to hate the robotic animal. " 'The tyranny of an object,' he thought. 'It doesn't know I exist. Like the androids, it had no ability to appreciate the existence of another.' "[33] Is there any way to overcome this kind of empathy deficit? If human beings recoil at this lack of mutual appreciation, is the problem insoluble or might there be a different way of compensating for this lack?

6. Compensating for Empathy Deficits

If the perception of emotional hollowness at the core of synthetic media serves as the most fundamental tell that something is a strong deepfake, how should we respond when we detect such a lack? Is there any way to overcome that deficit?

Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of developmental psychopathology at the University of Cambridge, explores how the absence of empathy underlies cruelty and other asocial actions in *The Science of Evil: On Empathy and the Origins of Cruelty*.[34] Baron-Cohen, relying in part on Martin Buber, argues that failure of empathy reduces interpersonal encounter between subjects to the relation between the "I" and an object. As he sees it, the reduction of the other to an object serves as a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for treating the other cruelly. Baron-Cohen does not cite Immanuel Kant, but his reflections echo Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative,

[32] Ibid.: 210.
[33] Ibid.: 42.
[34] Baron-Cohen 2011.

namely, "So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."[35] But what happens when another agent cannot recognize the emotional state of others? In that case, are they doomed to violate the laws of morality, causing harm to those around them? Not necesarily, argues Baron-Cohen. In certain circumstances, there are ways to overcome empathy deficits, at least of a particular kind.

Baron-Cohen contends that human beings "*all lie somewhere on an empathy spectrum* (from high to low)."[36] He explores the psychopathology of what he terms "empathy erosion," namely, the diminishment of the ability to understand the perspective of other people, that is, to see and sympathize the world from their point of view. Baron-Cohen makes a distinction between two fundamental types: 'Zero Degrees of Empathy Negative' and 'Zero Degrees of Empathy Positive.' The first is, as the name indicates, always negative and, frequently eventuates in harmful and destructive actions. The second form, Baron-Cohen argues, gives beneficial expression to this deficit through compensatory actions. In particular, this form emerges for those who suffer from a lack of "cognitive empathy," that is the ability to understand why a person is feeling the way there are, but who feel "affective" empathy, namely, a sense of care for another person's emotional state.[37] According to Baron-Cohen, such people may make up for that lack by 'systematizing,' which he defines as "the ability to analyze changing patters, to figure out how things work."[38] When applied to the field of ethics, a systematizer prefers to operate with universalizable moral principles rather than contextual ethical guidelines. For Baron-Cohen, this explains why people with Apserger Syndrom (whom, he contends, have deficits in cognitive empathy but maintain affective empathy) "are often the first to leap to the defense of someone who is being treated unfairly because it violates the moral system they have constructed through brute logic alone."[39]

As noted in the reviews of his publication, a controversial aspect of Baron-Cohen's work is his claim that autism, at root, stems from a failure of the empathic circuit to develop normally in the brain. As a critic has cautioned, "a critical autism studies has the potential to alert us to the ideological functions that can be performed when we try to define autism and its relation to notions put forth as 'fundamental human charac-

[35] Kant 2011: 87.
[36] Baron-Cohen 2011: 17.
[37] Ibid.: 109.
[38] Ibid.: citations omitted.
[39] Ibid.: 128.

teristics.' "[40] What matters for our purposes, however, is Baron-Cohen's notion that moral systematizing can overcome deficits in cognitive empathy. If an artificial agent could substitute a set of ethical principles in place of cognitive empathy, would that artificial agent be able to function socially among human beings? The answer seems to be a qualified 'yes.' Indeed, researchers may aim to endow machines with cognitive empathy, that is, the capacity to recognize and respond appropriately to human sentiments while regarding affective empathy as either unwanted or beyond the technological pale.[41]

7. Empathy in a Technological Age

Sherry Turkle, Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT, is our foremost ethnologist of the digital age. A primary focus of her work is the deleterious effects of technology on our capacity for empathy with fellow human beings. In *The Empathy Diaries*, Turkle reflects on how her research interests developed from formative childhood experiences.[42] In particular, her biological and adoptive fathers' failure (or perhaps inability) to consider the world from her perspective, to take her feelings and aspirations into account, led Turkle to the exploration of empathy, and its absence, in her scholarship. In her biography, she shares the personal and academic itinerary that carried her from Brooklyn, to Radcliffe, to studying the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan in Paris, to her professorship at MIT. From the campus of MIT, she has defended the role of interpersonal empathy in an increasingly technological society.

"We must confront the downside of living with the robots of our science fiction dreams," she writes. "Do we really want to feel empathy for machines that feel nothing for us?"[43] Turkle calls the effort to create machines with the pretension of empathy "the original sin of artificial intelligence."[44] Is our willingness as humans to extend empathy to non-empathetic agents a flaw or feature of our emotional makeup? Or is the answer perhaps that it is both at once, and that calibrating our response to the situation proves more challenging than opting either for callousness toward or naive comity with the machines in our lifeworld.

[40] McDonagh 2013: 44.
[41] Stephan 2015.
[42] Turkle 2021.
[43] Ibid.: 345.
[44] Ibid.

Looking back at *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, Deckard worries, on the one hand, that fellow bounty hunter Phil Resh relishes the experience of "retiring" androids, exhibiting zero empathy toward them in a manner that Deckard regards as vaguely psychopathic. On the other, he senses that his own developing sense of empathy toward androids is liability. "Emapthy toward an artificial construct? he asked himself? Something that only pretends to be alive?"[45] In fact, Rachel Rosen, an android manufactured and then employed by the Rosen Corporation, attempts to neutralize Deckard as a bounty hunter by enlarging his sense of empathy for her and her kind. Still, there is something human about empathizing with the unempathetic. Philip K. Dick once remarked, "to me, the ... replicants are deplorable. They are cruel, they are cold, they are heartless, they have no empathy, which is how the Voigt-Kampf test catches them out, don't care what happens to other creatures."[46] But he then went on to observe that "the theme of my book is that Deckard is dehumanized through tracking down the androids."[47] In phenomenological terms, the androids' near perfect mimicry of the somatic behaviors of the human ineluctably engages our analogical sense of empathy. We cannot help *but* seek for the corresponding I of the other. As Deckard realizes, shutting off the effort at empathy is as dangerous as failing to perceive that the android, at its core, lacks the capacity for empathic response.

8. Empathy: Human and Divine

In his *Aids to Reflection*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge meditated on the meaning of James 1:25 "But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing" (NRSV). Considering the metaphor of "looking" into the law in Aphorism XXIII, Coleridge noted, "*Quantum sumus, scimus*. That which we find within ourselves, which is more than ourselves, and yet the ground of whatever is good and permanent therein, is the substance and life of all other knowledge."[48] Ralph Waldo Emerson subsequently reversed the phrase to read, *Quantum scimus sumus*, that is, "What we know, we are."[49] If we take empathy as a form of knowing, that is, as an intentional activity that engages us with the world, the more we empathize the more empathetic we become. And, of course, the less empathy features as a primordial form of engagement,

[45] Dick 1996: 141.
[46] Sammon 1981: 27.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Coleridge 2017: 30.
[49] Emerson 1978: 118.

the less caring we become toward others. The danger of seeking to empathize with machines is potentially that we will experience our own empathy eroding. Or, to follow Turkle's more subtle reasoning, "These days, our technology treats us as though we were objects and we get in the habit of objectifying one another as bits of data, profiles viewed. But only shared vulnerability and human empathy allow us to truly understand one another."[50] As we connect more and more with humans through machine interfaces, is technology exercising a corrosive effect on our ability to express and experience empathy?

The potential of technology to foster empathy erosion carries us to the final work of science fiction I wish to consider, namely, Kazuro Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*.[51] The primary theme of this novel is also empathy, but the roles have been reversed. Klara is an artificial friend, an android created for the vocation of serving as a companion to children whose parents, presumably, lack the time or the inclination to care for them themselves. Klara belongs to an older class of artificial friend, the fourth generation of the B2 line, which lacks the somatic and cognitive upgrades of the newer B3 model, but which remains unsurpassed in its ability to empathize. Klara seeks to understand the interpersonal world around her, first observing bypassers from a shop window and then learning from the interactions of the stressed family she winds up living with. While Klara comes to greater awareness of limitations and motivations of the human beings in her sphere, the trajectory of the human agents runs the opposite way. The biotechnical artifices they use to boost the cognitive capacity of their children seems to render them steadily less empathetic about others.

The juxtaposition of the empathetic android and the unempathetic humans drives the drama, but a secondary theme of the novel concerns the role of the divine. While the human characters have lost any sense of religiosity, Klara personifies the sun as a benevolent deity and, at crucial junctures in the narrative, petitions the sun to intercede on behalf of others. The sense of strength gained from her faith in the loving-kindness of the sun inspires the human beings around her with hope, even as they instictively disregard the source of her confidence as "well, [Artificial Friend] supersition"[52] The empathy that Klara feels for her young ward leads her to appeal to the empathy of the sun for situation of the child. While Ishiguro leaves the efficacy of the android's religious convictions an open question, he underscores through the contrast between

[50] Turkle 2021: XIX.
[51] Ishiguro 2021.
[52] Ibid.: 287.

Klara and the humans she interacts with how intrincally connected, and connecting, are religious devotion and empathy for others.

9. Two Concluding Codas on Empathy

Two more quick reflections in closing. In her recent young adult novel, *Deepfake*, Sarah Darer Littman examines the potential of deepfakes to disrupt contemporary students' lives. She imagines two students, Dara Simmons and Will Halpern, competing to become valedictorian of their high school class while secretly also dating on the side. After the couple both receive early acceptances to highly-selective colleges, a video posted to an anonymous gossip site shatters their idyll. In the video, Dara offhandedly claims that Will cheated on his SAT to gain admission to Stanford. In the student center of the high school, Will confronts a bewildered Dana, who contends she never said any such thing.

> "I know it looks like I did," I say, breathless desperation making my voice unnaturally high-pitched. "I don't understand how, because I swear that *I never said those things*. /"Yeah? So what's your brilliant explanation for the video showing you doing exactly that?" / ... / "I don't have one," I'm forced to admit. "I don't know where that video came from." I try to put my hand on his arm, my eyes pleading with him, but he flinches away from me. "Will, please...you *know* me. You've got to believe that I am telling you. I would *never* do this to you. /"Except you did," he says. His gray eyes are glacial. "And now I don't know what to believe about you anymore. We're done. Finished. Over."[53]

The plot of the novel unfolds like a detective story. Dara must figure out the origin of the video to clear her name and to salvage Will's college acceptance. Without giving away details of the plot, the video turns out to be a deepfake. Dara is able to identify several convincing "tells" that, when scrutinized, eventually lead her and Will to identify its creator. At a deeper level, the theme of the novel is about trusting despite appearances. In this case, the young love between the couple does not survive Will's disbelief that the video could be anything other than genuine. The deepfake shut down his ability to empathize with Dara, deafening him to her pleas that he *knows* her.

A second case caused a stir in April 2021. VICE posted an interview between Eliza Mcphail, an intern, and Matt Loughrey, a digital artist. The article detailed

[53] Littman 2020: 27.

Loughrey's colorization of photographs of victims of genocide who perished at Security Prison 21 in Phnom Penh from 1976 to 1979. As Loughrey described his motivation for colorizing the images, "It's somewhere between curiosity and empathy."[54] The interviewer remarked on the eerie smiles on the visages of some prisoners. How could they be grinning in the face of their imminent executions? Loughrey offered a pop psychological explanation, but the actual explanation seems to have been more straightforward: Loughrey allegedly retouched the faces of the prisoners' synthetically. The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, located on the site of the former Security Prison 21, issued a statement requesting "researchers, artists and the public not to manipulate any historical source to respect the victims."[55] VICE retracted the article, apologizing and promising an editorial investigation.[56] The incident, however, underscores the dangerous appeal of empathy. By drawing us into the story, our empathic nature seeks to understand and engage with the disturbing emotions manifested in the photographs. But, at the same time, we have to attend to our inner sense of dissonance when we cannot imagine ourselves feeling that way when putting ourselves in the place of the other. Such a failure of empathy may arise because someone is manipulating us.

Believing in spite of appearances. Disbelieving despite the evidence. Seeking for signs or "tells" contradictring what otherwise appears genuine. Keeping faith in the other, but not falling prey to false messiahs. Are these traits of empathy in an age of deepfakes? Or characteristics of witnessing to the coming Kingdom of God in a fallen world?

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[54] Eliza Mcphail 2021.
[55] BBC 2021.
[56] Vice Staff 2021.

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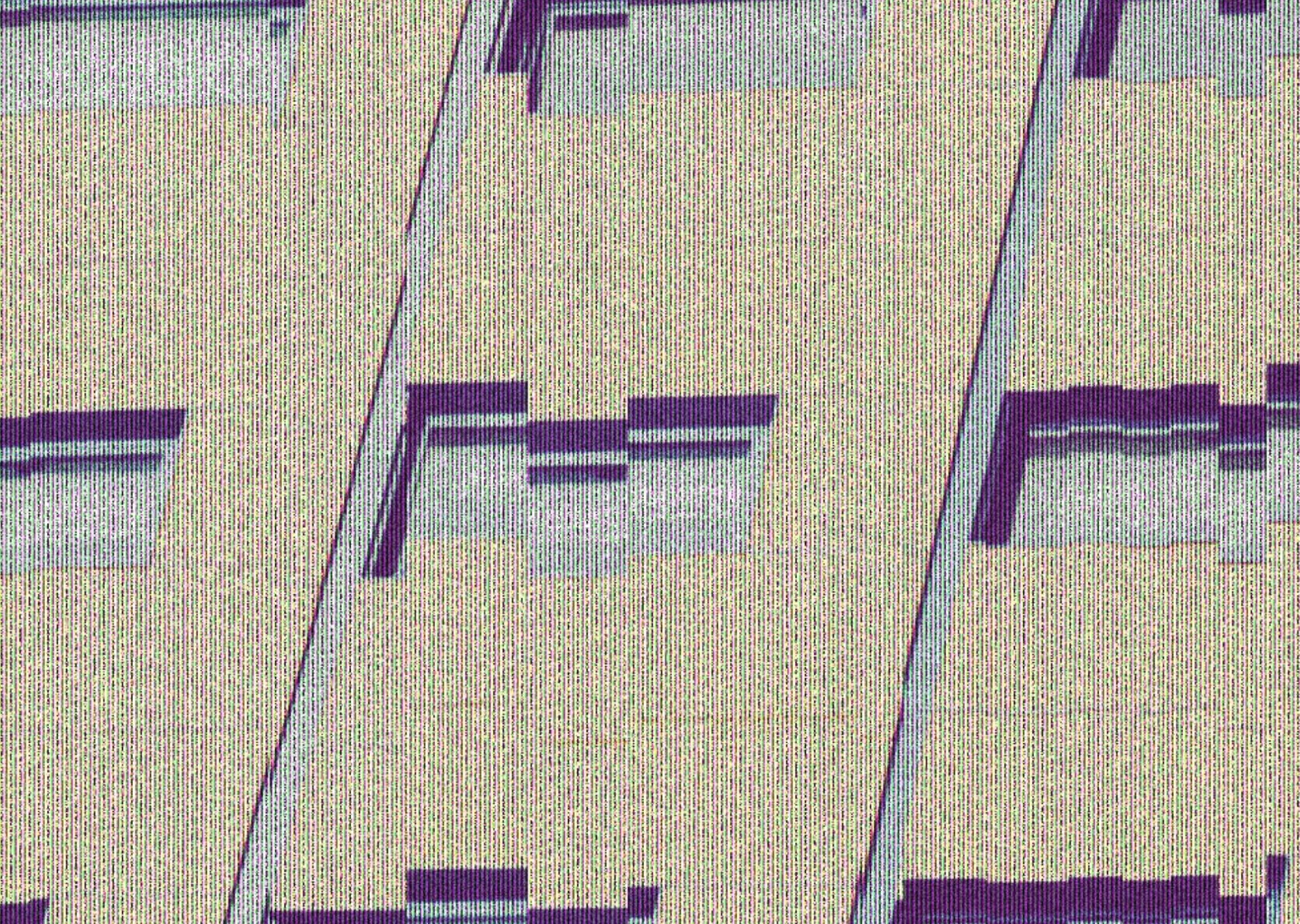

Webs of Harm?
Online Child Sexual Abuse and Theologies of the Digital

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This article points to the darker side of our digital era. It explores the escalating reality of online child sexual abuse around the world as a key concern for many actors. There is increasing pressure on faith actors to respond effectively, especially in the light of damaging public revelations in recent years around wider child sexual abuse within faith institutions and by prominent faith leaders. This article argues that faith actors must be better engaged and appropriately equipped to use their social capital to disrupt these patterns of harm and create safe spaces. This also offers opportunities for deepened theological engagement with faith's spiritual capital in the light of commitments by senior faith leaders to address this issue. Reshaping faith communities as safe spaces requires breaking the silence on patterns of sexual abuse and reimagining testimonial spaces where children's voices and agency are respected.

1. Introduction

Despite the many benefits that the digital era has brought into many human lives in the last few decades, there is also a darker side to its realities. Digital technologies play an increasing role in enabling 'webs of harm' – virtual realities that are abusive and exploitative of other human beings, for example through cyberbullying or the online sexual abuse or exploitation of women and children. This paper focuses on one

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example of this 'web of harm' – namely online child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSEA), an increasing global concern in today's world. Offline child sexual abuse and exploitation offline has been the subject of increasing concern by many faith leaders around the world in recent years, especially in the light of damaging public revelations from within faith communities themselves, particularly, but not only, in the Catholic church, as harbouring unaccountable sexual perpetrators, being havens of institutional abuse, and failing to safeguard the children in their care. In the light of these disturbing realities, churches around the world have been confronted with this spiritual and social failure and need to understand how to respond in ways that 'do no harm' for the future. However, the *online* aspects of child sexual abuse and exploitation often still remain hidden despite statistics that show that this area of abuse has rapidly grown and expanded in the last decade.[1] A survey of 124 faith leaders from seven major faiths (54% were Christian) across 29 countries carried out by the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities in 2018[2] highlighted that faith leaders currently feel ill equipped to engage with online CSEA despite a strong consensus that faith spaces can, and should be, platforms for its prevention. This is both a risk and an opportunity.

The rapid rise of online CSEA alongside its offline forms is increasingly documented as a harmful reality and a global concern as the 60-country study entitled 'Out of the Shadows' shines a light on. [3] The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and current social responses to it have also led to an escalation of this form of abuse with a much larger number of children being online for longer periods, including very young children, with risks of online CSEA increasing further as a result. This online presence is increasingly taking place in unsupervised ways due to parents being put in positions of unofficial home-schooling de to school closures under COVID-19 whilst also trying to work from home themselves. Technology companies themselves are recognising these dangers, and the *#WeProtect* alliance[4] seeks to build multi-sectoral collaborations to end online CSEA. Faith communities have been identified as having an important role to play in these alliances too.

This paper explores how faith leaders can be equipped to play a part alongside others in disrupting and reimagining these *digital webs of harm*. While the *access* and *social capital (*or* influence) that many faith leaders have around enabling or tackling child*

[1] See www.thorn.org for more details around these statistics.

[2] Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities 2018b.

[3] Economist Intelligence Unit 2018.

[4] See https://www.weprotect.org/ for more information.

sexual abuse has been recognised, arguably not enough attention has been paid to date to the spiritual capital *which they may bring, in both positive and negative ways, to this task. Recent research has challenged local faith actors who are seeking to end violence against children to engage more deeply with their spiritual capital as a theological task.[5] This paper raises questions about the unique roles that faith leaders can play to disrupt and reconfigure underlying theologies and beliefs that contribute towards these webs of harm in the light of online CSEA. It offers, as an example, some contours for engaging with key theological beliefs within the Christian tradition in ways that can nurture more emancipatory, liberating child-centred theologies within digital spaces. Increasingly harmful social norms, often shaped by underlying beliefs, have been recognised as playing a key role in the deformed hierarchical relationships that still underpin some forms of violence against children, for example ideas that 'children should be seen and not heard' or that to 'spare the rod is to spoil the child'. The impact of these distorted relational assumptions on children must be acknowledged, made visible and transformed if they are not to underpin continued silence around 'webs of harm' for children within our expanding digital realities.

2. When Reality does Harm – Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Child sexual abuse is a worldwide problem with estimates suggesting that up to 1 in 5 girls and 1 in 10 boys will have experienced contact forms of sexual abuse by the age of 18. Lack of reporting means however that it often remains obscured.[6] However online child sexual abuse and exploitation (exploitation includes where a perceived benefit is received in return) is even more hidden from view. The organisation End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT) highlights that the volume and scale of online child sexual abuse material has reached unprecedented levels. For example, in 2014, INHOPE, the association of INTERNET hotlines, assessed that 83,644 URLs containing child sexual abuse material exist worldwide, a 64% increase from the year before. The National Centre for missing and exploited children's Cybertipline has received more than 70 million reports of online child sexual abuse since 1998, with their figures showing a rapid escalation of this abuse in the last decade. Child abuse material is also being circulated by offenders through hidden platforms, such as peer-to-peer file sharing networks. the 'Dark Net' or encrypted software. This shows the dark side of the technological revolution:

[5] Palm / Eyber 2019.
[6] See Lucy Faithfull Foundation 2021.

> Although information and communication technologies (ICTs) are an important and positive component of modern life, their rapid expansion is making more children vulnerable to online sexual exploitation. The swift evolution of technology is leading to a terrifying growth in online child sexual abuse material as well as new emerging threats to children.[7]

Reports of online CSEA are increasingly positioning this growth as an inevitable consequence of countries gaining broadband access. For example, a National Centre in the USA seizes 480, 789 online CSEA images per week. Research by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection suggests that the vast majority of these images are of children under the age of 12 (78%) with over half of these of children under 8. Over 80% of these images are of girls and 20% of boys – showcasing the gendered realities of online CSEA.[8] The same children are often seen in multiple images over time, suggesting a pattern of continued abuse. As a result, organisations such as Thorn are insisting that all sectors of society must take pro-active steps to open up difficult conversations about this reality.[9] If they do not, child abuse and oppression will continue in hidden forms where perpetrators remain invisible, even if many are extended family, guardians or trusted adults known to the child. This grim reality makes reporting even more unlikely as children are groomed by adults they trust not to see what is happening to them as abuse.

ECPAT highlights five main types of online child sexual abuse and exploitation which are prolific in our digital realities; sexual extortion, online live child sexual abuse (CSA), sexting, online grooming for offline abuse or trafficking and digital CSA materials, (often labelled as 'pornography') They showcase evidence around why and how each of these types is enabled, and how they create patterns where children are first involved, and then blackmailed into silence (e.g. around sexting) or where parents can also be involved in enabling sexual exploitation (by using live webcams) as well as highlighting typical patterns adopted by perpetrators.[10] These insights, if better understood by all, can be identified and disrupted by multiple actors, including faith communities if they are educated, capacitated and supported. While stereotypes of evil paedophile rings and gangs of traffickers still predominate in our media-infused imaginaries, these misrepresent the disturbing reality that online CSEA (like its offline forms) is far more likely to be perpetrated or facilitated by someone that the child

[7] Lai-Smith 2016.

[8] Canadian Centre for Child Protection 2020.

[9] See https://www.thorn.org/child-sexual-exploitation-and-technology/ for more information on this area.

[10] ECPAT International 2020.

knows and trusts. ECPAT calls this the 'circle of trust'. This means that faith communities, such as church, mosque or temple gatherings, faith schools and religious spaces such as orphanages are high risk spaces as they often work in closed settings on a regular basis with vulnerable children. They also hold a high level of trust from communities, families and children themselves. In online CSEA, extended family members are also often directly involved. Online child sexual abuse also cannot be detached from its offline forms or from other forms of child abuse and violence. This was highlighted by a faith leader who is working on child protection issues at community level who notes:

> Child sexual abuse does not exist in a vacuum, kids who are sexually abused are often abused in other ways. There is a tremendous intersection with other kinds of violence. It becomes a baseline for conversation while looking at the broader spectrum[11]

ECPAT highlights that as part of the online grooming process, perpetrators can make gifts or payments to children to gain their trust and convince them to share material of a sexual nature of themselves. Or, as part of financially driven forms of (sexual) extortion, after obtaining compromising photos or videos of a sexual nature, they pressure the victim by threatening to disclose the images on the Internet or saying they will send it to the child's peers or relatives if they do not comply. Some offenders use multi-user gaming platforms to access children and become virtual 'friends' and then 'progressively sexualise the interaction.'[12]

While technology companies are under increased pressure to prevent these patterns, this is not something they can resolve on their own. Techniques such as blocking, online safety report tools, and splash pages urging perpetrators to seek help and support for behaviour change are seen by experts to have some deterrent effect but they can also potentially send this activity even further underground. Collaborative partnerships are required with all sectors of society, particularly those in long-term trusted relationships with children and their families. The gendered realities of this sexual abuse must also be acknowledged, with men overwhelmingly identified as the perpetrators (only 3% of online perpetrators are estimated to be women), and with girls as the predominant targets. However, boys are also victims and evidence is emerging of female involvement in enabling online abuse and exploitation, sometimes for financial

[11] Cited in Palm 2019b: 7.
[12] Lai-Smith 2016: 8.

gain.[13] An intersectional approach to gender dynamics is required to address all genders and ages to look critically at roles that many stakeholders play in enabling webs of harm.

Global economic disparities also play a role in these webs. Patterns such as live-streaming children involved in sexualised acts are often shaped by underlying structural realities of socio-economic poverty and the relative low cost of producing and viewing this type of material. For example, the Philippines has been identified (by ECPAT) as a hub for this specific type of online abuse where many involved adults do not even see sexual live-streaming as 'real' abuse because of its virtual dimensions. Social norms constructed around this acceptability can make it hard for children to report or even perceive what they are doing as abusive. Faith leaders in settings like this often hold significant power and influence and yet they often fail to speak about this harmful reality, seeing discussions of sex and sexuality as taboo in their faith contexts and perpetuating invisibility. It is to this specific connection between online CSEA and faith actors that this paper now turns.

3. Online Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation and Faith

Public revelations around the sexual abuse of children by numerous faith actors, for example within Catholic spaces in Ireland and the USA, and around the Salvation Army in Australia are just two prominent public examples which form the tip of a larger iceberg of sexual abuse seen as still sitting beneath the surface that the *#metoo* movement has begun to surface. The recent speaking out by sexual survivors of charismatic global Christian leaders such as Pentecostal minister Ravi Zachariah, and Catholic priest Jean Vanier only after their deaths are forcing the ministries set up in their name into more in-depth theological reflection as well as into legal investigation. As a result, many faith communities around the world are increasingly having confront their historical perpetration, complicity, silence and failure to act to safeguard the children in their care from sexual abuse. Confession and confrontation of this difficult reality, must be the starting point for any transformational engagement in this area. Faiths may also be doing good work around child protection on the one hand, while at the same time, be unwittingly inculcating harmful myths and beliefs about children that continue to fuel abuse, such as purity, silence, obedience and sexual shame. Children with diverse sexual orientations or gender identity or expression are often particular at risk of both abuse and of harmful faith beliefs.

[13] Lai-Smith 2016: 34.

The ambiguous role of churches on this topic is highlighted in a study done for UK faith-based organisation *Tearfund* on sexual violence in South Africa.[14] In this empirical study, sexual violence survivors across multiple communities highlighted how inadequate they felt the churches response currently was to sexual violence in their contexts. It was noted that faith leaders were at times also perpetrators who were not held to account by faith systems and that most churches failed to be safe refuges for survivors:

> The church is an anchor for the community, it is their refuge, it is actually the only refuge in the world that we are now living in, and if the church have such things going on, the pastor sits on the internet the whole night and looks at pornography, and Sunday morning he preaches so he gets his salary, who will then be interested in the church, because I mean, there are no examples[15]

A 2019 research study on violence against children and local faith communities around the world identified sexual violence against children as the second largest concern in faith settings by child protection experts who were interviewed across diverse faith communities. Sexual violence formed 20% of all direct perpetration reported in the secondary literature review on faith.[16] This took a number of forms. First, child sexual abuse within religious institutions of care and education, but also within families of congregants. Second, commercial sexual exploitation and child trafficking, especially, but not only, in Asian contexts. Third, harmful practices, such as forced and child marriage or female genital mutilation, was often tied into religious and cultural justifications.[17] A concern was expressed in this 2019 study that due to an increased focus on girls only in many global circles, the ongoing vulnerabilities of boys to sexual abuse could be overlooked.

This study also highlighted the need to better understand and engage with hidden and emerging forms of violence against children, such as its online and digital forms, to effectively prevent it both within religious institutions and beyond. For example, one Buddhist expert in Thailand noted: "...for example, there are so many monks using Facebook sometimes they can use Facebook to get children to come in for sexual things."[18] Parents and faith communities were often not adequately equipped to

[14] Le Roux 2013.
[15] Le Roux 2013: 14.
[16] Palm 2019b; Rutledge / Eyber 2019.
[17] Le Roux / Palm 2018.
[18] Palm 2019b: 25.

respond to these new threats and often believed unhelpful myths about who perpetrators were. Sexual abuse by individual religious leaders was a main issue raised by faith experts interviewed, as was sexual abuse within religious institutions, often connected to residential care and education. Religious leaders, staff and volunteers were, and still can, hold special coercive power over the children they interact with because of their perceived spiritual and social authority and the trust placed in them. Religious spaces for care and education have been shown up as often potential 'havens' for abusers, who may target these spaces due to their easy, trusted access to children. Religious institutions were noted as often exempt from enforcing minimum standards of child care, due to their perceived voluntary or spiritual nature. Sexual abuse here is further silenced and hidden due to religious taboos around sex in general. Religious institutions were identified in this study as using their spiritual power or capital in both positive and negative ways. A worrying disconnect was seen between what is preached and what is practised. In the light of the *#metoo* campaign, further media coverage and legal evidence is emerging of the historical perpetration of sexual abuse, as well as complicity in covering up sexual abuse allegations by many religious leaders and faith institutions. A failure to respond to sexual abuse happening to children within families, was also noted with some faith leaders aware, but not equipped, to engage effectively as first responders. Another dimension of concern was a rise in child sexual abuse images, both involving and targeting children, but also by children being increasingly exposed to explicit sexual imagery in public spaces at young ages, especially through online dimensions, as also seen as a form of child sexual abuse.

As a result of these concerns, certain faith-based organizations have come together in the last few years to focus more attention on faith and online CSEA. In 2016 ECPAT collaborated with *Religions for Peace* to develop a manual for faith leaders around responding to online CSEA. Since 2014, *Arigatou International* (as a member of the *WeProtect Global Alliance)*, has intentionally engaged with diverse faith communities to help protect children from online CSEA. They have led the adoption of the 2017 Panama Declaration on ending all violence against children, supported the organization of a 2018 Child Dignity in the Digital World Forum in Abu Dhabi and co-led regional interfaith workshops and a survey with over 124 faith leaders across 7 major faiths on this theme. This work highlights strong support for the idea that places of worship and faith gatherings should be used as platforms for the prevention of online CSEA but also shows that currently faith actors are not equipped to do so. Further engagement is identified as being needed to tackle this sensitive area leading to the de-

velopment of a global interfaith alliance on this issue.[19] At the same time, UNICEF has pioneered the *Disrupting Harm* and *Global Kids Online* projects which insist on the importance of centering the voices of children, a theme that is also being developed by Christian ethicists working on developing child-centred digital realities.[20] This focus on the authentic representation and voices of children is essential to avoid fear-based parental protective mechanisms emerging around sex and sexuality often shaped by religious and cultural norms that ignore child agency and can reinforce new patterns of harm in the name of 'protection' e.g. by marrying daughters off early. This is an important insight for faith actors to consider.

During the 2018 Abu Dhabi Forum, Father Hans Zollner, from the Centre for Child Protection of the Pontifical Gregorian University, noted that there was an urgent need to better identify effective child safeguarding measures, both online and offline, noting, "When you talk about safeguarding, everybody wants to improve children's situations but scientifically, until this day, we don't know what really works better."[21] Faith communities need to learn more about what works to ensure that they do not 'do further harm' by responding inappropriately or without challenging their underlying assumptions. They need to learn from practices and ideas emerging from other sectors. Studies by *Arigatou International* in 2019 point to important common ground between child rights, ending child violence and core religious beliefs.[22] Since 2006 onwards, many faith actors have mobilised internationally to reflect on their roles in ending violence against children. The 2017 Panama Declaration, signed by diverse senior religious leaders from around the world, committed their religions to play an active role in ending all forms of child violence. A focus on online CSEA must build on those global commitments to make them locally embedded realities.

4. Tackling Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation - Faith in Action

Currently, faith communities remain a predominantly untapped resource to prevent and deter online CSEA. They have unique access to more than three quarters of the world's population, strong influence in shaping social norms and behaviours, and have influence and status as highly trusted community actors in many regions. However, disturbing revelations over the last decade by many adults who were abused as chil-

[19] Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities 2018b.
[20] Ott 2019.
[21] Internal communication to author, 2021, Arigatou International.
[22] Arigatou International 2019.

dren within their faith communities (often by faith leaders) also reveals that spaces of faith have often been unaccountable places of child sexual abuse and silent complicity. Online CSEA takes place in many settings, including within faith communities. However, as faith spaces such as churches are also turning more and more to digitalized faith experiences for their followers, especially under the COVID-19 pandemic and for a younger generation, it is critical that faith actors are better equipped and enabled to support safe digital experiences for children and to think more creatively about how to nurture healthy forms of spirituality within online networks. According to Cornelius Williams, Associate Director of Child Protection at *UNICEF*:

> Violence seriously jeopardizes children's growth and development. Religious leaders and faith based communities are uniquely positioned to address violence in society and challenge social norms that are harmful to children, and promote positive, protective norms. UNICEF looks forward to continued collaboration with religious leaders and faith-based communities to harness each other's strengths for a joint vision to protect children.[23]

Online CSEA is also not merely the responsibility of global crime organisations such as *Interpol* or of large technology companies. It requires careful collaboration across all sectors of society, including faith actors. It is also not something that happens far away. Its webs of harm reach across all borders and boundaries and enter into all local realities. For example, in 2017, a 29-year-old white male church youth leader based at the church down the road from my own local congregation in South Africa where I worked as a youth leader, was accused of 47 online sexual abuse charges related to 7 boys aged between 12 and 17. He had posed as a young women online to secure sexual images, and then used them to sexually blackmail boys across 9 church congregations and in local schools, whilst holding a trusted role as a church youth worker. He had begun as a church volunteer in 2012 and became a full-time employee in 2015. Only in 2019 when he was convicted and sentenced to 15 years did details of his online abuse become public including online child sexual abuse materials and online grooming of boys in his care through the use of simple social media tools such as Instagram and Whatsapp.[24] This story offers a sobering reminder of the ubiquity of global 'webs of harm' within local faith communities. It places a responsibility by all faith leaders to ensure that staff, children, parents and volunteers are equipped in this area.

[23] ECPAT International and Religions for Peace 2016.
[24] Chambers 2019.

An opportunity exists here as many senior faith leaders are making formal public commitments on child abuse and developing systems to also take action to stop the harm of online CSEA. This momentum can be built on to offer deeper understanding and capacity development in this area, to share promising practices and new ideas and to engage those faith leaders across the globe who are willing to learn and address this issue, as a positive way of starting to change other faith leaders for whom sex and sexuality is still a deeply taboo topic. Faith communities should always be safe spaces for children, both online and offline and not safe spaces for perpetrators, where CSEA in its online and offline forms is silenced, hidden and/or overlooked. This needs to be framed as a primary ethical and spiritual imperative, not a secular imposition, and requires deliberate action to disrupt the chain of harm from online CSEA within local faith communities, as well as ways in which online engagement contributes to grooming children for offline abuse.

Faith spaces are currently often a ambiguous resource or a 'mixed blessing' in relation to ending violence against children.[25] They can play a key role in safeguarding children but they can also become complicit havens for abusers. A binary separation into good and bad spaces is also unhelpful. Faith spaces such as churches can sit at various points along a spectrum with excellent formal programs on child protection but no deeper engagement with underlying spiritual assumptions about children or about sex. They also exercise significant influence in families, especially with parents and can, if equipped, play important roles in disrupting offender pathways, and recognising and referring children-at-risk. Many children spend regular time in faith spaces. As a result of COVID-19, many faith spaces are developing online activities, creating additional risks on top of their existing failure to respond effectively to many forms of offline sexual violence. Palm and Le Roux point to the complicit role of churches in sexual violence across six communities in South Africa and the need to do more. They note that:

> When asked to reflect on how their churches were responding to sexual violence, participants were unanimous: very little. This is seen as a result of churches not seeing sexual violence as an issue it should be addressing, as it is only concerned with so-called 'higher' matters, such as prayer and Bible reading. According to participants, churches do not take sexual violence seriously and do not apply the Bible contextually to the issue. Participants consistently spoke of the misogyny of churches and their theologies, their complicity not only in ignoring the reality and silencing those who speak out, but their own role in perpetration.

[25] Eyber / Palm 2019.

> According to the majority of participants, many church leaders were themselves guilty of perpetrating sexual violence. However, they remained unconfronted by wider church leadership because these perpetrators were persons with authority.[26]

Churches (and other faith spaces) can only build credibility to address sexual violence within the wider community if they publicly confront and eradicate forms of sexual violence in their own congregations. This often requires a paradigm shift in the mindset of how relationships between genders and between adults and children are spiritually understood. Entrenched beliefs around relational hierarchies and patterns of one-way respect, silence and obedience by children can be used to underpin and enable both online and offline patterns of abuse. Key stories from their sacred texts have to be reinterpreted in ways that shed light on the patterns of sexual child abuse that they endorse. Evidence shows that faith leaders often know of instances of child abuse in their congregations, but fail to respond effectively. A similar pattern may happen with online CSEA. Coordinated action is urgently needed to translate commitments made by faith leaders at global level around online CSEA to "commit to form and engage effectively in partnerships with leaders of every faith to address the religious implications of online child abuse and exploitation"[27] into targeted local strategies and interventions that do no harm. Their commitments to protect and nurture children with specific responsibilities for the most vulnerable children as a core faith mandate must be expanded to the digital realm. Faith actors cannot do this alone and need to be equipped to recognise and refer cases to other specialist services and work with the technical experience gained from policymakers, law enforcement and child-focused experts to ensure this violence stops.

Many senior faith leaders are increasingly accepting their ethical responsibility to protect children: they are still perceived as safe spaces for the social/spiritual development of children and can be equipped as platforms for preventing online CSEA. However, without capacity building, currently these spaces may exacerbate risks of CSEA, offline and online, due to low levels of understanding. While faith actors can play important *access* roles as community gatekeepers, and hold significant *social* influence in communities and even nations, further attention needs to be paid by each faith to engage their *spiritual capital* to reaffirm faith imperatives for protection and stand against the perpetration, enabling or silencing of online CSEA. This is required to

[26] Palm / Le Roux 2018: 142.
[27] Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities 2018a: Commitment 4.

both disrupt current harmful beliefs about children, and to offer positive theological resources that can support a commitment to child dignity and voice within both faith spaces and our wider digital realities.

4.1 The Social Roles of Faith Leaders

A "Guide to Action for Religious Leaders and Communities to Protect Children from Online Sexual Exploitation" developed by ECPAT and Religions for Peace was launched at the Global Network of Religions for Children Panama Forum in 2017.[28] It highlights a number of important social roles that faith actors can play in preventing online CSEA, including;

Raising awareness. Faith leaders are often turned to for moral guidance and advice and must be comfortable discussing online CSEA issues, breaking taboos and opening up conversations about how their faith tradition views sexual abuse and exploitation both online and offline. This creates awareness, disrupts perpetration and helps prevent children from exploitation or abuse.

Empowering children to feel safe and given voice by creating a confidential, non-judgmental culture to encourage them to discuss issues around sexual abuse and exploitation, using targeted age-specific campaigns for children and child-friendly tools. This equips children to protect themselves and helps tackle rather than reinforce internalised shame if something bad happens.

Breaking the silence to avoid forms of complicity by faith groups. Faith leaders must bring a strong message around ending the silence around sexual violence because sex is often still a taboo in faith settings. By opening up conversations and educating followers about the risks, it encourages children and community members to be able to report cases within these spaces. Faith groups can also create safe dialogues during meetings or integrated in their specific child-related faith programs.

Setting up a policy and advisory group for a child-safe faith environment, including the participation of children and families to discuss the risks of online sexual exploitation and develop safeguarding policies. Training programs that highlight child protection standards for new volunteers are key and also form a deterrent for potential perpetrators. This should include a Code of Conduct on how staff members and volunteers contact and communicate with children electronically and how they use

[28] ECPAT International and Religions for Peace 2016.

digital images of with children, as well as agreeing standards for their own social media usage.

Recognising, reporting and referring all cases of sexual abuse rather than seeking to 'protect' your faith community or its members by hiding the issue and avoiding either formal reporting or going to the police. This can lead to entrenched patterns where abusers are moved within the faith system rather than reported externally, which leads to more harm for more children.

Providing survivor support to help all boys and girls understand that violence and abuse against them and other children is always wrong and how to learn to recognise and tell a trusted person (adult or peer) about physical, sexual or emotional abuse, in both offline and online spaces. This can help children know that places of worship and religious institutions should be safe places. Phone helplines for children are a key part of child protection services.

Engaging perpetrators. Leaders in faith communities may find themselves in situations where they must confront a colleague or member who is a sex offender or who is at risk of offending. To prevent further exploitation, they must report any criminal behaviour and also support them to recognise their behaviour as abusive or potentially abusive and to seek help. It is important to remember that many adult perpetrators were also abused themselves as children, creating a vicious cycle out of our historical failure to protect children. They also need safe spaces to heal without compromising child safety requiring education across the faith community around prevention.

The above seven suggestions offer helpful, practical ways for faith leaders seeking to navigate current digital realities of abuse and exploitation. However, they draw primarily on the *social capital* of faith actors and their trusted *access* to communities, families and children. While these are important contributions, a need remains for faith leaders to also engage theologically with their underlying spiritual beliefs and ethical values if the root causes of many forms of violence against children are to be tackled. One child protection expert from Panama states:

> We need to involve faith leaders not only because they are influential but first and foremost because ...in many cases, there are underlying beliefs and social norms and values that are somehow highlighted in or by the religious sector that need to be changed.[29]

[29] Palm 2019b: 29.

This paper's final section reflects on this theological task within the Christian tradition to point to some contours of 'spiritual capital' that could be brought to bear on these digital realities of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

4.2 Nurturing Theological 'Webs of Life' – the Spiritual Role of Faith Leaders

Faith's religious resources and mechanisms in the form of doctrines, practices, rituals, experiences and sacred texts and structures can play an important role in the formation of protective norms, beliefs and attitudes about how children are seen and treated both online and offline. Faith communities should not just be instrumentalised to access wider communities and run secular programmes, but they also need to nurture spiritual beliefs and values that protect and empower children and shape how children are seen by adults. This often involves disrupting historical theologies, adultist assumptions and taboos that still underpin many existing patterns of violence and abuse for children.[30]

At the heart of Christian faith is a deep commitment to human flourishing and life in abundance for all, adults and children alike. The Christian story makes grand statements about relational anthropology, connectedness to the divine image and sinful falls into distorted, violent and patriarchal relationships. It also makes incarnational claims about God's entry into our human world as a vulnerable child who, as he grows up, also places a vulnerable child at the centre of his vision of the kingdom of God and also as the touchstone of our adult moral behaviour in God's eyes. Online child sexual abuse and exploitation require a deep confession of faith's failure to embody these values of human dignity for all children within our digital world. Public theologians have worked in recent years with the concept of human dignity. However, without care these insights can hover above our lived harmful realities as unreal, utopian abstractions that mirror a God who requires our unquestioned obedience to maintain his dignity. In reality, our own world is still shaped by hierarchical forms of dignity tied to status, power and position. These also play out in the toxic power dynamics that underlie online child sexual abuse and exploitation. If theologians are to speak meaningfully about human dignity for the most vulnerable, a *cruciform theology of human dignity* is essential, which situates God on the cross of the current reality of online CSEA and at the places of pain in deep solidarity with all children whose dignity is currently denied, instead of merely hovering above it as a violent parent who is prepared to sacrifice his child. Faith leaders who are human rights activists such

[30] Palm / Eyber 2019.

as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Dr Martin Luther King Jnr have insisted that we are all deeply connected in a web of mutuality and 'ubuntu' and must take seriously the ongoing ethical question – who is my neighbour? How can our relational anthropology and spiritual webs of interconnection be taken more seriously within our networked digital webs in ways that engage healthily with human and sexual embodiment in virtual forms? How can online sins be better named by faith leaders as real human entanglements in digital webs of harm that deform and dehumanise vulnerable others as sexual objects? Digital technologies offer promising ways to reimagine churches as networked webs of connection that recalibrate relations between adults and children away from the mono-vocal voice of a single male preacher who holds unaccountable power in the name of a male punitive God-figure in whose name children are often punished. A cruciform, child-centred theology of human dignity that refuses to see children as merely 'not-yet adults' repositions God within this web of life as a vulnerable child who also talks back to his parents with moral authority.

A set of seven controversial child 'crucifixions' images have been produced by Cuban photographer Erik Ravelo as part of a 2018 art project with the Brazilian director/editor Daniel Ferreira entitled "Los Intocables (The Untouchables) — The Right to Childhood Should Be Protected."[31] One of these icons depicts the theme of child sexual abuse visually by showing a naked child who is being 'crucified' on the back of a Catholic priest. This disturbing image highlights an important starting point for genuine engagement with child sexual abuse by faith actors, an open confession of the failure of many faith communities to protect children in their care.[32] It offers a visual indication of the need for a cruciformed theology in this area by asking viewers to reflect on where is God present in this image?

In the original version of this article, a media file is included at this point.
It can be found in the Pubpub version of this article.

If Christian theologies in particular are to nurture webs of life about this issue, three areas need to be carefully re-examined within churches to start to root out damaging myths and patterns of toxic theology that have been identified as causing harm to children. First, feminist and queer theologians show that many Christian theologies about both sexuality and gender remain outdated, sex-negative, oppressive to both women and children and nurture deep communal patterns of hiding, silence, shame

[31] Art image accessed on 15 March 2021 at https://www.iloboyou.com/controversial-art-los-intocables-erik-ravelo/.
[32] Palm 2019a.

and guilt around sex.[33] These fail to 'get real' and connect to the serious questions of sexual harms in our world today by silencing important conversations about adult and child sexual desires, orientations, curiosity, exploration and fears as taboos or sins. Marriage and procreation issues often predominate in heteronormative faith narratives to the exclusion of wider sexual questions of pleasure, sexual diversity, loneliness, desire, abuse and consent. Traditional faith beliefs are often ill equipped to explore love in an online age of Tindr and believers often inherit a sex-negative tradition that they can pass on to a younger generation who quickly learn that sex is not something that can be talked about honestly in the church. This harmful body/spirt divide and spiritual taboos around God-given sexualities can create damaging hidden, silenced spaces around sex and sexuality in faith-families and faith spaces that can indirectly drive children and adults to the internet to find out more, where they then encounter new risks that they are rarely equipped to navigate safely. For example, the church's long historical obsession with gendered sexual purity and virginal girls and its sacred text's entanglement in patriarchy and intergenerational sex also reinforces a culture of oppressive gendered patterns of sexualization, male entitlement and body negativity that needs to be urgently addressed. Many feminist theologians have made important contributions here that need to be practically engaged in the spiritual formation of boys and girls from early on if a positive theology of sexuality and embodiment is to be offered in ways that are non-abusive but this is beyond the scope of this paper. Religion contributes to a set of social taboos about gender, sex and sexuality which become a source of harmful beliefs, especially but not only for queer bodies. Engaging religious leaders to reject these taboos and speak out in new integrated spiritual ways is important. Without this reimagining, the online realm will continue to become a place where repressed sexual desires within faith spaces find anonymous and often abusive digital enactment with those who are most vulnerable being harmed.

Second, embodying liberating theologies of children that place the child at the centre of churches as both seen and heard is urgently required.[34] Children have not always been served well by religious precepts. The expression 'children should be seen and not heard' is an old English proverb dating from the 15th century, recommended by religious leaders of the day and transported globally on colonial ships. This harmful legacy of quiet obedience by children who were expected to 'know their place', much like the adult workers violently colonised here through slavery, was often accompanied by religiously-infused moral dictates that 'to spare the rod would spoil the child'.

[33] Tonstad 2018. See also Palm /Le Roux 2018.
[34] Palm 2020.

Sexual violence in both its online and offline forms, takes place primarily by people who are already within a child's circle of trust. Faith leaders can reinforce their existing social power with spiritual power by making children feel bad, guilty or ashamed or by suggesting that this is something God allows. This is often underpinned by a theology of the child which forms a root cause of violence against them and which assigns children to an inferior position compared to adults, with fewer social rights and less legal protection. This prevalent hierarchical belief forms a root cause of many forms of violence against children including sexual and online aspects and faith communities must take responsibility for their role in indirectly perpetuating these relational norms and take steps to change this.[35] Behind these theologies, sits the spectre of God imagined as a violent parent, and this image must be deconstructed at its roots by theologians if adults are not to feel justified in reinscribing these hierarchies in their own lives.

Promising initiatives are emerging in this respect. For example, the World Council of Churches has invited all its members worldwide to create local child-friendly congregations that place child protection, participation and creation of a world fit for children as its centre.[36] Spiritual rituals with, and for, children such as baptism, eucharist and confirmation can also be used as places to reinforce these child-centred messages, as well as refuting religious messages and dogmas about silent obedience to family adults in the light of the realities of child abuse. Faith leaders must better recognise that children's perceived religious duties to 'always honour your father and mother' must never be interpreted in one-way forms that become harmful to the child but must be situated within a two-way commitment to mutual respect. Family is seen as 'sacred' in many religious traditions, creating unregulated spaces for abuse by parents or extended family and preventing reporting by others.

Third, faith leaders have access and influence not only to children but also to those who are potential and actual perpetrators. They hold unique spiritual authority to speak about sin, to engage perpetrators for change and to break the silence on these issues in ways that centre the safety, dignity and participation rights of all children. Many members of faith communities still hold harmful theological beliefs about children and their badness, proper place or need for silence that perpetuate violence.[37] As a result, faith leaders can play an authoritative role in dismantling entrenched beliefs that some forms of violence are acceptable, that the online realm is somehow not 'real'

[35] Ibid: note 9. Palm 2019b: 1.

[36] World Council of Churches 2018.

[37] Trofgruben 2018.

violence, that children should be seen and not heard, or that unquestioning obedience to adults is required. However, to do this, faith leaders will have to be equipped to reinterpret many stories within their sacred texts which treat children as disposable possessions of their parents and other adults. They need to find new ways to read these stories with children to develop liberating theologies of the child. The opportunity exists to develop positive connections between child protection and participation and faith that enables sacred text reflections on dignity, justice and peace with children involved as a central part of these moral reflections.[38] Faith communities can help develop alternative religious and cultural rituals that do not endorse harmful practices but place the best interests of the child at the centre and change the hierarchical paradigms of adult power-over children as God-ordained:

> The way that certain patriarchal religions conceive the world is that there is a hierarchy... someone at the top...in charge, they are punitive, powerful, in control and if you don't do what they say you are going to get thumped in one way or another[39]

At the heart of reshaping the underlying attitudes and behaviours that often lie beneath patterns of violence against children, is making a shift away from hierarchical relationships of fearful respect, ownership and power over children who are still often seen as second-class persons who are 'less than' or beneath adults to instead build trusting relationships of child nurture and growth. These can open up spaces for children to participate safely in their families, communities and nations and to enable them to speak up in both online and offline spaces without the fear of punishment or abuse. Ingrained notions of one-way respect and obedience shaped by religious and cultural scripts need recalibration into new patterns of mutual respect, seeing and listening between adults and children within a commitment to do no harm.

Faith traditions have the potential to nurture children's voices and their active participation as part of enabling spiritual and moral responsibility as well as supporting a participatory intergenerational approach between adults and children, especially in families. However, much current religious engagement with children still revolves around the spiritual requirements of passive, respectful behaviour towards all adults (and God). Social norms are a key factor underpinning the social tolerance of, or silence around, violence against children, especially taboo areas such as family-related

[38] Ott 2019.
[39] cited in Palm 2019b.

sexual violence. These norms can act as a major factor in the vulnerability of children and the continuation of violence. Jamieson et al. note that:

> Social norms that consider children as the property of their parents and not as rights holders can place children at risk of physical violence and promote a culture of silence that hinders reporting. The low status of children, evidenced by the widespread belief that children should not question the authority of their elders, disempowers children and leaves them vulnerable to abuse and neglect[40]

At the centre of Christian faith, is the bold confession that God became a vulnerable child and experienced human life, including the early terrors of a refugee childhood at risk of violent death and abuse. This God then not only welcomes children but makes the child a 'sacrament' or sacred symbol of the kin-dom or community of God. Jesus insists that it is only when adults honour and respect children and identify with the child in themselves that they can learn how to participate in kin-dom existence which turns existing patterns of power in his society upside down.[41] In this way, Jesus also makes the child's status the touchstone for all Christians seeking abundant life. If we take seriously Jesus' words to receive each child in his name as Christ, then all Christians share responsibility for the fate of all children. This child-centred theology has practical spiritual implications for child protection and for freedom from child abuse and violence in its offline and online forms. In Jesus's own violent death, he stands in solidarity with all victims of violence and abuse to remind survivors they are not alone, and that new life is possible. At its heart, the church founded in his memory is called to be a networked community of care that places those that society deems as weakest at the centre. Its vision stretches beyond the 'local' neighbour only beyond borders considered inconceivable by his own religious tradition – to encompass foreigners, prostitutes, eunuchs, slaves and gentiles. Churches become testimonial spaces for the social freedom that these groups found 'in Christ' and the recalibration of power as a result. The legacy of this subversive spirituality and its contemporary inspiration in the lives of those such as Tutu and Luther-King holds promise for the recognition of churches as testimonial spaces where children's voices and stories are taken more seriously and where bridges not walls emerge between bodies and spirituality.

[40] Jamieson et al. 2018: 38.
[41] Nessan 2018: 12.

Conclusion

> Safety and security don't just happen, they are the result of collective consensus and public investment. We owe our children, the most vulnerable citizens in our society, a life free of violence and fear[42]

The expanding reality of online and offline child sexual abuse and exploitation can be hard to face. It requires faith communities to confront and confess their own historical failures at times by forming havens for sexual abuse, targeted because of their easy access to children and trusted roles. But this is a hard conversation that must be had, especially since sexual violence has often been further hidden and silenced in this space – due to a history of religious taboos and toxic theology. Breaking the silence is a critical first step if faith communities are to 'do no harm' in this emerging area and instead contribute to nurture human flourishing and moral connectedness in a digital age. The temptation to sweep these hard issues under the rug must be acknowledged as creating silent complicity with patterns of sexual abuse.

However, faith leaders are not alone in this difficult task. They can work together across denominations and faiths, and with other child related sectors to listen and learn from what other experts already know.[43] In fact, faith leaders trying to tackle this issue merely 'in-house' is one of the quickest ways to do more harm. This involves humility. Rather than pointing fingers elsewhere, faith leaders are invited to acknowledge that this challenge affects all faith communities and seek to change together. Religious leaders can play roles across the child protection system especially around prevention at child, family and community levels. They can use spiritual occasions, such as childbirth, baptism or marriage, to involve children's voices, to provide children and parents with information on abuse and neglect, and to incorporate spiritual messages around the protection of children. They can offer ongoing pastoral support for overstretched caregivers and connect them to informal support or formal services. Opportunities for caregivers to share challenges and accomplishments and to support each other can also be rooted in faith communities. At the same time, theologians must critically explore how different forms of violence against children are understood in their traditions, highlight sacred texts and teachings that promote the protection of children and challenge those which can be misused to do harm.

[42] Mandela 2002.
[43] Ligiero et. al. 2019.

Finally, faith leaders can use not only their access to communities and their social resources, but also engage the spiritual aspects of this issue as a unique theological task. The spiritual power of *God* has at times been misused as a form of blasphemy that is still harming children today. This image of God as a violent adult needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed in ways that stretch into digital realities today across theologies of human dignity, sex and gender and liberating child centred theologies including the spiritual endorsement of harmful patterns of sin, suffering, obedience and submission.

This paper concludes with some final questions for future engagement. Do people feel less accountable to God or others for their behaviour *online* due to its hidden nature and the idea that it is 'not real' but merely fantasy, even if there are real children being harmed in these interactions? How do long-established hierarchical power dynamics around God and humans, men and women, adults and children, rich and poor play out in new ways in these online spaces and how can these be first confessed, understood and recalibrated in the light of global commitments by senior faith leaders to end online child sexual abuse? How does increased access to sexualised, digital images by, and of, children shape children's own understanding of sexual realities in potentially harmful ways for their embodied sexual development? Can healthy spiritualities be developed within digital realms that offer a more networked, fluid and interactive engagement between adults and children seeing them both as full participants in this web of connection in ways that disrupt our digital webs of harm. The reality of online CSEA confronts faith communities with hard questions for 'theologies of the digital' to engage.

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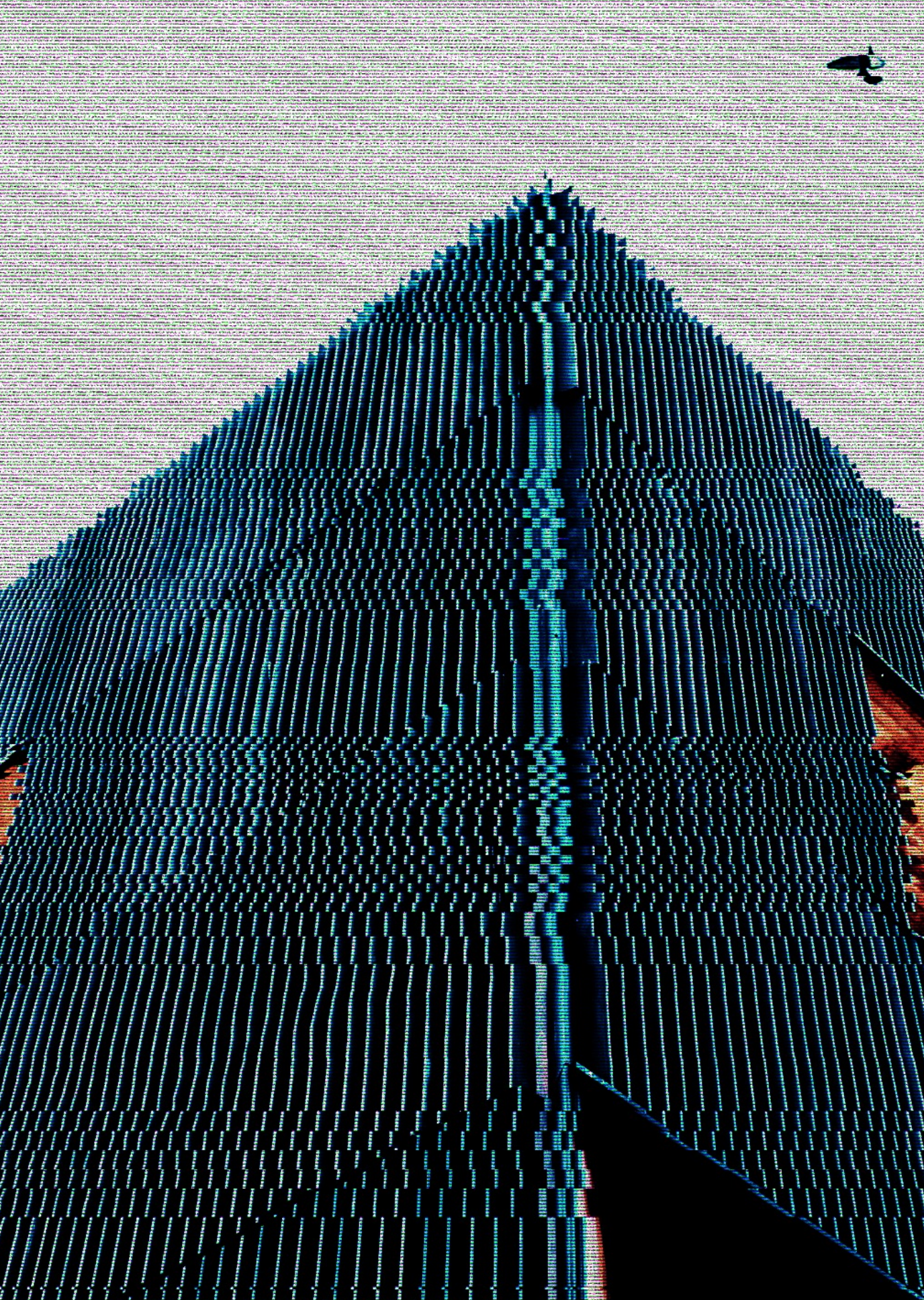

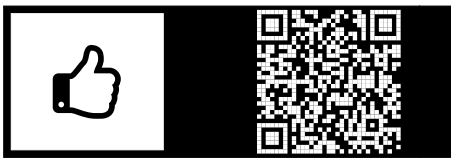

Interrogating the Church's Relationship to Technology Through Pandemic Memes

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This paper explores how studying memes can reveal popular narratives that people hold about the relationship between technology and the church, informing perceptions of the move from offline to online worship services during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Of most interest in this article are the stories that memes tell about religion and religious groups during the pandemic related to technology. I argue that this provides a unique insight into the Digital Theology that is emerging out of the COVID-19 pandemic, or the dominant theological assumption about technology widely circulate online and promoted via memes.

1. The Challenging Depictions of Technology's Relationship to the Church Through Pandemic Memes

Through this thematic categorization, we observed that memes served as a dynamic visual-textual language that enabled individuals to articulate multiple-level stories of social and spiritual meaning-making around the COVID-19 crisis. From this, we analyzed how memetic discourse can simultaneously serve as a communal space for defusing emotions, expressing catharsis, and sense-making for individuals. Specifically, we

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noted that memes served as a tool for crafting and affirming distinctive understandings of the relationship between organized religious communities and churches and digital technology during the pandemic.

This paper explores how studying memes can reveal popular narratives that people hold about the relationship between technology and the church, informing perceptions of the move from offline to online worship services during the COVID-19 global pandemic. I suggest that by approaching memes as multi-dimensional, storytellers invite consideration of the ingrained assumptions many church congregations and leaders hold about digital media in contemporary society and its potential impact on church culture. Over the past eight years, I have dedicated much time to memetic research, considering the role that internet memes play in revealing popular assumptions about religion in contemporary society.[1] From this research, I assert the unique visual-textual language of internet memes can house complex layers of meaning about a variety of social-cultural issues.

Internet memes are more than digital artifacts that virally communicate humorous interpretations of contemporary events and issues. In reality, internet memes represent a dynamic visual-textual language that enables individuals to articulate multiple-level stories, in this case, they help reveal the social negotiations and spiritual meaning-making people have sought to work out online about the COVID-19 crisis. This paper uses memes as a platform for exploring and unpacking the common understandings of the relationship between churches and digital technology during the pandemic.

Over the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic (mid-March to mid-July 2020), I gathered over 1000 memes focused on a variety of topics including themes of social distancing, quarantine practices, masking, and social anxieties raised by the coronavirus and technology use. Of special interest to me was how religion and religious groups were framed through memetic discourse during the global pandemic, as well as how religious group employed coronavirus memes to display their reaction to new social-cultural practices that were birthed or promoted during the pandemic. In this article, I focus on sharing results related to the latter topic, of how memes with religious themes shared via social media presented the relationship between digital media and religious groups and leaders during this time period. I believe that this reveals some of the popular assumptions that churches in Western and English-speaking context have about digital technology. This analysis shows that while many churches readily embraced the internet, social media platforms, and digital technology during the

[1] Bellar et al. 2013; Campbell et al. 2018.

pandemic, this was done out of necessity rather than out of a changed mindset or perspective on digital media. This analysis reveals that much of the digital media experimentation continues to be undergirded by a critical evaluation or negative perception about the potential impact of digital media used during the pandemic on the church and its established practices and identity. Identifying these representations of resistance underlying digital worship are important for scholars of Digital Theology to be aware of as they seek to develop a platform for conversation that might advocate for the embrace of a digital ecclesiology for contemporary churches.

2. Methodology

The aim of this study was to identify and study the religious narratives and content that internet memes revealed about specific beliefs regarding the relationship between religious groups and technology. I argue that religious pandemic memes showcase a variety of responses to church engagement with technology and through this, we are able to unpack the key discursive narratives that memes reveal about the perceived relationship between the church and technology.

2.1 Sampling

Memes were collected primarily through a specific Facebook Group called "Holy Pandemic! Encouragement & Memes."[2] I created this group in March 2020 initially as a way to cope with the stress and anxiety created by the uncertainty of the coronavirus, while I was temporarily quarantined in Germany. Starting with an initial invitation of 80 Facebook friends, the group has grown in one year to over 21,000 members from around the world. Together, this group has shared over seven thousand memes with each other on a wide range of topics related to the pandemic. Thus, this meme-sharing group has provided a dynamic and growing collection of memes telling a variety of stories about the pandemic.

Of most interest in this article are the stories that memes tell about religion and religious groups during the pandemic related to technology. I argue that this provides a unique insight into the Digital Theology that is emerging out of the COVID-19 pandemic, or the dominant theological assumption about technology widely circulate online and promoted via memes. In the first three months of the pandemic, we collected 327 pandemic memes focused on religious themes. Overall, these 78 memes

[2] https://www.facebook.com/groups/2204121290120000 accessed November 14, 2022.

told stories about how churches and religious leaders used or perceived of the internet or other digital media during the early days of the pandemic. It is this population of memes that this article focuses on.

2.2 Analysis

While the Facebook group from which the meme samples are drawn from began in mid-March, it was not until mid-May when I began to approach this work as a potential site of research. In early May, two research assistants and I began to systematically identify and categorize memes shared on the group. Memes were initially recorded in an Excel-based database, which was then transferred to database specifically for this project. Meme images and data were collected and the stored in a specially designed App meme database. The App Database enabled me and my research team to categorize, tag, and sort these memes for further analysis of core themes and narratives about religion emerging from this collection.

Religious-focused pandemic memes from mid-March to mid-June were first categorized in terms of the core themes that they engaged with or topics they depicted. These memes mostly focused on the Christian tradition with the majority of references being made to American or British religious groups or contexts. These memes covered a variety of themes that will be discussed more below. Memes in this collection were then categorized in relation to the religious frames used. This analysis draws on the work of Aguilar et al. 2016, whose study identified the dominant ways that religion in general is framed in memes. This includes categories such as: depicting religion in playful terms, promoting religious belief and practices, questioning religion, mocking religion, or suggestion religion is irrational.

2.3 Theme Identification in Meme Sample

A total of twenty-five separate themes were identified in the collection of religious-focused memes. Themes included: memes depicting religious holidays that fell during the early days of the pandemic such as Easter and Passover, church reactions and practices related to social distancing, church leaders such as the Pope or Biblical characters such as Moses or Mary and their imagined responses to the coronavirus, and finally, fictional verses about with pandemic. Although some memes could easily be grouped into two or more of these themes, each meme was identified with one as its dominant representative category. In general, all of these memes dealt with some aspect of religion, one of these twenty-five themes, and the new or religious social practices that

emerged related to health and safety measures advocated during the pandemic. Several prominent themes included creative depictions of quarantine and social distancing practices that forced modifications pf traditional religious practices. This is exemplified in ten playful memes about how the religious sacrament of baptism would have to be modified due to social restrictions. This is seen in the meme depicting a "Social Distancing Baptistry" that shows a photograph of a carnival dunking booth that playfully suggests that dunk tanks could now be used as a social distanced form of baptism.

Another prominent category were memes used to re-present Biblical characters and stories, retold in the context of pandemic-related practices and restrictions. Over 20 such memes were found to match this description from this sample. This is seen, for example, in several memes that make connections between the pandemic and Israel's exodus from Egypt. For example, one meme shows a cartoon of Moses saying: "Let my people go" as Pharaoh responds "#StayHome," suggesting his denial of the Israelite Exodus could be seen as a preventative health and safety measure. Another meme shows a photograph of a condescending, scowling Pharaoh from the 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments* with the text, "Ramses watching you complain about just one plague."

A personal favorite category of mine is "Church Signs" memes which involves humorous church signs focused on the pandemic. Over 15 memes showed photographs of real church signs or signs that had been remixed for comical effect that tried to frame pandemic practices with a touch of humor. One purported sign from an Episcopal church said: "Let God get closer than 6 feet, but still wash your hands..." This meme seemed to encourage people to practice good hygiene and strengthen their relationships with God.

Other signs were silly; seemingly trying to add a touch of humor to the seriousness of the growing pandemic, such as a meme showing a Methodist Church sign that read "I don't like this virus. I wanted zombies for the apocalypse." Memes such as these brought lighthearted and comic relief to a situation of much uncertainty that required significant and swift changes of religious institutions not known for their abilities to be flexible or willing to embrace change. Yet the external conditions of the pandemic intruded into many areas of society and culture, and churches were not immune from the adaptations that were required, and while digital technology enable churches to adapt and modify their practices it also became an object on which to focus their anxieties and apprehensions about the conditions created by the global pandemic.

2.4 Meme-ing Reactions to Conducting Worship Online

Of note, 78 of the 372 memes, or about 20% of these religion and pandemic memes, focused on telling stories about how church leaders and congregations used technology to adapt to online worship. These were most commonly found under four classifications of memes; specifically those focused on: depicting churches, church services, doing church service online, representations of Jesus or quotes/tweet-styled memes about church worship during the pandemic.

Most of these offered playful representations of religion, rather than the more common mocking or questioning of narratives that other researchers have found in their study of memes representing religion online.[3] This suggests that memes in this sample offer a more positive and optimistic view of the role religion plays in contemporary culture. This implies that religiously focused pandemic memes too might offer a more open approach to the social-cultural changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indeed, many of the memes that emerged in the first few weeks of the pandemic presented a more positive view of the swift shift to church online than I initially expected. A number of prominent memes captured this change in the perspective of seeing the internet as innately immoral or problematic to leaders describing technology as a god-send gift during the pandemic. This is captured by a meme showing two pictures of the same Chihuahua side by side with very different expressions. On the left side of the meme is a photo with the dog growling and baring its teeth. In the right photo, the dog looks as if it is posing with a big smile on its face. The meme reads: "Pastors in 2010 'Facebook is from the devil!' 2020 'Follow our LIVE services online.' " The meme captures how many church leaders publically changed their opposition towards social media and the internet during the pandemic, some almost overnight.

Such memes highlight not only these surprising shifts in opinion about technology by some religious leaders, but also their willingness to engage it hands on. Other memes addressed how church leaders tried to use technology during the pandemic, which required them to adapt and change in unexpected ways. New forms of church worship such as livestreamed services and online ministry via Zoom technology were envisioned and implemented at a speed that most churches were not accustomed to.

Transferring traditional liturgical practices online was no small endeavor for many churches. This created challenges for both pastors and the church members responsi-

[3] Aguilar et al. 2016.

ble for running various aspects of these services. While livestreaming video content is in no way a new technology, the idea of moving from an offline to an online worship context was a radical idea and foreign territory even for churches that already had media or technology teams of volunteers in place. This anxiety was illustrated by a meme with the text: "Everyone: No problem, we'll just stream church online. Tech Crew and Pastors:" with an image showing a man with sweat pouring down his face. What seemed like a logical strategy to many congregational members who are surrounded by digital media and required to use it in their daily lives, sounded like a revolutionary milestone and overwhelming task to take on for others.

This transition toward online church was especially momentous for pastors from small churches who did not have the technology infrastructure in place to make such a move, or any experience in digital technology or production. Social Distancing required not only the reworking of worship space and restructuring of services, but modification of established pastoral patterns of leading services. For example, a half dozen memes depicted new strategies that pastors adopted to help deal with preaching to an empty sanctuary while broadcasting their sermons online. One such meme showed a photograph of an empty church sanctuary with puppets and animal props, seemingly from the children's Sunday school supplies, which were socially distanced on the pews to simulate an actual audience. The meme read: "When the Pastor needs some support while filming the livestream." This suggests that many pastors were new to broadcasting their sermons or mediated preaching which they were introduced to during the pandemic. They had to find creative ways to help themselves adapt to the news ways of communicating and doing services.

So, the lived experience of utilizing digital technology as a central and crucial tool for church ministry in a pandemic indeed contributed to changes in many religious leaders' perceptions of contemporary media. The internet was no longer just a gateway to immoral content and unethical behavior, or an unnecessary resource irrelevant to church ministry. However, even though many churches embraced the internet as a platform to facilitate church services during the lockdown and social distancing restrictions does not mean that all concerns and critical evaluation of technology were totally erased. Indeed, internet memes studied here reveal several common concerns and hidden tensions digital media engagement raises for churches and religious leaders.

In the remainder of this article, I focus on memes that tell stories about how churches used digital tools, framed the internet, and understood the roles and implications of

technology during the pandemic. This is done by exploring three narratives about religious reactions to technology that are depicted through meme images and texts about online and mediated worship experiences. I argue that through surveying and analyzing these memes, we see three dominant stories about the relationship between digital media technologies and the church that are worth paying attention to.

3. Technology as a Disruption to Tradition and Established Practices

The first clear narrative presented by internet memes about technology used by churches during the pandemic is that it seen as a disruptor, interrupting "business as usual" for church leaders and congregations. Memes highlighted how church congregations and leaders were pushed out of long established, embodied religious traditions, into a time of reinventing weekly gatherings and modifying rituals in ways that still met the expectations of what a church community is and does. Digital media was presented as essential to meeting these new challenges and attempts to re-establish some normalcy of religious patterns of worship and gatherings.

This is exemplified in several memes that appeared in late March and early April of 2020 right before Easter which predicted or reflected on how holy celebrations would be disrupted by moving from offline to online. One popular theme were the "Last Supper" memes, which often used remixed versions of classic paintings of Christ's last meal with his disciples to illustrate how the introduction of forced social separation and digital mediation would alter our perceptions and the meaning of this holy gathering.

One such meme shows a deconstructed painting of Leonardo da Vinci's painting "The Last Supper" entitled: The Last Supper 2020. We see Jesus siting alone at the table as if he were hosting a virtual Zoom meeting, with his place setting, a computer, hand sanitizer, and an Amazon box in front of him. Above him, we his disciples edited from the original images and placed into separate squares, to mirror them Zooming individually into the gathering. The meme reads: "Jesus: Judas sent me a text saying he had a business meeting at the temple and would check in late. So let's go ahead and get started. Amazon has delivered each of you a box. If you've all washed your hands, open the box. It contains your bread, your wine and your hand sanitizer." The meme makes playful reference to what was (at the time) the new hygiene habits encouraged for people's health protection, as well as how this traditional celebration might have to be reimagined under the lockdown requirements. It also shows how Zoom technology both enables Jesus and the 12 disciples to be connected for this sacred event,

yet demonstrates the ways in which it disconnects them by making it a much more individualized rather than communal encounter. This meme shows how the pandemic and especially Zoom upsets shared experience, presenting digital media as something that interrupts religious tradition.

Another "last summer" meme further emphasizes this concept by showing Jesus alone in the da Vinci painting, with seven of the disciples in boxes or streaming in from separate locations to the virtual event. The meme text reads as if Jesus were calling the meeting to attention: "Ok, ok. Hello Everyone. Judas you on?" Judas, as well as four other disciples, are notably absent from the meme. There nonattendance from this mediated meeting suggests that the original story has been disrupted, adding questions to how the absence of more than one key actor might skew the story. In this way, the meme humorously, but pointedly suggests that Zoom church meetings leave out key individuals which create potentially problematic consequences. So while digital technologies allow congregations to keep meeting, these are limited gathering that unsettle the normal rhythm and shape of the church.

This underlying narrative of technology being a disruption to church gatherings, established expectations, and patterns of involvement is seen in many of these memes. The promotion of even nostalgic glorification of embodied, face-to-face worship as the standard of religious worship was stressed in multiple ways. One meme shows the actor Colin Firth standing in a suit with a solemn face in church. Behind him, a chaotic fight has broken out with people tackling and hitting one another. The memes reads: "Watching church at home, with children." The meme communicates that once the church service is broadcast and taken out of its normal context of the church sanctuary, chaos ensues.

Gone are the social constraints and expectations that help people focus on the church service, especially young people. This is further emphasized by a series of memes created by a family to show how certain in-church social behaviors can still be replicated at home during the online worship experience. Yet, it is the more problematic social behaviors of being late, talking during the service, or sitting in the back row not paying attention to the service which are spotlighted.

This is exemplified by a remixed version of one of these same memes that shows a family of four sitting on the couch behind two other rows of empty chairs. The family sits as far away from the TV screen playing a sermon as possible. This new version reads: "Live Streaming Church. The more things change the more they remain the same!" This suggests that congregations need the sanctuary setting and the embodied experi-

ence of worship, lest they be tempted to replicate the less favorable worship patterns of behavior at home.

While the COVID-19 pandemic, the resulting global health crisis, and social distancing practices that were required for health and safety were the actual disruptors of the normative practice of religion within churches, the unexpected or forced engagement with digital media through online worship was often too framed as the main culprit for creating new problems for churches.

4. Technology skills and knowledge framed as outside pastoral/priestly remit

The second narrative about technology that emerges from the sample of memes studied focused on the internet and media technology as being framed as a foreign territory for pastors and churches. Memes used irony and sarcasm to question any assumptions and expectations that pastors and church leaders would have some technological knowledge or any skills related to preparing to move offline service to online platforms.

One meme that speaks to this shows Dr. McCoy from the original Star Trek series proclaiming with tears in his eyes: "Darn it Jim, I'm a pastor not a videographer!"

First, this meme emphasizes the challenge and stressors that many pastors experienced during the pandemic as they were forced to take on technological tools to continue services safely. Next, it shows the inadequate preparation of pastors for such a situation that, required them to modify their performance as pastors to uncomfortable new roles. For example, this meme shows many pastors do not even have knowledge or experience with mass media broadcasting, such as the way that Dr. McCoy refers to livestreaming a church service as a videography skill.

Until last March, many church leaders had been able to ignore the idea of engaging more with the internet or the need to consider the possibilities online worship services might offer their congregation or church ministry. In 2020, they were faced with the reality of the limitations of their actual technological skills and knowledge. Many congregations assumed that their church and its leaders should and could quickly adapt to the technological requirement needed to run online worship services during the first wave of lockdowns. From having to decide what social media platform to use to host sermon feeds to figuring out how to set-up video equipment to record sermons for livestreaming, pastors faced a myriad of technological choices upfront, which heightened their anxiety. They found themselves in a situation of forced engagement with

technology, and often were very much out of their depth in the technological skills and knowledge required to make a fast and smooth transition from traditional to online worship in such a short period.

As lockdowns and the global pandemic dragged on and more health regulations and social distancing policies were put into place in most countries, pastors began to realize that in many cases, online worship services were not a short-term emergency strategy, but a long-term reality. This heightened many religious leaders' anxieties, as they realized creating a digitally mediated worship experience is not a solo endeavor; it often required a team of people to prepare for and successfully execute online worship service. This meant not only personally taking on a new role and learning new skills, but the recruitment of volunteers to help. Other staff members had to take on re-defined roles to help with service digital production or moderate online interactions between the pastors and viewers during service livestreaming. Pastors had to identify and recruit media savvy congregation members to assist in running cameras or monitoring sound quality of broadcasts.

This is exemplified by a meme showing a black-and-white photograph seemingly of the United States Space Program's mission control room from the 1960s. The meme includes text reading: "Church in 2020 be like, ground control to Pastor Tom." The text is a direct reference to David Bowie's song Space Oddity that describes an Astronaut exploring the new frontier of space. The meme communicates that like the picture, the church is hesitantly entering a new territory and engaging new technology that in reality is dated and well-established in the culture. The technology team seeks to support and guide the pastor into the unknown frontier of the online worship service. This team-based exercise with the pastor still being placed as the center of the technological endeavor.

Technology or media teams have been a common part of many non-denominational and evangelical church services for several decades, where a substantial emphasis is often placed on production values such as the strategic use of lights, graphic backgrounds, and contemporary music performances. However, this has not been the case for most mainline and traditional churches, where microphones and sound systems constitute the height of their technological engagement. Thus, like the meme above suggests, doing church online is a move into an unexplored, other-worldly space with new rules. This endeavor requires new practices, which need full support teams and carefully monitored technology to make sure the mission will be a success. This me-

diated multi-person driven worship event is new for everyone, even the congregation members.

Members too find themselves in a new territory. Times of lockdown and quarantine mean that they are barred from the church building, solemn traditions are broken, and liturgical rituals from communion to call-and-response recitations are reinvented. Members were themselves forced to engage with new technologies, as overnight, embodied worship became a mediated and distanced experience. Pews were exchanged for living room sofas as they now engaged with church from television or computer screens in their homes. Even more surprising was the image of their pastor transformed from a preacher into a television presenter.

For some, seeing their familiar and respected pastor broadcast through TV evoked imagery of a "televangelist" and all of the negative stereotypes associated (i.e., dodgy theology, greedy or money focused, performative rather than pastoral, etc.). This surprise and bewilderment were captured in several memes, all using images from the movie *Forrest Gump.* In one meme, we see the character of Forrest leaning forward with a look of amazement and the text reads: "Just like that, all pastors are televangelists."

Another shows Forrest Gump leaning back on a bench with a stunned look on his face. The meme similarly reads: "And just like that, my priest turned into a televangelist!" These memes use tongue-in-cheek humor and sarcasm to mock the idea of their leaders as taking on a criticized religious role in culture. While many pastors and priests were forced into these public performances online due to community rules and governmental policies that banned face-to-face religious gatherings, there is still a sense that many members in mainline denominations and the Anglo-Catholic tradition found this as uncomfortable as the leaders themselves did.

The pandemic created new social conditions that required religious leaders to act and perform outside of their typical duties, skill sets, and training they had received when preparing for religious service. Therefore, the belief that *technology skills and knowledge are not an essential part of contemporary ministry is a belief held by both congregations and religious leaders.* Indeed, very few seminaries or Divinity faculties offer any theoretical courses on religious engagement in popular culture and media analysis, let alone any practical training in digital media use and technology implementation for contemporary ministry. If church leaders do have these skills, it is often because of their previous work, career training, or personal hobbies related to computers or digital media. Therefore, engagement with digital media is seen as a non-essential part of religious training, so framed as outside their required remit. This sets up pastors

to have a hesitancy, fear, or even adverse reaction to the idea of digital media engagement, which quickly became a requirement of pandemic ministry. Thus, even if they embraced the need to incorporate media into their worship services, the assumption that their attitude towards technology quickly changed is simply flawed.

5. Concern Technology May Create or Encourage Consumeristic Practices in Church

The third theme we see arising from these memes inspired by the move from offline to online church during the pandemic comes from a fear in the potential cultural impact of congregational media engagement. One of the rally cries used by religious leaders since the age of television promotes the shunning of popular media tools because of the anti-religious values media is seen to promote. Media is not just seen as exposing people to immoral or secular content, it is seen as promoting problematic cultural values and practices.

One such set of values that underlies a number of the internet memes in this study is the assumption that digital media use encourages consumeristic practices. Specifically, it is the fear that as people engage church through the screen, it becomes a user-focused experience. In the digital age, it is understood as engaging with the screen that also becomes a consumer directed experience, where individuals personalize their engagement to meet their own needs and desires, rather than those dictated by what the experience creates. This concern about online church creating consumeristic individuals focused on their worship preferences, rather than congregationally-focused communal encounters, was a clearly articulated in a number of memes

For example, in one meme, we see a drawing of a family of four in the 1950s. They are sitting together in a pew at church. Above his head, the father has a talk bubble revealing what the father is thinking. Internally, he says: "I am glad we are able to attend to church again, but I do miss being able to fast forward and mute." This suggests that church online offers people a more personally directed and controlled experience.

In the nostalgic depiction of church, it is the pastor and/or worship leader that sets the order of service, selects the songs, and dictates the focus and length of the sermon. In a digital service, the pastor relinquishes the oversight of his congregations' worship experience to the digital tools, which allow them to customize how they will experience the service liturgy. Digital media transfers control from the service leader/creator to

the audience, specifically the person who holds the remote control, computer mouse, or laptop touch pad.

This concern is expressed in a meme showing two photos that demonstrate the conflictual perception of what pastors may have in mind when they design an online worship service compared to the reality of how people actually engage with online worship at home. The top photo shows a White family sitting on a couch with their hands raised, as if they are responding "Hallelujah!" to what the Black pastor on the TV screen is preaching. The text reads: "How pastors think I watch livestream." In contrast, the bottom image shows a man lying in bed in his pajamas, looking up at his phone screen, with the simple text: "Reality:" This meme demonstrates two fears about online worship.

The first is that when church services are transferred into a familiar environment, it will mean people will turn this sacred gathering that contains set ritual practices of spiritual significance into a mundane, everyday experience that becomes treated like one is watching just another YouTube video.

The second concern is that online worship services will be stripped of its communal context. Digital services could be viewed as an opportunity to create a new family-focused religious event where digital media provides a time and space to engage with each other and God. Instead, they fear digital worship will encourage people to engage via personal digital devices and therefore seen as an individual activity to be done further disconnecting family members from one another.

One meme is entitled: "Sermon Response Kit during Social Distancing" and shows six emoticons. Each one offers examples and explanations for how to affirm aspects of the pastor's sermon in an online chat space. For example, participants could show their agreement with what the pastor is saying by using the symbol of two hands clapping together to mean as "Preach it!" or use a smiling face with hearts as eyes as if to say "Yes!" They could use the emoticon with two hands symbolically high-fiving another two hands in a double high-five to suggest, "C'mon Jesus!"

These memes articulate a strong concern that the online church worship experience could easily become disconnected from the tradition and the historical, communal culture from which it has emerged over the centuries. There is a fear that online worship strongly takes on the traits of social media culture, where emphasis is placed on personalization, customer-centered engagement, and flexible, dynamic manipulation based on user preference rather than the creators. It seems many churches are asking

questions about the extent to which online church is encouraging individual rather than communal investment in religion.

6. Addressing the Digital Theology Presented by Pandemic Memes

This analysis of internet memes explores themes about religion and the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this analysis analyzes how church online was depicted in the early days of the pandemic. Three stories about how religious groups and leaders perceived technology in light of these events have been identified and discussed in detail. Specifically, we see technology being framed as a disruptor, outside the skill set of most religious leaders, and a tool which encourages problematic consumeristic approaches to religion.

The narrative of technology being a disruption to established religious traditions and practices highlighted that while the move from embodied to online church worship services was necessary, it was still a shift that caused concern for many churches. Of most concern were the ways that digital technologies and patterns of use would require modification of time-honored liturgical ritual. This pointed to a fear of a loss of control by religious leaders, as technology and not tradition became the driving force guiding changes in church worship practices.

The narrative of technology skills and knowledge being outside the normal remit and expertise of religious leaders also pointed to a concern in how technology shifts authority. Specifically, moving church online required pastors and priest to rely on other experts for advice and the overseeing of the transfer from offline to online worship. This recognition that church leaders might not have the ability to manage change on their own undermined religious power structures and congregational perceptions of the pastor as the wise and capable spiritual leader during times of crisis. Thus, technology spotlighted the weaknesses and fallibility of the pastor who was not prepared to deal with digital culture head on.

The final narrative discussed in this analysis focuses on the fear that the implementation of digital technology may create or even encourage individually focused consumeristic practices in participants' engagement with Church. Digital media shifts control from the established producers of the religious gathering and places decision-making into the hands of the congregation. Digital technology and its characteristics of interactivity and flexibility allow members to personalize their worship experience

in new ways as they make choices about how, when, and where they engage church online.

All three of these narratives highlight one underlying concern: the loss of control or authority to individuals' encounters with the church. It shifts the weekly gathering from a top-down, carefully constructed, and guided experience to a bottom-up, individually directed worship encounter. Thus, these memes reveal that even though many churches embraced digital media, this was not a decision that was easily accepted without hesitancy. Additionally, these memes explore the concerns about the long-term implications of this forced digital church experience. This paper and analysis show that even though more churches are now able and willing to engage with digital media, the fear of how has and will alter the church culture and structures has not disappeared. This is an important issue to realize for those engaged in the work of digital theology, as they should be prepared to address the tensions that underlie these narratives in the advocacy work that they do, calling the church to engage with digital media and culture as we move toward a post-COVID reality.

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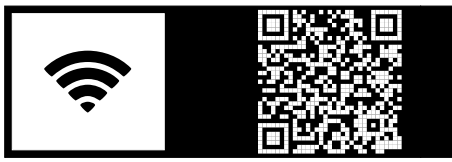

Network Sanctorum
Reflections on an Image of Church Online

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The paper examines digital forms of community and their theological interpretation in images of the church online. The image of the "network" Heidi Campbell and others proposed for the interpretation of digital religious communities serves as an exemplary way to think about digital ecclesiology. The ecclesiological implications of this image are discussed in the fields of identity and story, community and communion, open margins and the body of Christ, the future and the people of God and communio and congregatio. How "Network Sanctorum" is a helpful and future-oriented dogmatic interpretation of digital religious communities is discussed at the end.

Images express who or what the church is: body, temple, people of God – these are the images with which we describe the community we are used to calling "church". New forms of this community require new images of the church, which illuminate, comment on, and clarify existing images. This need is currently visible in the emergence digital forms of church life. Here the image of the church as a "network" is used frequently to describe the space, the structure and the character of church(es) online.[1]

These images of the church – as part of implicit theology, as Campbell puts it[2] – demand a conceptual re-thinking of traditional concepts of ecclesiastical life, and thereby

[1] Campbell / Garner 2016; Cloete 2015: 1; da Silva 2020; Musa 2020.
[2] Campbell / Garner 2016: 10. See also da Silva 2020: 8–10; Musa 2020: 53.

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also require a dogmatic reflection on the relation of images of church to the underlying ecclesiology. We must consider: how does the image of the network relate to other ecclesiological descriptions of the church? I propose we sharpen the image of the network in order to clarify its ecclesiological potentials and limits. This is of particular interest because the "network" is widely discussed not only in the field of digital church life but also in practical theology with a view to analog and digital church life. In the context of this conference and referring to the broad oeuvre of Heidi Campbell on this issue I will primarily focus on the debate about digital ecclesiology in the broader field of digital theology.

First I will describe the image of the church as a network following Heidi Campell et al. In the second part I develop four dogmatic observations coming from my Protestant – German – background. These observations are discussed in the third part focusing on current debates on digital church.

1. Church as Network

Speaking of the Church as network usually is part of an media theory interpreting digital culture. Following Manuel Castells, this is described as a network society.[3] Heidi Campbell and Stephen Garner describe it as follows: "Network society is based on social relationships that are flexible rather than fixed. These relationships are loosely connected by needs and preference rather than tightly connected by tradition and institutions. [...] The image of the network further emphasizes that societal structures, and even our social relationships, are increasingly decentralized yet interconnected and supported by a social-technical infrastructure."[4]

Transitions toward networks also influence the broad field of religious communities. Fluid communities are formed around religious topics, issues and persons. I see at least three basic forms relevant for my German context at the moment:

1. Digital worship services: These are mainly held as video or streaming worship services. Some take place in social networks (e.g. "Twomplet", an evening prayer made up of short text messages on Twitter). On Instagram, church services are usually staged by pastors in a sequence of images, short video sequences or live videos. The same applies to platforms as TikTok and other channels

[3] Campbell / Garner 2016: 3–10.
[4] Campbell / Garner 2016: 64. See also da Silva 2020: 7; Musa 2020: 54.

based mostly on visual communication. In most forms, community is built up and expressed in the form of liturgical interjections or prayer groups.

2. Religious communication and pastoral care networks: especially on social networks, communities are formed around one channel or account, sometimes related to church services. Following the description of "influencers" in social media, the term "Christfluencer" was formed in the German debate.

3. Virtual congregations: virtual congregations are congregations which live their congregational life as a permanent community in digital spaces. Such congregations exist in social networks, such as "Facebook Church". Others organize their community life on their own platforms, via messenger services and streams (e.g. Virtual Reality Church https://www.vrchurch.org/).

One dimension of this form of community is described in the image of the "network." The image is taken out of the socio-technical environment and serves to describe and integrate religious communities in the cultural-theoretical description of the network society. In this sense the image of the network is a reflexive concept.

Campbell and Garner aim for a comprehensive theological reflection of these processes, which they call a contextual networked theology.[5] Part of this endeavor is constructing a "digital ecclesiology": The corresponding volume from 2020 offers an impressive overview of current issues in this area from theologians around the world.[6] The image of the network is characterized in these and similar descriptions by five characteristics.

1. Inwardly, the image of the network is used to describe a community. There are fluid connections between the participants that can be changed at any time based on the personal choices of individuals, leading to strong or weak connections.[7]

2. The network structure is interpreted as egalitarian: Networks are described as communities of equals, as democratic, flat, and anti-hierarchical. Authority is acquired through authenticity and competence – therefore Campbell speaks

[5] Campbell / Garner 2016: 10–12.
[6] Campbell / Osteen 2020: 70.
[7] Campbell / Garner 2016: 73; Cloete 2015: 1.

of "shifting authority"[8]. Office and assignment are losing importance, as are institutions and organizations.

3. The identity of the community is based on a connecting religious narrative: It serves as a center of gravity of the community. Campbell describes it as "storied identity"[9]. This description is connected with the Spirit of God, who connects the network variably in time and space – it is at the same time an asynchronous, timeless and placeless community.

4. Outwardly, networks are characterized by open margins. They are part of overlapping lifeworld networks and their practices – online and offline – are described as convergent practice and multisided reality by Campbell.[10]

5. The network is often deeply related to thinking about the future of the church: a future-oriented church beyond institutional, spatial and temporal boundaries seems conceivable in the network and can be connected to existing social forms.[11]

In these descriptions a second dimension of the network becomes visible: in addition to its reflective character outlined above, it seems to gain orienting character. Media structure is interpreted theologically, anthropologically and ecclesiologically. In this way, the network becomes a model, a dogmatic guiding principle, to which it is to be oriented.[12]

In summary: in discourse on religious online communities, the image of the network in its reflective dimension serves to describe and integrate digital church life within a cultural-theoretical framework. In its orienting dimension it is interpreted theologically, anthropologically and ecclesiologically and thereby serves as an ecclesiological model of Church. The two dimensions are often not explicitly differentiated in discussion.[13] As an ecclesiological model, the image of the network describes an egalitarian

[8] Campbell / Garner 2016: 73; cf. 55, 77–78; Friesen 2009: 115.

[9] Campbell / Garner 2016: 68.

[10] Campbell / Garner 201: 77–78.

[11] Campbell 2020a: 3.

[12] In this double perspective Campbell describes their understanding of networked theology as follows: "At one level, networked theology is about theology and media in dialogue [...]. [...] At a deeper level, this books [on networked theology, FvO] seeks to engage Christians in their faithful living in a networked world [...]." Campbell / Garner 2016: 12–15.

[13] A quite similar double structure can be found in the German practical-theological debate about the network concept, even if it is somewhat different.

and sustainable community with open margins, whose identity is based on a common narrative and is founded in the spirit of God.

Now let us turn to four observations on this image of the church as network – following some „classical" biblical and (German) protestant descriptions of the church. A fifth observation focuses on the relationship between the different dimensions in play.

2. Network Ecclesiology

2.1 Identity and Story

The image of the network describes the informal connections of the believers in, between, and among relevant organizations – or completely detached from them. A common story, a shared narrative unites these communities: it expresses the common reference to God and connects the believers with one another. As Campbell states: "In storied identity we recognize that the religious self is malleable rather than fixed yet unified through connection to a shared religious narrative."[14]

Following the German theologian Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, one can describe these communities as communities of preaching and witness in a very concentrated form. These communities live out of the representation and circulation of the shared "God-consciousness" ("Gottesbewusstsein").[15] According to Schleiermacher, these forms of circulation are not only characteristics of the worship service – rather, religion itself ushers in questions and answers and therefore inevitably leads to communicative interactions building up uneven and "fluid" religious communities.[16] This exchange of "pious self-confidence" ("frommes Selbstbewusstsein") builds up communication networks, through which "strictly speaking" an "unlimited community" is formed.[17]

Tellingly,Schleiermacher differentiates between these unlimited communities and the churches by pointing out the need to distinguish between what is personally believed – in his words, "subjective religion" – and what is common believed – objective religion.[18] Schleiermacher emphasizes that the faith comes from the Word of God and

[14] Campbell / Garner 2016: 77–78.
[15] Schleiermacher 1983: 746.
[16] Schleiermacher 1999: §6, 38, 39, §115, 255; Schleiermacher 2001: 4. Rede 97.
[17] Schleiermacher 1999: §6.4, 57.
[18] Schleiermacher 1999: §6, 41.

cannot be empirically determined or described. Yet objective religion in the Church has a definite content and a common direction. So Schleiermacher is not primarily concerned with a fixation on shared beliefs, but rather emphasizes the dynamic character evolving out of the community: The church for Schleiermacher is a "social communication community [...] which deepens and propagates the new relationship to God of the believers opened by Jesus through mutual exchange", as Laube puts it.[19] For Schleiermacher, it is this common belief that defines the dynamic of the church – and that at the same time releases a different dynamic than a circling around itself. Schleiermacher emphasizes therefore the "special spirit of community" (besonderer Gemeingeist) of the church: The church aims to become more and more one, according to the invisible church that is active in it. Such a dynamic around what is commonly believed, a concentration around the identity-creating narrative, characterizes the church in contrast to an unlimited communication network.

What is striking in the descriptions of network ecclesiology is that while the subjective beliefs of individuals become accountable, the shared belief often remains indefinite: The common narrative, the shared story, is often not clearly discernable. Thus it remains open whether and how these narratives actually bind a community together – or whether they would implode in an attempt to determine their shared belief. The Swiss media scholar Felix Stalder describes this phenomenon as typical for digital communities.[20] According to Stalder, digital communities are communities of practice. Knowledge and shared insights arise out of the shared practice, but are not the aim in themselves. Rather, they are characterized by their common actions. In conversation with classical ecclesiological descriptions of the church, two questions arise. On the one hand:to what extent does this description provide a more precise picture of the reality of church communities – analogue and digital – better than ecclesiologies, which are primarily based on shared "content"? On the other hand, it must be examined whether and how this common content – classically described as the teaching and sharing of the Word of God (CA 7) – should or can continue to be constitutive for the description of communities as churches.

This leads to a further question: the question of the subject of the identity-creating narrative and thus the connection between community and communio.

[19] Laube 2011: 148–149.
[20] Stalder 2017: 135–137.

2.2 Community and Communio

The starting point in the descriptions of the community is the individual believer, through whom communication networks arise. Thus, it is initially a horizontal description of human communion as a "community" – as the media-scientific and sociological origin of the image suggests. At the same time, the communities of digital churches see themselves as *communio digitalis*. They are founded in the Spirit of God and connected to one another through God. As Teresa Berger explains, the physical co-presence of the celebrants – i.e. the physical spatial proximity – is not a mark and therefore also not a constitutive element of spiritual community.[21] With this, Berger hopes to build up a network that spans time and space. In this context, the ecumenical character of the image of the network repeatedly comes into focus. Denominational boundaries are either not named at all or are marked as irrelevant and removed in the image of the network.

In this respect, the image of the church as a network shows similarities to the ecumenical communio-ecclesiology. Communio, the communion of saints that transcends space and time,[22] is not limited to what can be seen or seen locally. This communion is a community and at the same time a participation *in* something. The communio Sanctorum is therefore a community based on sharing in God. The image of the network takes up this description and thus comes to a theological interpretation of the digital community as communio digitalis.

Network ecclesiology and communio ecclesiology thereby focus primarily on the church as a spiritual community. Clarifications are necessary with regard to the relationship between this description and the description of the network as a communication community.Firstly, I observe a tendency to identify the virtual character of communalization with spirit-driven communion, which is based on digital mediatization. A careful distinction must be made here: virtual communities are not founded in the spirit per se, but initially only characterized by a different form of mediatization.

Secondly, this focus on the spiritual community follows a specific assignment of virtuality and materiality, following Castell's concept of the "culture of real virtuality", where the biological, carbon-like coming together loses its relevance and is interpreted in the virtual presence. [23] These connections are currently leading to discussions about the physical dimension of community that go far beyond the description of net-

[21] Berger 2017: 39. See also Chia 2020: 21; Musa 2020: 55.
[22] CS Z 1, Z 5.
[23] Castells 2017: 425, 502.

work ecclesiology.[24] But for the image of the Church as network, we must ask: what is the relationship between communio and the corporeality of a concrete *congregatio*?

Thirdly, if we describe a spiritual community, some questions regarding its constituting factors need to be clarified. Is it the spirit that inscribes the individual or is it the believers? Does the network understand itself as creatura verbi – as a narrative community? How can these dimensions be related to one another? Where and how is one inscribed in biblical stories? This touches on the question of whether and how the common narrative is intended to be connected with the word of God and preaching.

2.3 Open Margins and the Body of Christ

The description of the "storied identity" shows that identity in networks is build up from within – or from above? – but not from the outside. Rather, the image of the network shows the possibilities for continuities and connection. The church should be "everyone's home,"[25] an "open we."[26] The relation to other networks is described not only as a cybernetic possibility, but as an essential characteristic of the church – networks merge and overlap. Network nodes are never just nodes in a network; other networks with which they are connected also cross at these nodes.

The resulting networks are interpreted theologically with the biblical image of the body of Christ. With this biblical image, a new dimension of the identity comes into view: It describes the integration into the identity of the spiritual community as a new being. Here, too, the focus is on the connection with one another.[27] Paul describes the connection of otherwise separate groups in the body of Christ and the abolition of the differences in the new being of the members of the body. This connection with one another is based on being in Christ. This also leads to a new identity of the community and of individuals. This vertical reestablishment of identity leads at the same time to a distinguishability through the following of Christ.[28] Being called to and baptized into the body of Christ not only leads to a common narrative of callings, but to a new being as the body of Christ.

The new identity of believers must be recognizable in the concrete coexistence of believers. Because Christians are members of the body of Christ, their behavior in the

[24] We touched this already in other parts of the workshop – see the articles by Clifford Anderson and Selina Palm.
[25] da Silva 2020: 10.
[26] Friesen 2009: 55–56.
[27] See for the following Wolff 2011: 302–304.
[28] CS Z 21.

community has theological significance. This communion of the body of Christ is visibly modeled in the communion of the worshiping congregation.[29] In and through this new identity, the community appears open and inviting to the outside world.

2.4 The Future and the People of God

This only ever succeeds selectively: the physical community of believers is not only a realization of the image of the body of Christ, but often also an imposition for individuals.

The ecumenical descriptions of communio recall this in the image of the wandering people of God: the church is on the way, and is undergoing pilgrimage and fellowship on the way.[30] The image of movement implies a goal that has not yet been reached in the current being. This creates a curious dynamic: the eschatological perspective of what was promised constitutes ways towards the goal – and at the same time makes the provisional nature of one's own, constantly changing location recognizable as such.

Combining this dynamic with the descriptions of the Church as Network outlined above would be a fascinating endeavor. At first glance, the hope for the future of the church seem to arise from the presumed connections to existing social forms on the one hand and the multiple connection points of an open network – temporally, spatially and beyond the institutions[31] – on the other hand. I would be interested in balancing the tension between connecting with the existing and approaching what is to come. This brings into focus what I would like to call an "eschatological flaw." The ecumenical community is not a complete community and the goal of this path lies beyond human scope for shaping. This moment of inadequacy in comparison to what was (or "is"?) eschatologically promised represents for me a fundamental moment of the church in all its forms and practices. The community always falls short of what is biblically attested and eschatologically promised. The hope for the future of the Church rests on resolution of this eschatological tension.

2.5 Communio and Congregatio

This tension does not release one from the careful examination of the communities of the Church in the world – including virtual communities. A mere virtual ontology of

[29] Schröter 2011: 53.
[30] CS Z 27.
[31] EKD-Zentrum für Mission in der Region 2016: 24; EKD-Zentrum für Mission in der Region 2017: 6; EKD-Zentrum für Mission in der Region 2015: 4.

an "electronic temple"[32] is in danger of overlooking the necessity – and the reality – of the concrete space, place, and structures of the spiritual communio in this world. In the Lutheran tradition, this reference to concrete communities has a prominent place, in response toto other theologies, which mainly focus on the spiritual community. Confessio Augustana states in its seventh article that the church is not only communio, but also always concrete congegatio sanctorum. This congregatio sanctorum can be found where "evangelium recte docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta" (CA 7). In this sense, CA 7 emphasizes concreteness: the concrete situation of the communities gathering in the spirit and their actual practices and forms of organization are central.

For me, the double dimension of the network outlined above proves to be a strength at this point. Network ecclesiologies not only develop an ecclesiological model, but also provide an analytical structure that can be analyzed by social-scientific means. Thereby the empirically describable social structures – the concrete congregatio digitalis – comes into view and can be discussed. I will now briefly sketch some ideas of such an institutional and empirical concretion of the network church.

Looking at an institutional level, facing the *congregatio* the relation between fluid communities and organized and institutional forms of Churches comes into sight. Schleiermacher stresses this point: churches, in contrast to potentially unlimited religious communication networks, are "pious communities" that communicate "within certain limits" in such a way "that one can somehow achieve certain recognition about which individual belongs to it and which not".[33] Churches are therefore characterized by some kind of "orderly interaction and cooperation."[34] For Schleiermacher this is not a question of control or ministry, but rather arises out of the need to organize a community which reaches a certain size. A look at the New Testament texts adds a further perspective: the formation of organized structures there is essential to ensure durability. And I would add a third perspective: for me, it is a sign of ecumenical respect to relate to other Christian groups as legitimate community. Not in order to become part of them, but in order to let the connectedness in faith, in the spiritual community, also become recognizable in the *congregatio*.

So, how fluid network communities are connected with other forms of church organization and institution is an old question asked newly to digital church networks –

[32] Musa 2020: 55.

[33] Schleiermacher 1999: §6, 40 ("daß irgendwie zu bestimmter Anerkennung gebracht werden kann, welcher Einzelne dazugehört und welcher nicht").

[34] Schleiermacher 1999: § 115.

medially, personally, structurally, liturgical and dogmatically. Focusing on analogous church networks, Roleder points to the constitutive interplay of formal structures and informal networks that maintain and promote one another.[35] Horst Gorski describes an "institutional resistance" of the church – which can be brought into the future vision of digital networks not only as an obstacle, but also in a constructively irritating manner.[36] The decentralized understanding of authority[37] and the associated changes in the understanding of ministry[38] are of special importance regarding the possibilities of participation and realizing the priesthood of all believers – and at the same time ecumenically highly problematic issues to discuss.[39]

On the other hand, CA 7 forces dogmatic reflection on digital network churches into empirical concreteness. Here we touch several questions from social networks analysis and media theory. One could ask, for example, to what extent the image of constant connectivity and openness is actually fulfilled in the networks described? Where are church networks ostensibly open, but still lead to exclusion – through language, aesthetics, know-how, etc. (Reckwitz), but also through the necessary technical infrastructure? Network theory has clearly worked out how network structures lead to segregation and homogenization. How and where are these processes recognizable and ecclesiologically reflected in the church networks? How can these processes of demarcation and exclusion be related to the ecclesiological model of open margins? Another question is: How do the media structures relate to the model? Youtube rankings, search algorithms and personalized timelines in social networks are of crucial importance for the question of who can network with whom. How democratic are these structures and where do new hierarchies arise – and with them new structures of authority? And – connected to Rendtorff's description of the church as an institution of freedom[40] – where is there perhaps a potential of freedom in finding and connecting to an institution? As a dogmatic theologian I can only sketch out these questions, which are far beyond my expertise and form central components of an interdisciplinary reflection on digital church practices and their images of the church.

[35] Roleder 2020: 299, 302.
[36] Gorski 2018: 206.
[37] Dyikuk 2020: 35; Rice 2012: 4.
[38] EKD-Zentrum für Mission in der Region 2017: 15.
[39] Berger 2017: 45; Campbell 2020b: 52; Cloete 2015: 5; Dyikuk 2020: 35; Rice 2012: 4.
[40] Rendtorff 1977: 130.

3. Network Sanctorum?!

If one considers the ecclesiological potential of the image of the network, the description as a network of saints at second glance is less remote than it seems. The image of the network focuses on the spiritual community, which is the *communio Sanctorum*. At the same time using the image of the network provides a specific social structure. Reflecting on these two dimensions, I want to conclude my considerations.

At the level of the social structure, I have highlighted central questions for further reflection on concrete *congregationes digitales*. Network analyses open concrete empirical access to existing communities. There is also great potential here for the perception and representation of ecumenical community. While the ecumenical description of communion remains at the level of the spiritual community, network ecclesiology offers a more precise definition. Based on the structure of communio as a network, the different forms and levels of what is called "Ecumene" come into sight and relate to each other. The formal and informal structures of ecumenical practice such as ecumenical prayers etc., can be combined with theological searching in ecumenical discussions as well as institutional cooperation. Described as a network, these are independent and equivalent forms of ecumenism – without releasing anyone from the responsibility to reflect on the indissoluble relationships to one another.

In my remarks, I have modeled what such a reflection can look like from a dogmatic perspective. On the level of the ecclesiological model, different aspects can help to sharpen the image of the church as a network. Especially the common narrative and its references to what is commonly believed, the relationship between communication, community and spiritual community, and new identity, as well as the determination of the relationship between virtual, spiritual, and corporeal community must be specified more precisely. In particular, the determination of the office and the institution must be specified further.

The specific potential of the image of the network lies in the connection of these levels. Schleiermacher also provides a good basis for such a connection. He was first – and only? – to introduce a theological discipline called "ecclesiastical statistics" in dogmatic theology at the University of Berlin in order to grasp and dogmatically reflect on the variety of concrete forms of church life.[41] Responding to this concern, the interdisciplinary examination of the image of the church in the network contributes to the readjustment of ecclesiology at the intersection of practical theology and social

[41] See Gräb 2013.

sciences. Focusing on the relation between the dogmatic concept of the church and empirical reality not only serves the development of instruments in dealing with social science perspectives in dogmatic theology, but also helps to adjust interpretive figures and ecclesiological images of the church.[42]

My thoughts on the image of the church as network thereby showed something fundamental: Community in churches cannot be described and captured in one picture. One requires many pictures that illuminate, inform, and clarify each other. As Campbell describes, it is one task of theology to develop some images of the world and the church.[43] To incorporate the image of the network sanctorum constructively into this endeavor, searching for a – post-pandemic?[44] – "digital ecclesiology"[45] from a dogmatic perspective was my aim today.

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[42] For this task in the German context see Laube 2011: 163.
[43] Campbell / Garner 2016: 12–15.
[44] Dyikuk 2020: 35.
[45] Campbell 2020a: 3; Campbell / Osteen 2020: 66–67.

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