DIGITALISED SPIRITUALITY?[1]

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What are some of the promises and perils that the age of 'digitalised spirituality' (i.e., spirituality 'in, with and under' cyberspace) holds for us? Given the history of evangelicalism in the twentieth-century, it's interesting to note that, even with concerns over the accessibility of on-line pornography, no conservative church leader with any credibility has suggested that we keep the internet entirely out of our homes, as was suggested in some of the debates in the 1950s (in the United States especially) over the question of whether Christians should watch television. Acceptance of the television revolution more or less primed us for the Internet invasion of our lives.

And it is amazing to consider what futurologists are saying about the technological developments in the not-too-distant future. Leading futurologist Ray Kurzweil has made some rather bracing projections about the coming merger of human and machine.[2] If Kurzweil is correct, we are only about a decade away from the disappearance of computing as a 'discrete technology' that needs to be carried.[3] In reading his descriptions, one supposes that even the *Jetsons* would be jealous. Most computer electronics in the near future, Kurzweil says, will be embedded in our eyeglasses, clothing, etc. These computers, he says, 'will enable us to meet with each other in full immersion, visual-auditory, virtual reality environments as well as augment our vision with location and time specific information at all times.'[4]

Yet we are, Kurzweil says, only a few decades away from the development of *biological nano-electromechanical systems*, which, when implanted, will allow us to experience 'full immersion' in virtual

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[1] Lecture delivered at Houghton College, Houghton, New York (USA) in March 2004.

[2] Ray Kurzweil, 'We Are Becoming Cyborgs,' (March 15, 2002) at http://www.kurzweilai.net/meme/frame.html?main=/articles/art0449.html See also Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (London: Phoenix, 1999).

[3] Kurzweil, 'We Are Becoming Cyborgs,' par. 11.

[4] Ibid.

reality at will, a virtual reality that is been constructed so precisely that we will be able to, among other things, experience what its like to be someone else by plugging into his or her sensory-emotional beam.[5]

These prognostications may seem a bit far-fetched, but clearly the potential for the growth and distribution of knowledge in the next stages of technological advance is staggering. 'Cybermarketeer' Michael Bauwens reckons that, according to calculations based on the mathematical study of novelty, our collective knowledge about the world has been reduced to less than three years, whereas in early ages it took some thousands of years. According to Bauwens, there is some speculation that 'a hypothetical point in the not too distant future will occur, called the Singularity. At this point, knowledge will double in a single moment, leaving mankind utterly unable to even understand what is happening.'[6]

Bauwens reminds us of a comment by science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke: 'any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.'[7] I'm reminded of *Star Trek* episodes in which the gods and their miraculous powers really turn out to be aliens with advanced technology. If futurologists are correct, we all are going to have seemingly magical powers at our fingertips, and there is no holding this future back. In fact, those who stick their heads in the sand or seem to be resisting the inevitable are increasingly held in suspicion.

In my class on postmodernism I use a scene from one of the most well-written programmes to ever grace the small screen, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The character *Giles* comes from the traditional world of books and can hardly help being dragged kicking and screaming into the computer age. In one particular scene, he's asked one of his young charges to scan a book and, as usual, expresses his fear and loathing of computers. After Giles expresses his unwavering preference for 'a good book,' another character intones, 'The printed page is obsolete. Information isn't bound up anymore. It's an entity. The only reality is virtual. *If you're not jacked in, you're not alive.*'[8]

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[5] Ibid, par. 14.
[6] Michael Bauwens, 'Spirituality and Technology: Exploring the Relationship,' (1996) at http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue5/bauwens/index.html, par. 5
[7] Ibid, par. 21.
[8] The script for this episode ('I Robot, You Jane') can be found at http://vrya.net/bdb/clip.php?clip=2909

'If you're not jacked in, you're not alive.' The point of the metaphor refers to more than just a VR helmet. If you're not jacked in, online, hooked up to broadband, plugged into the new cyberworld, not only are you not with it, you're not alive. Our life in the future, everyone seems to be telling us, is going to be dependent more and more on the ongoing cyber-revolution. If you're not 'jacked in,' you won't really be alive.

Our advances and dreams of the future cannot help but have an impact on religious structures and how we conceive of spirituality. Richard Thieme, a popular techno-philosopher, points out that the past three great eras of what he calls 'the technology of the Word' –speech, writing and printing –all transformed religious structures and gave birth to distinctive forms of spirituality and religious experience, and we should expect that fourth great era of electronic media in our time –cyberspace and virtual reality- will have a similar effect.[9]

It's interesting to hear what leaders in the technology industry itself have to say about the interface between spirituality and the realm of technology. Many of these business leaders have a strong interest in spiritual matters. Kim Polese, for example, who was the original product manager for Java and co-founder of *Marimba*, believes that 'as evolution is about matter moving towards spirituality,' the internet itself is an important development in spirituality, since 'it makes physical presence less important. We can exist on another level – a slightly higher consciousness. Plus, the hum of millions of collective voices on the Net is itself a level of consciousness that floats above that of individuals.'[10] Her sentiments are also expressed by those who believe that our expanding global sphere of communication is producing, is evolving into, what is called a 'noosphere' (a term originally used in the utopian literature of Teilhard de Chardin), a higher collective mental reality.[11]

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[9] Richard Thieme, 'The Future Shape of Religious Structures,' (March 1997) at http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/mar/last.html, par. 3.
[10] quoted in Kevin Maney, 'Will Religion Survive? The Curiosity That Makes Technologists Shine Puts Faith to the Test,' *USA Today* March 27, 2001, at http://www.usatoday.com/educate/college/healthscience/casestudies/20020313-religion.pdf, par. 12.
[11] Lonny J. Brown, 'The Spirit of Cyberspace,' *Convergence Magazine* Winter 1996, at http://www.lightparty.com/Spirituality/CyberSpace.html, par. 4.

Indeed, cyberspace and the net have themselves taken on a spiritual and quasi-religious quality. The World Wide Web has been likened to the ancient Vedic mythical image of Indra's vast 'web of Jewels' in which each jewel reflects all of the jewels in the web infinitely, the Internet to the 'Akashic Records' mentioned in Buddhist literature, which contains the stories of everyone's lives and the record of all events, actions and thoughts in this earthly realm.[12] Some groups that refer to themselves as 'technopagans' have created elaborate shamanic rituals to sacralise the net. Michael Bauwens reports that just a few years ago, Tibetan monks at the Namgyal Institute Ithaca, New York consecrated cyberspace by using a ritual usually performed by the Dalai Lama himself.[13]

In sum, the picture being painted for us, on a number of fronts, is that of a shiny happy techno-spiritual future. Our optimistic friends at Unifying Fields Foundation, whose aim is to utilise the insights of Unified Field theory for the spiritual transformation of human consciousness –and whose motto is 'Downloading your Higher Self' - have this to say to reassure us of the future:

> Science will discover answers to its mysteries; nations will evolve new forms of governance, businesses will use new forms of harmonious commerce; arts and religion will enter a new golden age; and individuals can construe new paradigms for self-transformation, interpersonal relationships and spiritual unfoldment. We want to be a part of this discovery. We believe this mission to be profound.[14]

This language of mission in relation to 'downloading your higher self' is provocative, since we, of course, happen to be on a mission too. John Perry Barlow has described cyberspace, the virtual world, as a 'new locale of human community,' a town that has neither seasons nor sunsets nor smells.[15] Is this our new 'locale' for mission? Andrew Careaga reminds us that several years ago George Barna predicted the emergence of a cyberchurch at the dawn of the new millennium.

Millions, Barna said, will never actually travel to a church but will instead 'roam the Internet for meaningful spiritual experiences,' and as the traditional church becomes less and less relevant, Barna concluded that we would see a growing number of people 'isolated from the traditional church format.'[16]

Barna's predictions have been close to the mark. In recent years church leaders more or less have been forced to grapple with the question some people have about the possibilities of cyber-spirituality in light of their dislike of traditional church structures, questions of the order: 'Why on earth would I want to get involved with a traditional church structure and all of its nonsense –boring services, power struggles, the big heavy boot of a church hierarchy and official dogma - when there is so much freedom to search for exactly the kind of spirituality you want in cyberspace? I can be a part of a truly worldwide community, get connected with people from all parts of the globe in spirituality chat rooms, get the best spiritual music and streaming video, all just by jacking in.'

In thinking about these questions, we have to reckon first of all with the fact that postmodern spirituality itself is rather slippery yet angular at the same time. By that I mean, there may be an interest in a rather vague transcendent something 'out there' –or, more likely, something mystical 'in here'–but established authorities can keep their hands off my quest to find out what it is, thank you very much. Konrad Waloszczyk gives as succinct and accurate a definition of postmodern spirituality as I've ever encountered: 'spirituality is the realization of values and realities called divine, sacred or simply 'transcendental,' without revealed, fixed doctrine or external organization.'[17]

And when the putative freedom of postmodern spirituality is put together with the hypermodern world of readily available consumer options in cyberspace, *everyone* seems to be happy. David Kinnaman, vice president of Barna, puts it this way: online seekers are like 'grazers' at a spiritual smorgasbord. 'They're more concerned

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[12] Michael Bauwens, 'Deus ex Machina vs. Electric Gaia,' (April 1997)
http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/apr/last.html, par. 2.
[13] Bauwens, 'Spirituality and Technology,' par. 38
[14] See the *Unifying Fields Foundation*'s mission statement, at
http://www.unifying.com/web/mission.html. Cited by Lonnie J. Brown, 'The Spirit of Cyberspace,' at http://www.lightparty.com/Spirituality/CyberSpace.html
[15] Bauwens, op. cit., par. 34.

[16] Cited by Andrew Careaga, 'Embracing the Cyberchurch,' (December 1999) at
http://www.next-wave.org/dec99/embracing_the_cyberchurch.htm, par. 1. See also Andrew Careaga, *E-vangelism: Sharing the Gospel in Cyberspace* (Vital Issues, 1999)
[17] Konrad Waloszczyk, 'Shaping the Intercultural Spirituality,' (paper at 2003 Fifth Congress of ISUD), at http://www.isud.org/papers/pdfs/Woloszczyk.pdf, par. 11.

with how spirituality can improve their quality of life and enhance their choices than as a way to connect with a holy entity.'[18] So this slippery character of postmodern spirituality, especially as it is manifested on the net, makes mission a tricky affair. Careaga says that if we are going to be successful in 'jacking into' this field, there are a few things we're going to have to think about.[19]

First of all, he says, we're going to have to develop our interactivity online. People with surfing mentality have short attention spans. We're going to need things like webpage sermons that incorporate hypertext links to bible passages, audio clips, visuals, chat room Bible discussions. We'll also have to recognise that ministry in cyberspace is a loosely structured instead of a top-down affair. Cyberspace spirituality fits well with the postmodern desire for rhizomatic or non-hierarchical forms of communication, and we're going to have to deal with it. Connected with this, we're going to have to face the fact that the net is the great leveller of religious claims: our faith is seen as just one more religious option out there in the spiritual marketplace. Cybercongregations have the freedom to accept a variety of religious truths and perspectives.

In this situation of radical pluralism, Careaga says we should expect and even encourage serious questioning from people, and make available the resources to answer people's questions. This in turn is going to make it necessary for us to collaborate with other online ministries - there are many Christian groups from different parts of the world who've never met but who work together on the net for evangelism. And finally, Careaga says, we're going to have to remember that the online church is unfettered by time or space. Somebody may still be in his pjs while on the other side of the world someone may be logging on at the end of the day. So 'church' can occur for these people 'at any time, at any place.'[20]

As perilous as digitalised spirituality seems to be, Careaga and others seem to be saying, the promise of engaging people with the gospel makes it worthwhile for us to 'jack in.' Essentially, I share this sense

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[18] Cited by Marilyn Elias, 'New Ways Likely to Replace Old-Time Religion,' *USA Today* Feb 28, 2001, at http://www.usatoday.com/life/2001-02-28-baby-boomers-religion.htm, par. 5.
[19] Careaga, 'Embracing the Cyberchurch.' In what follows, I have summarised the key points of Careaga's essay.
[20] Ibid, par. 15.

of promise and agree that we must boldly go into this still relatively new missions frontier. But as the church 'jacks into' digitalised spirituality, as a theologian I'm still concerned for flesh and blood congregations, and have a few observations and counter-questions of my own about this whole phenomena in relation to that question posed above: 'Why in the world should I belong to a traditional church –or any conventional religious institution for that matter –when I have all these resources and possibilities in cyberspace?' My questions have to do first of all with the *kind* of spirituality idealised in cyberspace, secondly with the kind of personal identity that tends to be engendered or encouraged in that context, and thirdly with the kind of community that's envisioned and actually established.

To begin, it seems to me that cyberspace does well with those types or kinds of spirituality that conceive of spiritual advancement or sophistication in terms of a gradual evolution from matter to spirit –maybe along the lines of some Eastern forms of spirituality, the creation of a 'noosphere' as mentioned above. But that is not necessarily a higher form of spirituality; in fact it sounds fairly Gnostic.

Far from having as its aim a rarefied spiritual ether or noosphere, at the very centre of Christian spirituality stands the incarnation. We do not believe in an avatar; we believe in an incarnate Saviour. Christian spirituality is an earthy and embodied spirituality, by virtue of our Lord Jesus assuming human being in all its essential aspects and thereby sanctifying those dimensions. We do not believe that our ultimate destination is a spiritual noosphere; we believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Far from being a flight into the abstract, the realm of disembodied ideals, Christian spirituality pushes us back down onto the earth. Contra Polese, Christians don't believe that that less physical presence is an advance or improvement on spirituality.

Christians realise that there is nothing innately or intrinsically holy about the realm of mind or spirit, as though if we could just transcend this 'stuff' we'd be in an immortal realm of untainted ideas or undistorted communication. Innsbruck theologian Jozef Niewiadomski reminds us that such an immortalisation of human consciousness in cyberspace is also an immortalisation of our unredeemed properties - our rivalries, envies and so on. Cyberspace is, after all, he says, merely empty 'space' in which our anxieties,

desires and hopes, passions, deeds and misdeeds are mirrored, imitated and turned back to exercise their power on other human beings.[21]

The two other concerns mentioned above have to do with the question of what the digital and virtual are posing about the nature of personal identity and of community. These are deeply interconnected themes; I will tackle the question of personal identity first.

How does one's identity develop and perdure across time and a variety of social interaction? Life in the anonymity and heteronymity of cyberspace forces us to grapple with that question. The question of personal identity is one with which postmodern theorists regularly wrestle, of course, but let me tell you how it really came home to me in connection with the subject of cyber-identities.

Over the past few years I've been reading a great deal by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. Pessoa wrote under a number of heteronyms: Alberto Careiro, Ricardo Reis, Alvaro de Campos –and a semi-heteronym named Bernardo Soares, who 'authored' the magnificent *Book of Disquiet*. While literary alter egos were fashionable among early twentieth century authors, none of them went as far as Pessoa, who gave each of his heteronyms a personal biography, psychology, physique, politics, aesthetics and religion.[22] He even wrote under an orthonym named Fernando Pessoa, who was just as fictional as the others. By his life's end, Pessoa had written under some 72 different names that were responsible for literally thousands of texts. These personae interacted with each other, collaborated with and critiqued each other, and even translated each other.

Richard Zenith, one of Pessoa's translators, has this to say of him: Pessoa's heteronymic conceit accentuated his personal condition of self-estrangement. 'Each heteronym was a fresh personification of

his abdication from being, a restatement of the fact that he was nothing at all, just an empty place in the universe where many roads happened to meet.'[23]

While reading Pessoa, the thought occurred to me that this man –and his multiple heteronyms– was in some ways a forerunner, and is perhaps symbolic, of the 'Age of the Alter Ego' we see emerging in internet chat rooms and forums, where a single person can author a myriad of identities across a number of conversations on the web. (Maybe St Fernando could be the patron saint of the chatroom!)

People who engage in this kind of activity seem to me to be afflicted by a kind of Pessoa-syndrome (even if they're bereft of his magnificent command of language and verse), and in the disembodied chat of the chatroom it's likely that their own situation of self-estrangement, like Pessoa's, becomes accentuated. Who am I? No one in particular: just an empty place where a variety of cyber identities are tried out. And if that is the case, then what kind of communities are likely to emerge, are they likely to be a part of? - hence the third question I raised earlier.

Niewiadomski and Juergen Moltmann have some insights we need to hear in relation to these concerns. Moltmann reminds us that only within the nexus of promises –promises made and promises kept—does a person acquire continuity within time and thus identity.[24] People who forget their promises forget themselves; those who remain true to their promises remain true to themselves. And these promises are connected to our names. We sign contracts with our names and vouch for promises with our names. Thus a person's identity over the course of a life history is designated by that person's name. 'Through my name, I identify myself with the person I was in the past, and anticipate myself as the person I want to be in the future.'[25]

This question of identity, Moltmann says, is closely connected to that of freedom. Making and keeping promises, he says, 'are not restrictions on personal freedom but rather the concrete actualisation

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[21] Jozef Niewiadomski, 'Extra Media Nulla Salus? Attempt at a Theological Synthesis,' (2003) at
    http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/events/innsbruck2003_Niewiadomski_Paper.doc,
par. 26. Niewiadomski is reflecting a basic Girardian analysis in his paper.
[22] See Richard Zenith, 'Introduction: The Drama and Dream of Fernando Pessoa,' in Richard Zenith, ed., *Fernando Pessoa & Co. – Selected Poems* (New York: Grove, 1998) 1-36, especially 2-3.

[23] Ibid, 7.
[24] Juergen Moltmann, 'The Change of Values in the Western World,' (1997) at
    http://www.ctinquiry.org/publications/reflections_volume_1/moltmann.htm,
par. 39.
[25] Ibid, par. 40.

of freedom.'[26] So where am I personally free? he asks. In a supermarket where I can buy whatever I want but no one knows me and not even the cashier looks me in the eye? I would add: in the anonymity or heteronymity of the chatroom where you can say anything about yourself but no one really knows you? Or in a community where people can look me in the eye, in which I'm accepted and thus affirmed as I am? The first, Moltmann says, is the reality of 'individual freedom of choice'; the second the reality of 'communicative freedom.' Where should the primary locus of community be?

In relation to the question about community, Niewiadomski makes the point that in some ways the media society has promised a kind of Cyber-Constantinianism: an apparent universality or catholicity, as it absorbs individuals, cultures and even religions into a new kind of religious unity.[27] What the church did not achieve while Constantinianism was in full bloom, the electronically linked society seems to accomplish now. 'Everywhere in the world,' Niewiadomski writes '... the decisive factor of socialization of the global culture –the commercialised new media—overcomes frontiers and barriers; human persons of all races and classes, all layers and groups of society are, voluntarily or involuntarily, gathered into one and the same globally passionate community.'[28] We are reminded of media theorist Marshall McLuhan dreams in the 1960s of a 'Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity' brought about by computerisation.[29]

But, Niewiadomski says, in the midst of this great promise of community a paradox occurs. The fascination that we have with cyberspace lies in the fact that it makes things like traditional institutions, market mechanisms and even the interlinking of communication itself necessary to my individual experience of freedom. In other words, cyberspace turns the traditional roles of institutions –such as the church—'upside down' and places them unreservedly in the service of my individual desire.[30] What this means, Niewiadomski says, is that even as people become interlinked electronically, their experience becomes even more individualised,

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26 Ibid, par. 41.
27 Jozef Niewiadomski, op cit, par. 15.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid (Cited by Niewiadomski), par. 16
30 Ibid, par. 17

until in cyberspace everyone can experience himself or herself as the creator of his or her own dematerialised world.[31] Once you 'jack in,' we might say, you can experience yourself as a kind of God.

The unleashing –and to some degree fulfilment—of that kind of human desire cannot help but incite envy, rivalry and competition on a hitherto unimaginable scale: thus increasing numbers of people are coming to define themselves as *victims* within the global society shaped by the mass technological media. Niewiadomski sums it up this way: As paradoxical as it may sound, while the global society that was created through the mass media by its webs of communication has brought about a common history of humankind, at the same time it has atomised its members and made them lonely. Above all, he says, it offers no solution to the 'experiment' it has started of globalising envy, jealousy, mimetic rivalry and resentment.[32]

Specifically, what form does this experiment take in cyberspace? Billions of naked bodies that can never be possessed, billions of people are desperately searching for romance ('just like you'), billions of dollars to be won, billions of credit card numbers to be plugged in (or scammed), billions of electronic signatures needed for various petitions. Who are the haves and have-nots? Which site is the most popular? Who will have their most intimate correspondence or most degrading video sent to every email box on the planet? Who will win? Who will lose? Who will be voted off?

The worldwide web is an amazing 'place' to be sure, but when we jack into this world, this matrix, it is still very much *our* matrix, *our* world. With these reflections in mind, to the question again: 'Why should I want to belong to a conventional congregation –with all its hassles—when I can simply 'jack in' to all the marvels of digitalised spirituality?'

Because, first of all, the Gospel *does* declare a solution to that envy, jealousy, rivalry and resentment that characterises our plight. That solution lays in the fact that Jesus Christ has jacked into our fallen flesh and blood reality. In his crucifixion he has exposed the powers, the frenzy of desire that holds us captive and always seeks a victim,

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid, pars. 19-20.

and in his resurrection he has triumphed over those powers and sent his Spirit to transform us. And we 'jack in' to that reality first and foremost in a flesh and blood community that has been called and gathered around font and altar, where the risen Christ continues to come to us through Word and sacrament. 'Digitalised spirituality' is one matter. 'Digitalised sacramentality' is a contradiction in terms—at least as far as I understand the meaning of the Christian sacraments.

In that community, our personal identities are enriched and mediated to us as we journey with each other in the physicality of discipleship together. Of making and keeping promises to each other to *be there*: holding the new baby, laying on hands in prayer, passing the peace or passing the casserole dish, waiting all night at the bedside, standing at the gravesite, being the shoulder to lean on or cry on, greeting each other with a holy kiss (or at least bear-hugging each other from time to time.) These things are not incidental to the life of the church; indeed these are the activities that make the strongest impact on people.

As this community of the redeemed, of the liberated, makes its calling sure, it does so in this world, this earth that has been groaning right up to the present time, this world filled with extraordinary beauty and profound suffering. I hope we can say to those around us: 'Jack into *this* community, this calling, this reality and you'll be truly alive.'