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On Sanctifying Cyberspace

Summary: Because of the ubiquity and usefulness of the internet it is sometimes deemed that not only the internet is a potent technological force, but that it is sacred. Views of some proponents of this view are critically analyzed. Paper concludes that for a believer, the source of all that exists is God and in this sense the internet is God's gift or at least the result of human ingenuity which comes from God. The internet by itself is morally and religiously neutral and it is up to the moral dimension whether it is used for good or for ill.

Keywords: cyberspace, theology, sacredness

An impressive growth of the internet and the possibility of instant communication are frequently hailed as a means “to increase understanding, foster tolerance, and ultimately promote worldwide peace.”¹ Telephone, telegraph, and TV did not accomplish the goal of establishing a global harmonious village, but apparently the internet that can be accessed by everyone from everywhere through the computer and the cell phone makes such prospects much brighter. Because of its tremendous impact of on the political, social, and personal lives of people and the vistas it offers,² the internet has been considered not only a technological marvel but an embodiment of theological yearnings.

1. Cyberspace a spiritual realm

The internet, a structure consisting of interconnected computer networks, is an immensely complex web of cables, routers, and computers through which flows an ocean of bits in form of electrical and laser light impulses. These bits have different meanings in different contexts and they collectively form an enormous world of meaning which is cyberspace. This world of meaning was considered to be the “Platonic realm incarnate,”³ it was compared to Popper's Third World, or even was

¹ Frances Cairncross, *The death of distance*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press 1997, p. xvi.

² “A new medium of human communications is emerging, one that may prove to surpass all previous revolutions –the printing press, the telephone, the television, the computer – in its impact on our economic and social life,” Don Tapscott, *The digital economy*, New York 1996, p. xiii.

³ Jennifer J. Cobb, *Cybergrace: The search for God in the digital world*, New York: Crown Publishers 1998, p. 31. “Cyberspace is Platonism as a working product,” Michael Heim, *The metaphysics of*

singled out as the Fourth World different from the three worlds of Popper.⁴ Because it is being seen as having some special status, it has sometimes also been endowed with a sacred dimension. „The image of The Heavenly City, in fact, is an image of World 3 become whole and holy. And a religious vision of cyberspace”; „the impetus toward the Heavenly City remains. It is to be respected; indeed, it can usefully flourish ... in cyberspace.” As the Heavenly City, it is „the New Jerusalem of the Book of Revelation. Like a bejeweled, weightless palace it comes out of heaven itself,” thereby being „a place where we might *re-enter* God’s graces ... laid out like a beautiful equation.”⁵ On a similar note, Stenger exclaims, „we will all become angels, and for eternity ... in this cubic fortress of pixels that is cyberspace” and „cyberspace will feel like Paradise.”⁶ Also according to Stenger, because cyberspace is a kind of space different from the „profane space” of the physical world, then it „definitely qualifies for Eliade’s vision” of sacred space. She argues that “cyberspace creates a break in the plane of reality, one that seems to generate the ideal conditions for [what in Eliade’s words can be described as] a ‘hierophany: an irruption of the Sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different.’”⁷ Also McLuhan expressed a religious sentiment about computers in the early stages of computer networking: “The computer thus holds out the promise of a technologically engendered state of universal understanding and unity, a state of absorption in the logos that could knit mankind into one family and create a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace. This is the real use of the computer ... to speed the process of discovery and orchestrate terrestrial – and eventually galactic – environments and energies. Psychic communal integration, made possible at last by the electronic media, could create the universality of consciousness ... In a Christian sense, this is merely a new interpretation of the mystical body of Christ; and Christ, after all, is the ultimate extension of man.”⁸

Such religious sentiments are sometimes expressed in all seriousness, sometimes rather flippantly; sometimes briefly, sometimes in a book-long argument, but many

virtual reality, New York 1993, p. 89.

⁴ Anton Kolb, *Virtuelle Ontologie und Anthropologie*, in: A. Kolb, R. Esterbauer, H. Ruckebauer (eds.), *Cyberethik: Verantwortung in der digital vernetzten Welt*, Stuttgart 1998, pp. 12, 18, 19; Cf. Angela M.T. Reinders, *Zugänge und Analysen zur religiösen Dimension des Cyberspace*, Berlin 2006, p. 17-20, 118, 198.

⁵ Michael Benedikt, Introduction, in: M. Benedikt (ed.), *Cyberspace: first steps*, Cambridge 1991, pp. 16, 18, 14, 15.

⁶ Nicole Stenger, *Mind is a leaking rainbow*, in: Benedikt (ed.), p. 52.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

⁸ M. McLuhan, *A candid conversation with the high priest of popcult and metaphysician of media*, “Playboy” March 1969, p. 72.

of them appear to agree with the statement that “our fascination with computers is ... more spiritual than utilitarian.”⁹

2. Hammerman

An attempt to show sacred aspects of the internet was made by Joshua Hammerman, a rabbi of a Connecticut temple, in his impressionistic book which not infrequently prefers florid style over clarity.¹⁰ In his view, “God is not *up there*. She is right here.”¹¹ “*We find God on the Internet through the redemptive power of the written word*” (130) [because] “the Internet is a medium of the word” (131); thus, there is nothing particularly special about the internet as a means of getting closer to God. Although Hammerman treats graphics somewhat dismissively as merely accompanying the word, a claim can be made that the sensory aspect of the Web (audio, graphics, video) is just as pronounced as the written word, or maybe even more than writing. In this respect, non-written aspects of the Web could be considered an obstacle in the way of experiencing God. Hammerman refers to the Logos of the Gospel of John to stress the importance of the written word. If so, the possibility of experiencing God by written word alone without any embellishments would appear to be a better prospect to experience God than the Web full of non-written diversions. Therefore, to be consistent, Hammerman should encourage the reader to stay away from the Web where written word is severely obfuscated by the non-written components and hence it is rather difficult to accept his pronouncement that “God is becoming less hidden with every cybermoment” (125).

Hammerman then refers to numerology of the Kabbalah to show the digital nature of reality or rather “numerical basis to Creation” (177). When Hammerman asks, “because a computer’s reality begins with 0s and 1s and the kabbalistic godhead happens also to be digital, does that really allow me to take such a leap of faith as to say that the world of cyberspace is a reflection of God’s inner life?” (179), the question appears to be rhetoric. In his view, “the cyber universe that is the inner life of God” (187) and he makes a distinction between God *on* the Internet and “God *as* the Internet (metaphorically, not exclusively), recognizing that the whole of cyberspace, when seen organically, can bring us closer to understanding and experiencing the sacred” (208). Moreover, in his words, “the world of the evolving inner God that I believe cyberspace to be” (143) should tell us something about the nature of God. However, we do not learn what/who is an inner God. There is a statement that “the inner life of God can be summed up in a progression of sunrises and sunsets, and in the erosion, construction and vision of our sacred spaces. People visit such places and notice first the light and shadows, the interplay of eternity and temporality, the

⁹ Heim, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

¹⁰ Joshua Hammerman, *The Lordismyshepherd.com: seeking God in cyberspace*, Deedield Beach 2000.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 47, cf. p. 226 for a similar nonconformist feminization of God.

rise and fall, which causes them to reflect in wonder at our own eternal desire to dream, to build and to rebuild” (102). This pronouncement, however, hardly explains anything. Is inner God to be equated with the inner life of God? But if part of this life is cyberspace, what is so special about the latter if this life should also include sunrises, sunsets, erosion of sacred spaces and the like? Finally, Hammerman speaks about the digital God (208)¹² as if it were self-explanatory what exactly he means by it. At least it is clear what he does not mean by it: “we’ve left in the dust those tired old images of the Lord as shepherd and old-man-in-the-sky, and have begun to make our acquaintance with the Digital God” (243). Rabbi Hammerman is curiously offended by the Biblical image of “God is my Shepherd” (since he cannot imagine himself “in the role of sheep” (8)), but he apparently finds the metaphor – which he never explains – of the female digital God more suitable for the internet age and thus being in no danger of offending anyone’s religious sensibilities. In the chapter on digital God he refers warmly to Kabbalistic numerology which equates the name of God with number 26 (since Hebrew letters are also used as digits; incidentally, the same is in Greek). How does it make God digital? It appears that the designation of God as female and digital is more an expression of political correctness on the one hand and an infatuation with the computer terminology on the other than of any theological reasoning.¹³

In the end, Hammerman offers nothing interesting concerning sacredness of the cyberspace and its special religious status. He is right when he says that “it is possible to find God’s presence in the tiniest bit of dust as well as the grandest spectacle of nature”; however, when he adds that “online, where everything is clearly interconnected, the electricity of the Word shines through even more clearly” (157), it is hard to see why this should be so. It seems that the Word shines best through personal contacts where the reality of this Word can manifest itself through people’s lives and can touch one another. The internet is a splendid medium that should lead to such personal contacts, but it is hardly the ultimate means through which the Word shines. Not even its electricity.¹⁴

¹² “The true essence of God can be understood – indeed most plausibly is seen – as being *digital in nature*” (xiii).

¹³ It is thus rather surprising to read that “Hammerman’s model, despite its theological character, encapsulates the essence of ICTs [information communication technologies]. If, however, instead of the word God, one uses words such as ‘the Other,’ ‘Reality,’ ‘Enlightenment’ and so on, then Hammerman’s model expands its applicability to all religious/spiritual/metaphysical traditions,” Anastasia Karaflogka, *E-religion: a critical appraisal of religious discourse on the World Wide Web*, London 2006, p. 130. Since we learn nothing about the digital nature of God from Hammerman, how can his model be expanded to anything? And what would exactly be the female digital Other or female digital Enlightenment?

¹⁴ In Hammerman’s words “computer-generated words are also engraved in fire (electricity)” (151); but what of it? Cf. his rather forced attempt to equate fire and electricity (154).

3. Cobb

A sacred character of cyberspace is also a topic of the investigations of Jennifer Cobb. In her words, “the divine is woven throughout all of reality in the form of creative, responsive love and evolutionary becoming. In this sense, the divine permeates the very fabric of the universe. This vision of the divine is of a persuasive God who coaxes us toward goodness. This God does not create from nothing but works to bring increasing levels of order and complexity to the chaos of the world. In the simplest terms, creativity unfolding in the universe forms the primary expression of divine activity.”¹⁵ In this way, she makes creativity the primary attribute of God. Therefore, when in the chess game played with Kasparov, the Deep Blue computer made very creative and imaginary moves but also missed some moves, it proved to be “brilliant one moment, blind the next” (6). But, in Cobb’s eyes more brilliant than blind – after all, it won – therefore, “the Hand of God is an apt name for Deep Blue’s sublime move. The essence of this creative moment *was* God” (12). So, at the moment of Deep Blue’s sublime moves, it was God who from within the circuitry of the computer so directed electrical impulses that they manifested themselves as a decision to make a particular move. It was God, in effect, who made the move that defeated Kasparov, God who expressed His creativity through the computer. However, it is an inscrutable decision why God would allow the machine to be blind at certain points and why He preferred to express His creativity through the electronic machine rather than through Kasparov. Moreover, it would also be rather puzzling why God would want to show His hand in the game of chess.

When giving prominence to creativity, a question can be asked: was God the essence of the creative moment in Deep Blue’s creative move alone or is God the essence of creativity in all situations? If the latter, then creativity of even the vilest crimes has a divine component. This can be defended on the ground that creativity is a divine element of the human mind; however, there is also a moral dimension which determines how this creativity is utilized. What would be the moral dimension in the case of a computer? Creativity without morality can be very dangerous. Would God infuse a machine with creativity without assuring that there is a morality in it? If so, would not it require that the machine is a rational entity to be able to make proper choices in the use of its creativity, the choices guided by rationality based on morality?

Impressive as Deep Blue’s performance is, Cobb does not limit God’s creative hand to this one machine alone. “Cyberspace has vast, untapped potential as a creative medium infused with divine presence” (15) because “creative process forms the soul of cyberspace” (44). In the view of John B. Cobb, apparently endorsed by Jennifer Cobb, “creativity, the very essence of the divine, is the life-giving principle that is also itself alive, moving, changing and growing. On the simplest level, divinity is the cosmic force that continually ushers novelty and creativity into the world. The

¹⁵ Cobb, *Cybergrace*, p. 12.

divine is not the process but the creative aspect of the process. From this perspective, the transcendent aspect of divinity is pure, unmanifest creativity or pure potential. The immanent aspect, that part we can apprehend in the world around us, manifests as creative novelty and richness of experience. Wherever creativity is found, there too can life be found” (56).

Jennifer Cobb uses the concept of not just creativity, but theological creativity. The latter concept is used by Ralph Abraham in whose view “the WWW is miraculous,” since “it is theological creativity in action. If you look at the Web, there are all these different pieces of software without which it couldn’t run. These pieces were created by volunteers, people who were responding to a kind of divine guidance. They were being pushed toward creative synthesis. The miraculous way the parts go together can’t be a coincidence” (47). This “mysterious process of theological creativity ... does not affirm the idea of the divine as a purely good entity from an anthropomorphic perspective, exerting control on a sinful humanity from on high” (71) and yet, “theological creativity is that which lures us always toward a deeper, more complex, and ultimately purposeful and loving outcome” (72). Unaccountably, theological creativity that “does not affirm the idea of the divine as a purely good entity” appears to lead automatically to a loving outcome. However, creativity by itself is morally neutral. Considering today’s security systems, thieves have to be very creative to do their deed, which hardly leads to a loving outcome except for the perpetrators, and even this is uncertain.

It is simply Cobb’s theological assumption that creativity – theological creativity – is the essence of the universe, which at times acquires somewhat pantheistic coloring; after all, the sacred energy that flows through cyberspace is “that we variously call God, Allah, Brahma, chi, or Tao” (18). In her view, when “software runs in a computer, something remarkable begins to happen. The abstraction becomes a field of experience that we call cyberspace. It is in this moment that the emergent quality of cyberspace makes itself known. The essential motor of this process, the spiritual center of cyberspace, is the fundamental sacred force that infuses all reality: divine creativity in action. The emergent dynamic found between the hardware and software in cyberspace is an aspect of divinity itself,” which allows her to say that “in the interaction between the hardware and the software, that the sacred locus of computation can be found” (51). The problem of good and evil becomes unimportant in the face of creativity in Cobb’s universe. Any action, even the most mundane and repetitive becomes thereby sacred, since it produces results that were not there before, unimportant and trifle as they may be. In this way, any action of anything becomes a sacred act and thus any execution of any program on any computer is a sacred act. In her enthusiasm for the enormous possibilities that cyberspace opens, Cobb seems to simply disregard malicious actions harmful to individuals, institutions, and to entire nations. If all is sacred, then there is no need to dwell on the negative. In this way, sacredness becomes merely an embellishment with little religious content, just

an expression of optimism, overwrought as it appears to be.

Cobb states that “love is the source of all great acts of creativity, both objective and subjective” (149); however, she does it right after apparently agreeing with Robert Jahn that the computer has faith, desire, and love for a human (149). Although Jahn himself dismissively stated that this may be regarded as “sterilizing the religion” (148), it is difficult to see it as anything else particularly when these pronouncements are made after quoting Paul’s ode of love from 1 Cor. 13. If computers are creative, then they must be loving entities and this love apparently enables their creativity. Unless it is assumed that it is God who works through the computer, as in the game of chess; thus, the computer is just a machine through which the hand of God is manifested.

“God, for process theologians, is the principle that brings order from chaos, not that creates something from nothing” (173). Cobb agrees with this view that God is not a creator out of nothing of what exists, but He only organizes chaos into order (173). God thus must have existed from eternity along with chaos like in the Plato’s or in Anaxagoras’ universe, unless He was always organizing it, from eternity to eternity, thereby existing alongside the universe which is coeternal, like in Aristotle’s worldview. Moreover, in her view, God is not omnipotent, although He is omniscient (174). Being not omnipotent, God has to negotiate with the world to shape it in a certain way, thereby becoming the God of persuasion (which also harks back to Plato). When we read her statement that “perhaps we are meant to be Gods of persuasion” (176),¹⁶ it becomes rather clear that this hubristic statement underlies the theological view that it is not man who is created in the image of God, but rather God is shaped in the image of man the creator: the concept of omnipotence “may no longer work for us as we seek to blend the digital world into our own” (174); thus, the concept should be modified, brought down to the human level. Moreover, as Cobb approvingly quotes Kevin Kelly, “absolute control is absolutely boring” (177). Boredom as a theological argument...

4. Cyberspace as a spiritual tool

The tendency to sanctify or even deify¹⁷ cyberspace can be considered to be a reflection of the view that “in contemporary culture, technology has religious meaning; it is regarded as an omnipotent force that can fulfil age old dreams and bring humanity to new and better ways of life. It carries dreams of salvation, it shapes our beliefs and values and it is the anchor to which our ideas about what is important and meaningful

¹⁶ The statement that “in the end we are not Gods” (185) may mean that we are not gods *tout court*, but we are gods of persuasion, yet, still, she gives advices concerning how “to be a god” and speaks about “god games” (177).

¹⁷ And if cyberspace is not considered to be a god, it is deemed to be a technological form of God because many of its properties are the same as attributes ascribed to God, Hartmut Böhme, *Die technische Form Gottes. Über die theologischen Implikationen von Cyberspace*, “Praktische Theologie” 31 (1996), p. 258-259.

are attached.”¹⁸ The ubiquity of the internet and its enormous influence on personal, social, political, and economic lives makes it a good candidate for the view that it is a driving force of our civilization and thereby it is something sacred. The view is partially justified. For a believer in the providential God, the internet is a product of the ingenuity of engineers, but this ingenuity is a direct gift of God, whereby, directly or indirectly, God has His hand in the technological development. As expressed in the opening statement of the encyclical *Miranda Prorsus*, “those very remarkable technical inventions which are the boast of the men of our generation, though they spring from human intelligence and industry, are nevertheless the gifts of God Our Creator, from Whom all good gifts proceed [as phrased by John Chrysostom]: ‘for He has not only brought forth creatures, but sustains and fosters them once created.’”¹⁹ This sentiment was repeatedly reaffirmed by pope John Paul II in his World Communication Day messages.²⁰ This strong endorsement of technological progress has theological underpinnings. As expressed by pope Pius XII, “the Church loves and favors human progress. It is undeniable that technological progress comes from God, and so it can and ought to lead to God,” since “all search for and discovery of the forces of nature, which technology effectuates, is at once a search and discovery of the greatness, of the wisdom, and of the harmony of God.”²¹ From a religious perspective, technological progress is ultimately a gift of God that is primarily designed to lead people to Him. Benevolent effects leading to the improvement of the quality of life are just welcome side-effects of this progress. Therefore, God can manifest Himself in cyberspace just as much as His hand can be viewed in nature and in the lives of people.

As potent and progressive a force the internet can be, by itself there is nothing sacred in it, just as there is nothing sacred in other equally revolutionary technologies, such as printing, telephone, telegraph, radio, or television. Like any technology, the internet can be used, and is being used, for good and for ill. It is just a tool that can be used to accomplish particular goals and the nature of these goals is determined by the scale of human values, by the moral dimension of man. Morality, in turn, be influenced by technology to be viewed as the only force worth pursuing and as the sole means of human salvation – in this world and the next, the next being the prospect of immortality that, in view of some authors, cyberspace offers. This progress can become the replacement of spirituality, or rather the spirituality can be taken over by the technological spirit, the conviction that technological force is viewed as the only

¹⁸ Karen Pärna, *Believing in the Net*, Leiden 2010, p. 4.

¹⁹ Pope Pius XII, *Miranda Prorsus: On motion pictures, radio and television*, Washington [1957?], p. 1, cf. p. 6-7.

²⁰ 15th World Communication Day in 1981, 21st in 1987, 25th in 1991, 26th in 1992, 27th in 1993; cf. also 24th in 1990 with the theme “The Christian message in a computer culture” which states that “we must be grateful for the new technology,” and 36th in 2002 with the theme “Internet: A new forum for proclaiming the Gospel,” in which it is stated that the internet is a “marvellous instrument [that] serves the common good,” but it also can “become a source of harm.”

²¹ Pope Pius XII, *On modern technology and peace: 1953 Christmas message*, Washington [1954?], p. 2-3.

force that can assure human happiness and satisfy all spiritual yearnings of man.²² McLuhan surely realized this since he quickly changed his view on the computer as a new interpretation of the mystical body of Christ and the same year when he gave his interview expressing this sentiment, he wrote in one of his letters: “electric information environments being utterly ethereal fosters the illusion of the world as spiritual substance. It is now a reasonable facsimile of the mystical body [of Christ], a blatant manifestation of the Anti-Christ. After all, the Prince of this world is a very great electric engineer.”²³ It is the strength of human moral dimension to oppose the ill use of technology and turn it as much, as possible, to the force of good. For a believer, if the prince of this world can thwart human attempts to do so, so the divine help can enhance these attempts. The internet and cyberspace – this space which is no space, this reality which is not quite real – are divine gifts because they were created by the divine gift of human ingenuity and should be treated as such. By themselves they can be constructive forces just as much as destructive powers. It is in the best human interest that, by relying on divine providential help, the constructive forces prevail.

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²² The technological spirit states that “whatever is technically possible ... takes precedence over all other forms of human activity, and the perfection of earthly culture and happiness is seen in it,” *ibidem*, p. 4.

²³ Marshall McLuhan, a 1969 letter to Jacques Maritain, in McLuhan’s *Letters*, Toronto 1987, p. 370.

O uświęcaniu cyberprzestrzeni

Streszczenie: Internet przeniknął niemal wszystkie aspekty życia społecznego i czasami nadaje mu się znamię świętości. Artykuł krytycznie analizuje poglądy niektórych autorów mówiących o uświęcaniu cyberprzestrzeni. Konkluzją artykułu jest stwierdzenie, że dla wierzącego źródłem wszystkiego, co istnieje, jest Bóg – i w tym sensie internet jest darem boskim, a przynajmniej rezultatem ludzkiej inteligencji, która również pochodzi od Boga. Internet sam w sobie jest religijnie i moralnie neutralny – to moralny wymiar człowieka dyktuje, czy będzie użyty do dobrych czy złych celów.

Słowa kluczowe: cyberprzestrzeń, teologia, uświęcenie