

# Grace and the Information Society

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Religious communities, like all other agents of culture, have to come to terms with information technologies and the avalanche of scientific expansion sponsored by them. For Christian churches these developments mean a challenge not only to the format of their thinking and their life, but to the very core of their existence.

Churches and people of faith in general function in the real world, even if they claim to deal with otherworldly matters. They are subject to the unexpected developments in the society in which they witness. They are bound to live with the latest scientific discoveries and technical novelties of their day, whether they applaud or fear them. They have cell telephones, personal computers, TV, radio, Internet, newspapers and electronic agendas. And even if they don't – which is true for very many of them – their lives are still dominated by these gadgets, because they form the new entrails of the world they live in. Through them they receive and disseminate information about everything which makes up their life's history: politics, culture, medical miracles, the economy. The avalanche of that information may be false or tendentious, it may be fictitious or meticulously verified. It is all they have.

Information Technologies (IT) have changed their *modi operandi*, changed their concept of time, diminished their idea of distance, confronted them with physical and mental mobility, opened their eyes to a myriad of things not possible for their parents: travel, medicare (heart operations, cancer cures, surgical magic etc), prospects of dying later or earlier, possibilities of cloning, unlimited access to information about these and other things. And all these new things bring with them a bag full of new moral and ethical challenges for which little traditional, verifiable examples exist.

Tough going! Religious communities now know – or can know – that the earth is not central to the universe, that man is not central to life on earth, that creation is process and not event, that people can tamper – if they choose to do so – with their and other people's lives (abortion, euthanasia). They (can) learn about the developmental character of their Holy Writ, about the changes and corrections in those holy books once regarded to have fallen straight from heaven. They (can) learn about parts of their religious history, usually kept away from them by their teachers, about perverse popes, torture of heretics, religious wars fought for more power or territory, connivance with slavery. Thanks to the media they learn about sexual abuse by clergy and cruel religious customs like genital mutilation and systematic discrimination of women. And most of that is still only on the periphery of the new challenges. It is not new facts or new artefacts that have given people entry to a new lease on life. It is a new mode of living.

Through that experience they learn that information is not just an addition to their knowledge but an invasion into the very fabric of their life and thinking: unless they want to become hermits this information shapes their lives. And even if they become hermits, on Mount Athos the monks read glossy magazines too.

To sum it up, the new IT not only influence the format of our work, but also its content.

## The new society

It can't be said often enough: we are living in a very new society. We live globally, we are aware of the extreme vulnerability of the world, we have become intricately connected to a myriad of man-made machines, we are no longer dependent on what we make with our hands: we are all little astronauts who have seen our own world from a distance. We know that we live in a technopark which will no longer disappear unless it takes us with it to destruction. The speed and the measure of these changes have never been witnessed before in human history. For want of better words, we call this new society the Information Society. That is a society in which

information is at the heart of the culture, where information technology has married into other cultural phenomena like the sciences, the economy, medicine and leisure.

Most frightening of all is the marriage between IT and the military. Wars have become computergames with smart bombs, unlimited surveillance, invisible attack and unparalleled propaganda. IT have made it possible for many things, economically and culturally, to be decided outside the control rooms of the nation state. They happen as if caused by an invisible spirit which blows where it wills. What films we model on, what our values are worth, what we are to think about friends and enemies, are decided somewhere in the virtual world of communication technology. The invisibility of the houses of decision is baffling even to those who engineer them.

Traditional organisations like churches, political parties, trade unions and many other institutions of our inherited culture suffer a loss of traditional functions in this new society. That is understandable enough, but no less frightening for all that. Political parties can no longer control the flow of information and what citizens do with it. Elections lose their stability: more and more voters no longer decide on long-term political preferences but on the spur of the moment. Large parts of the electorate become floating, buying governance like stocks and shares on the value of the day. Trade unions are no longer forces of workers fighting for a new society, but organisations to protect the interests of their members. Civil society organises itself preferably not in political parties of old but in international single-issue organisations: Amnesty, Greenpeace, Médecins sans frontières, Development Organisations. On many issues, political creations like the Worldbank and the IMF have more power than the traditional governments that called them into being and they certainly have more power than the international organisations which were created in order to control them!

Since we lack proper institutions to supervise all these informationally motivated happenings, many things take place without much democratic control. Thanks to a number of international networks the world still turns in spite of governments. Churches – if this is any consolation – are not alone in their struggle to redetermine their identity!

#### The new values

Globalisation – the international expression of the new society – carries another consequence: our traditional value systems appear to be inadequate. Traditional value systems had to be revised before, but never in such a short time and never so basically. When earlier (European) generations were forced to do away with slavery, with the absolute power of the sovereign, with industrial ownership or with discrimination against women, values also had to be critically reviewed but they took time to be changed. Now changes come very fast and in many forms at the same time.

We had come to believe that individual identities were sacred, but now personhood and even individuality are privatised. Individualism is no longer a concept with a social connotation. The scale of business is such that individual workers, high and low, together with their representative organisations, have once again become almost insignificant elements of the social machinery. Invisible interests and hardly visible shareholders determine their fate, companies change hands like a deck of cards. Employment and unemployment is a mass phenomenon. So is leisure. Work and leisure are regarded as rights in many countries now. The traditional values of work and earned leisure time have become statistics rather than personal choice.

Medical discoveries – the pill, transplantations, artificial spare parts – have made us all little gods capable of playing with our own and each other's lives as never before. Computerised science has created machines that have infinitely more productive power and (artificial) intelligence than their makers could offer themselves. Universality, long regarded in the European, American and Australian cultures as an authentic attribute of their values, lost out to pluriformity. African values, Asian values, Latin American values, usually religiously inspired, were often at odds with values of the North.

Duty to God for instance or the sanctity of life, patriotism or the command to evangelise the world, had to be rethought and since they often are not carefully thought through cause considerable confusion. The values one needs in order to survive in a confusing world are effectiveness, willingness to reconsider and to relativise, peer group solidarity, international orientation, preparedness to see a shrink or hire a consultant. And most of all we have to get used to the fact that everything has been turned into commodities. Ownership of information and its networks make most people servants of unknown masters. Freedom is no longer what it used

to be. Most influential of all is the fact that our world has been so grossly ineffective in organising its will and power that more than half of our generation is destitute, hungry and without access to whatever this article is trying to describe. That fact alone renders most of our value systems meaningless.

#### The churches struggle to survive

The New Society puts new and unexpected requests to institutions still struggling with the industrial society of yesterday. One sees it happen in political parties, trade unions, academic institutions and non-governmental organisations. Among those the Christian churches struggle to survive. There are areas in the world where the churches have not connected to the new world in time and have virtually disappeared or been reduced to sectarian groups; in other areas they have retained an important place in their community, lost their identity as missionary agents but regained a place for social and/or interrelations. In many parts of the world they are a refuge against the confusing world outside.

In a world in which religions are intrinsically bound up with economic underdevelopment and various political beliefs, churches are more divided than ever. In spite of the achievements of the ecumenical movement, economic disparity and a chasm between rich and poor drive Christians further and further apart. In turn aggressive groups of fundamentalists in other religions create Christian fundamentalism: fear for the growth of other religions has increased in the last few years rather than diminished.

But let us not forget that Christian churches have always been masters at adapting to new situations! The early church was small and often persecuted by the powers that be. It reacted very cautiously in matters of politics and social relations. As long as the government did not claim divinity for itself, Christians were willing to live a quiet life. They did not chose political sides, they obeyed the government, they accepted slavery. In their own groups the rights of slaves and women were recognised, but towards the outside they were very keen not to give offence.

When Emperor Constantine chose Christianity to be the state religion of the Roman Empire, it did not take long for the Christian church to adapt and to become the ideological and moral support of the ruling authority. The servant image of the first centuries gave way to a much more power oriented and controlling leadership role.

When the Renaissance swept over Europe the churches accepted the printing press and the rediscovery of Greek and Latin philosophy, the gruesome price of the Reformation (the end of the one church in Western Europe) was in itself an adaptation to the new values of personal responsibility and the breakdown of clerical authority. Much later slavery was given up, women regained their rights, homosexuals were slowly accepted. Where these processes are still in their early stages the outcome can be foretold by looking to the past. Churches take their time, but they always adapt.

Churches, are at their best just before they adapt! Whenever discussion becomes very basic and passionate the identity of the churches is at stake and both the worst and the best come to the fore. Not in the outcome but in their willingness to face the issues as important to life and death do the churches come to function. All the great Confessions in church history are the result of the clash between opposite parties: it is at those times that clergy and laity both take part in the struggle.

Contrary to popular belief – and contrary to what most of us like best – it is not harmony that is the greatest fruit of the Spirit but the strong medicine of faith, hope and love. None of those is a very harmonious concept: faith means trust in God and no one else; hope means readiness to fight the prevailing status quo and love is what brings an unloving world to fury: the icon of love is an Executed Man, not wedding bells!

#### The necessary attitude

The very first thing the churches need in the IT society is to learn and to teach humility. Learning humility is another expression for remembering earlier failures. We do not have to spell out again the record of the Christian churches vis à vis science, freedom struggles of nations and peoples, moral questions. Churches come to new questions in the knowledge that they have very seldom been part of the solution of any of the great ills of humankind, having previously been part of the problem for a long time. One important caveat: the Christian community also produced the lonely saints who did see the problem and were willing to go all the way with the victims. To put it a bit

crudely: the Christian faith often inspires what churches deny.

All of this should teach those of us who belong to churches to combine considerable humility with a clear insight into the revolutionary character of their message. Humility is no withdrawal. As the forgiven can best forgive, so the humble can best teach humility. In a period of history which oozes arrogance and false certainties, the churches can play an important role by teaching a little humility to the scientific, the economic and the technological leaders of our day.

The dangerous divide between rich and poor, between the frontrunners and those left behind, and the ease with which technological solutions – and they are always IT solutions these days – present their case without any insight into the social and cultural dimension of what they sell is frightening. Concepts like Smart Bombs, Industrial Growth, building huge international conglomerates kill, maim and humiliate millions of people. Recalling their own contribution to holy war, inquisition and excommunication, the churches can contribute to the debate.

#### Churches as Agora

The debate must be organised and kept alive. The IT industry will organise its own discussions, but most of them will not take the social, political and cultural dimensions of the debate very seriously. Political entities are not much better. Too many promises are broken and too many easy expectations quietly shelved. Churches, together with other concerned NGOs can make an impact if they are willing to organise the discussion about the New Society and the impact of IT on our lives.

The Agora function of churches has often worked well. East Germany before the Fall the Berlin Wall, the debate on racism, earlier debates on development in the Ecumenical Movement were not only of great interest to many people but also influenced political decisions. Churches have a network of training institutes, seminaries, local study groups and other facilities which can be canvassed for this debate, which is so important for the years to come.

On the ecclesial Agora the important thing is to analyse the problem and to point out the agents and institutions responsible for the IT component in the developments of our culture. Society not only needs description but also verdicts!

#### Churches as laboratories

With their large international networks churches are able to experiment with IT in various forms. The potential 'good' use of all modern technologies demand many experiments before we find new forms of communication. Already electronic media have made changes in people's perceptions: the documentary, however often misused, remains a blessed instrument to get new insights into how people live and suffer or celebrate. Once we had to do that through the written word. When film was discovered a new step in communication possibilities was created and used! Television made it possible to have large audiences participate in public education. Now the Internet adds a powerful tool for international contact – for instance between concerned groups on both sides of an armed conflict – increased people's participation in decision-making and the expression of their convictions.

Experiments in which the struggle is against the hegemony of technology and technological thinking can be small scale at first and multiplied with the same technique used to perpetrate their strengths. History shows that usually small scale experiments lead to large scale resistance and eventually change and renewal.

#### Theological perspectives

Many readers of Media Development are more or less used to theological language, also when the growth and consequences of IT are discussed in the churches. Many of them will also be aware of the divide between technology and theological language. In a multicultural and secular society, Christians must be aware that both the framework of their thinking and their language – inherited in the imagery of the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) – form a formidable obstruction to communication and understanding. Yet, I believe, that the content of their message, once unwrapped and cleaned, is very relevant to the debate.

Let me try to indicate briefly how the churches might find language for the debate on IT. Allow me to make a distinction about theological (God-centred), incarnation (Christ-centred) and pneumatological (Spirit-centred) attempts to think.

Theology, Christian and otherwise, speaks about life as Creation. That is not a scientific but a

spiritual term. It is after meaning not modern history. In many different religions theology starts from the belief that reality is no accident but willed. No biological or physical scientific discovery disclaims that fundamental insight. And since reality is no accident, nobody can claim ownership of it or any of its parts. With regard to reality humans are shopkeepers, stewards or a tenant farmers. They have to be accountable: in religion to God, in humanistic civilisation to their fellows or to history and generations to come. Being alive – in creational thinking – means being responsible for your deeds and even your thinking to those whom you meet in your life, be it God or others. Since life is willed, it is holy, i.e. different and unique. In the imagery of earlier generations that was what was expressed by such expressions as: we live to glory of God. That language may have lost much of its clarity, but the content is clear enough. Not to our own glory, not just to our own satisfaction.

The same is true for the imagery of the Last Judgement. Often our culture looks as if there is no ultimate judgement on our actions, power play of the powerful. Yet the notion of judgement is not far away. One does not have to accept the traditional idea of each one of us standing alone before the throne of God and hearing his judgement, to know about the various ways in which our lives are weighed. Spirituality is about accountability. If the debate on IT could be based on that notion, much would be won.

#### Incarnation thinking

Christian theology is about creation or reality, but it centres on the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who the churches call Christ, in order to indicate his closeness to God. Jesus called God his father, avoiding the more majestic and juridical titles in the OT. It means that reality is not only willed but also not left alone. Jesus is the climactic last of the OT prophets and the first one of the NT faithful. He testifies to what was revealed to him as God's visits to his people. Almighty God does not sit on a throne far away where He does His thing beyond our vision and beyond our understanding. He is present in human affairs through his prophets, ordinary persons called to remind the people of the calling and God's commandments (read: promises). In that way He encourages the people who are willing to accept His revelation (read: coming out). And so it happens, in each generation and among all peoples.

Properly understood, incarnation thinking does not hinder Christian churches from participating in any IT debate. On the contrary: it begins the debate from hope and from the search for charismatic (read: gifted) persons who may not have much following in the beginning but who are like mustard seed, negligible to start with and a tree before you know it! It also opens our minds to other prophets, who are called when churches forsake their calling. Is it thinkable, in this way of thinking, for Christians have a second look at Mohammed, like Mohammed had a first look at Jesus? (Read: Isaiah).

Next: the Christian gospel (read: mission statement) is unthinkable without the faith story of the Resurrection. Without it their life is without meaning says Prof. Saul of Tarsus, (nicknamed Apostle Paul). Whatever happened on that miraculous Easter Day, when an empty grave and a man, who was not immediately recognised by his close friends but at second glance appeared to be no other than Jesus, whatever happened there, it is certain to say that Death is no option. The Christian faith is about life. Maybe one should say: fear of death is not an option. And if death is no option then the infliction of death upon others serves no other purpose than covering up reality. The only reason for war, and the only excuse for the death penalty, is that we, the executioners, have failed. Life is indestructible say the biologists and the Christian message confirms it. That message is about victory over (fear and cool acceptance of) Death. It puts all we know and all we can at the disposal of life. Relevant insights!

#### The spirit of it all

A large part of the Christian message, also in the new society, is about the spirit of it all, in theological terms: pneumatological thinking. In the Old Testament the Spirit of God precedes creation (Gen. 1,1), it is the image of God himself at work. That image continues to be present in all the books of the OT. The lonely prophets are spiritual men, called and touched by the Spirit of God and rejected by their peers. The Spirit of God does not receive much popular support, but it is always at work and present.

In the books of the New Testament the same happens: the Spirit precedes and follows the events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his students. (In Afghanistan they translate: Jesus and

his taliban) The Spirit makes people critical analysts of reality. She makes people see that we need the cocktail of faith/hope/love if we do not want to live or work in vain, that we must learn that justice is to be done, especially in the absence of God and she helps people realise that evil has no chance of final victory (John 16: 8,9,10).

Of course I am well aware that such theology is not the only way of reading the NT, but it is faithful enough to the tradition to arm us for the struggle against all those 'powers and principalities' IT represents. All I wanted to point out in this article is that churches, if they are humble enough to know what burdens of past and present they bear, can be more than relevant to the debate and the practice of the new society. As long as they don't sit back and wait for grace to come. Grace comes to the workers!