

Theological and ethical issues in virtual communication

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The European Region of WACC held a seminar on 'Virtual ethics in Europe — Challenges for Christian communicators', which took place 1 March 2002, in Geneva, Switzerland. Participants heard speakers discuss some of the ethical questions raised by the impact of new communication technologies on society, especially the Internet and digital technologies. The following article is based on one such presentation.

In the movie *The Wings of Desire* (originally *Der Himmel über Berlin*) by Wim Wenders, there is a scene that pretty well represents what I understand by 'virtual communication'. At one moment, the two male characters of the movie, who happen to be two angels, are walking inside the big rooms of the public Library of Berlin. Here they are, where the knowledge of the world is located, the location of memory buried in books, and as they walk, because probably they are angels, they begin to hear the choir of internal voices of people sitting at the tables and silently reading their books. At the beginning all these voices seem a bit discordant, but after a while they mix into a beautiful melody. The fragmented knowledge is gathered into the total knowledge of the two angels... they create a kind of virtual communication: as they walk between the alleys of the library, somebody attentive enough to their presence could listen to this melody and join the choir and therefore this global communication...

This scene conveys a very positive image of what is called 'virtual communication'. There are other images, less poetic and transcendental. The image of the exclusion from virtual communication. The image of Finland which has more Internet connections than Latin America and Caribbean put together. The image of Switzerland where one third of families has access to the Internet, against one inhabitant in 400 in Africa. The image again of Switzerland, where 7 people in 10 have a mobile phone against 80% of the world's population that have no access to phone lines at all.

My first image is an idyllic one. My second is a realistic one. Both are dealing with elements, which are not my specific field of knowledge: I am not a specialist in so-called virtual communication, although I use it. Neither am I a specialist in political and social factors, which cause the reality of the world of today, dealing with injustice and exclusion. But as a theologian, I would like to work on the theological implications of these factors, as on the theological dimensions of the development of all new technologies of communication. My aim is, therefore, to unveil the theological issues of the new way of communicating today.

As our entire language is quite challenged by this new communication, I will proceed as if I were opening a dictionary, or a lexicon: opening words as turning keys in the doors of interpretation and dealing with their meaning.

Labyrinth

Since the beginning of human history, there have been labyrinths, related to legends of origins. Since the beginning of human history, people have tried to explain their common reality, their fears and the challenges they faced in their everyday life by telling stories about good and evil, about punishment and protection, mostly understood as coming from a divine origin, stories about travel as an initiation, darkness as a threat, a promised land as an answer to anguish. But surprisingly, all these stories are linked by a unique theme, the one of the labyrinth, understood as a road of wisdom, the road of the common message of all these stories, the secret of life!

Before the Internet, there were many former labyrinths in human history: Were they simple games or significant rituals? Some aesthetic work of art or mystical signal? A prison or a door to heaven? An eternal way of wandering or a true way to paradise? An initiation's starting point or a glimpse of human ignorance? Was it something that led to sin or salvation? Was it a primitive form of scripture or a sophisticated way of symbolic expression? The labyrinth is probably a little of each. But more than that, it is a mirror where every civilisation looks upon its own fantasies. And virtual communication doesn't escape this definition: a mirror of all the dreams and imaginative fantasies of our civilisation.

So far, the universal presence of virtual communication has been understood as a labyrinth and, therefore, as a tool to enter the way of wisdom. Probably an important one, like a mental code, a passage ritual that will help me understand in a better way my environment, my life and my world. But the temptation here relies on the fact that it seems to be an easy task to undertake. Virtual communication, understood as a modern tool to enter the way of wisdom, is not easy, simply because human life is not easy either. If you look at your own life, how many times did you have the impression of reaching a dead end – in your personal life as in your public or professional one, how many times did you have the impression of going back into your past even if you wanted to pursue your future, how many times did you have the impression that you were further and further away from a centre you wanted so much to reach?

Today people who surf the net look like modern pilgrims on the way to Santiago de Compostella, virtual nomads, travellers of the world of images, working at home, surfing without any guide through networks of information and power. This is the positive side of the coin. But its negative side reveals the creation of an elite, masters of all the networks, telling others which ones are the necessary ones, which values are the ultimate ones, which images of our modernity are the acceptable ones.

As a theologian, I ask that we analyse the labyrinth understood as a tool of possible power and possible wisdom: Who is going to give us the rules needed for travelling through it? Who is going to draw the maps for the journey? Again, a look to the past can help us understand our future: Why were the ancients drawing and organising labyrinths if not to ask us urgently not to forget some essential issues of human life? Continuously to discover who we are, to understand time as a space in which to organise our life, to take some strength from all the mistakes we make, to organise our life as a game, with improvisations, with joy too. As nomads in the desert need a god to turn their faces to, a god for healing and consolation, a supreme guide, the modern nomads in the deserts of today and tomorrow will need gods or a god to help them, to guide them, a god to turn their eyes to. This is probably why our future will be more and more surrounded by the immense spiritual and even mystical needs of people.

With the development of the new technologies of communication, every human being will be like the thread of a huge fabric, the word of a text, the cell of a living body, a point in the labyrinth that incorporates and transcends all other points. Another way of describing this human being, following a more theological pattern, would be to say that every human being will discover him or herself as a fragment of God, a god travelling with him/her. The fears generated by such a world can also produce extreme totalitarianism, narrow-minded sectarianism, and awful violence. The past century has shown the way... The problem is that even with the more positive option, the labyrinth understood as a way of wisdom, the story never ends because behind one labyrinth there is another one. What is important is the journey, and of course the encounters we make on this road. The end of the story belongs to each of us.

Temptation

When Jesus was caught by the Spirit in the desert to be tempted, the original text of the Scripture actually says that he underwent an experience: to be tempted actually means to undergo an experience, to go through an ordeal in an existential sense. Virtual communication also has its temptations, and as virtual users we are, so to speak, forced to go through the ordeals of temptation.

One of these temptations is to imagine that we are obliged to communicate or that we cannot escape the progress of virtual communication. On the one hand it is indeed true: whether we want it or not, virtual communication belongs to our environment. On the other hand, the very fact that people gather to speak about it, is a sign that as soon as the process of interpretation begins, we escape from total domination: the domination of the spirit as well as the domination of the economy, on a local or a global scale (because one of the many temptations of the virtual network is the commercial one, the merchandising one, the quest for more and more benefits). The other would be the domination of the spirit, as is well shown in the movie *Matrix*, which depicts a world close to the one of George Orwell, where people are surrounded by an electronic matrix which evacuates from their brain even the human task of thinking and interpreting reality. It is not surprising that the movie, having set the scene of a post-modern nightmare of an anonymous and sordid world, introduces the figure of the Messiah, a modern representation of the antique hero of all the salvation's stories of the world.

After some qualifying steps, and non-recognition of the official priests as well as recognition of some faithful disciples, the hero will face the forces of evil and after a passage through death and darkness, he will rise again, discovering in himself the energy to transcend gravity, reality, which has been manipulated by the matrix. If one were to try a psychoanalytical reading of the movie, one could argue that, at the end, the hero needed to escape from the feminine womb of the matrix, as well as needing to kill the masculine opponent to do so. At the end of the film, resurrected and having abandoned the pre-modern pattern of unique love, family and friendship, he takes flight – a kind of ascension – and leaves the earth, liberated and free from any spiritual and economical domination.

In one sense, regarding virtual communication, we are all heroes of our own salvation story. We are all able to take the qualifying steps, avoiding recognition and non-recognition because the important task here is not to be recognised by the other, but to confront the possible forces of the evil of domination. We have the energy and power to encounter them, to confront them and to gain the only possible price, which is our freedom.

The temptation of absolutisation

Another temptation consists in absolutising virtual communication simply because it offers the illusion of universal and total communication. Here again we encounter the figure of the angel. In western culture angels made their come-back approximately at the same time as virtual communication was developed, around the last decade of the 20th century. Supernatural bodies, artificial and still quite real, with a kind of luminescent beauty, pure energy, like the superb bodies proposed by the video-games of cyberculture, the angel represents a body capable of bringing technological development under control and delivering it from its physical hindrances in order to plunge into virtual worlds.

The angel also represents pure communication, the one all the businessmen of the planet dream of, as they are running after time, travelling in the fastest airplanes, simultaneopously using their mobile phones: they overcome what was always a real human difficulty, almost an impossibility: the gift of ubiquity. The remaining question is the one of the message. Because it is not sufficient to transcend the barriers of space and time: what is happening to the message? Is not the danger here the temptation to forget the message and to retain only the communication, perfectly functioning, as angels, inventing simultaneity but forgetting to transmit their message? Everything is transparent, rapid and objective. But even the God of the Bible, the God of the origins was not as powerful, as you probably remember the scene of Genesis 3 when God is searching for the human couple and asking 'Where are you?' At least original communication was not as paradisiacal as we imagine, not transparent, rapid or even objective! If even the Bible presents a limited divinity, why should we accept an unlimited conception of communication?

On the other hand, in the history of mentalities and cultures, the angels have sometimes represented the figures that helped people to understand the changes affecting their lives. For

example, during the two centuries before Christ, Israel was going through a rough time, influenced by Greek culture and others like the Iranian religion and Babylonian culture. This is the time when Israel will 'adopt' the figure of the angel in the process of reconstructing its history. In times of cultural passage, of religious intermixing, people and civilisations need translators to pass from one to another. In our time of passage, we probably also need translators, modern angelic figures. What we can expect are figures less connoted by the temptation of simultaneous communication than by the possibility of passing from one culture to another.

The temptation of possession

The last temptation of virtual communication would be the one of possession: possession of history and memory. Again the figure of the angel can help us to overcome this temptation. As a model for the black boxes of our culture, the angels tape all communications (like the black boxes in a plane, the first object to be searched for after a crash). A Jewish Midrash says that when a child is not yet born, still in the womb of his mother, he possesses all knowledge, the entire reality of the universe, including even divine knowledge. But when the time comes to be born, at the very moment when he comes 'outside', an angel, his guardian angel, will pass a finger over his lips and forehead and at the moment the angel erases all the knowledge the child possessed and he immediately forgets everything. It will be the task of his entire life to recapture the total knowledge that was his in a life before life. To see what we today call virtual communication as that total knowledge would be succumb to temptation. To see it as a tool to recapture that knowledge is much more attractive and challenging.

The problem with these temptations remains the status of human subjectivity. If virtual communication erases human subjectivity, if we are no longer recognised as human beings with some density, bodies of suffering, desire, thoughts, then we are effectively in danger of losing ourselves, which means our stories, our culture, our memories. Hopefully, research on the so-called theory of 'strong Artificial Intelligence' (the brain considered as limited to a complex game of neuronal connections and not containing any principle called soul or spirit or conscience) is quite challenging nowadays. Not to mention that these theories faced a solid wall of religious hate...

Choices

What strikes me when I consider the theological issues of virtual communication are the constant choices that are ours in terms of using the tools for our own awakening to life. Solitary pleasure most of the time, as a time of retreat, in front of a virtual community, where I can choose to join or to look from outside, especially in the chat-rooms. Solitary initiation, without any spiritual master, although we can constantly learn from the practice.

First choice, the choice of entering into this kind of communication. I already mentioned this, saying that it has to be used, the remaining question being the one of the status of such communication.

Second choice, the choice of travelling in a new world, through illusions which have to be unveiled, fears that have to be overcome, mistakes that have to be corrected, with others to help travelling as well. This time is also the moment of rediscovery of ancient qualities which have nothing to do with speed, reason or logic, but qualities such as perseverance, slowness, mischief, curiosity, trickery, improvisation and self control.

Third choice, the choice of accepting to lose oneself: it is by losing himself that Ulysses realises the strength of the love of his wife, that Columbus discovers a new continent, that Newton understands gravity. It is by losing itself that Israel receives the Law. In our society, to lose oneself is to lose time and money. The opportunity of virtual communication is to force people to lose themselves... in order to find themselves later.

The fourth choice is the one between the erosion of our old culture and the opening of new horizons. It is not easy to go through every passage: simply because the word 'passage' unquestionably conjures up a journey, taking to the road, moving on. It is also that fleeting moment of which one only realises afterwards that it has happened, when it has passed and already belongs to the past.

And it is finally that great passage par excellence, that discreet euphemism for death, which is popular in both French and English: *passer* in the sense of *mourir*, to die, to pass away. Culturally, we are probably going through one of these major passages. A passage that could be described as passing from an identity culture to a universal culture. Something close to globalisation but somehow different.

Until recently it seems that our world was constituted by a profusion of different cultures. Cultures which have invented thousand of worlds, some of them already disappeared, others appearing as the virtual ones of today. These cultures could be characterised as linked to an identity, linked to an identification of people, to the roles that were expected of them since the origins of their world. These identity cultures have been important in the past, but by maintaining people in a tradition which no longer has meaning, one can question simple imitation for the pursuit of culture. Cultures based only on identity create divisions, if not wars, fears and hatreds.

The Bible, as probably in other religious works, presents another type of culture, a dynamic based on a promise, a future which is already present, where human beings are understood as better than what they are in fact. The Jesus of the four gospels, in his encounters with people, says

'Stand on your feet', 'Be who your are', etc... all phrases which sound like new age clichés, but still contain existential strength.

Ethic of transmission

First of all, I do not think there can exist a so-called 'ethic of virtual communication'. The world of today stands globally under the sign of disorientation. We have to take it for granted. We have also to seek some ethical principles, knowing in advance that they will not be permanent. They will only be provisional principles. Principles as bridges between responsibility and hope: responsibility to assume the choices we have made, hope that gives the courage of being and acting.

In terms of responsibility, as Christian communicators, we have the responsibility to transmit something of the Gospel for today. Or, at least, to translate it in a less proselytising way, to transmit something of the Christian story in order to help people of today build their own stories. Speaking about transmission, we touch here on the limits of virtual communication.

Some years ago, when the Internet was developing very rapidly, even in the Church, one of my colleague argued that the Internet would be the next and best medium for dealing with laity training and theological adult education. I was never convinced. When I see the little dialogue and few questions I receive by virtual communication, I feel that I was right. For me the reason is very simple: when something of the Gospel has to be given, it is not a question of communication, not even a question of transmission. It is a question of initiation. I know that the term is not very much loved, especially in Protestant circles. Too old, too catholic, too esoteric... but I do think that it is probably the way of religious communication to come.

For practical activities, there is apprenticeship (learning how to use tools in order to create objects). For intellectual sciences, there is teaching (learning how to use parts of knowledge). For spiritual communication, there is initiation - which means a dual relation between master and disciple. Not even a relationship based on inequality: most of the time, the master doesn't know much more than the disciple. He/she just knows the way the disciple has to go. Spiritual initiation does not mean a huge amount of knowledge, but rather going through ordeals, knowing how and when to lose oneself, being curious about one's own mistakes. This journey of fear and pleasure, of impatience and patience, of losing and gaining, this initiation can only be based on human and not virtual communication.

I would even describe the initiation process as lost communication that we have to get back, with which we have to reconnect. Current communication seems to me based on the concept of teasing, forcing our individual freedom in order to get our attention. Initiation does not seek

attention, apart from the expectations expressed by the disciple. The initiatory master doesn't have all the knowledge, neither does he impose a particular pedagogical method. In the initiation process, there are no good or bad answers. Maybe there is even no knowledge to transmit. Knowing belongs to another level, more existential than intellectual. Based on the existential side of human being, on the being rather than on the doing or the saying, privileged link between initiator and initiated, initiation looks like a birth giving, a way of transcending one's own existence.

In the strong passage Christianity is going through, initiation communication is probably a way to overcome a theology of announcement, which looks rather empty after 20 centuries of use. Is not the ultimate question one of interpretation? How Christians are able to interpret the world of today, starting from the Scriptures and tradition?

How creatively, with what kind of new visions and new understandings will it be possible? I do not have the answers of course. I just recall the word of Jesus to the Pharisees asking for a sign coming from the sky (Mt 16, 1-4): 'When the sun is setting you say, we are going to have fine weather, because the sky is red. And early in the morning you say, it is going to rain, because the sky is red and dark. You can predict the weather by looking at the sky; but you cannot interpret the signs concerning these times! How evil and godless are the people of this day! You ask me for a sign? The only sign you will be given is the sign of Jonah.'

To interpret our times, our 'kairos', our important moments, including new ways of communicating and new ways of thinking about theology, do we need miracles coming from the sky or do we have enough signs in our tradition and memory? The Pharisees ask for something to see, and Jesus offers them something to hear (a name, Jonah). There are signs to see and signs to hear. The question that remains is how to interpret these signs of our times.

Apparently, virtual communication gives us tools for our interpretative and initiation tasks. Let us not forget that the important point remains the task: to interpret.

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