The Christian Potential of Cyberspace: An Appraisal

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To dlg, daf, and ksl:

Three people who are special to me in different ways,
but who have all supported me during this endeavor.

Contents

Today the Internet is increasingly permeating industrial societies. Affluent people in these cultures are e-mailing their friends and family, browsing the Web, and participating in online discussions through newsgroups and "chat rooms." Churches are sprouting Web sites; online "communities," such as beliefnet.com, offer prayer groups and religion news and information; and some amateur theologians are using the Internet to publish their own theologies.

But some believe that the Internet's contributions to religion may be far greater. For example, some people see the Internet leading to a greater and greater connectivity among all people, culminating in what Catholic theologian Teilhard de Chardin called the "Omega Point," a type of global consciousness. Others believe that it will be possible for individuals one day to transfer (upload) their consciousnesses into a computer and communicate electronically with other such people through a network. Some have suggested that the Internet might be a metaphor for God.

People might easily dismiss these predictions, such as mind-uploads, since the technology is not here yet or because they sound ridiculous. But the fact that some have conceptualized a computerized eschatology (such as the Omega Point) or a network god invites examination. Do these claims have any theological value, that is, do they contribute anything new to the discussion about God, or are they simply new manifestations of the dreams of immortality and omniscience that Western civilization has long sought to realize?

This thesis assesses whether the Internet can contribute anything "new" to Christian theology, that is, whether the hopes of seeing in the Internet a metaphor for God or using it as a mechanism for searching for God are possible. Or does the Internet instead make possible for worldwide religious communities and an image for contemplating process theology? In other words, can religion speak theologically about the Internet?

Chapter One. What God Is: The Internet and Metaphorical Theology

Humans need to talk metaphorically about God because they have always tried to find words that express their understanding of the reality of God, as mysterious as it is. As Brian Wren observes in his hymn "Bring Many Names," "Great, living God, never fully known, joyful darkness far beyond our seeing..."[1] Using "parable and story," and metaphor, helps Christians to articulate this mystery. In trying to find concepts to express what they think God is, Christians have used metaphors like father, king, and rock. These metaphors are contextual; metaphors like king worked well during a time when kings were well known to people as their rulers. But now most people no longer live under kings, so now some Christians both retain metaphors that are familiar (such as father) and also try to find new ones. As theologian Sallie McFague writes, Christians have always tried to find metaphors that are familiar in their experience so that they feel "a sense of the immanence of the divine in [their] lives."[2]

Sallie McFague defines an "alive" (effective) metaphor as "an assertion or judgment of similarity and difference between two thoughts in permanent tension with one another, which describes reality in an open-ended way but has structural as well as affective power."[3] Metaphor, in other words, describes both what an object is and what it is not. For example, when Christians say God is "father," most do not literally think of God as a parent, that is, a biological progenitor, but rather they attribute certain characteristics of the father-children relationship to God. God then becomes something that loves, punishes, nurtures, helps, and does other actions that fathers do, while remaining radically different from a human father.

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[1] Brian Wren, "Bring Many Names" (Hope Publishing Company, 1989). Wren introduces each stanza of this hymn with a different metaphor for God, including "Strong mother God," "Warm father God," "Old, aching God," and "Young, growing God."

[2] Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 2.

But, as McFague points out, metaphors die when they become too familiar. Tension between the two thoughts (God and father, for example) may diminish or disappear. Thus, when God *is* a father, Christians have slipped into "literalistic thinking."[4] When Christians literalize words like father, the words become idols and Christian worshipers commit idolatry. Indeed, religious "metaphors, because of their preservation in a tradition and repetition in ritual, are especially prone to becoming idols."[5] The consequence of idolatry is a loss of a sense of God's transcendence; if God becomes nothing more than a father, then human understanding of what God *is,* is confined to that image or relationship.

When Christians confine God to a certain image, Christians then confine themselves in what they can say about God. But the power of metaphor emerges when two different thoughts or objects are compared. McFague writes, good "metaphors shock, they bring unlikes together, they upset conventions, they involve tension, and they are implicitly revolutionary."[6] Paul Ricoeur, a theologian and scholar of biblical hermeneutics, states this more strongly, arguing that, "The strategy of discourse by which the metaphorical statement obtains its meaning is absurdity,"[7] and that, "Literal falsity is... an ingredient of metaphorical truth."[8] Thus, metaphors may seem strange and be easy to dismiss, but the greater the difference between the two things being compared, the more clearly the two maintain their different identities and the more meaning is disclosed by their juxtaposition.

Christians have adopted numerous metaphors for God, many of which appear in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. They include human metaphors, such as king, judge, and

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[3] Ibid., 38, 42. This definition implies an "is/is-not" quality of metaphorical language that McFague frequently uses in her explication of metaphorical theology and which she attributes to Paul Ricoeur. See Paul Ricoeur, Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics, ed. by John Dominic Crossan (Semeia, 1975), 75-89.
[4] McFague, 42.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 17.
[7] Ricoeur, 77.

father that suggest God's superiority over humanity. These metaphors and the relationships they convey show that the "dominant model on the Judeo-Christian tradition is that of a personal God relating to responsible and responsive beings."[9] But the Scriptures also contain transcendent, impersonal, and natural metaphors for God, which, "while less central, express feelings of awe, fear, exultation, and misery in ways which the more anthropocentric images do not."[10]

Science and technology have been a source for religious metaphors, as well.[11] The Internet, becoming more and more familiar to Westerners, is therefore worthy of an exploration of its suitability as a metaphor for God. As Debbie Gaunt puts it, "The opening up of cyberspace with its paradigm shift towards a new use of language offers theology... [a] challenge...to find a form of God talk that works in the computer age."[12] Charles Henderson, in the journal Cross Currents, asks the question of interest here: "Just how good is the Internet as a metaphor for God?"[13] At first glance, it does appear to hold some promise. When one puts the Internet and the Christian god together, there is an immediate tension, because there seems at first glance to be a significant contrast between the two, significant enough to forestall idolatry.

A collection of metaphors, however, is not theology; they must also lend themselves to "a comprehensive, ordering structure with impressive interpretative potential."[14] For example, saying that "father" is a metaphor for God is not theology; instead, a systematic theology develops because the metaphor lends itself to a system of thought that somehow expresses both the God-human relationship and the transcendence of the divine.

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[8] Ibid., 86-87.
[9] McFague, 106.
[10] Ibid., 106.
[11] See Chapter Two for examples.
[12] Debbie Gaunt, "Hypertext – hypergod?," 1997, <http://www.ecic.org/icic1/gaunt.html> (18 December 2001).
[13] Charles Henderson, "The Internet as a Metaphor for God?" Cross Currents, Spring-Summer 2000, <http://www.crosscurrents.org/henderson.htm> (25 October 2001).
[14] McFague, 23.

Before engaging with the question of whether the Internet might be a metaphor for God, God and the Internet must both be defined. The questions that will guide this process include: what is the Internet like, and what can one do on the Internet? What does the Internet say about reality, and what are its social implications? What definition will be used to describe God?

The Internet

At its most basic, the Internet, a worldwide communications network, has at least three dimensions: functional, structural, and personal. The Internet is composed of people (personal) communicating (functional) through a network of computer systems (structural).

Functional Dimension

Through the Internet, one person communicates with others using a variety of (usually) textual mediums, including e-mail, the World Wide Web, newsgroups, and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and instant messengers (IM). The Internet, unlike television for example, is "an interactive and not simply broadcast medium."[15] E-mail is a passive form of interaction, meaning that communication through this medium does not occur in real-time.[16] It is a time-delayed dialog of sorts between two people who know each other, similar to postal correspondence, but with a much faster delivery time. Newsgroups, while similar to e-mail, are different in that they expand the dialog by allowing a number of people to discuss issues of common interest; thus they allow a textual forms of community to develop. For example, the alt.religion.christian.lutheran newsgroup allows all interested people to discuss Lutheranism in an e-mail-like fashion. Contributors to newsgroups frequently do not know the personal identity of other contributors, but only their e-mail address (if valid) and an alias, which can be anything the individual desires.

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[15] Lorne L. Dawson, "Cyberspace and Religious Life: Conceptualizing the Concerns and Consequences," <http://www.cesnur.org/2001/london2001/dawson.htm> (18 December 2001).

IM and IRC, in contrast to newsgroups and e-mail, occur in real-time. IM and IRC also allow for a *number* of people to actively communicate at once. Typically, people use IM chat with people they already know, including friends and family, while in contrast, people communicating through IRC join chat rooms about topics in which they are interested, often conversing with people they do not know. Like newsgroups, people in IRC chats frequently know one another only through each person's chosen alias.

The Web is a network of millions of documents called pages that are connected ("webbed") together through hyperlinks. For example, a certain Web page might describe the blue whale. This page may contain hyperlinks, or pointers, to other documents about whales, such as the humpback. By clicking on a hyperlink about humpback whales, the Web "browser" (software used to access and view Web pages) retrieves the page on humpbacks. The Web is called a Web because it is made up of many of these pages (collections of which are called sites) linked together, allowing a user to travel from one site to the another by clicking on hyperlinks. The Web, unlike the other forms; is typically a one-way communication: there is little interaction between the Web publisher and the person who accesses a web page and so like e-mail, communication over the Web is relatively passive. The capabilities of the Web, however, are expanding, allowing for IRC-like chats and online discussions (similar to newsgroups) through the Web context. Beliefnet.com, for example, contains discussion groups where people can discuss religions and current topics like religion and cloning; this Web site also allows users to create prayer circles where "place where people can express their prayers, thoughts, or advice to someone in need."[17]

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[16] Merriam-Webster's defines real-time as "the actual time during which something takes place."
[17] Beliefnet.com <http://www.beliefnet.com/index/index_60.html>.

Structural Dimension

Structurally, all of this communication occurs through computers connected to one another through a giant network of small networks. For example, users connect to their Internet service providers (ISPs) on their own computer through software that communicates with the ISP's central computer, or server. An individual user's Internet applications "talk" through this server, which relays data to the appropriate server on the Internet. For example, when one sends e-mail, the e-mail software sends the e-mail to the ISP. The ISP's equipment, in turn, sends the message through its servers to the appropriate receiving server elsewhere on the Internet. Often data, as in this e-mail example, must be sent through many servers before it reaches its proper destination. Intended recipients finally receive the e-mail when they connect to their ISP and use e-mail software to receive (download) the waiting e-mail from the server.

This description suggests the decentralized and relational structure of the Internet. The Internet is a network connected by nodes (servers). These nodes communicate with one another through other nodes. In fact, the United States military created the forerunner to the Internet based on the power of this decentralized yet relational model:

> Begun as a strategic defense initiative by the U.S. Department of Defense, the first computer network, ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), was established in 1969 to constitute an assault-proof communications network for key strategic defense installations.[18]

The idea was that if a weapon devastated some geographic area, taking its communications infrastructure with it, communication could still occur because information could be routed through other computers on the network and still reach its destination.

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[18] Brenda E. Brasher, Give Me that Online Religion (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 28-30.

Personal Dimension

The Internet allows for a new dynamic in human relationships. While the Internet offers another possibility of creating human community, the very nature of personal identity and relationships online has the potential to be vastly different from those offline. Consider newsgroups and IRC. While people may join newsgroups or chat rooms on topics of common interest, almost everyone remains anonymous, known only by an alias or screen name. In communities outside the Internet context, it is rarely acceptable, let alone preferable, to remain anonymous, but the Internet "is the first mode of mass communications that encourages anonymity by both technical and social convention."[19] The Internet offers anonymity beyond that of other communication media, such as the telephone or the television, by eliminating visual and verbal cues that are found in those contexts.[20] This combination of anonymity and elimination of cues isolates the perception of identity in the text one sees; this is a primary characteristic of the Internet's textual communities. Anonymity and elimination of cues also eliminates responsibility or accountability in these communities. Even in offline communities like the American Association of Retired Persons, which seem fairly anonymous because they exist through contributions and postal mailings on the happenings of the national office, members are responsible or accountable to the group (through a yearly contribution, for example) because their names and addresses are on the organization's lists. Also, many communities of this type use printed communication, including "opinion" pieces and photography, to promote a sense of embodied community.

Internet users seem to welcome the Internet's anonymity. Lorne Dawson explains, "It is clear, from Internet ethnographies [such as those described by Sherry Turkle]... that this

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[19] Dawson.
[20] Gaunt.

anonymity is part of the appeal of these spaces for social interaction. It permits and often seems even to induce participants to engage in more risky behavior than they would entertain in so-called 'real life.'"[21] Dawson goes on to explain that under the cloak of anonymity, people will share their feelings more freely and even adopt new "identities," exploring "hidden or simply unexplored facets of their own social lives, personalities and minds." Citing numerous sources, he states, "[g]ender-bending is one of the most interesting and commonly discussed instances of such behavior."[22]

The Internet's anonymity thus allows users to express numerous identities and seems to offer numerous benefits. Turkle argues that "the virtual self is fragmented, fluid, and always under construction."[23] She suggests that this fluidity of personal identity "may serve a therapeutic function. It may offer individuals a 'moratorium' in some of the most distressing features of their real life..."[24] Multiplicity "of online identity," Turkle suggests, may also "actually enhance our ability to creatively explore and develop our personalities and relationships at a time of profound social dislocations..."[25]

How does the Internet allow users to construct these identities beyond the simple textual IRC chat room? It does this through what is often called virtual reality (VR), which "can be described as an immersive simulation ... The [ultimate] concept is absolute simulation: a medium so powerful that it... [builds] worlds that can stand on their own two feet."[26] Among the earliest and crudest examples of VR are Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), a name they got from their use in simulating the "Dungeons and Dragons" role-playing game. MUDs are similar

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[21] Dawson.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Erik Davis. Techgnosis. (New York: Harmony, 1998), 298.
[24] Dawson.
[25] Davis, 298-299.
[26] Ibid., 247.

to IRC, but are more than chat rooms that focus on single topics. MUDs are textual descriptions of "worlds" that one accesses over the Internet. In these worlds, users can explore and meet other connected users. Typically a user connects to a MUD server (a computer that hosts the software running the simulated world) and is greeted with a textual description of where the person "begins." After reading "the description of your immediate surroundings... you would type the direction you wanted to go, and the screen text would change, providing you a description of your new location."[27] As one moves into different "locations," the user runs across other people using the system in real-time, and can read the other's textual description, talk, and do other actions. The identities these users assume are called avatars, "digital doubles that embody the user's point of view and that also represent him or her to the other denizens of the digital" environment.[28]

An elementary example of VR with which most computer users are familiar is the video game, where a computer or gaming system projects a two-dimensional portrayal of some reality through which a human player must navigate to accomplish some goal. This medium is finding its way onto the Internet, where software designers are developing elaborate online "worlds."[29] These online games may be thought of as community video games. The software presents a graphical representation of the world to the player, and in this world, the player assumes an avatar. As in MUDs, the player's alter ego then interacts with others in the "reality," whether they are computer-generated and controlled (through the MUD's programming) or controlled by other users on the Internet. Virtual reality, in addition to allowing users to craft their own identities and explore simulated "spaces" (either textual MUDs or graphics video games), can reverse notions of power and suspend common cultural ethical notions. Popular games, such as

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[27] Ibid., 219.
[28] Ibid., 219.

a SimEarth and Populous, endow their players with god-like powers, "allow[ing] users to 'grow' toy worlds by altering, for example, levels of carbon dioxide or the rate of urban development."[30]

The Internet permits its users to *create* and *explore* (or make up and invent) new identities and worlds. According to some futurists and computer scientists, the Internet and its related technologies may one day permit individuals to *preserve* their identities, in whatever form they choose, as they might save a document to a computer disk. Referred to simplistically but accurately as "mind-downloading," neuroscience may one day advance to the point that scientists will be able to simulate the structure of the brain in computer software and hardware. Individuals could choose to have their minds "scanned," and the neurons and neuropath ways copied to computer. Ray Kurzweil's The Age of Spiritual Machines suggests that as soon as scientists can increase the memory and processing speed of computers enough to simulate the human brain, they will be able to create intelligent, conscious, spiritual machines.[31]

Definition of God

Equipped with this description of the Internet, we can begin to analyze its effectiveness as a metaphor for God. Choosing a definition against which to compare God with the Internet is daunting, since the whole project of theology is an attempt to articulate the mystery of God and the God-human relationship, eliciting many definitions over time. The wants and needs of believers, culturally conditioned, tend to delimit the language used to describe the mystery of God.[32] Christian metaphors like king and father indicate, for example, that Christians have envisioned a god as a powerful being who transcends human finitude. These metaphors evoke a god that can control society, protect its believers, comfort the distraught, provide an afterlife, and

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[29] Ibid., 204.
[30] Ibid., 248.
[31] Ray Kurzweil, The Age of Spiritual Machines (New York: Penguin, 1999).

so on. While a king no longer rules most people, the broadest needs of humanity have hardly changed: they still want to be cared for, loved, and protected. But after events like the Holocaust and an awakening to the common humanity of all people, regardless of religion, sex, race, and so on, more Christians than ever are consciously wanting a theology that explains massive suffering and evil and a god that wants peace and justice *for all.*

In this context, whatever the Internet as a metaphor may suggest about God should emphasize the power of God and believers to bring about a just society, which "has well-being when its structure insures not only that the basic needs of its participants are met, but that each participant can develop his or her human potential to the benefit of self and society."[33] To be an adequate reflection of Christian tradition, the metaphor should also suggest both the transcendence and the immanence of God and de-emphasize any split between soul and matter.

To test the adequacy of the Internet as a metaphor, this thesis will attempt to align the Internet with the definition of God used in process theology.[34] In brief, God in the process model is not omniscient in the classical sense; instead, God knows the past (what has already occurred) and current states of the world (what is happening now) by "feeling" each moment of reality. Therefore, God knows what is possible for the world and all of the relationships in it, but not necessarily what will happen.[35] After feeling each moment, God offers each "entity," from electrons to rocks to humans, possibilities for the next moment of becoming. These choices are tailored to the entity's context; for example, God does not offer a rock the possibilities that God offers humans. God gives humans choices that try to draw them into an increasingly relational

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[32] See Ludwig Feuerbach, "The Essence of Religion Considered Generally," The Essence of Christianity, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 12-32.
[33] Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, God-Christ-Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 74.
[34] Process theology will be used, because unlike some other modern theologies known to the author, it has a well-developed metaphysics that will be helpful in the discussion of what the Internet is.

existence, to a greater "good" of maximum relationality and possibility. Because entities, like humans, are offered choices constrained by certain relationships and contexts and have, to a certain extent, a "say" in choosing from God's possibilities, God is not omnipotent in the classical definition of the term.

With this definition in mind, we will now test the Internet's adequacy as a metaphor for God.

Implications of the Personal, Structural, and Functional Dimensions of the Internet for Christianity

Personal Dimension

One facet of the Internet, already described, is the ability it provides users to create new personalities and worlds, with the possibility of making textual identities more important than bodily ones by removing visual and verbal cues. In an IRC chat room, a newsgroup, a Web page, a MUD, or video game, the ideas one expresses are more important than the physical body expressing them since the physical body is rarely seen or heard by others during Internet communication. In other words, even though someone online is embodied (as there is someone sitting at a computer typing), this person becomes disembodied to others through text.

Disembodiment afforded by Internet challenges Christian theology, especially the key Christian claim that God became incarnate, or took human form, in the first-century person Jesus of Nazareth.[36] As Brenda Brasher observes, "In all of its diverse manifestations Christianity pivots around the idea of the embodiment of the divine in human form; however, this notion is

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[35] Charles Hartshorne, The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 121.
[36] Gaunt.

problematized by the coupling now underway of human and machine."[37] The incarnation has been central to the Christian tradition from the beginning of Christian theological reflection. The Nicene Creed, formulated in 325 CE, states, "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ... For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven... he became incarnate...and was made man."[38] Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130-200), arguing against the Gnostics in the second century, who thought material reality was a "mistake," writes, "This Word was manifested when the Word of God was made man, assimilating Himself to man, and man to Himself, so that by means of his resemblance to the Son, man might become precious to the Father."[39] In the Middle Ages, Anselm of Canterbury (1033?-1109) also articulated the centrality of the incarnation: "[I]f the race of Adam be reinstated by any being not of the same race, it will not be restored to that dignity which it would have had, had not Adam sinned, and so will not be completely restored; and besides, God will seem to have failed of his purpose..."[40] The incarnation of God in Jesus both established and proved humanity's infinite value—body and soul together—to God.

Therefore, given how the Internet can perceptually change identity and reality of the other, the Internet is not an adequate metaphor for the incarnate Christian God. The Christian tradition generally holds that what Christians know about God is what was embodied in Jesus, as is implied in the opening of the Gospel of John; that is, the mind and body of Jesus was God's definitive, embodied revelation *to* humanity.[41] Both Judaism and Christianity generally believe,

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[37] Brenda E. Brasher, "Thoughts on the Status of the Cyborg: On Technological Socialization and its Link to the Religious Function of Popular Culture," Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Winter 1996. <http://www.muc.edu/~brashebe/thoughts.htm> (18 December 2001).

[38] This translation was taken from the Lutheran Book of Worship (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 64.

[39] Irenaeus, Against Heresies: Book V, Chapter XVI, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/fathers/ANF-01/iren/iren5.html#Section16> (8 April 2002).

[40] Anselm, Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man), Medieval Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/anselm-curdeus.html> (20 March 2002).

[41] "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14 NRSV)

too, that humanity was made in the image of God and, in the understanding of this author, that has not only meant human mental and spiritual faculties, but also *physical* existences.

As a consequence of the incarnation, Christianity has historically maintained that all humans' embodiment is important. Martin Luther, in his exegesis of the First Commandment, writes:

> Although much that is good comes to us from human beings, nevertheless, anything received according to his command and ordinance in fact comes from God. Our parents and all authorities – as well as everyone who is a neighbor – have received the command to do us all kinds of good. So we receive our blessings not from them, but from God through them. Creatures are only the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings. For example, he gives to the mother breasts and milk for her infant or gives grain and all sorts of fruits from the earth for sustenance – things that no creature could produce by itself.[42]

According to Luther, embodied relationships and community are important because humans receive the good of God through them.

The metaphysics of process theology, however, may minimize the problem of online disembodiment by underscoring the wholistic nature of reality, not the dualism of offline embodiment and online disembodiment.[43] In process, existence/reality is created by "creative response[s] to the past"; the past is constructed by relationships, personal and non-personal.[44] These creative responses occur as "occasions of experience" (which is "Whitehead's term for the basic metaphysical units that constitute reality").[45] Thus, existence/reality is the "rapid unfolding of sequential moments of experience" that take place through time.[46] From this definition of existence, Jennifer Cobb draws the analogy between the Internet and the metaphysical framework of process theology, and hence between the Internet and the Christian metaphysical

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[42] Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, ed. by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 389.
[43] Jennifer Cobb, Cybergrace: The Search for God in the Digital World (New York: Crown, 1998).
[44] Suchocki, 10.
[45] Cobb, 63.

reality. She writes, "Cyberspace offers a wholly new terrain for contemplating Whitehead's system. ... A space of pure process is born."[47] So as people exist online as a computer process, they exist in reality as a process of continually unfolding experience.[48]

Process theology's conception of reality seems synonymous with Turkle's observation that on the Internet, "the virtual self is fragmented, fluid, and always under construction," since everything is in process; everything, including people, is "constructed" in each moment of reality.[49] Thus, not only is reality fluid, like online identity, but also the Internet is a part of the matrix of experience that constructs reality. As Cobb writes, "experience is contained in the elements that constitute it." The Internet helps create the reality because it is a part of human experience. Because the Internet is part of the reality that humans experience, Cobb is quick to try to avoid any sort of dualism. She says that the Internet is not "a world unconstrained by... material [as both] the hardware and the software are vital to the process," but that the Internet "was born from and continues to depend on human consciousness for its very existence."[50]

Structural Dimension

We have seen that embodiment is important both in Luther's theology and incarnational theology. But the Internet *may* be a metaphor for the Christian God (especially in process theology) because the online experience is relational and the Internet is structurally relational.[51] The *online experience* is intensely relational because it is a mode of communication, whether it

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 70.
[48] Cobb does not seem to explain this point clearly. The next paragraph is an attempt at interpretation.
[49] Chapter Two describes the extent humans have in constructing their moments of reality.
[50] Cobb, 70. Cobb mistakenly argues against the process dynamic of wholistic reality when she writes, "Cyberspace...creates a world of experience capable of enormous richness and diversity that is *derived from essentially nonphysical, creative events unfolding in time*" (43, emphasis Cobb's). But process metaphysical reality accounts for both flesh and consciousness. In case of the Internet, the system runs by software running on hardware, and used by embodied individuals, who are thinking, fleshy people.
[51] The relational nature of God in process theology is well articulated by theologians like Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki and Charles Hartshorne, among others.

be checking e-mail (requiring contact with the mail server), sending mail to a friend, accessing a Web page (requiring a request sent to the appropriate server), chatting on IRC or IM, posting to a newsgroup, or playing a MUD. The Internet is *structurally relational* because all networks on the Internet are accessible from any other network on the Internet. This is like the relational God of process that relates to the world by feeling every moment of existence and offering all entities choices for each moment of becoming. In this respect, God might be thought to be multitasking, interfacing with the world at many levels and processing all the feelings, all at the same time.[52] The Internet's infrastructure mirrors a process God that is relational, one that "feels the effects of all finite entities" and is "the Supremely Related One."[53] This may be what Marshall McLuhan was thinking about the power of computer networks in networking humanity: "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."[54] Hence, the Internet becomes a metaphor for God in the terms of Christ's body.

Functional Dimension

Notwithstanding the incarnation's central role in Christianity, disembodiment is not new to religion. Jonathan Rosen argues that after the destruction of the Temple, Jews died as people of the body; this led to the Mishnah and recreation of Jews as people of the mind and the book.[55] Paul helped to form the fledging gentile Christian community through his letters (text) to the various churches around the Mediterranean; the "early Christians understood that what was most important was not to claim physical power in a physical place but to establish a network of

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[52] Thanks to Deborah L. Goodwin for this insight.
[53] Suchocki, 33.
[54] Davis, 254.
[55] Jonathan Rosen, The Talmud and the Internet: A Journey between Worlds. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 15. Jeffery P. Zaleski observes, "It occurs to me... that in a virtual way the Internet has, by making possible a convergence in cyberspace of Jews around the world, spurred the reversal of the Diaspora as surely as has the establishment of Israel." See Jeffery P. Zaleski, The Soul of Cyberspace (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 21.

believers."[56] Thus, text has been both a virtual place for relationships and a catalyst for the creation of communities.

Disembodied relationships and communities do indeed form on the Internet. But some have suggested that computer-mediated communication (CMC) is fraught with problems that make effective community (a community that communicates in such a way that allows for "highly developed, positive personal relationships") unlikely.[57] Malcolm R. Parks and Kory Floyd, for example, cite numerous studies that suggest that computer-mediated groups "have greater difficulty recognizing and moving toward shared points of view" and "engage in more verbal aggression, blunt disclosure, and nonconforming behavior" than offline communities.[58] However, they cite enough counter-evidence, including studies and popular press, to suggest that people can work through CMC problems and create meaningful relationship and communities. Indeed, Parks and Floyd write that their own survey indicated that nearly two-thirds of the people interviewed "reported that they had formed a personal relationship with someone they had 'met' for the first time via an Internet newsgroup." Thirty percent of people in their study "had what might legitimately be considered a highly developed personal relationship."[59] As evidence of religious communities and relationships on the Internet, the Pew Charitable Trust's "Internet and American Life Project" indicates that 38 percent of the 28 million people the Project defines as "Religion Surfers" "have used email to send prayer requests," 35 percent "have used email to offer" "spiritual" advice, and 21 percent "have sought [spiritual] advice in an email."[60]

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[56] Cobb, 75.
[57] Malcolm R. Parks and Kory Floyd, "Making Friends in Cyberspace," Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 1, no. 4 (1996) <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol1/issue4/parks.html> (6 May 2002).
[58] Ibid.
[59] Parks and Floyd define such a relationship that has one that has a "high" level of interdependence, a "breadth and depth of interaction," "high" levels of "interpersonal predictability and understanding," "more personalized ways of communication," a "high" level of "commitment," and "the convergence of the participants' social networks."
[60] Elena Larsen, "CyberFaith: How Americans Pursue Religion Online," Pew Internet and American Life Project. 23 December 2001. <http://www.pewinternet.org> (14 February 2002).

In Sallie McFague's interpretation of the parables as metaphors for the Kingdom of God, she suggests that there is a high degree of relationality between people in this Kingdom, regardless of social class. Through Jesus' life as a parable and the stories told in the parables themselves, Jesus expanded the social circle of acceptance by contacting, forgiving, healing, and justifying those whom mainstream society marginalized. Just as Jesus crossed social barriers, the Internet allows its users to cross them. It "has a remarkable capacity to overcome distance and isolation, bringing people into contact with like-minded persons of good will who join in virtual communities of faith to encourage and support one another."[61] The Internet removes social barriers that initially and sometimes permanently inhibit community: for "those uncomfortable with their physical appearance or abilities, or simply resentful of the restrictions placed on how people judge one another by social conventions, the Internet is... liberating."[62] As Brenda Brasher observes:

> Fueling the trend that widespread mobility began, cyberspace diminishes the relevance of location for religious identity. As it widens the social foundation of religious life, cyberspace erodes the basis from which religion contributes to the destructive dynamics of xenophobia.[63]

The anonymity of the Internet also allows people to evade oppressive cultural or religious authorities by providing them a means to communicate with others and publish freely.

The Internet, while initially presenting a challenge to Christianity's esteem for embodiment, may also actually help it. Textual communities like those formed by destruction of the Temple or by Paul's letters were catalysts for embodied communities. Similarly, Parks and Floyd's study shows "that relationships that begin online rarely stay there." Just as texts of the

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[61] "The Church and Internet," Pontifical Council for Social Communications. <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html> (1 March 2002).
[62] Dawson.
[63] Brasher, Give Me that Online Religion, 6.

Talmud or the Bible bring believers together in physical communities of worship and study, the Internet might bring like-minded people together in contexts outside of the Internet. The Pew study indicates that "religious outsiders" "are particularly interested in using the Internet to meet others of their own faith..."[64]

At the same time, the potential of the Internet to create community is hardly being realized. The Internet may not be a metaphor for God, according to McFague's conception of Christianity, because the Internet shows little evidence of an expanding social circle; it is available to the privileged few. Technological "Have Nots"—the rural poor, minorities, and the less educated in the United States (not to mention the Third World)—are excluded from the benefits (social, educational, economic, political) of the Information Age; these poor are not "blessed." They lack the technical skills to operate computers, the money to buy them, and the infrastructure to access the Internet. According to U.S. government research, "Concerning personal-computer penetration and the incidence of modems when computers are present in a household, however, no situation compares with the plight of the rural poor."[65] Minorities and the less educated, too, have lower "telephone, computer, and... modem penetration."[66]

In addition, people can use the Internet to oppress culturally. The Roman Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Social Communications recently released two documents about the Church and the Internet, making it one of the few Christian churches to issue statements about the Internet. In "Ethics in Internet," the Church writes:

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[64] Larsen.
[65] Department of Commerce, Falling Through the Net: A Survey of the "Have Nots" in Rural and Urban America, July 1995. <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/fallingthru.html> (5 March 2002).
[66] Department of Commerce.

> Cultural domination is an especially serious problem when a dominant culture carries false values inimical to the true good of individuals and groups. As matters stand, the Internet, along with the other media of social communication, is transmitting the value-laden message of Western secular culture to people and societies in many cases ill-prepared to evaluate and cope with it.[67]

The document also reminds the reader of the Internet's origins in the military. Finally, the Internet is not being used primarily for religious community. Instead of being a suitable metaphor for God, it is rather a vehicle for commercialism. As Brenda Brasher points out:

> At the start of the new millennium, the *best-known use* of cyberspace is for commerce. Whatever else it may be, cyberspace is our first global, virtual mall. Surging excitement over cyberspace as a commercial locale produced some of the late twentieth century's wealthiest individuals.[68]

Christians cannot ignore lack of access and technological domination and cultural oppression. "Ethics in Internet" reminds Christians that it "is imperative 'that the gap between the beneficiaries of the new means of information and expression and those who do not have access to them... not become another intractable source of inequity and discrimination.'"[69]

The possibilities of mind-downloading and anonymous disembodiment also hint at a selfish purpose. Is preservation through the network "liberating" in the sense that is implied by the parables? Is the removal of social barriers allowed by disembodiment and anonymity a denial of real problems that demand to be fixed? One must be careful in distinguishing between liberation for self and liberation for others.[70] The definition of God elaborated above stated that an adequate metaphor should be one that promotes or demonstrates relationality, embodiment, and social justice, but mind-downloading and the evasion of social barriers offered (or one day may be offered, in the case of mind-downloads) seem to be focused on liberation for the self.

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[67] "Ethics in Internet," Pontifical Council for Social Communications. <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html> (1 March 2002).
[68] Brasher, Give Me that Online Religion, 6. Emphasis added.
[69] "Ethics in Internet."

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In summary, an examination of the Internet's basic structure and effects on identity indicate that the Internet may be an adequate metaphor for understanding the reality of process theology, but at the same time challenges the usual value of embodiment in Christian theologies. The Internet may be a metaphor for a God that is omnipresent and relational, but the limited access to the Internet and its predominantly commercial application do not reflect a God of social justice: it is instead a God available to a privileged few.

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[70] Deborah Goodwin pointed out this distinction.

Chapter Two. What God Does: The Internet in an Evolutionary Age

Erik Davis has suggested humanity's experience with technology inevitably leads it to nominate its science and technology as a metaphor for its creator: "[W]e can't help projecting dominant technologies onto the world and ourselves. So when clockwork machines were state of the art, people imagined the world worked in the same way."[71] After the discovery of Newton's laws, for example, many educated Westerners thought they understood the universe and God's relationship with it. Given the laws God had created to run the universe, God no longer needed to make day-to-day decisions that determined the fate of the world. Like the person who built a clock, which functioned according to certain principles and mechanisms, God had created the universe, assigned some laws that governed its operation, and let run on its own. God came to be understood metaphorically as the universal Clockmaker.[72] This technological metaphor not only describes what God *is* (a static God unrelated to the world God created), but what God *does* (created the world and left it be).

Subsequent scientific and technological paradigms eventually superseded the Clockmaker metaphor. Computer science and physics have sought to provide an alternative understanding of reality that is as reductionistic and deterministic as Newton's seventeenth-century physics was. Renowned theoretical physicist Paul Davies believes that discovering a Theory of Everything (TOE) is possible:

> In its most ambitious form, a Theory of Everything seeks to combine all physical laws and principles into a single, unified mathematical scheme, hopefully to explain many of the deepest mysteries that still confront science, such as the origin of life or the nature of human consciousness.[73]

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[71] Gavin McNett, "Is the Internet the new heaven?" Salon. 15 July 1999. <http://www.salon.com/tech/books/1999/07/15/cyberspace/print.html> (18 December 2001).
[72] Ian G. Barbour, Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 21-22.
[73] Paul Davies, "The Mind of God," in Physics and Our View of the World, edited by Jan Hilgevoord (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 226.

In computer science terms, the search for TOE is the attempt to find an algorithm: a procedure that defines and solves some problem or achieves some result.[74] In this case, TOE would describe how the universe runs; in other words, humanity's reality and the universe simply may be thought of metaphorically as a program running in a computer. Along with the suggestion that TOE might be a possible algorithm for the universe, some have suggested that DNA is the algorithm for life, a "code of creation," as it were.

Evolutionary theory is perhaps the greatest challenge to peoples' understanding of what God is and what God does. The theory of evolution implies at least a couple of important notions: one, in contrast to the biblical accounts, creation cannot be thought of as complete, since evolution hypothesizes that various forms of life evolve, in response either to their environment or to genetic mutation. Two, as evolution science suggests that humanity likely evolved from primates, it undermines the centrality of humanity to creation. In other words, if humans were not created as Genesis described it, are humans really so important after all?

Geologist, paleontologist, and theologian Teilhard de Chardin sought to understand where God fit into the evolution paradigm; as Erik Davis puts it, Teilhard wanted to respond "to one of the most pressing existential needs in twentieth-century thought: to find in the sloppy mechanics of evolution a positive basis for human life..."[75] Teilhard's "science had... convinced him of the validity of evolution as a paradigm fundamental to the meaning of human existence," and he maintained that "evolution has a definite direction."[76] Teilhard believed that evolution has a "positive" direction toward both unity and complexity because of the increasing

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[74] Physicist Stephen Hawking is famous for suggesting that once humanity discovers this algorithm, "it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God." See Stephen Hawking, A Brief History of Time (New York: Bantam, 1988), 175.

[75] Davis, 292.

mental complexity he saw in human and primate life and the "organic and symbiotic drive toward unity and complexity that initially led freelance chemical elements to band together as molecules and cells."[77] He sought to fit the model of evolution into Christianity; he went so far as to say, "Christ is realized in evolution."[78]

How is Christ "realized in evolution?" Teilhard believed that evolution is driving toward "the final unification of the world."[79] He thought, "Evolution, having reached its pinnacle in humankind at the biological level, must give way to another level of evolution[,] the evolution of the human spirit."[80] This evolution "involves the expansion of the human capacity to love."[81] The shift from physical evolution to the evolution of the spirit and consciousness is called the "noosphere," in which the earth becomes "enclosed in a single thinking envelope, a single unanimous reflection."[82] In The Phenomenon of Man, Teilhard calls this final stage of evolution the "Omega Point," which, at the theological level, is Jesus Christ.[83] In summary, as the biological world reaches a certain point of organic complexity and organization, evolution gives way to evolution of humanity toward a greater capacity for love. The end of evolution is the Omega Point, which is the union with Christ Jesus. So, God brings humanity in union with Christ through biological evolution that lends itself to a spiritual evolution.

Theologian Jennifer Cobb and others, including computer industry leaders, contend that the Internet is both a description of what the noosphere might be and a means of helping

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[76] Philip J. Cunningham, "Teilhard de Chardin and the Noosphere," CMC Magazine, March 1997. <http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/mar/cunning.html > (18 December 2001).
[77] Davis, 291.
[78] Cunningham.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Richard R. Gaillardetz, "Teilhard de Chardin on Evil: Suffering and Evil as a Theological and Philosophical Problem" <http://www.utoledo.edu/~rgailla/suffering-evil/LECTURE-NOTES/TEILHARD-DE-CHARDIN.HTM> (27 March 2002).
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid. and Cunningham.
[83] Gaillardetz.

evolution achieve this. Says John Perry Barlow, cofounder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, "The point of all evolution to this stage is to create a collective organism of mind. With cyberspace, we are essentially hardwiring the noosphere."[84] Cobb makes Barlow's observation more explicit:

> The global communications infrastructure of cyberspace... forms its organizational aspect. Its interior aspect is made up of a free flow of consciousness... that anyone with a connection can plug into. Together, these two aspects make the noosphere tangible to us, drawing us into a world whose primary quality is the constant, ever-changing synthesis of information.[85]

But Cobb proposes that the Internet is not merely analogous to Teilhard's noosphere; she also makes the claim that God *is using* evolution to work through the Internet: "The divine expresses itself in the digital terrain through the vast, global communication networks that are now beginning to display rudimentary self-organizing properties."[86] Teilhard might have agreed, as he believed that technologies helped along the evolution of the world; as Davis summarized, "technologies are not simply human tools, but vessels of the expanding... body and nervous system of a world consciousness striving to be."[87]

In summary, the Internet not only becomes a metaphor for Teilhard's theology ("a collective organism of mind"), but also, in Cobb's estimation, an evolutionary vehicle through which God drives humanity to a greater capacity of love and union with Christ.

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[84] Cobb, 85.
[85] Cobb, 87.
[86] Cobb, 44.
[87] Davis, 296.

Complexity, Organization, and Process Theology's "Response"

While the Internet appears to connect the world, the question of whether it represents—or is leading the world to—higher consciousness and maximum complexity has yet to be answered. Indeed, the models that Teilhard conceived and Cobb endorses have some problems.

First, it is not apparent that God is working through an algorithm of evolution to coax the world to greater biological complexity and unity, a step necessary for the creation of the noosphere. Stephen Jay Gould, in Full House: The Spread of Excellence From Plato to Darwin, argues that diversity, not complexity, is the arrow of evolution, if there even is one. In fact, he points out that perhaps the most successful species is not the human, generally considered the most complex, but bacteria. Bacteria have been around for some 3.5 billion years, whereas the "first multicellular animals [did not] enter the fossil record until about 580 million years ago..."[88] Bacteria "exist in such overwhelming number, and such unparalleled variety; they live in such a wide range of environments, and work in so many unmatched modes of metabolism."[89] While there is no debate about whether humans are more conscious, bacteria's biological success make it difficult to argue that evolution is driving toward complexity; even though there are many kinds of bacteria, their success has allowed them to remained single-cell organisms.

The Internet certainly demonstrates plenty of complexity; the definition of the Internet itself and the volume of information available on it are evidence of this. However, the Internet lacks the mechanisms for organization. Steven Johnson points out, "The... search engines exist

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[88] Stephen Jay Gould, Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin (New York: Harmony, 1996), 176.
[89] Ibid., 178.

in the first place because the Web is a tremendously disorganized space, a system where the disorder grows right alongside the overall volume."[90] He also notes:

> The technologies behind the Internet—everything from the microprocessors in each Web server to the open-minded protocols that govern the data itself—have been brilliantly engineered to handle dramatic increases in scale, but they are indifferent, if not downright hostile, to the task of creating higher-level order.[91]

Hence, complexity is not necessarily an evolutionary ideal, and organization is not demonstrating itself on the Internet. How, then, can Jennifer Cobb and others assume that biological and technological evolution is heading toward complexity, harmony, or union with Christ? To bring God into biological evolution, Jennifer Cobb maintains that evolutionary chance "leaves open the possibility of purpose in the universe." Chance's "two evolutionary bedfellows"—self-organization and self-transcendence—also "carve a pathway directly towards the divine principle in the universe."[92] Cobb argues that God must be working through evolution, or else humanity, like "the universe [would be] rushing headlong into a state of chaotic dispersal..."[93] In other words, she appears to argue that evolution is a manifestation of order in a universe fraught with entropy.

But perhaps Cobb's strongest approach to talking about God evolutionarily is her choice of a theology that *uses the language of evolution and allows self-transcendence: process theology*. Process theology proposes a model of God that offers possibilities to each entity at each moment. These possibilities offered by God are creative and allow for self-transcendence, seeming to point to God: "The aims of God pull the world toward complexity and harmony so that in its own way the world might be reflective of God; the aims of God pull the world toward

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[90] Steven Johnson, Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software (New York: Scribner, 2001), 117.
[91] Ibid, 118-119.
[92] Cobb, 37.
[93] Ibid., 56.

the image of God."[94] This drive toward God "is always toward correction and transformation; this is the [grace] of God. God's aims lead us... toward the possibilities of the future, toward the mutuality of relationships."[95] Because God's possibilities allow for self-transcendence, and hence evolution, Cobb concludes that, "As the divine force moves into the world through the pathway of evolution, it manifests increasing levels of spiritual consciousness on the material plane."[96] Here, Cobb seems to imply that evolution is a visible hand of God working in the world.

More explicitly, process says that *entities*, whether they are electrons, rocks, or humans, choose from the choices that God offers them at each moment of being. Hence, process theology redefines God's omnipotence, as classically understood. While the choices entities have at each moment include "redemptive possibilities" that God continually offers, "the element of contingency is real; that which happens finally depends upon those choices whereby the world, in its solitariness, chooses from among its alternatives that which it will become."[97] Therefore God does not decide the world's future; God is "the God of persuasion... This divinity influences the world but does not control it absolutely."[98] As mentioned, these possibilities allow for humans to overcome evil and achieve greater potential; in other words, these possibilities permit self-transcendence.

But process theologians explain that the tendency for entities to choose the "best" possibilities is rare. The past carries its inertial energy to the present, influencing the choices made in each moment. Because the past helps define the possibilities at each moment, there is a tendency to repeat the past. As Marjorie Suchocki writes, "That which was done in the past has

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[94] Suchocki, 45.
[95] Ibid., 40.
[96] Cobb, 42.
[97] Suchocki, 70, 71.

an internal effect upon the present, adding a determining power to the present. That power is a call for repetition... The temptation is internal, brought about by the inevitability of conformal feelings transmitting the reality of one occasion to another."[99] In other words, self-transcendence is not necessarily an easy or constant process.

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In summary, the biological world is not necessarily heading toward greater complexity, and organization is not demonstrating itself on the Internet. These facts make it difficult to show that God is drawing the world to Godself through increasing complexity or physically building the noosphere through the Internet. Rather, process theology does offer a language that allows people to talk about an evolutionary God, one that feels the world at each moment, adapts, and offers it the possibilities that allow for self-transcendence.

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[98] Cobb, 174.
[99] Suchocki, 19.

Conclusion

Religion and technology have a long history of interaction, both practically and metaphorically, as David Noble has pointed out.[100] Early examples include the cathedral builders of the thirteenth century, who thought they were building the new Jerusalem, and Christopher Columbus, who believed that his technical achievement in reaching the New World marked the End of the World.[101] Westerners have sought to explain the significance of technology by pointing to sacred texts such as the Bible. Francis Bacon argued that the historical accounts of Noah and Solomon "offered sufficient evidence for the belief that the restoration of mankind's original powers was part of the divine plan"; in other words, technology could save humanity, as the Ark saved Noah and Solomon built the temple.[102]

Can people speak of the Internet theologically? An examination of the current literature on religion and the Internet provides no definitive answer. On the one hand, evangelical Christian theologians like Douglas Groothuis reject the Internet, claiming it fosters idolatry by rendering a number of classic Christian notions like the incarnation obsolete.[103] Groothuis writes,

> Many of the burgeoning technologies of cyberspace promise a similar emancipation from the drag of the body... A host of cyberphilosophers exhibit an almost Gnostic approach to matter while simultaneously worshipping the ability of material technologies to provide them with the medium for their disembodiment.[104]

On the other hand, theologians like Jennifer Cobb propose that God is using the Internet to manifest Teilhard's noosphere.

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[100] David Noble, The Religion of Technology (New York: Knopf, 1997).
[101] Ibid., 26, 33.
[102] Ibid., 51.
[103] See Douglas Groothuis, The Soul in Cyberspace (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
[104] Groothuis, 39-40.

I propose an answer somewhere in the middle. I believe that we can 1) speak metaphorically of God as the Internet and 2) experience God's goodness through the Internet. This proposal also tempered with an understanding that sinful humans have constructed and use the Internet.

Metaphor: What God Is

Chapter One defined the Internet in three dimensions: personal, structural, and functional. The disembodiment created by text does present a challenge to traditional incarnational theology that seems to stress the value physical embodiment. In this respect, the Internet may not be a suitable metaphor for the incarnate God in Christianity. But theologian Jennifer Cobb has suggested that, if we can conceptualize the Internet in terms of process theology, the Internet can then find value in religious understanding. As all entities, like electrons, rocks, and humans, are constructed in each moment of reality, so are online identities continually "under construction." Process theology also reminds us that identity cannot be sectioned off into components like bodies, but instead are enmeshed in a reality where entities are defined instead by their relationships. In this case, the personal dimension of the Internet is not so much a metaphor for God as it is for process theology.

But using process theology allows us to see clearly how the structural dimension of the Internet is a metaphor for God. The Internet is relational: not only do people relate through it, but also the physical structure of servers (nodes) makes its highly relational. Similarly, the God of process theology is both relational and omnipresent; God feels the whole world at each moment of becoming, hence everywhere, and offers the world possibilities, hence relational. One might say that because God is able to do all of this at once is, God is multitasking.

How people relate on the Internet leads to its functional dimension. By analogy to the work Jesus did and what he implied in the parables, the Internet is like a god that liberates one from constricting social norms. Just as Jesus broke his society's religious-cultural norms by eating with tax collectors and adulterers, and hence validated their worth as children of God, the Internet equalizes its users through text, removing social prejudice.

What God Does

Teilhard and Jennifer Cobb have attempted to understand how God might work in an evolutionary paradigm. Both also believe that technology can help evolution realize itself. But it difficult to prove that humanity is the pinnacle of biological evolution, as Teilhard maintains, and it is also hard to prove that the Internet shows any form of organization that would demonstrate it is the noosphere. Another difficulty in thinking about technology in this way is that there is a danger of idolizing an imperfect invention; the Internet is a number of computers connected to each other through software and wires, mechanisms susceptible to crashes and virus attacks, among other problems.

Therefore, a necessary step in helping us to avoid the idolatry of technology like the Internet is to repudiate its ties to evolution and notions that humanity is creating God through technology. As demonstrated in Chapter One, the Internet may be driving Internet users toward increasing social complexity, but it is hardly evident it is driving toward greater unity and harmony. Instead of arguing for the Internet as the realization of Teilhard's noosphere, Cobb may make more sense when she writes, "Cyberspace was born from and continues to depend on human consciousness for its very existence. ... Cyberspace may be our creation, but it is more

appropriate to think of it as an extension of divine creativity working through the medium of human consciousness."[105]

Indeed, I believe that the Internet can be viewed as a new "means through which God bestows... blessings."[106] As we have seen in our examination of the functional dimension of the Internet, we can receive these blessings through communities that indeed have been shown to form on the Internet. In addition to removing social prejudice that can be determined by appearance (sex, race, and disabilities), the Internet also helps communities to form by removing geographic barriers. However, this view must be tempered by several conditions. The Internet is used by sinful beings; it was initiated by the military and is predominantly being used as a vehicle for commercialization; in addition to those without access in the United States, millions in Third World countries lack access to the blessings of God through this medium. Additionally, "a recent study published in American Psychologist indicated that greater use of the Internet leads to increases in depression and loneliness."[107]

Questions

A number of questions warrant further investigation. First, are there other ways one can talk about the Internet as a metaphor for God? What other theologies might have something to contribute? With lack of access still a problem, liberation theologies might have something to say. Second, as Chapter One highlighted what one can do on the Internet, an examination of how religious ethics might contribute to the discussion would be fruitful, especially as more and

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[105] Cobb, 70, 71.
[106] Luther, 389.
[107] Joshua Hammerman, Thelordismyshepherd.com: Seeking God in Cyberspace (Deerfield Beach: Simcha Press, 2000), 59, 251. Hammerman writes, "The... study was covered in depth in the September 1998 edition of APA Monitor. Other studies have followed, including most notably a study that came out of Stanford University, reported in a frontpage story in the New York Times on 16 February 2000."

more people come online. For example, how might one act ethically in communities of anonymity?

Third, where do Christ and his death and resurrection fit into this context? Does the Internet suggest any new interpretations, or do the more orthodox interpretations somehow fit into a theological Internet framework, such as the initial one presented here? Asking questions like these demonstrates the power of metaphor, forcing Christians to ask anew what the life and death of Christ mean.

Fourth, how does disembodiment affect the sacraments? A fairly common question asked in the discussions on Internet and religion, the Catholic Church is the one church that has offered an answer: "Virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the sacramental reality of the other sacraments, and shared worship in a flesh-and-blood human community."[108] The Church, dismissing virtual sacraments, instead urges, "pastoral planning should consider how to lead people from cyberspace to true community..."[109]

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Although there are unanswered questions, I believe we can speak—at least provisionally—of what God is by using the Internet as a metaphor. It is also an image for contemplating human identity as conceived by process theology (where individuals are fluid and less physically identifiable online). Charles Henderson's description of God is similar; for him, the Internet is both like God and a means through which God can act:

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[108] "The Church and Internet."
[109] Ibid.

> [I]n the information age God is increasingly visible in the commonplace and the ordinary and is available in the intensity of the present moment. ...[I]n a networked world God is relational; the God of the information age speaks from within the relationships and events that constitute daily life. ...[in] the Information Age, God will be perceived as being present in and through that network which connects us with each other and with the world in which we live.[110]

I hope that the Internet will continue to allow communities to form, and hence to spread the goodness of God. I also hope that these online communities ultimately lead to embodied communities. Indeed, as Rabbi Joshua Hammerman observes, "To the extent that the Internet is alienating, God cannot be found there... For God to be found online, the experience must leave us more fully human and more fully connected to other real human beings."[111]

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[110] Henderson.
[111] Hammerman, 60.

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