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Tatusko - The Theological Challenge of Cyberspace and the Logic of Simulation - JCRT 2.2
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The technologies we create and the cultures in which they are embedded are strikingly similar. The Western expansion and frontier mentality finds its expression in the constable where large caravans of families would move together to find a new home in new land. The clock that arose out of monasteries fit in perfectly with regimented monastic schedules and made scheduling the day easier and more standardized. With the clock and the assembly line, among others for sure, we may locate a distinctly linear, fixed, and foundational mode of rationality that we have christened with the blanket term “modernity.” It is both a temporal disposition in culture and a cultural movement itself that crept into our civilization roughly with the emergence of the vernacular Bible that, for all intents and purposes, would not have been possible without Gutenberg’s moveable-type press. Thus, we shall reasonably say that the seismic shift in civilization to a distinctly modern framework cannot be removed from its technological milieu.

3. The reciprocal relation between culture and technology has seen its fair share of attention in recent years. Perhaps Lewis Mumford can be credited with providing the impetus for an examination of this relation. His work is most adequately exemplified in *Technics and Civilization* where he argues that the increase of mechanization decreases the cultural foundations from which such mechanization arose. Thus, mechanization slowly comes to be the “substitute religion” for society where “the necessity of invention was a dogma, and the ritual of a mechanical routine was the binding element in the faith” (Mumford 1963:53,54). Later Martin Heidegger examined technology as an invisible shaping force for which he used the term “Enframing” (1977). An important connection he makes is between modern science and technology and how they are embedded in and revelatory of the epistemic values and processes within modernity. Marshall McLuhan followed with his oft-quoted aphorism “the medium is the message” (1964; or later, the message, [1967]). Our environments are invisible to us unless we step outside of them, and our technologies are a very salient force shaping our environments. What is at stake here is that society, culture, and the self are all shaped by the technologies that shape the environment, but this shaping goes on continually at an invisible level. More recently, we can look to Albert Borgmann who looks carefully at information and its relationship to what we understand to be the real, and how the degree to which the structures of our information affect our notions of the real (1999). James Gleick shows how technology has altered our notions of time calling the phenomena “the acceleration of just about everything” (1999). Sherry Turkle, drawing extensively from Jaques Lacan, argues for multiple identities evidenced in cyberspace as the basis for a relational personality rather than the more traditional notion of a unitary ego espoused in psychoanalytic circles (1997). Looking at the effects of virtual reality on our notions of reality, Michael Heim advances the notion that we need to split the difference between the virtual and the real to achieve an “uneasy balance” in how we live with the existence of both (1998). And perhaps the most influential thinker in the relation of technology and culture is Neil Postman who has written extensively, perhaps following Mumford, that our reliance on technology is slowly pulling the cultural foundations out from under us (1992).
4. Only hinted at is the effect of technology on theology. Tom Beaudoin briefly looks at the notion of multiple identities in cyberspace and the effect of virtual simulations in the practice

of worship (1998). In the spirit of Teilhard de Chardin, Jennifer Cobb claims the evolution of technology is coterminous with the evolution of the human race. She argues that the creative power of God exists not just in the evolution of biological life, but also in the technology of cyberspace, where God reveals God's creative potential (1998). But despite the noted attempt at looking at technology through a religious lens, the foundation for the discussion seems to be lacking. Such a discussion seems to be relatively limited in scope, focusing on how religious institutions may use technology for certain ends such as mission, information, and promotion. That is to say, there does not seem to be, as of yet, a discussion that fruitfully attempts to merge the stream of the technology/culture discussion with the culture/theology discussion.

5. The first purpose of this essay is to show developments in technology that shape and reveal postmodern, non-foundational reasoning strategies at work in culture. We will pursue an investigation of postmodern rationality as it is seen through the technologies that give expression and shape to this rationality. Next, we will look at three important areas in theology 'the real, the self, and the community' that are challenged by the postmodern rationality revealed through technology. The ultimate aim of this essay is to lay suitable and fruitful groundwork for the technology/theology discussion by showing that our present cyberspace-based information technology reveals and then applies a postmodern rationality that presents a unique challenge to fundamental theological categories through its logic of simulation. All of the implications for the technology/theology dialogue as it relates to culture will not be drawn out here. Instead, my goal is to sharpen the focus regarding this dialogue by honing in on rather specific problems.

The Ambiguous Postmodern Rift

6. How do our present information technologies reveal the rationality of postmodernity? First, let us look at modern rationality and its relationship to technology. McLuhan locates the origins of a distinctly modern rationality in the alphabet followed by the printing press. Here the printing press has created what we call " 'civilized man' 'the separate individuals equal before a written code of law. Separateness of the individual, continuity of space and of time, and uniformity of codes are the prime marks of literate and civilized societies" (McLuhan 1963:84). Oral communication (before the telephone) required us to be in close proximity to one another. The written word, in its transference from the ear to the eye, enabled societies to become more separated and fragmented. Messages could be sent over larger distances, and the printing press allowed those messages to be distributed at a cheaper and more efficient rate. It is here that we encounter the Western linear logic that, for McLuhan was given form by linear forms of communication through the written word. The separation of community and members of communities brought into being by the printed word also instances the notion of a self that is less connected to community and so, more apt to be independent from a community. Where the self in a tribal context is intimately connected with a collective, in a literate society the self becomes self-relational, unified, and independent, able to subsist autonomously. Mumford emphasizes this modern rationality by considering seventeenth century philosophy as the rational basis for mechanization. We can see the metaphor of mechanism emphasized in the mechanical notion of the universe in the thought of Descartes, Bacon, and La Place. Mumford notes three aspects of philosophy and science during the modern period, which are then applied in technology. These are "the reduction of the complex to the simple"; "concentration upon the outer world, and the elimination of or neutralization

of the observer as respects the *data* with which he works"; and finally "isolation: limitation of the field: specialization of interest and subdivision of labor" (Mumford 46). Thus, the assembly line in the Fordist economy becomes the perfect technical representation of modern rationality, reciprocally giving shape to and supporting modern rationality itself. Efficiency in production and the division of labor into specialized components is the means by which this linear conception of rationality is revealed and then practically applied, thus giving shape to the culture in which it exists.

7. There is a similar relation to culture with present information technology. Our information technology, while it arose from within culture, also gives shape to that culture. We now turn to this relation.

Flexibility in "The Informational Space of Flows"

8. What makes the Internet such a novel technology is that information itself is not only its primary product, but also its only product. This is not information delivered solely in terms of text but through various images and sounds as well. The Internet is an abstraction to the world we inhabit, yet it is intimately tied to our world as a technology having a shaping force on the world as do all technologies. This abstract and virtual world is often called "cyberspace." While economic issues and globalization are certainly paramount issues related to cyberspace, the question that concerns us here is how cyberspace as a technological environment effects our notions of the real, self, and community; and how the logic of simulation in cyberspace can give us clues about the shaping of our postmodern rationality today. Although it can certainly be argued that cyberspace challenges theology on various other fronts such as globalization and trans-national economies, cyberspace challenges reality, self, and community in unique ways and so, offers a unique challenge to these concepts in theology.
9. The Internet was developed as a system to interconnect numerous locally networked computer systems enabling different networks to communicate with each other by means of the Domain Name System (DNS) wherein each computer has a specific address or Internet Protocol (IP). Each network, however, communicated information in different formats, so translation was necessary from network to network. The World Wide Web was later developed as "a unified and simple means of utilizing all the resources of the Internet ' broadly consisting of two parts: a means of organizing resources and a means of looking at that organization" (Jordan 43). What has come out of this is the .com, .org, .edu, etc. address system that is a far more universal and centralized way of locating different computers and systems. The decentralization of the Internet by way of the World Wide Web makes the entire, vast system global and trans-national with millions of centers of activity all over the world. It enables anyone to have access to the Internet and also enables anyone to publish information worldwide almost instantaneously.
10. The entire construction of the Internet and the World Wide Web has been motivated by the desire to exchange information across vast distances, to provide any location connected to the Internet, anywhere across the globe, with access to information stored at any other Internet location. This, we may argue, is perhaps a cultural response to the growing fragmentation in culture beginning with print and finding its zenith in mass production through specialization and division of labor. Thus, this technological achievement was built on information for the purpose of information and its product is information itself. Ostensibly, many have seen the Web as a means for creating a more egalitarian space that is more free, universal, unlimited in resources, and unhindered by spatial constraints. "Cyberspace provides to offline life a

unique space of information flow. Not only does cyberspace create its own particular forms of life, but it contributes an extraordinary form of space that is indispensable to the new form of global socio-economy that looks likely to dominate the twenty-first century" (Jordan 168). This space is a web where every part is linked to every other part and where there is no center that one can locate. Everything is linked by way of *hypertext* "a dynamic referencing system in which all texts are interrelated. Hypertext is no less than electronic intertextuality, the text of all texts, a supertext" (Heim 30). From this view we may think that hypertext is simply a way of organizing our information like a large library where we can cite our sources instantaneously. Perhaps this is accurate, but it is only part of the picture. There is a way of organizing thought that occurs in hypertext that is quite different than when reading the quite linear, line by line, page by page, motion of the written word. In hypertext one can jump from place to place without the need to process thought in a linear fashion. Organizing thought happens by way of "a literacy that is prompted by jumps of intuition and association" (Heim 30). The informational space of flows within the grander matrix of cyberspace carries with it a more flexible way of thinking and so, a far more flexible rationality. "So each reader in effect becomes author, in part, of the text that comes into being as the text is hypertextually read across documents" (Levinson 146) where "the center (of the text) is not the center" (Derrida 279) and "the signification of the saying goes beyond the said" (Levinas 37). It is this rationality that also permeates the postmodern turn in literature, the arts, and culture. This shift in culture from deeply embedded foundations to the "celebration of the surface" is one that Frederic Jameson has argued in his seminal essay "Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." Certainly we can find the other side of this postmodern rationality in the work of Derrida, who argues that our inability to fixate meaning in a narrative structure relegates meaning to an endless supply of texts. Such a loss of narrative is also the focus of Jean François Lyotard in his work *The Postmodern Condition* where he argues that the loss of metanarratives renders such an intertextual rationality possible. Thus, the very structure of the World Wide Web and the Internet, the way in which information is organized through hypertext, and the notion that the objects in cyberspace are simulated present us with practical applications of the very rationality of postmodernism itself. With the computers that enable us to explore the geography of the Internet and the World Wide Web, "the abstract ideas in Jameson's account of postmodernism become newly accessible and even consumable" (Turkle 45). Postmodernism is no longer just a theory, but a tool we can use. Just as the assembly line, the clock, and the printing press function as signs of modern culture, information technology, cyberspace, and the computer function as signs of postmodern rationality.

The Challenge of Cyberspace to Theology

11. With the two key notions of simulation and hypertext through cyberspace established as practical applications of postmodern rationality, we now have a direct challenge to theology presented by the shaping force cyberspace simulation and hypertext exert on culture and rationality. The abstractness of postmodern theory and its challenge to systematic theology, which is practically applied through technology, is nowhere better demonstrated, perhaps, than in the works of Mark C. Taylor and Jean-Luc Marion. There are three crucial areas of theology that, if not challenged by postmodern rationality already, most assuredly will be. These are as follows: reality, the self, and the community. Because simulation and hypertext through information technology challenge traditional theological notions of these areas we are placed in the position of thinking through what these challenges mean for theology.

Simulation and Reality

12. The very thought processes associated with hypertext have been active in our culture (specifically the Western world) since well before the emergence of the Web. We can perhaps go back as far as Kierkegaard to find these roots, but our focus is better placed in Jean Baudrillard's theories. Baudrillard argues for a heightened abstractness within culture, pointing us to the negative side of an intertextual worldview where meaning is paradoxically contained in and unbound by *deferance*. He encapsulates this strange worldview with the term *simulacra*.
13. To fully understand what he means by this term, it is helpful to understand something about the social context from which Baudrillard was coming. At the same time that the Vietnam era of protest was injecting heavy doses of confusion and violence across the United States, a neo-Marxist movement was rising from a socially active academy in France called the Situationists. Out of this milieu came the prominent thinker Guy DeBord, who was initially part of a French avant-garde artistic movement. The surge of disposable capital in post-World War II consumerism gave impetus for the debate over modern society. The movement emphasized forms of media and consumer society that DeBord called "the society of the spectacle" in which authenticity is absorbed into a world where "all that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (DeBord '1). "In this society, individuals consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own" (Best & Kellner 82). In a society where relationships are mediated by images, alienation rises while authenticity is consumed by an increasingly passive society (or, a "hot" society in McLuhan's terms). Thus, reality is reduced to appearance as an end in itself. The mission of the Situationists was to find ways for people to express their authenticity by creating new "situations" through a *critical hermeneutics* "that sees through appearances, illusions, and fantasies to the realities being masked and covered over" (Best & Kellner 91). The praxis of this mission was to reverse the abstractness of spectacular life by *détournement* "the fluid language of anti-ideology [that] occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty" (DeBord '208). It is a way of deconstructing situations established by the passive consumption of images. By deconstructing these situations through altering political slogans, defacing billboards, using graffiti, etc., the Situationists hoped to reveal the bourgeois control of image media and society as a whole. Thus, with DeBord, we see a reliance on Hegelian modernism through Marxist praxis.
14. Baudrillard came from this same setting, and he seems to share the view that society has become infused with spectacle as the proliferation of images as the ends and means of production increases abstraction. Unlike DeBord, however, Baudrillard dumps references to Marx in a conscious and overt postmodern theory that tries to divorce itself completely from modernism. His theory caricatures abstraction to a heightened level that in the end looks quite bizarre and counter-intuitive. There is no longer any mission to find authenticity and truth that is veiled by the image. Rather, it is the image that exists on its own. There is no more reality at stake. We have completely and utterly lost any concept of what the real is, and the drive to seek the real can only find itself satiated by images that cannot really satiate at all. He gives the impression that society has become so abstract that even events and activities that we take as quite "normal" are simply another form of the illusory nature of our culture. Thus, there is an extreme negation in society that can never find redemption because there is nothing available to redeem it'all of our possible resources are illusions or abstract simulations so removed from what they once simulated that the object of simulation has been utterly destroyed.

Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum. Such would be the successive phases of the image:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;

it masks and denatures a profound reality;

it masks the *absence* of a profound reality;

it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard 6).

15. In contrast to DeBord, we see no hint at social action or reform. Such acts are pointless in a world of simulation. If we feel compelled to reform our society, we need to know what to reform. But if we ask "What shall we reform?" the only answer available via Baudrillard is *nothing*. Even the question is absurd because we have lost any concept of reform itself even the concept is an illusion. For Baudrillard we live in a world of societies that have been duped by a grand illusion and sadly live within it, but will never realize it. Even realizing the illusory denatured nature of society is itself an illusion. Thus, even the notion of an invisible, shaping environment is taken to a heightened level of abstraction that pushes us to a rather hopeless and nihilistic world-view. The rationality in such a worldview is notably different from the modern linear rationality where progress and optimism were the conceived *telos*. While Baudrillard offers an explicitly cynical perspective and perhaps takes postmodern nihilism to an extreme, he does point to a crucial dimension in cyberspace that has direct impact on rationality and culture. This is the relationship of the simulated, fluid, and intertextual geography of cyberspace with the world in which we live, move, and have our being.
16. What is most salient for the present argument is the tension that exists in the relationship between the virtual and the real. With the World Wide Web one can copy images and text from an infinite number of contexts and then place them in any other context. There is no limit regarding what images can be used with what text and what hyperlinks can link to what. Thus, signs can be removed from their original referents and take on new and often contradictory meanings. One can place a cross on a page about fishing that links to a page about gardening that links to a page selling comic books and *ad infinitum*. Moreover, in the abstract geography of cyberspace, reality is composed completely out of information, where the information load increases by thousands upon thousands of new words, images, sounds, and video daily. If Baudrillard's theory of the simulacra seems to be a bit on the cynical side for our biological life, it seems to be an apt description of the realities that live in cyberspace. It is a virtual geography that has no referent, and its contents do not need referents to exist. It is a technological version of Main Street USA at Disney World where everything is tamed to the point of abstract sterilization; a place where everybody is happy and knows your name; where cartoon and human, technology and biology coexist in perfect harmony; where future and past, fantasy and the real, and the escapist frontier mentality all commingle in a perfectly orchestrated dance.
17. The challenge this poses to theology resides in discerning what is real. A central claim in theology is the reality of God. In Western thought from Augustine to Aquinas and, to a degree, Karl Barth, the dogmatic project of theology begins with the assertion that God is one. For thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas the foundation of their arguments is in the examination of the essence of God who God is in God's Self. The doctrine of the Trinity flows from this examination of the being of God. By beginning with the essence of God one also begins with an assertion about reality. Augustine, highly indebted to neo-Platonism, locates

this essence of God in the notion of the greatest Good from which all lesser goods originate. That is, humanity is created in the image of God and is thus created good. It is this notion of our relationship to God where reality finds its dwelling place. Since God is viewed as the greatest Good, God is also the most real. The goal of human life finds its reality and definition in God, the greatest Good, the most real being, to whom we give thanks for dwelling in us even as we dwell in God. Working from the nature of who God is in God's Self, the reality of all that is is then understood in terms of its relation to God.

18. Athanasius' argument in his work *On the Incarnation* is rather similar along these lines. In the Garden of Eden, Adam misused his freedom to be with God by relying on his own devices. The punishment was banishment and death. But what does death mean? Athanasius bases his argument for *On the Incarnation* on the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. As all that is was created from nothing by God, so separation from God returns us to that state of nothingness. What is so vital here is the relationship between negation and creation. It is quite clear that for Athanasius creation is sustained by God. What we understand reality to be continues through time by the will of God, but when it is separated from God, reality returns to nothingness. This separation and movement into nothingness is the result of the Fall. Through the Incarnation, God enables us to change our direction away from death and nothingness toward God, who is the highest Good and the most real. Through union with the divine Logos, we become more than what we were in the Garden by becoming coheirs with Christ who are unified with God. Thus, reality and all of our notions of the real are contingent upon God the most Good, and the most real.
19. As we have seen it is difficult to think of such a notion through the geography and rationality of cyberspace. There is no movement to the real in a virtual space that eschews a notion of "the real" as a philosophical concept. The unique problem here for theology is the relation between what is necessary and what is contingent. In theology the division between necessity and contingency seems quite apparent, at least in the above understandings of the relationship between God and creation. All of reality as we know it is contingent upon God who sustains it. Perhaps Robert Sokolowski best expresses this relationship, "In Christian belief we understand the world as that which might have not been, and correlatively we understand God as capable of existing, in undiminished goodness and greatness, even if the world had not been" (Sokolowski 19). Even though the being of God is not exhausted in either the creation or the Incarnation, the image of God is still imprinted on all that is. Moreover, the Spirit of God sustains creation through time. Realizing the contingency of the creation is a rather crucial approach to understanding what reality as we understand it is: that which was brought into being and sustained by God.
20. But how is this crucial distinction between God and the world rendered in cyberspace? The very structure of cyberspace does away with the distinction between the contingent and the necessary not only through its decentralized structure, but also through its intertextual rationality where all information is placed on a horizontal plane. While we may say that the structure of the Web is what holds all of the pieces together and so makes them contingent upon itself, the very structure is so designed to remove any reference to a reality upon which its contents are contingent. This is fulfilled in the medium of the interface that simulates ordinary objects of experience, such as windows and desktops, but is not contingent upon those objects. Hence the interface, also called the Graphical User Interface or GUI, is quite independent of the objects of experience it is intended to simulate. It is thus an example of a simulacra and loses its reference to the realities it signifies. The medium by which we access

the Web, and the Web itself, are geographies that are self-contained. The information and dimensions of experience within cyberspace relative to this structure of non-contingency are likewise non-contingent. With such a horizontal plane that places all notions of the real on the same surface that has rid itself of any depth, the notion of God, when it enters that same rationality, is simulated along with the rest of what is in cyberspace. God becomes as real as everything else. This is to say, God becomes a simulation. Contingency removed, God is no longer the One who created reality as we know it but is part of that same reality.

21. If the relations between sign and referent, contingent and necessary, and virtual and real are compromised, how we envision worship is likewise challenged. The experience of worship draws heavily upon symbols that point toward God in an effort to draw the congregation into unity with God through the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the greatest debate in the church that has led to schism and fragmentation is how Christ is present in the sacraments. The debate surrounds itself around trans-substantiation, con-substantiation, and symbolism. With the rationality of cyberspace at work, none of these definitions is able to account for the transformation of the notion of symbol into simulation and then simulacra as a result of the implosion between contingent and necessary in the intertextual play of surfaces. How can a sacrament function within a rationality that removes referents from its simulated geography? Here simulation is a rather different notion than symbol. A symbol is recognized to be like the reality to which it refers, but is likewise recognized as a sign pointing to the reality to which it refers. A simulation acts as that which can replace a given reality upon which it is based and so, can replace that given reality. A simulation in cyberspace replaces rather than refers to a reality. Simulations are used in the medical field to perform intricate brain operations, but there is still a brain on which an operation will take place. Simulations are used in the military to perform dangerous exercises, but this is to save lives for when pilots and tank drivers get behind the controls of a real vehicle. Simulations are used in education to demonstrate processes of physics and biology, but these are used in reference to principles and concepts in an effort to render a fuller understanding of them. When simulation is the governing aesthetic and rationality of an entire environment that needs no reference to a given reality, the gravity of cyberspace warps the notion of the real into another form of simulation. This is the logic of cyberspace that functions through hypertext. With the rationality of cyberspace at work sacraments become simulations of sacraments: signs of signs to the degree that the referent to which the original sign pointed is forgotten or at least unnecessary. Here cyberspace turns a sacrament into *deferance*'signs infinitely deferred to other signs.
22. This challenge to theology culminates in examples of so-called "virtual churches" that simulate physical houses of worship that seem to be "outdated" or too "institutionalized" for those seeking a more egalitarian religious experience without the hindrance of institutionalized structures of governance created by humankind. An example of such an environment is www.virtualchurch.org. "The Virtual Church only exists on the Internet. We are solely interested in fulfilling the great commission in whatever way we can." It is quite clear that they do not expect the Virtual Church to replace the physical church or become another denomination in any way, and they also encourage those who visit to seek out physical congregations. It is also quite apparent that they wish to avoid any controversy over denominational affiliation or debate over doctrine, while at the same time they also are very clear about the doctrines that they support such as the rapture and baptism in the Holy Spirit. One may find vast amounts of information from sermons that are streamed, to clip art, Scripture readings, and Bible quizzes. Also rather clear is that their "major purpose is not to develop a 'sense of

community,' although that does happen when repeated interchanges occur over the Internet on a regular basis." This further supports the notion that the Virtual Church is not in any way intended to replace the 'physical' church. There is a noted anti-institutional bent throughout the organization, which is indicated in their statement of faith:

We understand that there are believing Christians in all Christian churches and accept those Believers as our brothers and sisters in Christ, irrespective of the denomination they attend, as long as they have accessed repentance and forgiveness through Jesus Christ and believe in His resurrection from the dead. We do not split hairs over church dogma, whether it may be Calvinism or eternal security, versus Wesleyan or Armenian beliefs, versus Catholicism. We do not enter into those controversies since they foment discord and separate true believers instead of pointing them to the salient points of salvation. Pointing people to Jesus Christ is our only mission.

23. The implication is that dogmatic controversy and arguing over doctrine point the church away from Christ rather than toward Christ. Rather than have doctrine be the goal of this site, the goal is "A Religious Experience Without Walls" 'a statement that can perhaps be taken both metaphorically and literally. Although they are very clear that their intent is not to simulate the church to the degree that the Virtual Church could or should replace it, what I have been arguing is that by virtue of the way we interact with information through the Web via simulated interfaces, simulation can easily become simulacra. The structure of the Virtual Church simulates an actual church building with rooms such as youth room, sanctuary, music room, library, fellowship hall, kitchen, lavatory, mail room, etc. In the gallery you can find images of physical churches and stained glass. The most fascinating room that relates to the point of worship and symbol is the "virtual sanctuary, [where] you can participate in worship by listening to music, reading hymns, prayers, scriptures, sermons, and the communion liturgy." It is not clear what is meant by "participation" since there seems to be no one else in this sanctuary but you and your computer. Although there are a series of links to various aspects of the order of worship, there is nothing that gives feedback to the participant in that experience. Nor is it clear what is meant by religious experience. For this to be an environment that fosters religious experience it seems that such an experience is simply the reception of information. Thus, the church seems to be more like a kiosk than a house of worship. Communion is a description of the sacrament along with a text often used in liturgy. The altar call contains images of altars and pulpits from sanctuaries and then provides nine steps to receive forgiveness and salvation. At the end of this there is no apparent way to access information on how to join a church, nor is there an explicit call to seek out a physical congregation. There is then a benediction that does not offer this access either.
24. Despite all of the intents and purposes of the authors of the Virtual Church to be a source in which the Gospel can be preached and heard, one that does not try to play the same role as the physical church, the affect of a tour of the Virtual Church by the user nevertheless has the very effect they sought to avoid. In a world of simulation with a logic of simulation such as cyberspace the church so conceived is relegated to easily accessible information that is as disposable as an ad for a beer company or an image of your favorite "boy band" plastered across various fan pages. All information is given equal credence, and cyberspace transforms information into the aesthetic of simulation through a medium that has simulation as its core means of communication and rationality. Thus, the congregant of the Virtual Church may

not feel compelled to go to a physical congregation since the simulated congregation without walls, conflict, or community offers the salvation and eternal position that the church also offers, but at a much easier expense without the uncertain and sometimes messy events that occur in our relationships day in and day out. The effect of this logic of simulation will become even clearer below.

The Self and Community

By David Benbennick - Möbius strip.jpg, CC BY-SA 2.0, Link

45. A Möbius Strip is a paradoxical structure that is three-dimensional, but it has only one side. In it there is a coherence despite the visual image of a many sided object. "The apparent two sides or edges of the Möbius band represent the two poles in a dynamic interrelatedness which via a 180° twist brings the apparent duality into a paradoxical unity" (Loder and Neidhardt 55). In M.C. Escher's woodcut "Möbius Strip II" the path of the ants shows how the band is one-sided. If you follow the path of the ants you will arrive at the origin (see Fig. 1). The top and the bottom of the band are clearly visible, yet they are paradoxically part of a one-sided figure. This band is also a metaphor for how the Incarnation is possible. The human and the divine come together in Christ in a bi-polar, paradoxical union where neither side is confused with the other yet they are nonetheless one. In the feedback loop I have been describing one is confused with the other in a relation that blurs and confuses the human with the machine. Yet the feedback loop is more and more becoming the norm for how we conceive our identity, how we form community, and what we understand reality to be. With this blurring of boundaries the understanding of contingency is also compromised. The distinction between the feedback loop in our relation to technology and the Möbius band in theology needs to be clarified.

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25. Cyberspace is not a space that closely resembles the spaces we inhabit daily with our bodies. In cyberspace you rarely are aware of to whom you are sending and from whom you are receiving information. Identity is cloaked behind a veil called an *avatar*, or a virtual or on-line identity. While you may think that you are sending messages to and receiving them from a twenty-year-old lingerie model it may actually be an elderly woman in curlers (as parodied in a recent commercial). Or, on a more serious note, it could actually be a pedophilic voyeur looking for a partner to fulfill his sexual fantasies. But there is a reciprocal effect that the avatar has on human identity itself. Closely related to this is the notion of community. I will take both of these aspects at the same time since, most definitely in cyberspace, one seems to clarify and even define the other.
 26. Kant argues the modern notion of identity through his notion of the transcendental unity of apperception in which there must be an "I" that synthesizes perceptions into a coherent experience that is "my" experience. On the side of psychology, Freud best shows us what such a unitary self means through his notion of the ego which is also the Greek term for "I." The notion of a unitary self is also found in Descartes, and goes farther back to Augustine in his *Confessions*. From theology, the notion of the self as created in the image of God, but fallen from that image, is quite common as a notion of self. But postmodern psychology and the notion of identity in cyberspace challenge this view. The move is from a unitary view of the ego to a view of the self as a self-relational multiplicity.

27. Viewing the self as multiple conjures images of multiple personality disorder and schizoid personality disorders. These disorders came from a time when the unified self was the norm and so, a multiple self was understood to be dysfunctional. However, it is now being argued that an understanding of the self as multiple is more or less the norm—an argument that is finding a friendly home in cyberspace. Note the following experience:

There were times when the cacophony of selves in cyberspace frustrated me so much that I attempted to end my virtual life, literally. The drama of my identity in cyberspace brought me great anxiety about my “real” identity. On three different occasions, I sent my acquaintances, friends, and virtual communities what a friend later called “virtual suicide notes.” I wrote the first after only six months on-line, and I wrote the last after about three years on-line. I could no longer maintain such an aggregation of personae. I wanted to stop and separate myself from this society of identities that all reflected me and yet did not represent me. I had let my self (selves) become too diffused throughout cyberspace. The person I thought of as Tom Beaudoin dissolved into a wide-ranging constellation of personalities that different on-line communities knew only as TBEAUDOIN. If asked, they would all have described TBEAUDOIN differently (Beaudoin 135-136).

28. The above experience is an example of *identity fluidity* in which there is an “elastic connection” between online and offline identities, between avatars and physical identity. “Avatars can develop to the point where the connections between identities is so stretched, so tenuous, that the ‘ping’ of broken elastic can be heard in cyberspace, but the connection can be surprisingly strong, with collective refusals to think of avatars as distinct identities” (Jordan 75). In the case of Beaudoin, such a snap in the elastic fibers connecting his offline and offline identities can be seen in his “virtual suicide notes.”
29. Sherry Turkle is perhaps the leading authority on the notion of a multiple self in cyberspace. Drawing from Jaques Lacan, she advances the theory that the self we thought of as a unity is actually composed of multiple “selves.” The experience of the self as different personae through the exploration of different on-line roles and identities is also the experience of the many selves or aspects of self within us. “Lacan insisted that the ego is an illusion. In this he joins psychoanalysis to the postmodern attempt to portray the self as a realm of discourse rather than as a real thing or a permanent structure of the mind” (178). The notion of a unified self as ego is as much of a false myth as the notion that meaning can be fixed in a term or structure. Lacan deconstructs the notion of what a self is in much the same way Derrida deconstructs the notion of meaning in a text. As we project different personae in such a realm of discourse through our interfaces into cyberspace we simultaneously internalize these personae as visible aspects of who we really are. There is then a reciprocal relation between the self as a realm of discourse that is visualized and then internalized in a feedback loop through the computer interface. Thus, playing with different identities on the Internet does not create a multiple notion of self, but actually reveals the multiplicity that constitutes what the self is. Our use of different personae in cyberspace actually reveals to us who we really are and allows us to explore our selves as multiple. This comes close to Robert Jay Lifton’s notion of the “protean self” in which we take on different roles and follow different passions in life and hence take on different roles. What Lifton argues is that despite the tendency to explore many different roles during a lifetime, there is a natural inclination to find coherence and integration in the midst of fragmentation.

30. If the revelation of the self as multiple through cyberspace is the first step, internalization of these multiple selves made object through cyberspace follows closely behind. Turkle, in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1993) examines the experience of participants in Multiple User Dimensions or MUDs where, similar to role-play games, one can take on different characters and act them out with other players in an interactive environment that users create with its own rules, rights, and regulations. What users of MUDs create are self-contained cultures loaded with myth and an unusual mixture of fantasy and reality. It is in this environment that Turkle unpacks her understanding of identity as multiple. In the MUD, the different personae people create come together to form virtual communities that exist solely in the form of textual commands in real-time over the Internet. These identities are explored in community and then internalized, shaping and reshaping our notions of who we are. The connection between virtual identity and virtual community is one not explored in enough detail, but it seems to be quite important for our understanding of what a community consists of and how we define it. It seems that the existence of the MUD is dependant upon the participation of virtual identities, and that the notion of a virtual identity cannot come to full realization without the existence of the MUD. Identity entails community and community entails identity. The key for Turkle is that the multiple identities revealed to us in cyberspace, in the MUD, are then internalized and reshaped. Thus, she calls the MUD “laboratories for the construction of identity” (Turkle 184).
31. Here Turkle’s notion of multiple self comes closer to the radical vision of the relationship between technology and biology offered by Donna Haraway who argues for the blurring of the boundary between the machine and the human in cyborg myth. If our identities are realized and experienced as a multiple discourse of personae through engagement in a feedback loop with the computer interface, one can argue that without the interface identity as a multiple discourse will not be fully realized. Hence the reciprocal relation between human and machine is actually a relation in which identity is formed. That is to say, identity is formed in the relationality between self and computer, a relation that can exist only if self and computer are related in the feedback loop. This is also true on the social level in the virtual community. The fluid relation between “RL” (real life) and technology is here raised to a new level, begging a further question of where the computer stops and the human begins. This is precisely what Haraway argues is the “boundary breakdown ‘ between animal-human [organism] and machine” (Haraway 293). To argue the full extent of what this means is far beyond the scope of this essay. What is salient for my argument is the notion of the feedback loop itself as a means to construct identity and community. Why enter into this feedback loop at all?
32. The reasons for joining such a community seem to point us back to the experience of religion the Virtual Church seeks’an anti-institutional, non-dogmatic, easily accessible resource in which participants feel connected to something greater than themselves. This connection to a greater community enables the individual to play out roles that may not be possible in real life. Thus one day I can be a prince, the next day I can be a slave, I can also be a extroverted swinging single, or a religious zealot, or I can be all of these at the same time. Switching identities becomes a function of opening different windows on the computer interface. There is a freedom in cyberspace that cannot be had in the real world. There is a freedom to “be” anything by acting out any role that I choose. There is a sense of egalitarianism where race and gender cease to be the limitations that they so often are in the world. It is a safe environment where physical harm by another is impossible. Everything seems to point to a freer and more equitable culture that allows us to explore identity with others who are doing the same. Such

myths of cyberspace are common, and attractive to many.

33. The desire to enter into the feedback loop arises from a sense of negation. One common thread that seems to run through Turkle's case studies is the alienation and loneliness she describes. For example, in the MUD Julee "made the relationship to her daughter her paramount value" (187) where in her own life she felt alienated by her mother. Matthew, after breaking up with a girlfriend, moving away from home, and experiencing the death of his father, from whom he already felt alienated, felt a void in his life.

Role playing provided Matthew and Julee with environments in which they could soothe themselves by taking care of others and experiment with a kind of parenting different from what they had experienced themselves. As neglected children comfort themselves by lavishing affection on their dolls, Matthew and Julee identified with the people they took care of (Turkle 191).

34. There are other cases as well, such as Stewart, who seeks a sense of extroversion and adventure that is lacking, or Robert's loneliness after being separated from his mother who was "[his] security." Thus, to fill these feelings of negation, virtual community provides not only a sense of community and support, but also the ability to explore and discover one's self in the process of participating in the community. In many cases, however, this process does not result in satisfaction that the negation has been counteracted and the void thus filled. Stewart, for example, "is emphatic that MUDing has ultimately made him feel worse about himself" (Turkle 198) because of the fluid relation between his sense of self in "RL" and his virtual identity's fluidity that he could not seem to congeal. There is, thus, a continual motion of the human self to seek integration and coherence throughout one's life. This is a motion that Piaget so brilliantly sets forth with the notion that human development undergoes a process of equilibration between assimilation and accommodation. This process, according to Piaget, equals intelligence. Equilibration as the balance between the interaction of the self and environment is the precise point at which coherence and integration take place. Underneath this process, however, there is the continual presence of negation in development, a negation that we see in the affect of Stewart's unhappiness with the fluidity between his virtual and "RL" personae and his inability to integrate the two. The key here is the relationality between self and environment. Why does the feedback loop of the MUD seem to be inadequate to achieve the human inclination toward integration and coherence? How is it that the tension between equilibration and negation are not resolved? A theological understanding of relationality can perhaps parry the challenge of virtual identity and community with another understanding of relationality that pushes the feedback loop beyond its capabilities for understanding the self.
35. A Möbius Strip is a paradoxical structure that is three-dimensional, but it has only one side. In it there is a coherence despite the visual image of a many sided object. "The apparent two sides or edges of the Möbius band represent the two poles in a dynamic interrelatedness which via a 180° twist brings the apparent duality into a paradoxical unity" (Loder and Neidhardt 55). In M.C. Escher's woodcut "Möbius Strip II" the path of the ants shows how the band is one-sided. If you follow the path of the ants you will arrive at the origin (see Fig. 1). The top and the bottom of the band are clearly visible, yet they are paradoxically part of a one-sided figure. This band is also a metaphor for how the Incarnation is possible. The human and the divine come together in Christ in a bi-polar, paradoxical union where neither side is confused with the other yet they are nonetheless one. In the feedback loop I have been describing one is

confused with the other in a relation that blurs and confuses the human with the machine. Yet the feedback loop is more and more becoming the norm for how we conceive our identity, how we form community, and what we understand reality to be. With this blurring of boundaries the understanding of contingency is also compromised. The distinction between the feedback loop in our relation to technology and the Möbius band in theology needs to be clarified.

36. With the feedback loop, to what are we relating? We are relating to aspects of self that are revealed through the interface. At the core we become self-relational beings internalizing aspects of the self to restructure our identity. This continues to emphasize the postmodern preoccupation with the surface and the play of texts without a need to relate to anything beyond. This also emphasizes the logic of simulation at work in cyberspace and the blurred distinction between necessity and contingency. The feedback loop itself is inherently self-relational. This is not only because through it we experience aspects of ourselves that become objects we internalize, returning them to subjectivity in re-imagined configurations; it is also because of the blurred distinction between where identity stops and the logic of simulation begins. Here one entails the other in a self-relational play of surfaces. Negation seems to be an ongoing threat to this self-relational perspective, but why?
37. If we view Kierkegaard's notion of the self through the lens of the Möbius band metaphor we will see the rather clear, yet subtle distinction between relationality in theological anthropology versus the feedback loop. In *The Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard begins with a rather complex series of paragraphs that encapsulate his understanding of a relational human identity.

A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between the two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self (XI 127).

38. If human identity is self-relational and relates itself to itself, it is not a self at all. To construct one's identity this way leads ultimately to despair. When the self only relates itself to itself in this way, the result is despair. Kierkegaard resolves this tension by positing a third term that relates the human being to itself. "The formula that describes the state of the self when despair is completely rooted out is this: in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it" (XI 128). Here he comes close to Augustine, who says, at the beginning of *Confessions*, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Identity is indeed relational, but the relationality that constructs identity must be understood in relation to God. We saw earlier that in the scheme of how we envision reality, we are continually striving for the greatest Good who is God. Here, identity is envisioned in the same way. The negative side of this striving toward God for identity to be established is when the self is separated from God. This leads to the despair that Kierkegaard calls a "misrelation," which is also the very affect experienced by MUD users, such as Stewart, who lose themselves in the ambiguity created by cyberspace in its logic of simulation. In other words, cyberspace alone cannot comprehend the negative side of identity because its very logic expels such a notion from its matrix. Yet the negative side is still there until the very day we die. Kierkegaard gives us a practical window into human existence to show why the self that is self-relational, composed and restructured from various personae through cyberspace, and enmeshed in the computer/biological feedback loop experiences despair. This notion of self is not grounded in anything beyond itself. Thus, human nature properly conceived is in the image of God and relates its relationality to God in a strange loop where eternity and existence come together in the human self, creating and sustaining that self by

giving definition to its relationality. Karl Barth sees a similar relationality at work in human nature so conceived. For Barth human nature properly conceived as the image of God “is not that of a fixed state of being (*Zustand*) but of a dynamic movement, a circular arrow moving toward the human side from God and returning from the human side toward God to make the circle complete (III/2, 162-63)” (Johnson 86). Likewise Simone Weil sees human identity grounded in its “inchoate striving after Good” (Allen and Springstead 180). For Weil there is no essential self that necessarily continues through time, but the self is a self only as it can receive the Good. The self is thus constructed in relation to God. What Barth further offers us is an understanding of society and the relationships we have with others along these same lines.

39. How do we conceive this relationality in terms of the community? For Barth there are two ways of conceiving relationality that he locates in his doctrine of the Trinity. The first relation is God *with* God. This relation is the being of God, or as is sometimes referred, the essential Trinity. The other relation is in God *for* God, or the economic Trinity. This is a more active view of God’s relationality where God is for humanity in Christ. This is the ground for fellowship and community that we may also be *for* each other. This understanding implies that even when we conceive of the self that relates itself to itself and rests transparently in the power that established it, the self is still incomplete. A complete notion of self rests in its ability to be for other selves in a community. In this way, Barth is able to connect human nature to community while relating the whole back to God. Human nature and community *together* reflect a proper image of God in the created order. The point is that human relationality reflects divine relationality as human relationality is grounded in the power that created it (Johnson 87).
40. A virtual community in cyberspace, by contrast, does not have the necessity for obligation to the other or the need to be for the other in this way. Rather, the virtual community is most commonly thought of as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 5). Like the rationality for joining a church that is without walls, that seems to promote egalitarian and democratic value, and that eschews dogmatic controversy or conflict, so the virtual community adopts as its impetus the shared feeling of liberation and utopia. “Community seems to refer primarily to relations of commonality between personas and objects, and only rather imprecisely to the site of the community. What is important is a holding-in-common of qualities, properties, identities or ideas” (Wilbur 47). What problematizes this utopian vision is the open door that admits fluid forms of self, which may or may not be true representations of the members of a community. To form a viable community that incorporates a shared understanding, with the effect of creating connectivity in the midst of social fragmentation, identity of the community members does not seem to be an issue. Thus,

There is the invocation of community, but not the production of a society. There is “groupmind,” but not social encounter. There is on-line communion, but there are no residents of hyperspace. This is another synthetic world, and here, too, history is frozen. What we have is the preservation through simulation of the old forms of solidarity and community. In the end, not an alternate society, but an alternative to society (Robins 89).

41. As with identity, the community is pulled by the gravity of the logic of simulation and flees

from the physical world, abandoning it to form synthesized and simulated versions of what we wish a society to be. Moreover, the image of a kiosk seems quite appropriate since the connective tissue that holds such simulated societies together is the sending and receiving of information in a collective consciousness. The call for moral obligation so central to the formation of a community rooted in a dynamic relationality to God is simply unnecessary. While this can be simulated to some degree, the simulation is not the same thing as the reality simulated. Like Disney World, the presence of the real is no longer needed in the midst of a mythic utopia such as the notion of community in cyberspace. Rather, the real community of the church hinders the utopian dreams of the virtual with its constant unpredictability, phenomenal chaos, and restrictive denominational and dogmatic boundaries. The church in the physical world, in "RL," becomes a barrier to religious experience rather than a doorway to enlightenment.

42. The challenge of the simulated logic of cyberspace to any theology of identity and community rests in the relation between the feedback loop and the Möbius band. The feedback loop rests in the blurring of polarities between human and machine holding any ontology together with the logic of simulation in cyberspace, which blurs the distinction between real and simulation. The problem here is that any notion of self or community will take on the characteristics of and be shaped by this logic, which will call their very reality into question. The Möbius band holds the relationship between the human and divine, existence and eternity, in a paradoxical loop where the relationality between the two poles creates identity at the center. This identity is complete when it relates itself not only to God but also to the other, making ethical and moral demand a central component to the creation of an identity that rests in God's power that establishes both identity and community. This view of human self cannot exist, so it seems, if it is grounded in the simulated logic of cyberspace. This is a logic that consciously tries to separate itself from any concept or notion outside of itself that could act as its ground. Grounding reality, self, and community in cyberspace is not really a grounding at all—it is the mere simulation of a ground, but it is groundless.
43. Cyberspace takes the postmodern notions of plurality, deconstruction, intertextuality, web, paradox, contradiction, and simulation and brings them to a material form that we can interact with and use as a tool. In this way, it is a perfect fit with a postmodern world that has been seeking ways to incorporate these notions into society for years (e.g. the Situationists). Baudrillard's philosophy of culture adds a significant lens that magnifies the processes that go on within cyberspace, despite the fact that this philosophy took root twenty years before the World Wide Web, the Internet, and ".com" were widely available signs in our culture. What is so startling, perhaps overwhelming, about the way that signs and information are brought to us through cyberspace is the sheer volume of it—each piece demanding our undivided attention. The heightened pluralism that takes shape in cyberspace is a perfect fit for a postmodern culture that celebrates pluralism and web metaphors for rationality.
44. The challenge that this logic poses to theology and the church is very real. As technology continues to expand the notion and use of virtual reality as a commodity, the concept of reality will change more rapidly and thus transform notions of self and community. The technology of cyberspace literally covers the planet in such a way that some have called it the *noosphere* that de Chardin envisioned. If it is true that technology shapes and transforms our environments invisibly, and sometimes rather explicitly, then perhaps we are in the midst of a global-scale transformation the consequences of which we are only beginning to understand and predict. The church and the relationship between God and humanity forms a

perpendicular plane to this transformation and will be forced to speak to it. The other option is to adopt unconsciously the logic of simulation into theological consciousness as a means of development and transformation. I have argued that the former is the better option of the two, and that the latter carries with it potentially disastrous consequences.

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