In a recent survey, the nation’s religious newswriters selected the invention of movable-type printing as one of the most important religious developments of the second millennium, second only to the Reformation (Religious Studies News, February, 2000). If newswriters still concern themselves with such things a century or even a millennium hence, the invention of computers and the Internet will surely hold a similar rank, and be associated with a religious transformation on a par with the Reformation. No one in 1500 could have foreseen the sweeping consequences of Gutenberg’s innovation of 1436; neither will I pretend to foresee all the ramifications of new computer technologies on our species. There are more than enough popular books and articles that offer various prognostications, from the glowingly ecstatic to the darkly apocalyptic (Cobb, Zaleski, Kurzweil, Joy).

What is interesting is how deeply theological this literature is. It offers a vision of a salvific future in which our deepest dilemmas will be solved and our deepest desires realized. Quite remarkable, for instance, is the number of times one runs across the name of Teilhard de Chardin in this literature. Many, like Jennifer Cobb, see Teilhard’s predictions about the coming realization of the “noosphere” fulfilled in the Internet (Cobb, 1998).

In short, current literature on the new computer technologies manifests a theology of salvation, a soteriology. Passing over many serious ethical issues raised by the Internet, I would like here to explore, however incompletely, this theological and soteriological dimension.

I take as my touchstone a fundamental ethical and soteriological proposition derived by liberation theologians from Matthew 25: our salvation is integrally tied up with how we respond to the suffering of this world. This principle casts a stark light on the new Internet revolution, insofar as it is not only leaving the poor behind, but is rendering them increasingly invisible. In a recent New York Times Magazine article, James Fallows asks why, in comparison with past periods in U.S. history, there is so little discussion about the continuing reality of

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poverty during the present economic boom. He contends that part of the answer lies in the "dot.com" culture, the "spiritual symbol" of our era of wealth, driven by new Internet technologies. In this culture, "for reasons of geography, personal background and working style the tech wealthy have very little sense that they live in the same country as anyone who is poor" (Fallows, 78). Fallows suggests that the new technology is accelerating a process already noted by Christopher Lasch (Lasch, 1995), in which the educated and managerial elites of this nation remove themselves from society and its dilemmas to inhabit a global community—one in which the poor are invisible.

In Rio de Janeiro the wealthy use helicopters to commute from their homes to their workplaces, avoiding the traffic, poverty, and crime in the city. In the United States we can accomplish the same task even more easily by "telecommuting" or by living in enclaves like San José which are so expensive that the people who clean the offices at night cannot afford to live there. This raises troubling theological questions. As Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan the two religious professionals had at least to make the physical effort to cross the road to pass by the wounded man; if by chance we encounter them in Cyberspace, we can avoid the wounded of this world with the click of a mouse.

Yet is it not the case that the Internet has the potential vastly to extend our capacity for solidarity with the suffering majorities of this world? One can visit the diocese of Chiapas, with its efforts to grapple with low intensity warfare in that southern Mexican state (http://www.laneta.apc.org/ cdbbasas/). Who can forget the telefaxes from Tienanmen Square, or discount the power of e-mail to inform and mobilize people about, for instance, the continuing struggle to shut down the (recently renamed) School of the Americas at Fort Benning?

So perhaps, as for any technology, the effects of this one will depend upon the uses to which we put it. Technologies have the power to amplify the vices and virtues of the societies within which they are situated, and the Internet is no exception. This is true enough, but technologies are not just tools external to us. They express and reinforce a certain set of values which constitute a vision of what it means to lead a meaningful life now, as well as of what we can hope for in the future. The more pervasive they become the more they have the potential to form us according to this vision. This is particularly true of the Internet, and nowhere more so than in the modern West, with its intoxicating confidence in the salvific potential of science and technology (Gilkey, 90–119). What is the soteriology of the new Internet age? From what does it promise salvation, and how does this soteriology affect what we hope for in the world, and the ways we act, or decline to act based on that hope?

I suggest that the soteriology of the Internet is as old as Gnosticism. It offers freedom from the body. This soteriology is most dramatically proposed in the prediction that in the not-so-distant future a person will be able to "download" her or his consciousness into a computer that models the neural network of the brain, and not only "live" forever, but escape the physical-temporal limitations of organic bodies (Kurzwell, 101–32). It is present in the Cartesian conviction that what is most human about us is our capacity to observe, analyze, conceptualize, predict, and manipulate our environments. On this view, computers become intelligent, self-conscious, and even spiritual, at the point at which their powers to do these things consistently equals or exceeds that of, say Gary Kasparov (with his famous chess loss to Deep Blue). Other human qualities—particularly those quintessentially embodied human powers of compassion.
and mourning, of love, of commitment and fidelity—are seen as inessential, or at best, derivative and epiphenomenal compared with the more basic power of a purportedly disembodied intellection.

Computers may or may not become “intelligent” on these terms. The deeper issue is that as their functioning and use becomes more and more “second nature” in the Information Age we run the risk of recognizing as rational and intelligent only the particular ways that they allow us to think and to relate to one another, misunderstanding or even dismissing others, and modeling ourselves according to the idol we thus create (Psalm 115). Walter Ong has elaborated this insight with great erudition in his work on the difference between cultures which depend primarily on oral/aural media for retrieving and communicating knowledge, and those that have developed the technologies of writing (Ong, 1978, 1982). He writes that “the new technologies of print and electronics have affected not just the external world but the interior of man’s mind, the entire noetic economy in which he experiences himself and the world around him” (Ong, 1978, 112).

In comparison with primarily oral cultures, societies that trade in writing or print conceive of knowing and knowledge as increasingly abstracted from the concrete, embodied engagement of human knowers with their world and in conversation with one another. Meaning is more likely to be conceived of as something static, frozen on the page. This tacit assumption finds expression in an understanding of revelation. Fundamentalism, for example, understands revelation in terms of a fixed meaning exhaustively expressed in invariable propositions—whether inscribed in the Bible (the Protestant version) or in ecclesial doctrines (the Catholic brand). Such an abstract view is almost inconceivable in an oral culture where the requisite standardized texts simply do not exist. But, as the modern advent of fundamentalism shows, it is all too conceivable in literate cultures.

With the coming of the electronic media we enter a new chapter, a culture of “secondary orality,” overlaid on the text-based culture of modernity. The intellectual reverberations of this technological-culture shock wave are found in postmodern thinking which rejects the alleged stability of meaning enshrined in texts in favor of an ephemeral, constantly shifting play of meanings more appropriate to the age of MTV and the Internet. With the disembodiment, diffusion and dispersion of knowledge along the countless strands of the World Wide Web comes a concomitant dispersal of the web surfer’s sense of self. If I spend countless pseudonymous hours in chat-rooms, or moving at the click of a mouse over vast distances and times, is it any wonder that a sense of firmly located, embodied identity becomes more and more tenuous? That I find myself in a new, lonelier crowd (Markoff)? That I am more likely to experience myself “channeling” multiple identities (Brown), or find myself in need of spiritualities, like that offered by popular spiritual writer Thomas Moore, that put me in touch with a stable center, a soul or inner self that transcends and unifies the dispersed “selves” produced by the Internet Age (Wuthnow, 142–67).

A faith committed to a Word made Flesh must resist the Gnostic dream of a disembodied self dispersed over the Internet. A tradition that affirms, beginning at least with Gregory the Great, that love itself is a form of knowledge (amor ipse notitia est), must question the reduction of human knowing to abstraction, analysis, manipulation of data and prediction. Let this not be construed, however, as a Luddite appeal for the renunciation of this technology. After all, the technologies of writing and printing brought many of the same dan-
ners. Yet, while the Church embraced these technologies of the written word, it also embodied the written word, re-enfleshing it with the illuminated manuscript, or by means of spiritual exercises like lectio divina or monastic chant. These Christian appropriations of writing and printing both relied on and exploited their new possibilities, but brought them within a broader, richer stream of embodied human relationship to our world and to God. Handel’s Messiah or Mozart’s Requiem depend on highly developed abstractive technologies of writing and print, yet they are deployed in an unparalleled way to immerse us bodily in the realities of human mourning, longing and hope.

What is more, visionary figures like Francis of Assisi or Dorothy Day insisted on the continuing need for a radical embodied knowledge, love and imitation of the Word made Flesh. This is even more necessary today. However much the telephone, telefax, and Internet have strengthened our solidarity with, say, El Salvador, they would be ineffectual without the deep, costly, yet life-giving embodied solidarity exercised by Ita Ford, Maura Clark, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan. It is important that we continue to remember and to exercise embodied forms of knowing and loving our world: liturgical celebration, simple quiet contemplation, a preferential option for the poor.

Perhaps we should adopt a Sabbath “fast” from our new technologies, learning from a Jewish insistence on rest and on the celebration of the adequacy, indeed the overwhelming goodness of our primary, physical embodiment, despite its poverty when measured against the seeming omnipotence and omnipresence of the computer. Our stubborn fidelity to our fragile but precious embodied selves, and our creativity in appropriating this new technology to it, will determine whether the Internet is a humanizing force or a dehumanizing idol.

References


