

Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 34 · Number 3 · July 2010

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

eVangelism: The gospel and the world of the internet

Rob Haskell (USA)

Since we are exploring the meaning of 'the world' it seems appropriate to spend some time thinking about the gospel in the world of the Internet. I will discuss several aspects of interactivity related to this technology, such as social media and virtual reality, and argue that a Christian evaluation of them must be done from the standpoint of a biblical understanding of creation.

I What is Web 2.0?

When the Internet became popularly accessible in the 1990s it was essentially an information provider and the average Internet user was a reader of text. This was 'Web 1.0' and it can be categorized as static. But even in the 90s it was recognized that this was the first stage of something much more interactive.¹ This interactive Internet that we now experience is called 'Web 2.0.'

The first intimations of the interactivity that would soon dominate the web were seen in chat programs such as AOL, ICQ and later MSN Messenger. Next came blogs. These were important because they allowed anyone to have a presence on the web, they provided for interactivity through com-

ments, and they were designed for immediate publication. Another development was collaborative content creation via the wiki platform, most spectacularly implemented by Wikipedia.com. Here content is created and edited by any number of people who have permission to log into a site and edit its text.

Social Networking is the newest and perhaps most important development of Web 2.0, beginning with Friendster.com around 2002, then MySpace, and the now ubiquitous Facebook, which, if it were a country, would be the 4th largest in the world.² There are many other social networking sites as well.³ These usually include a user profile, a mechanism to meet 'friends' (fellow users) and ways of interacting with those other users, be it by chatting, live comments, or tools for sharing photos, videos, links, etc. Social networking is also growing on the mobile platform with such web applications as Twitter. These allow

1 D. DiNucci, 'Fragmented Future', *Print* 53 no. 4 (1999): 32. Digital edition: <<http://www.cdinucci.com/Darcy2/articles/Print/Printarticle7.html>> accessed March 24, 2010.

2 Digital Evangelism Issues Contributor, 'Web Trends in 2010', Digital Evangelism Issues, <<http://www.internetevangelsmday.com/blog/archives/1112>> accessed March 24, 2010.

3 For a list of social media sites by region of the world see, Wikipedia contributors, 'Social network service', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Social_network_service&oldid=334640674> accessed March 24, 2010.

users to interact with each other, but they also interface with social networking websites.

There is no doubt that Web 2.0 is here and has transformed the way in which many use the Internet. There is still a great deal of 'static' information available, but making information available in a digital format is not the real revolution. The most significant innovation is related to interactivity, and especially social sites.

II Social Networks and Face to Face Reality

It has been common in recent years to express concern about the anonymity of Internet interaction and the possibility of reinventing one's identity online. For example, in 2000 Veith and Stamper worried that,

An individuals' presence on the Internet consists only of a screen name, which need not have any connection with one's real name. The screen name—unlike an actual name—has no social context, presenting no family, with no community ties or obligations. In cyberspace one can function apart from any fixed identity, surfing in total anonymity, where no one knows who you really are.⁴

This can still be an issue today. But social media has introduced new dynamics that may in fact reduce the problem of 'flexible identity'. Social networking sites are expressly built on

existing face to face relationships. Their goal is to connect us to our current and past friends, relatives and acquaintances. Along the way, users are also introduced to friends of friends and may build 'merely virtual' relationships with them. But the nature of the medium dictates that even these virtual relationships will not be anonymous, for they come about in a web of relationships that is firmly anchored in the face to face world. As more and more people go online to find friends and acquaintances, anonymity in relationships may become less of an issue. The trend to social networking shows that Internet users are less interested in anonymity than was thought.

Some may want to insist that pornography is still a large issue related to anonymity, and this is correct. But even this area has felt the impact of social networking. As Internet search guru Bill Tancer explains, there has been a direct relationship between the rise of social media sites and the decrease of web searches for sex. His explanation, quoting a candid if crass college student, is, 'who needs porn when Facebook gives you the opportunity to hook up in the flesh?'⁵ While this is itself no doubt problematic, it does illustrate my contention that there is a significant trend away from the Internet as a place of decontextualized interaction towards the Internet as another dimension of our real world social life. Even if this young man does 'hook up' with someone through Facebook, he will know that person and their mutual friends.

⁴ Gene Veith and Christopher Stamper, *Christians in a.Com World*, Focal Point Series (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2000), 128.

⁵ Bill Tancer, *Click* (New York: Hyperion, 2008), 26.

III Virtual Reality

An important exception to this trend is online communities such as secondlife.com that create virtual worlds. These are graphically intensive sites where one can create an identity and use an 'avatar' (a graphically generated character) to move around in the world, interact with others and perform 'virtually' most of the common tasks that humans perform in the face to face world. The trend here is definitely to disconnect from the face to face world and immerse one's self in another, or *second*, life. This raises the question of the status of the virtual world, and the place the church might play in it. In what follows I will use 'virtual reality' to refer to a range of more graphically complex systems of digital simulation, but it is worth noting that many Web 2.0 applications share enough features with virtual reality that my conclusions also apply to 'the regular Internet'.

In his recent book, *SimChurch*, Douglas Estes affirms that virtual communities such as Secondlife.com are the way of the future: 'For many people, the virtual world will be the world where they carry on more interactions and conduct more transactions than in the real world. It will be the place where they find love, soothe their feelings, make deals, and worship.'⁶

Estes argues that Christians must move into the virtual world, create virtual churches and establish a virtual Christian presence. The interesting point for our discussion is that Estes

seems happy to allow the virtual world to be its own universe without reference to the face to face environment.

While some might want to critique Estes' agenda by arguing that the virtual realm is not real enough to support meaningful relationships, recent experiments by the EU-funded Precencia project have made a good case for the psychological reality of virtual input. It appears that at some level the human mind does not distinguish between 'real' and virtual, even when a subject is aware that the input is artificial. So, for example, people in a virtual room that is on fire may panic and bolt for the door, or a young man may feel fear when he experiences standing on the edge of a pit.⁷ Various experiments showed that, 'people's responses are similar regardless of whether what they are experiencing is real or virtual. The plausibility of the events enhances the sense that what is happening is real.'⁸ This is so, even when the quality of the virtual reproduction is not very high. Perhaps none of this should surprise those of us who are accustomed to having emotional reactions to vicarious experiences like reading and television watching, but certainly in virtual reality vicariousness has been taken to a new level.

This insight into the psychological reality of virtual input dovetails with the modern Kantian emphasis on reality as perception, and the possibility of

⁷ Interaction with virtual worlds is accomplished by means of VR gear, such as goggles, gloves and even full body suits, which are programmed to cooperate with the simulation.

⁸ ScienceDaily, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/05/090511091727.htm>> accessed March 24, 2010.

⁶ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 20.

manipulating experience via artificial input that was latent in that world-view. Modern science may have been driven by the attainment of knowledge for knowledge's sake, but in the post-modern world the goal and impetus of science seems to be moving towards improving human experience. If it turns out that experience is nothing more than perception, science will inevitably turn in that direction.⁹ Indeed, a parallel trend is already underway in neurobiology, where the big money pharmaceuticals are shifting more and more to mood alteration drugs.¹⁰ Why spend the energy required to change the world when we can simply change the brain?

But while many embrace virtual reality, there is also significant discomfort with these trends at some levels, as two recent Hollywood science fiction films illustrate. In *Gamer* (2009) a genius has created a technology that allows one individual to experience the sensory input of another and also control them. Thus, a physically unattractive man can enjoy sexual experiences through the body of a live hired woman, and a wealthy teenager can control a live death row inmate in a real death match. The film's message is unambiguously negative, suggesting that un-incarnated experience tends to break down normal constraints and quickly become abusive, coercive and dehumanizing. In another film, *Surrogates* (2009), the

world is populated by realistic androids that are controlled by their human users from the safety of their homes. In this way people can enjoy the real world at a distance without any personal danger or significant consequences to their actions. One of the subplots involves a man's frustration with his estranged wife, who refuses to meet him in the flesh but only interacts with him through her surrogate.

IV God's World and Human Worlds

Since virtuality raises questions regarding the nature of reality, the best place to begin a theological response is creation. Our biblical story tells us that the problem with the world is that God's good creation (so called seven times in Genesis 1) was spoiled because of human sin, that is, the breaking of trust between humans and God and between each other. It also tells us that God's goal (his mission, if you will) in salvation is the restoration of that good creational intention. The biblical vision climaxes with the new, redeemed world in which God and humans once again enjoy intimate fellowship. The Christian worldview, then, is intimately tied to the given world because the biblical goal is the reconciliation of human experience within God's creational ideal.

This provides a stark if ironic contrast to rational scientism's agenda of the endless improvement of human experience. Though it is in one sense completely this-worldly, rational scientism also proceeds from the Gnostic premise that the physical world is defective and inadequate and that

⁹ Of course, for Kant knowledge of the world was perception plus transcendental categories. But I think my point still stands.

¹⁰ See Charles Barber, *Comfortably Numb: How Psychiatry Is Medicating a Nation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).

physical constraints are a hindrance to human expression. If the human project of world-making beginning with Babel and ending with Babylon the great in Revelation, has been to build a reality in which sin may flourish, we would expect virtual worlds, then, to follow this same trend and create spaces where created givenness is set aside in favour of self-focused human fulfillment. It comes as no surprise, then, when we see that in Secondlife.com everyone is young and beautiful, there are no boring lives, and as we might expect, sex is very prominent. The created order itself embodies love, but worlds of human creation tend to embody human rebellion and selfishness. This virtual world creation is what N. T. Wright has called 'feeding the Gnostic dream'.¹¹

Of course, virtuality may also serve any number of good ends. But I am attempting here to establish a basis from which to evaluate the Christian involvement in this new world. The root question we must keep returning to is whether any kinds of virtualities, be they as light as chatting and emailing or as intense as wearing virtual reality headgear, will cooperate towards the restoration of God's creational vision: the reconciliation of all things under Jesus Christ and the restoration of God's loving purposes in his creation.

Failure to think biblically will lead to one of two common fallacies. First, the pragmatic option of saying 'we can

reach more people this way!' and rushing in headlong to new methodologies without considering whether they might be consistent with our root principles. We have to remember that 'reaching' people within the context of humanly created worlds can come at a very high price. The second fallacy is the obscurantist option of rejecting anything that is new, and masking our personal discomfort in the face of change with pious traditionalism. Here we risk missing great opportunities to expand the kingdom and legitimate new ways to express our humanness.

V Church Website as Evangelistic Tool

In light of the creational basis for evaluating virtuality, the fact that in some respects the Internet is moving towards an integration of online life with face to face reality is welcome. It is the extreme immersion in Internet or virtual reality that will most tend to devalue creational reality.

Many commentators point also to the inadequacy of electronic communication as it stands today vis-à-vis face to face communication. Emotion and intention are communicated in myriad ways which a listener picks up both consciously and subconsciously.¹² Further, we as interlocutors cannot hide our reactions or feelings as easily in face to face interaction, leading to greater vulnerability, which is healthy. This all points to using the Internet as a dimension of our face to face interac-

¹¹ N. T. Wright, perf., *NT Wright on Blogging/Social Media*, prod. Bill Kinnon, July 2009: <<http://vimeo.com/5682808>> accessed March 23, 2010.

¹² David Pullinger, *Information Technology and Cyberspace* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 79-80.

tions, not as a replacement of them. This principle may be fruitfully applied to the use of a church website for outreach.

Most church sites appear to be designed for the church member or the Christian looking for a congregation, but in societies that use the Internet a church web site is arguably the congregation's most public presence. It is also a non-threatening venue in which to explore church. Thus a church website should be geared primarily to the outsider. It should be a digital dimension of the face to face reality of the church community, and should inform and invite the non-believer to join that face to face community.

Ceri Longville agrees that Internet relationships need grounding in the face to face world, but sees the 'virtual community as a fantastic opportunity and tool to encourage initial contact'.¹³ She also notes the importance of the quest for community in the postmodern environment, which also tends to assign value to face to face interaction. What follows are some of her important recommendations for creating effective outreach church websites which also use the Internet in a manner that is also consistent with the principles established above:¹⁴

- They must follow best practices for design: be succinct, avoid clutter, have clear navigation, etc.
- Church websites should be an authentic reflection of the church, not an ideal. To be dishonest here would mean to fall into the temptation of using virtuality to create our own world.
- Church sites should inform and thus reassure the outsider about the church experience. This can be done by showing pictures of people in the worship service, explaining the events as to outsiders and including a prominent list of Frequently Asked Questions, or FAQs.
- People are key. More than a lengthy textual explanation of the gospel content (which would be a web 1.0 approach), personal testimonies and pictures of real people will effectively communicate the sense of church community and the difference our faith can make to the website user. This is an example of the positive power of the Internet to communicate on a level previously inaccessible.
- It will be important to have prominent contact information and prompt responses to enquiries. However, other forms of interaction may also be considered—for example, a pastoral blog.
- Creative gospel presentations. In the web 2.0 environment there are many graphically intensive presentations of the gospel that can be incorporated into a church site free of charge. We should also consider the pastor's sermon under this category. It is especially important for the pastor to consider that if his sermons are online, he is speaking not only to his congregation on Sunday morning.

¹³ Ceri Longville, 'Reaching the Community with Church Websites,' (MA diss., Redcliffe College, 2008), 22. Available online: <http://www.internetevangelismday.com/docs/churchsite_dissertation.pdf> accessed March 24, 2010.

¹⁴ See chapters 4 and 5 of Longville, 'Reaching the Community with Church Websites'.

Many churches now also participate in social networking sites such as Facebook and the current level of Internet technology provides many different tools for this.

VI Conclusion

Although the Internet and virtual reality can feed the 'Gnostic dream' of indi-

vidual self-satisfaction, there are also many opportunities to expand healthy relationships and do evangelism in this new virtual world. The church would do well to take hold of this opportunity without forgetting that Internet and Virtual Reality are also part of the human urge to create alternative worlds which facilitate sin.

The separation of beliefs and religion in Europe

Birger Nygaard (Denmark)

"My beliefs have nothing to do with what is happening in Church"

One of the amazing features of our time is the way in which religions themselves are undergoing transformation in our fast changing globalized cultures. We used to think that religion was a pretty static feature in society and that the beliefs of any specific religion were only marginally adjusted. Today we see massive changes taking place, both in the area of radicalization through religious fundamentalism and through secularization of religion in affluent (Western) societies, where religion seems to change contents, character and role in the minds of believers and societies. We are still in the middle of this transition, the outcome of which is not yet clear.

Christian mission has not been good at reaching people of high religious heritage (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, etc.), whereas we have been very successful in reaching peo-

ple of animistic/folk religious heritage. We still need to focus much more on reaching the high religions. Similarly, however, we need to pay keen attention to the change in the very perception of religion—including our own faith, Christianity—due to globalization/pluralism/secularization. These globalizing forces are likely to affect people from disparate religious backgrounds because they are characterized by the same *subjective turn* and individualization, which is such a strong feature of secular, often affluent societies.

The following case study focuses on how this change is influencing religious life in Denmark, a society that is in an advanced secularized state. It is based on a recent PhD study.¹ In this

1 Ina Rosen, 'I'm a Believer—but I'll be damned if I'm religious', *Lund Studies in Sociology of Religion* 2009: 8.