

The Princeton Theological Review

VOLUME XVII, No. 2

FALL 2010

ISSUE 43

THE CHURCH AFTER GOOGLE

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HACKING INTO THE CHURCH MAINFRAME: A THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT OF THE POST-INFORMATIONAL WORLD

Henry Kuo

... *the first social ethical task of the church is to be the church ...*

- Stanley Hauerwas¹

It should come as no surprise to the reader that we live in the midst of an increasingly technological society. By technological we refer to the internet-based communications technology that is commonly referred to as Web 2.0. The term was conceived by Darcy DiNucci to describe a new evolution to the internet.² In Web 1.0, internet users communicated to each other largely through webpages and e-mails. Web 2.0, on the other hand, signified a greater communicative revolution through which internet users can get to know each other. This includes social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as information sources such as Google or Yahoo. Corporate interests routinely utilize this evolved internet in their marketing efforts, since by gathering specific necessary data online, they can tailor marketing efforts for each specific individual for the maximum effect.

It is common to perceive such technological advances as both ethically neutral and as *Pareto optima*; that is, they come with many benefits and few, if any, drawbacks. Even though the internet revolution has, unfortunately, revolutionized the pornography industry for example, most people whose exposure to communications technology is limited to common websites and e-mail are tempted to conceive of such technologies as an ethical free-for-all, where everyone can enter and find the information they desire with no effect whatsoever on their ethical worldviews. Even churches have wasted no time in taking advantage of Web 2.0 technologies, in some cases going so far as existing only on the internet. These are the so-called virtual churches where people can literally attend church in their underwear—at least in theory.

1 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 99.

2 Darcy DiNucci, "Fragmented Future," *Print* 53, no. 4 (1999): 32.

But is Web 2.0 and its related communications technology ethically neutral? With the exception of obvious ills, do they indeed have very few, if any, ethical drawbacks? Even before the internet underwent its evolutionary ascension, computer engineers and philosophers have given some thought to these questions. Few have taken such insights and applied them to the life of the church. How does the church make use of such technologies? How has the church abused it? And, most importantly, what is the church's witness in a world of Facebook, Twitter, and Google?

THE POST INFORMATION AGE

In 1995 Nicholas Negroponte wrote about a "post-information age." At the time, the internet was beginning its transition from purely academic and research applications into commercial sectors. His book, *Digital Beings*, was important because it was arguably one of the first books that took seriously the notion that such post-Google technologies were not ethically neutral.

What, then, is the "post-information age?" Negroponte describes three aspects of it. First of all, the paradox of mass-media is becoming "bigger and smaller at the same time."³ Previous mass-media technologies focused on expanding their reach in order that they might be exposed to a larger demographic. Post-information communications technology becomes so far-reaching that nobody is left untouched, but at the same time, it is so small that it caters to the single individual as demographic of interest. Thus, as DiNucci notes, the internet will become fragmented because the information provided will become increasingly individualized, catering towards the individual habits and preferences of the user.⁴ Amazon.com makes use of such a communications strategy in their product "recommendations," which are based upon the customer's purchasing history. The objective is to tailor the communications so that it applies wholly—that is, to make it completely relevant and personal—to as many individuals as possible.

The second characteristic of the post-information age is an emphasis on immediacy, which is the result of a gradual dissolution of time and place in life.⁵ Previous communicative technologies depended on some sort of proverbial schedule. Friends would meet at a certain time and place, for example, where they can keep each other updated on the latest goings-on in life. But with Facebook, Skype, and Twitter, this updating is instant and occurs anywhere. A friend could be at a concert in Los Angeles and—via Twitter—tell his friend in New York about how amazing the concert is. Even economic exchanges have taken on an air of immediacy. Previous exchanges took place at a location—usually a store—at a time the consumer had parceled out for the specific purpose of consuming. Today's consumers could purchase anything in a few seconds. The location of the purchase is a virtual store such as Amazon or iTunes, which is easily accessible at any time of the day, seemingly operating outside the bounds of time and space.

3 Nicholas Negroponte, *Digital Beings*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 164.

4 DiNucci, "Fragmented Future," 32, 221.

5 Negroponte, *Digital Beings*, 167.

An increasingly individualized mass media coupled with the consumers' immediacy leads to a world where information is no longer "pushed" to the masses, but that information is simply made available for the masses who fish for the information they desire, making them "information consumers." Such is, indeed, the post-informational world embodied by Google, whose search service is precisely just that: allowing internet users to find whatever they desire a split second. This year, Google introduced a new "instant search" device whereby the website comes up instantly with search results, to be updated with every new letter the user types into the search parameter. Such new technologies make "fishing for information" faster and easier.

When such "informational consumerism" abounds, no longer does the important information become news, but the information alone is the news since it is so tailored to individual tastes.⁶ Thus, amassing more of them is better. And just like material consumerism, we become convinced that the more we know about "stuff," the farther along we progress in terms of human development. The quality, the meaning of the information we accumulate, is not as important as the fact that we accumulate a lot of information.

The third aspect is a more interconnected world, where geography becomes less of a limiting factor. It is indeed possible now, through Google and Wikipedia, to know much about China without actually having to physically visit the country. Yet knowledge and intimacy are not the same. The accessibility of knowledge leads us to easily deceive ourselves into thinking that we indeed know "stuff" with some degree of familiarity. David F. Wells writes, "We have undergone a staggering enlargement of our personal circumference, which now contains within it many whom we 'know' without actually ever having met."⁷

What is the significance of this for post-informational age? It is instructive to compare the communications revolution that is the internet to the revolution that was the printing press. The printing press, simply put, allowed for the voices of the few to make a difference for many by way of making the distribution – and therefore dissemination – of information more efficient. The success of the Protestant Reformation was thereby ensured as the theology and writings of the Reformation magisterium were quickly distributed to everybody. No longer were spiritual truths accessible only to clergymen; now they were also made accessible to the laity.

Yet history would reveal the dangers of abusing the privilege of informational accessibility. An unfortunate consequence of the Reformation was that the laity, if not instructed properly, could embrace an individualistic reading of the Scriptures. The modern repercussions of that were not lost to Stanley Hauerwas, who wrote that "no task is more important than for the Church to take the Bible out of the hands of individual Christians in North America," for they "read the Bible not as Christians, not as a people set apart, but as democratic citizens who

6 Ibid., 170.

7 David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 1998), 82.

think their common sense is sufficient for the understanding of scripture.”⁸ Such a communications revolution can inflate the self by, as Graham Ward warns, approximating “modernity’s Promethianism... [which is] the vision of human potential... where human beings can become whatever we will, even children of God.”⁹

The point is that advances in communications often empower us to think that we are all we need, that human progress is solely in our hands. It makes it possible for us to think that because we have so much information readily available to us we can indeed play Creator and fashion a virtual world that is the consummation of our hopes and dreams. Now, virtual worlds, where individuals exist and interact among each other as digital avatars of themselves, do indeed exist. But these worlds are merely created worlds upon which the hopes and ideals of the real world are projected. The result, of course, is what Ward describes as an implosion of secularity where “humanism, contractualism, freedom, democracy, liberalism, progress, dialogue, consensus have collapsed upon themselves and, now inverted, are celebrated in and through simulacra.”¹⁰

THE HACKER ETHIC

Yet, the greater disconcert comes from the opposite direction of thought, which is the direct application of post-informational values in the real world. What results is a society whose morality will embody the virtues of the virtual world. The most systematic treatment of those “post-informational virtues” was given by Pekka Himanen, who was able to conceive an entire ethical system drawn from the intellectual milieu that gave birth to the computing revolution in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In his book, *The Hacker Ethic*, Himanen—a computer engineer turned philosopher—was not referring to the hacker as a cyber-criminal, but as a person who perceives the advance of technologies—particularly ones pertaining to computing—as transcendent. Thus, the hacker ethic is fundamentally a non-utilitarian ethical worldview. The computer hackers of the late 20th century in particular were not driven by financial gain or worldly fame, but simply the vision of the endless possibilities that technological progress avails to society. This, coupled with their pure, intense interest and love for their craft, coagulated into the hacker-ethical *Weltanschauung*.

Himanen’s philosophy is interesting because he was not elucidating a philosophy of technology, but also a peculiar philosophy of living and working. Most businesses remunerate employees according to talent, which undergirds the corporate entity with a utilitarian ethic. Workers would engage in work simply because they were being paid for their efforts. Himanen advocated the dismantling of such utilitarianism and duty-boundedness, advocating instead that workers should work purely out of interest for their work. Thus, their craft is their

8 Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 15.

9 Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge Press, 2000), 251.

10 *Ibid.*, 252.

passion, almost their *raison d'être*. Yet, while he restricts his inquiry to business institutions, it is quite evident too that his virtues have wider societal implications as well.

Himanen's hacker ethic is virtue-based, but his virtues are not inspired from Aristotelian or Thomist sources. Just as most virtue ethicists were concerned with the attainment of "the good life", so was Himanen. The virtues of his conception were based off similarities between many well-known hackers of his day, from Linus Torvalds (the creator of the operating system Linux) to Steve Wozniak (a co-founder of Apple Computers, Inc.). Curiously, there are seven virtues, all of which are important in the development of the technological "good life" or, as Himanen termed it, "personal development."¹¹ However, they can be generally summed up into three.

The first is *determinacy* in which the individual sets a goal for himself or herself, and then proceeds to meet that goal. Himanen, however, stresses that such a determinacy must be augmented with the other three virtues. The individual must also procure the information and skills necessary to meet the goal. A desire to write a software program, for example, must be accompanied by the necessary skills. The second is *efficiency*, which is the effort expended in order to ensure that the goal is met, accounting for changes in circumstances. If the programming language has changed in the course of the project, the individual hacker must be kept abreast of its development and incorporate that into the project. The third is *measurability*, which provides a means whereby progress and goal attainment can be evaluated. So, in the example of programming software, the hacker would regularly test a program to ensure that it is free of errors.¹²

Himanen's hacker ethic is a philosophical step-forward in terms of linking post-informational technologies to the human ethical picture. Yet, it is troublesome because the hacker ethic operates much like any software would; it requires regular updating! Mozilla Firefox, a free internet browser created in 2004 by the Mozilla Foundation, has gone through three major revisions, and many minor updates since. In fact, a fourth revision is currently in its testing phase. Software requires updating because the preferences of the users, as well as the virtual environment where the software is used, change frequently. Likewise, the hacker must continually stay abreast of changes and developments in order to continue pursuing his or her interest. It is in this sense that Himanen describes hackers as "self-programmable workers."¹³ Because they are driven by passion for their fields of interest, self-management is necessary so that hackers can efficiently progress towards achieving their self-made goals.

It should not be surprising that the Prometheism which is evident in Negroponete's appraisal of the post-informational age also holds true with the hacker ethic. Just as the post-informational age emphasizes a "we are all we need" mentality, the hacker ethic places progress solely in the hands of the individual.

11 Pekka Himanen, *The Hacker Ethic: A Radical Approach to the Philosophy of Business*. (New York: Random House, 2001), 111.

12 Ibid., 114.

13 Ibid., 112.

No longer does he or she need to have some outside motivation—be it religious, financial, or political—in order to live the good life. As long as the individual pursues something of great interest, the good life is made easily accessible with the proper motivation.

THE CHURCH AND THE WEB

While discussing the characteristics of the post-informational world, it is worth discussing the way in which the philosophical ethics of both Negroponte and Himanen can be seen in the church today. Douglas Estes, for example, conceived of the virtual world—that is, the digitally created world represented by programs such as Second Life and World of Warcraft—as a missionary frontier. He praised the digital ministry of a few pastors who were able to set up a virtual church in Second Life. Individuals who were represented in the simulator as their virtual avatars would attend church, hear a sermon, and sing songs of praise. Since these individuals do not attend a physical church in person, theoretically these parishioners could “attend church in their pajamas,” or even not needing to leave their beds. Estes praises such innovation, writing that,

The church has been around the block for two thousand years, and our world takes it for granted. As we attempt to engage the post-Christian world with the truth of the gospel, we will need to draw up new blueprints for being the church; it is absolutely necessary that we don't allow church culture to hold us back from reformulating the church for this time and place.¹⁴

Such a conception of the church is problematic for two reasons. First of all, such a time and place does not exist in the real world; they are only simulated. Some people, in fact, participate in these simulated worlds because they have encountered disappointment in reality. Thus, these virtual realities are all the more attractive because they offer a refuge from—or, in extreme cases, a replacement of—the world. By starting a “church” within the virtual spheres the church legitimizes a withdrawal ethic instead of offering a real place of sanctuary in the world.

Of course, it is true indeed that there are many who recreationally participate in virtual worlds. But if it indeed is so, then everything in the virtual world is recreational. Exchanges, interactions, and other forms of actions in the virtual world would simply be that. Whether walking into a virtual store to purchase goods or driving a half-dead avatar to the virtual hospital, all activities would be recreational activity, as would attending a church. Thus the church is robbed of her ontological witness; she is denuded of her identity as the God-created and God-shaped institution, and becomes one that is created and shaped by the world. For anything within that virtual world is a creation of the real world. It has no identity apart from it because is simply a human-constructed simulation of reality.

¹⁴ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 52.

Secondly, Estes' observations do not take into account how the church lives out her witness. The church does not need to reformulate for any time and place to make the Gospel somehow attractive or relevant. The church simply needs to *be* herself. It is through such an ontological living that the post-Christian, and post-informational world can realize the transformative power of the Gospel. To put it differently, accommodating to the world is not a good missional strategy. After all, as Ellen T. Charry reminds us eloquently, “[the church] makes us, we do not make it.”¹⁵

The lack of a robust ecclesiology is, unfortunately, common and costly. Without a sure identity, the church is forced to look for it in the wrong places. Even though they might not publicly identify with it, some have found Himanen's hacker ethic to be a perfect resting place. The virtues of the hacker ethic are inwardly directed, for individuals are able to accomplish their self-ordained goals only through measurable actions that are driven by themselves. In the context of the church—a “hacker church,” if you will—is an institution moved by her people, not by the Holy Spirit. It is not a church founded on theological truth, but founded on secular virtues.

Many churches, and even whole denominations, embody these virtues perfectly. Take, for example, a website from the denominational leadership, advocating a 10-step process for church planting by which - if followed correctly - the number of churches can thereby increase.¹⁶ This is a textbook example of a hacker ethic finding context in a church or denominational setting. First of all, the denomination has a goal: church-planting, or more specifically, to increase the number of denominationally-affiliated churches. The means of accomplishing that is to have an efficient process (the ten-step method) in which its success could be measured—in this case—by noting how many new denominational churches have been founded. Again, the focus is on numbers. Apparently, for the denomination, it was more important to have more churches than to ensure that existing churches are faithful in their public witness to their communities.

Without an ecclesiology, the church has no recourse for witness except by doing “stuff.” Thus, the church becomes not that much different than a non-profit institution that serves to provide religious services catering to the widest demographic possible. The virtual churches that have drawn praise from Estes are only post-informational versions of such a church strategy, because the simulated churches simply cater to the audience of one. How, then, can the church today have a real witness in a post-informational and sometimes simulated world? Perhaps the ideal starting point is to revisit what the church simply is.

15 Ellen T. Charry, “Sacramental Ecclesiology,” in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel Treier (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 205.

16 The Christian and Missionary Alliance, “Key Biblical X Factors / X Equals Multiplication,” *Alliance News & Stories*, August 22, 2006, accessed September 3, 2010, <http://www.cmalliance.org/news/2006/08/22/key-biblical-x-factors-x-equals-multiplication/>.

THE CHURCH IN A POST-INFORMATIONAL WORLD

The church, properly understood, is created and instituted by God. Ellen T. Charry defines the church as “that body whose identity, vision and mission are constituted by its participation in the work of God in Israel and Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ The church is not the product of her members who somehow effect the will of God by their strength alone. Instead, the church aligns herself with the will of God. It is important to note that this alignment is a deliberate turning away from the self-centered, individualist milieu that is fiercely prevalent today. In fact, a robust ecclesiology and the hacker ethic cannot coexist, for the hacker ethic requires that each person is empowered with the power for self-progress. The church, on the other hand, maintains that such empowerment, especially when aggregated together, is doomed to failure. The Old Testament narratives tell of the Tower of Babel, which was supposed to be the crowning achievement of a people who, having mastered the technology of fired bricks (as opposed to the weaker dried versions), desired to build a great city as a lasting testament to their greatness. God’s foiling of their grand plan was not because of humanity’s potential threat to His authority, but a gracious measure to prevent humans from self-destruction! The hacker ethic insists on the organization or institution as an aggregation of many self-driven people. Importing such an ethic into the life of the church can only lead to schism. Thus, it remains imperative that the church continually safeguard against any notion of self-empowerment, but embody the empowerment that can only be made possible by the Holy Spirit. The non-individualist nature of participation in the church is reinforced by understanding that such participation is more akin to participating in a family than in a voluntary non-profit organization. Once an individual belongs to a family he or she has to participate; there is no withdrawal from the family at will because the individual’s identity is inseparable from that of the family. Furthermore, the identification with the family persists regardless of location. My membership in my family, for instance, does not cease upon exiting the house. Likewise the Christian does not simply “shut off” his or her Christian identity upon exiting the church building, because the individual’s ecclesial identity persists despite shifting locations.

Perhaps that is why virtual worlds such as Second Life and World of Warcraft are so alluring. Participating in those worlds allows the participant to temporarily renounce his or her worldly identity in favor of a new and personally created one. This renunciation is possible because the participant has no reason to import his or her identity into the virtual world. After all, what is the point of having a virtual world if it were no different than the real? Unfortunately for some this virtual world is so much preferable to the real one that they have developed an internet addiction, spending an inordinate amount of time interacting as their virtual avatars in those worlds.

How, then, should the church respond in her witness? Simply this: by living in the reality of the Gospel. Very much unlike Second Life or World of Warcraft, which are opportunities for people to withdraw from the unpleasantness of the

17 Ellen T. Charry, “Sacramental Ecclesiology,” 214.

real world, the Gospel—the *euangelion*—encapsulates the grim reality of living in this world within the broader narrative of God’s plan as told in the Scriptures. The church, in other words, does not seek to withdraw from the struggles and imperfections of the world, but confronts them with the reality of the Gospel, which—as Stanley Hauerwas writes—is that

The story of God does not offer a resolution of life’s difficulties, but it offers us something better - an adventure and a struggle, for we are possessors of the happy news that God has called people together to live faithful to the reality that he is the Lord of this world.¹⁸

It is important to realize the centrality of *koinonia* in the church. The most common translation, “fellowship”, has lost most of its original meaning over the course of time. Today the general idea of fellowship centers around the notion of friendship which, while not reprehensible *per se*, is merely a superficial relationship when compared with the biblical intention of “fellowship.” For friendship connotes affinity; one usually makes friends with those whom he or she likes. The theological definition of *koinonia*, on the other hand, entails, as Pope Benedict XVI wrote, a “mutual acceptance, giving and receiving on both sides, and readiness to share one’s goods.”¹⁹ Unlike mere friendship, *koinonia* brings people together selflessly based on a common identity afforded by being members of the body of Christ.

Furthermore, a *koinonia* exists between individuals because they, having heard the good news and owned it, live in the reality that the Lord is king. Thus, *koinonia* flies in the face of the post-informational hacker ethic, not only because such an ethic assumes the kingship of the individual alone, but also because the ethic requires a more-is-better ethic. The church, on the other hand, does not need more purpose-driven programs to cater to smaller audiences within a wider demographic, but she simply needs only to *be* the church. It should be noted that the early nascent church was not known for having programs that catered to the masses, but simply met and ate together “with glad and sincere hearts.”²⁰

What, then, is the role of such communications technology within the life of the church? Simply this: to enable all God’s people to live out the Gospel message faithfully on a global scale. Because such technologies have made location no longer an impediment to communication, Christians in a post-informational world can no longer claim ignorance to the plight of brothers and sisters across the globe. Our *koinonia*, in other words, must extend beyond national borders, beyond the confines of our familiar personal circumferences to include international brethren as well.

It is important to note that through such a witness, the church is actively fighting against the inwardness emphasized by post-informational hacker ethics.

18 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 149.

19 Joseph Card. Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of the Faith: The Church as Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 69.

20 Acts 2:44-47 (NIV).

That is, the church uses the technology that spawned the hacker ethic not to increase self-reliance and self-worship, but to direct the church's witness outwards. Instead of promoting isolationism, the church can use technology to promote a community that takes *koinonia* seriously. In doing so, she places technology in its proper place: as a tool to be used, instead of as a basis for an ethical system the church cannot accept.

WHEN WEB 3.0 ARRIVES...

It has to be said that Web 2.0 has been largely positive for human development. It is extremely useful for individuals within the church to update each other on the goings-on of their lives, in order that *koinonia* may be practiced. Not long ago, a friend of my church had a family emergency, which he posted on Facebook. Within minutes, prayer requests and inquiries about whether he needed help appeared in everybody's e-mail inboxes. Indeed, such advances in technology have enabled Christians to practice *koinonia* regardless of location. Certainly when used within its proper context, technology is a windfall for the church in her private life and public witness.

The argument of the article, however, stays the same: that the communications revolution ushered in by Web 2.0 has, indeed, a dark side to it. While it retains the potential to make the world flat—that is, to draw people regardless of location together in communication—it also presents an alternative worldview for its users. On the surface it certainly looks innocuous, but in actuality it is incompatible with the worldview of the church, for the church is the possessor of the Gospel message and lives its implications out in reality. The post-informational era described by Negroponte and the hacker ethic outlined by Himanen are both premised upon the supreme authority of individuals in determining their own progress and destiny. The church, on the other hand, insists that such authority rests only with God. Furthermore, the church serves as a powerful witness in contrast to the fragmented post-informational world when her members unite and participate together in *koinonia*.

Even now, rumors are circulating that the world is slowly transitioning to a Web 3.0, where computers are able to “read” online information, allowing for users to more precisely locate their desired information.²¹ Of course, new informational technologies will once again alter every user's ethical perspective. Yet, so long as the church continues to hold true to the Gospel message, she will continue to be a place of sanctuary for many who will be lost in the sea of information-gathering.

Henry Kuo is currently an MDiv junior at Princeton Theological Seminary.

21 Cade Metz, “Web 3.0,” PC Magazine, March 14, 2007, accessed September 14, 2010, <http://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2102852,00.asp>.