Sacred space and time in the computer age

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THE COMPUTER AGE IS HERE TO STAY. Even though it is still in its infancy, it has already had a tremendous impact on almost every aspect of life. For example, *Newsweek* magazine, in its issue of 20 September 1999, described the influence of the internet on business, health, sex, family, politics, education and science.[1] Religion and church life are no exception.

When Michael L. Keene surveyed religious web sites, he found that they help all the faithful (not just the clergy) look up a wide range of information, help build community within established denominations as well as among like-minded people scattered everywhere, provide opportunities for people to engage in prayer and religious conversation, and 'bring a refreshing wind of serendipity into our faith lives' through the many unexpected discoveries which occur while working through the web's religious sites.[2]

As a further indication of the influence of the computer on religion and religious studies, I received a questionnaire while preparing this article which surveyed students at the Washington Theological Union in Washington DC, where I formerly taught. The survey of forty-two questions asked about the students' use and perception of electronic communication. It covered access to the internet, the value of web sites (including the school's own), and the use of e-mail to converse with professors about studies. Perhaps the most interesting question was: has the use of e-mail or a web site helped you grow spiritually?

That question is at the heart of this article. In order to answer the question, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of what constitutes spirituality, but such clarity is extremely hard to come by. Definitions vary widely, as do the resources and experiences which 'count' as spiritual. Rather than try to sort through this complex scene, I prefer to turn to the Gospel of John for a brief description of the key elements in the spiritual life of Christians.

A gospel model of spirituality

In the first chapter of John's Gospel, verses 35–42, two disciples of John the Baptist hear him describe Jesus as the Lamb of God, as he walks by. This phrase has messianic overtones derived from the lamb whose blood saved the Israelites from the avenging angel in Egypt. It may also have suggested the suffering servant of Isaiah, led like a lamb to the slaughter. It certainly arouses the disciples' curiosity and they begin to follow Jesus.

When he senses their presence, he turns and asks them what they are looking for. They seem to be taken by surprise and ask him in turn where he is staying. Jesus invites them to come and see, whereupon they spend the day with him. After that, Andrew, one of the two disciples, finds his brother, Simon, and brings him to Jesus.

Four key elements of the spiritual life are summarized in this story. First of all, the two disciples were spiritual seekers. They were already followers of John who had been drawn to his message of repentance and preparation for an imminent intervention by God. They also must have trusted John because, when he pointed out Jesus, they immediately began to follow him. Trusting a spiritual guide to point the way into a fuller experience of the holy is a hallmark of the spiritual life. This is usually a gradual process, filled with success and disappointment, patience and perseverance.

The second element of the spiritual life in this story is the importance of space. The disciples want to know where Jesus lives, not what he believes or does. They are drawn to be in the space he occupies, to get to know him in terms of where he dwells. His space becomes a place of personal encounter. Sacred space is a key ingredient in the spiritual life, whether it is designated as such or holds special meaning for certain people as a place where they feel close to God.

Third, the disciples spend time with Jesus. The Gospel does not say what they did during this time, but it is not hard to imagine that they talked about things of common interest: their occupations and families, what drew them to John the Baptist, how they felt about his message, what they knew of Jesus, what Jesus himself had to say. No doubt they also shared food and drink. Their time together became sacred because of what they did with it. And if they spent the rest of the day with Jesus because it was the sabbath, then their time together takes on this additional spiritual quality. In any event the time they spent put them in touch with the holy and moved them to share it, as the fourth and last element in the story indicates.

Andrew went to fetch his brother, Simon, and lead him to the experience he had just had with Jesus. The spiritual life is contagious. When one person enters a place of encounter with the holy and spends meaningful time there, it is hard not to share it with others.

Computer spirituality

What if this episode had occurred today instead of two thousand years ago? How might it be described? Most likely, there would be a single disciple rather than two disciples – ours is a more individualized age. Being a spiritual seeker, this disciple might sit down at a personal computer and 'surf the net' to find out what is available. Instead of a trusted spiritual guide, the contemporary seeker would rely on an internet search engine; instead of heeding the guide's suggestions, the seeker might type in a keyword such as 'Lamb of God'.

The computer would list all the items in its data bank that matched the keyword. This would undoubtedly include a number of web sites which would use graphics, sound and other forms of virtual reality to describe what the person or organization at that site has to offer. Our modern seeker would quickly sort through the list (depending on the speed of the computer's processor), clicking on the menu items and internet links which seem most relevant to the search.

If one of the web sites proves really exciting, the spiritual seeker might e-mail friends and acquaintances about it or consult a religious list server or chat room to share the good news with others, in effect bringing them to the source of the seeker's discovery.

In this modern, electronic version, people still seek a fuller spiritual experience and share the results of their search with others. The primary difference is the way space and time enter into the search. In the remainder of this article I want to focus on the role of space and time in the spiritual life and consider how computer technology affects these basic dimensions of spiritual experience.

Sacred space

In the spiritual life space is the setting for an encounter with the holy. It is not empty; it is already filled with the presence of God. The goal is to become aware of this presence and enter it where it seems most alive and appealing.

Some places (churches, chapels, meditation rooms, sanctuaries, shrines) are designated as sacred because they are set aside for the spiritual purposes of prayer and worship. Their architecture and fur-

nishings are designed to enhance this experience, but more important is the memory of faithful and devout disciples who have used these same spaces before. Their spiritual experience lingers and fills the environment, giving it an unmistakable human continuity which a person feels upon entering such space.[3]

In addition to designated places, there are other locations which readily convey or contain a sense of the sacred. For many people nature has this effect. Sunrises and sunsets, mountains, forests, waterways and the plants and animals that inhabit them put many people in touch with the sacred. Then there are specific places, special to individuals, which reveal the presence of God in powerful and enduring ways. The streets where I marched on behalf of civil rights, the cemetery where my father is buried, the place on the beach where I met my soul mate – all these have a spiritual meaning to me which perhaps no one else feels in quite the same way.

The story of John's disciples illustrates another aspect of sacred space. They wanted to know where Jesus lived, because where a person lives is an expression of who the person is. A person's space is a place of self-revelation and, for those who enter it, it becomes a place of personal encounter. By entering Jesus' space, the disciples entered his life and allowed his reality to intersect with theirs. Once inside his space, they picked up clues about him which facilitated their encounter. And the clues must have been positive because they stayed the day.

In short, sacred space is a place of mystery, of revelation, of wonder and of expanded humanness. How does this compare with space in the computer world?

Cyberspace

The world of computer technology is the world of cyberspace. Cyberspace is not really a place in the sense of an inhabited space shaped by human experience. Cyberspace is a network of systems designed to convey data in encoded forms. For this purpose it works amazingly well, but it relies on standardized, uniform processes which have precious little human feel to them. Sometimes the closest that computer users get to an awareness of other human beings is when they can't log on because of the number of other people on line.

A more serious problem is that the equipment and infrastructure required to enter cyberspace are not available to everyone. Like other resources both natural and manufactured, access to cyberspace is concentrated in the hands of a relatively small portion of the world's

population. Whether this will change in the future is unclear. For the present it is clear that cyberspace is privileged space available to the few.[4]

For those who do have access, the equipment required is stunningly uniform: a computer, a keyboard and a monitor (conveniently packaged as one in the case of laptops). One computer terminal is more or less exactly like every other terminal, as evidenced by the public computer rooms in libraries, universities, hotels, banks and retail stores. The commands needed to operate computers are virtually identical, whether consisting of keystrokes or icons. All of this is incredibly efficient technologically, but woefully deficient humanly.

To compensate for this human deficiency (and implicitly to acknowledge it), computer technicians and advertisers employ a user-friendly language ranging from the very term 'personal' computer and 'lap'top to the self-creation of personal identification numbers and passwords. Despite these efforts, it's hard to imagine the disciples of John asking Jesus whether he has a web site they could visit. And if they did want to visit his web site, they wouldn't have to 'go' anywhere to do so. There would be no sense of following, of journeying, of making pilgrimage, or even of arriving – all mainstays of the spiritual life.

Cyberspace facilitates contact but not encounter. As a medium of communication it is already unsurpassed for its ability to link people simultaneously who are spatially distant and enable them to com-municate with one another. It also makes possible the almost instant communication of the same message to a large number of people through e-mail. However, in all these contacts there is no face-to-face presence in the full, direct sense of human encounter.

The feeling of mutual presence is one of the most powerful features of sacred space. It occurs when a community gathers to pray, when an individual meets with a spiritual guide, and when believers feel con-fronted by their God either in private or in public. At such moments there is an inevitable degree of self-revelation which is spiritually significant and humanly real.

Cyberspace avoids this openness to unintended exposure by placing the control in the hands of the user. One need only reveal what one wishes about oneself; contacts in cyberspace must take it at face value. This may make the individual at the keyboard feel powerful and secure, but it eliminates the surprising, humorous, insightful and ultimately human self-discoveries that occur in encounters with others. It's hard to imagine that Jesus would have perceived Simon as the rock for his

followers without meeting him face to face, or that Simon would have become that rock if he had complete control of Jesus' perception of him.

A cyberspirituality?

The spiritual deficiencies of cyberspace pointed out above are not an indictment of the technology; they are an indication of how much cyberspace differs from the traditional sense of space, especially sacred space. This difference is likely to alter the traditional sense of space only if persons become so addicted to their monitors and the world it virtually displays before them that they are disorientated when they enter the environment of real space. There is little sign of that happening, primarily because the virtual reality of cyberspace is still modelled on the real world of physical space.

On the other hand, the virtuality, the impersonal uniformity and the controlling one-sidedness of cyberspace may well become a positive contrast experience similar to other hi-tech, hi-touch reactions.[5] The more people use the hardware of high technology, the more they welcome simple, personal gestures like hand-written notes and home-made gifts. In this case, cyberspace could move people to appreciate anew the reality and value of sacred space and to seek it out in their own experience.

Cyberspace will not replace sacred space despite the churches, worship services and spiritual communities currently on line. E-space remains more of a technological maze than a spiritual mystery, and when the human spirit longs for mystery, it will continue to seek it in sacred space, off line. Is the same true for time?

Sacred time and computer time

In the spiritual life, time is a graced progression. It is not pre-measured into uniform segments; it is structured around the key events of a person's (or community's) spiritual growth, often referred to as *kairos* moments. Ordinarily these include initial conversion, spiritual direction, the practice of spiritual exercises and disciplines, learning various forms of prayer and meditation, and using one's charisms for service. In between these specially graced events there are periods of preparation, study, experiment, routine, disappointment and surprise.

There is no prescribed timetable for achieving spiritual progress. The spiritual life is a gift from the Holy Spirit who interacts freely with each person. Nonetheless, most people seem to move through certain stages

from purgation to illumination to mystical union. Along the way there are distinct schools of spirituality to become acquainted with, forms of meditation to try, psychological, emotional and physical dimensions to integrate.[6]

Liturgically, daily time is ritualized by the Liturgy of the Hours, weekly time by the celebration of the Christian sabbath on Sunday, and annual time by the liturgical calendar. This system creates a rhythm of memory and expectation, but it does not guarantee that spiritual growth will occur predictably on these occasions. They are a framework within which each person and community charts its own experience of the mysteries celebrated by the whole Church. The main point is that sacred time is spiritually eventful time, whether unexpected or prepared for, whether brief or long in duration, whether methodically or spontaneously spent.

The story of John's disciples illustrates these features of sacred time. They probably did not expect John the Baptist to direct them to Jesus, especially with the use of an ambiguous title, but they responded when the suggestion was made. Their response no doubt came from hours of listening to the Baptist, mulling over his message, debating it with one another, relating it to their knowledge of Scripture and what they heard at synagogue, testing it against their own innermost hopes, feelings and thoughts.

When Jesus invited them to his dwelling, they accepted and spent the day. This was not necessarily a twenty-four hour day, because, in John's Gospel, time designations ('hour' and 'day') often refer to special, *kairos* events. Even if it was a twenty-four hour day, it was not a day like any other. It was a transition between the disciples' prior experiences and expectations and the beginning of their relationship with Jesus. It marked a progression in their spiritual lives that would profoundly change them.

In essence sacred time is God's time, shared according to the divine pleasure and defining a person's existence not by length of days but by depth of experience. Sacred time is a duration punctuated by *kairos* moments for which one prepares, into which one enters, and from which one draws the meaning, insight and value which lead to the next stage of spiritual progress. How does computer time affect this process?

Computer time

Computer time is orientated to speed rather than events or meaning. The megahertz replaces the *kairos* as the standard of value. The faster a

computer can process data and move around the internet, the better it is. This is perfectly consistent with the purpose of a computer, but it can foster a megahertz mentality. This means that people always expect rapid results and are impatient when anything takes longer than they think it should. These twin reactions can easily lead people to devalue processes that move slowly – reflection, analysis, planning, personal relationships, community formation – and to short-cut existing or traditional processes. Neither reaction works well in the spiritual life.

As already indicated, spiritual progress is often gradual, unpredictable, and marked by long periods when nothing very special occurs. Discernible results, much less measurable results, are slow to come by. If the two disciples in John's Gospel had had a megahertz mentality, they would hardly have spent the whole day getting acquainted with Jesus, nor would they have achieved the spiritual progress they did.

Computer speed is valued because there is so much information to be processed and data to be calculated. In some endeavours (business, finance, medical research, political polling, police investigations), getting data quickly can be critically important, but it can also reinforce certain cultural attitudes that are inimical to the spiritual life. Getting the most or the latest information faster than anyone else fosters a spirit of win–lose competition rather than win–win co-operation. In the spiritual life the goal is not to get there before everyone else but to get there with everyone else.

A megahertz mentality also feeds the consumer impulse to acquire more faster, to keep it for oneself, and to treat it as a sign of superiority over those who are slower. This is especially unfair to groups who currently lack computer access to the internet and other sources of information. And it contradicts the humbling and overriding truth in the spiritual life that no one owns it and no one can control it.

Finally a megahertz mentality tends to confuse acquiring information with gaining knowledge. The information highway is not by itself a path to wisdom and understanding. Computer technology deals with data, not interpretation, and is biased towards compressed chunks of information rather than conceptual reasoning, dialectical debate, or extensive argumentation, which are the skills basic to knowledge.

In addition, the sheer deluge of information which the computer makes available discourages thorough analysis and critique while promoting a private, almost gnostic form of evaluation. The sense an individual makes of the data is the sense they have. The spiritual life, on the other hand, is a cumulative discipline enabling a person to appropriate the insights and experiences of others which have been tested by

time and tradition. While speedy computer processors can retrieve vast amounts of data rapidly, they don't appropriate it for anyone personally.

A megahertz spirituality?

The spiritual shortcomings of a megahertz mentality are potentially more serious for the spiritual life than the shortcomings of cyberspace, noted above. The impact of rapid access to what one wants, the corresponding impatience when it doesn't happen fast enough, the reinforcement of competitive and consumer attitudes, and the tendency to be the sole arbiter of what is retrieved are more likely to carry over to other areas of life, such as spirituality, than is the virtual reality of cyberspace.

This megahertz mentality could show up as an unwillingness to wait for the Spirit to initiate *kairos* moments, a compulsion to be the first to try every new spiritual offering on the market (and to try only new offerings and only those on the market), or an assumption that the spiritual life can be acquired through the right combination of technology and application. It is true that fast computers can save time, but if the cell-phone phenomenon is any indicator, it is almost certain that the time saved will not be spent on the more time-consuming pursuits which the spiritual life requires. Cell-phone users seem compelled to use their free time to make more calls, even when they are ostensibly spending time with another person.

On the other hand, rapid access to great amounts of information has two distinct advantages. First of all, it provides quickly, easily and attractively a vast pool of resources and options for spiritual living. In itself this signals to web-surfers and computer-age youth that spirituality is a major interest to many people. How many may be gauged by the number of visitors to each web site or participants in a chat room.

More important, rapid access to this information is an enriching and broadening service, especially for people who do not have direct access to such resources where they live, or who simply want information about what the spiritual life is, how it has been lived historically, and what aids and opportunities are available today. In this respect the computer functions somewhat as John the Baptist did, catching people's attention, arousing their interest, and pointing them in a helpful direction.

At the same time, as noted above, information is not in itself knowledge. Data do not come critically interpreted. To assess the accuracy, value and effectiveness of the computer's yield, it is

necessary to obtain informed and reliable evaluations. Here the chat rooms, interactive opportunities, and e-mail features of computer technology are unique services. They provide ready access to authorities, spiritual experts and co-seekers all over the world. Tapping into this source of expertise and guidance, or simply finding people with similar interests willing to talk, is an unprecedented resource, especially because the current internet etiquette prompts people to respond quickly to e-mail requests and web site visits.

Conclusion

Computer technology will not replace the traditional spiritual life, but it can be a valuable aid in preparing for and leading to authentic spiritual experience. The virtual reality of cyberspace might awaken a new appreciation for the human and spiritual reality of sacred space, while the megahertz speed of computer processors can put spiritual seekers in touch with a wealth of resources and guides almost instantly. To settle for a cyberspirituality or a megahertz spirituality is to settle for too little, but to assume these electronic developments have nothing to contribute to spirituality is to assume too much. Somewhere in between, the computer age and the spiritual life are trying to find each other. And they should, because both are here to stay.

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NOTES

1 'How the internet is changing America', a special report, *Newsweek* (20 September 1999), pp 38–78. Excerpts from this issue are, of course, available through the magazine's web site, www.newsweek.com.
2 Michael L. Keene, 'The church on the web', *The Christian Century* vol 116, no 22 (11–18 August 1999), pp 774–778.
3 On the importance of sacred space and its connection to 'the commons' which the public uses, see Patrick T. McCormick, 'Sacred space: balancing the sanctuary and commons', *Worship* vol 74, no 1 (January 2000), pp 37–52.
4 On this and other points of comparison between the computer age and the prophetic church, see Charles Ess, 'Prophetic communities online? Threat and promise for the Christian church in cyberspace', *Listening* vol 34, no 2 (Spring 1999), p 87–99.
5 See John Naisbitt, *Megatrends* (New York, 1982), pp 39–55.

6 See the appropriate headings in Michael Downey (ed), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1993).