God in Cyberspace

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WHERE IS GOD located? Despite the Enlightenment, despite the scientific revolution, traditional Christian piety has located God within time - called eternity - and space - called heaven. 'Our Father, who art in heaven', the faithful pray, confident that God is somewhere, as opposed to everywhere or, even worse, nowhere. To the contemporary academic theologian - as to the post - Enlightenment scientist - things are not so simple for time and space are now construed differently. Yet each of us carries vestigial memories of a 'happier' time, when to the eyes of simple faith, eternity was an easy concept to deal with. We took the perspective of Psalm 90:4 'For a thousand years in your sight are like a day when it is past, or like a watch in the night', and mapped out time by projecting from the known, a twenty-four hour day, to the unknown, a thousand years, and did this by the simple means of multiplication.

Nothing makes so powerful a bid to the human heart as the promise that we will live forever, albeit in heaven. Nothing is so comforting as the sense that more time means more of the same kind of time, with regular sunrises and sunsets to measure out our days. Scriptural images of eternity are reassuring for that very reason. Whatever science and reason teach us, part of the Christian community, part of the Christian imagination wants to be confident that when Lazarus gazes down from Abraham's bosom, he is either wearing his day clothes or his nightclothes. It is as though we want eternity to be a regulated affair, with something to break up the implied tedium of the 'eternal rest' for which we pray.

As with time, so with space. To the eyes of faith in a pre-scientific world, there was room in the heavens for a place called heaven. Yet science now offers us another corrective, showing us that space is infinite. There is no room for heaven to be a distinctive place. Moreover the scientific project which has enabled us to map space in the outer world, where the work of geographers and cartographers gives us emotional as well as intellectual stability by locating us, is matched nowadays by the speculations of modern phrenologists, those who seek to map the mind. Our interior geography, particularly as contained inside our heads, is the subject of intense interest and research. The brain is all the rage; we want to understand both its hardware and its software. These days science gets into our heads with machines as subtle as any that have been sent to the moon and into outer space.

Yet they too have displaced us, for now there is no room for the soul. It too is a casualty of the race for space; it no longer fits. Yet the desire to be located, constellated and configured remains overwhelming, so there is evidence of the soul's passing. Counsellors and therapists make a living from this work, poets and artists paint their way towards it, artists and musicians give it a shape in visual and auditory

signals. The need to know who we are and how we fit is a major part of the human project.

God in the pre-digital world

So what about God? Where is God? In a pre-scientific world, such as that described by Dante, God lived in the divine space beyond the stars. In Dorothy L. Sayers' remarkable translation of the Divine Comedy the final lines of each of the books are translated to maximum effect. Dante fixes our eyes on heaven, the place he located so confidently, beyond the stars, the place of encounter with God, with a human self which is no longer wandering blindly though a dark wood, but which can gaze upon the face of God.

Once science had discovered that space is infinite and that it has no boundaries, we were left with a dilemma. Where does God fit if there is no room for heaven? How can we say that God dwells in a named place if, logically, there can be no such thing as heaven? Theologians grapple with the spirit world, with that space beyond known space where the human soul flourishes and which can be called heaven; or with 'sacramental' space, namely the places where God is present within this world and within the Christian community. In many respects though, popular spirituality hangs on to the notion of a real-time/real-space heaven as a place we could go to. We may sing from the same hymn sheet, but very different things are happening when we sing the hymns of Christian devotion, for we mean different things by the words we sing. An example: 'Praise to the Holiest in the height/ And in the depth be praise,' has many different ideas of where these supposed heights and depths might be. To the p oet or musician, they might be emotional space; to the builder's merchant or marine engineer, physical space; to the astrophysicist or brain surgeon, the world of macro and micro investigation; to the faithful, the heights of heaven and the depths of hell; to the priest, the dispensation of grace.

These fragmented images of space are the legacy of a pre-digital age. Now though, in the new millennium, new insights have entered the public consciousness: the computer which deals in digits rather than atoms; and the Internet which lays out a brand new concept, 'virtual' reality.

Atoms and digits

What is the difference between atoms and digits? For a start, you can see atoms. They cluster together and turn into things. The obvious example is a fax. If you want to send information to a friend you can write a letter. This is atom-communication of a high order, for the piece of paper on which you write will end up in an envelope; it will wing its way across the country or between continents without changing into anything else. It belongs to the solid universe of which our hymn-writers wrote. It is a real thing which you can hold in your hand and it is an extraordinarily accurate and efficient form of communication. Only is it? For nowadays, speed is all.

Enter the fax, stage left. The invention of the facsimile machine is a landmark event. For now written communication becomes volatile. You write on one piece of paper; it goes into a machine; and your information emerges at the other end on a different piece of paper. So yes, we are still dealing with atoms but something subtle has

happened in the middle. For the period of time during which transmission takes place, your precious information stops being available in the form of atoms. Momentarily it becomes digits, little electronic signals which whizz their way invisibly down the wires in binary form and which emerge as typing or - miraculously - as an image of your handwriting at the other end.

I visited a community of religious sisters at Ballarat in Australia where three generations of the same family were members. Great auntie, aged over ninety, had just discovered the fax machine. During the morning recess, she would slip through from the retirement home alongside the school where she had once taught and get the office staff to send her faxes for her. The machine gave her a new lease of life. I admired her enthusiasm for the new technology and the way in which her apostolate of letter writing to her former students was renewed.

What would she have made of emails? I suspect that she would have become an email junkie. Where a letter is strictly about atoms and a fax is a mixed economy mode of communication, with atoms and digits working together, the email is purely digital. It begins life on your keyboard, gets transmitted through the ether in a series of digital packages and arrives on the screen of your correspondent without so much as a brush with atoms. Only when you or your correspondent choose to make 'hard' copy by printing it out does it assume atomic form, does it become a thing which you can hold in your hand.

A brand new concept has entered the human imagination, one which is as significant for objects and things as radio was for sound and the television for images. Some participants in this new revolution are ecstatic and see the Internet with some of the enthusiasm of early radio enthusiasts. The early story of wireless reminds us that it too was received lyrically by some. An example, taken from Hilda Matheson's Broadcasting, published in 1933. This is prophetic writing of a high order.

Broadcasting is not strictly another machine; it makes use of apparatus (although the tendency is moving rapidly towards simplification); but fundamentally it is a harnessing of elemental forces, a capturing of sounds and voices all over the world to which we have hitherto been deaf. It is a means of enlarging the frontiers of human interest and consciousness, of widening personal experience, of shrinking the earth's surface. It is only possible to see it in its right perspective by seeing it in the scale already suggested - a milestone in the development of communications as momentous as its forerunners, and, like them, accompanying and assisting a new stage in civilization. Broadcasting as we know it, moreover, is in its infancy; it is comparable to the rudest scratchings on the caveman's dark walls, to the gutteral sounds which served the first homo sapiens for speech. It is not possible to pass final judgement upon its full significance; this is still wrapped in shadows....

Broadcasting, and its allies, telegraphy and telephony, are only stages in the long process that began with man's existence some three hundred thousand years ago, and may end in some form of thought transference of which we now have no conception.

Maurice Gorham of the BBC wrote in 1952 that, 'The history of broadcasting is short but tremendous. At the end of the First World War broadcasting did not even exist; by the beginning of the second it had covered the world. A new medium, a new habit, a

new profession, and a new industry had all sprung up. All based on the new power to transmit sounds of every kind over distances to people in their own homes.'

It is precisely this newness that we must explore: for a new medium generates new ways of thinking.

Virtual reality

In a digital world a variety of new theological ideas become available to us. For a start, we can locate God in a new way, so the inadequacy of the old models is no longer so troubling. For we now have a fourth or even a fifth dimension, one which lives alongside the world of atoms which we call our universe. If this digital world is so accessible to our computers, then why not a spiritual equivalent? Suddenly God fits because there is a place for God to live. The idea that angels may indeed dance on the head of a pin gets re-instated, for there is more to space and time than can presently be seen and communicated. Virtual reality provides us with a powerful metaphor, one which asserts that the world of digits is matched by spiritual reality, the world where our spiritual selves may flourish. It offers a new dimension, one beyond the limitations of metaphors based on atoms or on the work of science. We are invited to flourish in cyberspace.

What will this flourishing look like? How are we to come alive in cyberspace? What is the great task of Christian living? A gospel answer might be to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself. A present-day answer might be more banal: to be relevant, to try to pretend there is not a huge chasm of dissonance between most of the interests of present-day society - football, food, sex, the minimum interest rate, Harry Potter, the weather and those of the Churches.

The early Church Fathers were wiser than we are. They saw the Christian project in far grander terms than we are inclined to. For them, the great Christian task was to become fully alive, to live out the insight of Jesus who said, 'I am come that they may have life, life in all its fullness, (John 10:10) his great work, Against the Heresies (Book 4 chapter 20), Irenaeus put it like this: 'The glory of God is man fully alive.' Well, person fully alive. I find this a transforming concept, because it does not introduce artificial distinctions into our imaginations. It does not suggest that sex, drugs and rock and roll have to be in conflict with faith, hope and charity. It offers us an altogether greater and grander field of moral reckoning than we ordinarily allow ourselves. It already speaks to the frame of reference offered by cyberspace, because it transcends the world of atoms.

It proposes that human dignity is to be associated with self-transcendence, with aspiring to live in the image and likeness of God because that is how we are made. It reminds us that we are more than atoms, whether these be the atoms of which we are made or the atoms which we possess. It invites us to live for more than the preoccupations of the present moment. It says that ours can be a culture of life, rather than a culture of death. It changes the ways in which we look at reality; at handicap and disability; at colour or gender.

It reminds us, in Augustine's words, that Almighty God made us for himself and that we will have no rest until we rest within God. We were made like God and for God.

God intends us to 'come alive'. God underpins the idea that we are searching, questing beasts and does not withhold the goal of our quest and our questioning from us. John's gospel puts before us two young men. Jesus asks them a question: 'what are you looking for?' and they reply with a further question, 'Master, where do you dwell?' God is hovering over our search and meta search buttons, constantly moving us on to fresh realizations and ways of imagining things, even to a new sense of time and space where digits, rather than atoms inform our metaphysics.

The communications and information revolution

On a visit to Dublin, I spent a morning in Trinity College. I gazed at the first page of St John's Gospel in the Book of Kells. It is kept in a darkened room with no artificial light on it. For the eighth century monk who produced it, pen and ink were a medium of proclamation, opening up a highway of faith with the technology of his age, certain that 'in the beginning was the word'.

I returned home haunted by that image. And then I resumed my work at the computer screen. And very soon I had the same picture in front of me. It's now my screen saver, the default image that comes up every time I switch on. The same opening to John's Gospel that I saw in Trinity. There I bent over it in its historical form, captured on vellum. Since then I have searched for its digital version on the Internet. I typed in the words Kells, Trinity, hit return and lo and behold this glowing picture grew down my screen. I clicked my mouse on the words 'save as' and the image was brought safely to my hard disk. From a monk's imagination, through his pen into a book, a digital camera. a telephone connection, a computer screen onto my hard disk. Digits become atoms, pixels a picture before my very eyes.

Now is this an experience of Babylon? Many people of faith feel alienated from the modern world of telecommunications. To them, it represents the place of not-belonging. Communications enthusiasts do not always help either. They burble on so; they slip into jargon; they are suspiciously acquisitive. True discipline, it is assumed, is better mirrored in the austere life of the monk. His artefact, the Book of Kells, is so evidently a masterpiece. But is it as simple as that? Where can our knowledge and love grow? And was the transformation of the Gospel which was enacted at Kells, all in one direction only?

From the moment the Gospel was first written down by the four evangelists, something was gained and something was lost. You can hold a written gospel in your hand and take it about with you; but what about the raw intensity of the primitive stories? Does that get lost? By the eighth century, in this highly visual transformation at Kells, there was great gain obviously. An object of beauty was born. But what of the loss involved in the reification of the Gospel stories, as they now became a work of art, a thing rather than a story. And in our own times, as sacred texts from all our traditions tumble their way onto the Internet, along with much else that seems to cheapen or trivialize human experience, the loss is obvious. We lose control and ownership. Its images enter our very imagination and distort our sense of what is real or unreal.

It is not simply 'teaching Churches' or academic institutions which fulminate against the Internet at this point. Each of us is driven by a vision of orthodoxy; we aspire to

get it right. And along comes the Internet and says, 'but there are lots of different rights', and 'your orthodoxy has to compete with mine'. So, in any analysis, is it more than the ultimate post-modern artefact or plaything? Is its only message that 'more is better' and 'even more is best?. We have choice, certainly, an abundance of it at the moment, but how are we to exercise it with discernment rather than to worship it? How can an ethic be brought to bear in the world of technology and communications? True discernment lies in wrestling with this question.

The information and communications revolution is like another Protestant Reformation. People have access to the Word, even to the most sacred word, the Bibles of our modern world. Can we trust people who enjoy such autonomy in the presence of the word? Will they go off and create their own morality, their own religion?

The world wide web has provided us with a new image of time and space. It gives us a new metaphor for understanding God and the work of God in holding our world our world in being, cradling it in a web of communications. For God is not 'in' any named time or space in the sense that God is not subject to the same laws as atoms. The cyber-revolution demonstrates that God is as available to us as the unseen world of digits and that the work of God in underpinning our reality may be just as powerful and omnipresent to the eye of faith. There is an ethic of trust to be discovered here and a theological underpinning to sustain us as we become cyber-travellers.

Becoming cyber-travellers

For Christianity is a Trinitarian religion. It knows that communication lies at the heart of the Godhead. That is why community is so central to our human endeavour. Community is the fruit of true communication. The working out of love. That is why we can ask further questions of all our communications systems, from the CCTV cameras, through the emails, TVs, mobile phones and so on. We have a template for evaluating them and their influence. We are able to judge them because we can assess their capacity to respect personhood, relationship and true encounter in community. They have to pass a test, and it is such a blindingly simple one that we might miss it: it is the test of passion, the test of love. Does our IT provision, do our communication systems develop a real sense of personhood and equally do they build community?

So I want to declare my hand: what about the Internet? If it is simply an information-gatherer, then it is a particularly seductive one and one which we need to watch. For the fire within its wheels can burn as well as illuminate. Or is it more than that? Does it provide a metaphor for understanding our times? Can its digital surface carry a script as important as that borne by the vellum of the scribe at Kells? There are those who would argue that it can. They see the Internet with visionary intensity, stretched out like a woven web around our world, bringing people inexorably closer to each other, and setting up a cocoon of communication which is constantly changing shape, glowing with intensity as continents come in and out of sleep. According to this reading, the Internet flaps with angels' wings. It is the ultimate message bearer. But is there not more to be said? Submit it to the test of love and it could be that the greatest of its messages has nothing to do with its functio n as an information provider; the greatest of its messages is that communication between named people - known and unknown - generates community.

The scribe of the Book of Kells knew about community; his was a monastic calling. Yet the discipline of scholarship required him to spend time alone; his art made this a necessity. This is the balance we are offered by a vision of communications which takes personhood, relationship and true encounter in community seriously. This is the balance that gives us a sense of where there is loss and where there is gain in our own use of technology. I would say that this is the balance we find in God, three in one, one in three. As our communications' systems become more diverse, we need to exercise the gift of choice with true discernment; to mirror the divine image and likeness in which we are made in its true complexity. Like the young men who walked beside the Sea of Galilee, we can be fearless in our searching and fearless about asking him their question: 'Lord, where do you dwell? We thought the answer was all about atoms. Now we have discovered that it is about digits as well.

Further Reading

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