

## HEKIMA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

### TECHNOLOGY AND RELIGION REFLECTION PAPER

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### THE CHURCH IN THE VIRTUAL AGE:

#### A PERSONAL REFLECTION

##### INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I was having a debate with a friend of mine about the need for the Church to be relevant in order to survive. I was in favour of modernisation and he was against it. I cited the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* and in exasperation he responded: “The document is entitled ‘The Church in the Modern World’ *not* ‘The Modern World in the Church.’” His point was that the Church ought to *lead*, it ought not to be merely *reactive* but *proactive*. The Church ought to set the agenda for the world, and *not* the other way round. As with most debates of this nature, the truth was probably somewhere in between.

Over the past 14 weeks, our seminar explored the relationship between technology and religion, particularly in the Virtual Age. Technology drives change, religion is rooted in the past. The question of how religion interacts with technology and accommodates change is vital, especially in this age in which a combination of significant technological advances and

environmental and health crises have posed a challenge to religious beliefs and practices. This paper is a personal reflection of this symbiotic relationship in the virtual age, specifically what the two can learn from each other. The video lectures and my written reflections on them, form the basis of this reflection.

## THE CHURCH AND CHANGE

Benjamin Franklin once said, “in this world, nothing can be said to be permanent, except death and taxes.” To this I would add change (although death is a kind of change). Change is always present in human life and history. In order to survive, every institution must confront the reality of changing times, not least the Church. At the centre of the Church’s mission is the belief in the Incarnation, God taking on flesh and confronting the reality of this world to save it. The Church is incarnational and must never at any point seem alien to it.

The myth behind the resistance to change in the Church would be the view that an earlier age was better and that the decline of the Church was as a result of its abandoning tradition for innovation. In fact, the Church has always been an innovator, and that has been the key to its success. Every time the Church hesitated to accommodate the realities of its time, it lost people to something else that stepped into the gap, for example in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, Marxist movements filled a gap the Church was hesitant to do until Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*.

The Church has always been abreast of the times: the Fathers accommodated Greek philosophy to explain the faith, the religious movements of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century adapted to a more versatile one to minister to people in the wake of the Renaissance and the Reformation, and the Church took up the cause of social justice with movements such as the Catholic Worker Movement to address injustices arising out of the Industrial Revolution.

The main problem, as I see it, is not about the Church accommodating and incorporating change, it is about the pace of change of our world today. Driven by significant advances in science and technology, change occurs at a breath-taking pace. In the past there were a few innovations in a generation or even a century. The mouldboard plough of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century was the standard agricultural implement for centuries after. These days, however, products are replaced by new and better models almost every year. The rate at which new technology replaces the old, affects even how we do our jobs. In the 1990s, one could be trained as a teacher, to use a blackboard, chalk, textbooks, and so on, in exactly the same way as one would have been trained in the 1950s. With all kinds of teaching aids replacing these, such as smart boards, video conferencing and so on, teachers have to learn how to teach again.

In the same way, technology's fast pace has affected religious practice. As usual, it is a crisis that has compelled the Church to confront this reality. The Covid-19 pandemic has made impossible to perform religious rites and services in the manner that we have always been accustomed to. Ignoring the virtual world would result in losing an entire generation of people to alternatives.

The reticent attitude of the Church to modernisation, may stem from a pride. The Church has traditionally seen itself as a teacher, and definitely since the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, seen itself as a power that should set the agenda for the world. However the Church has always learnt from the world and vice-versa. The Church has a positive contribution to make to the world that has arisen from virtual technology and vice versa.

#### THE CHURCH'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE VIRTUAL WORLD

First of all, let us consider the nature of the Church as Incarnational: grounded in the reality of the world in order to make the world a better place, and lead people to God. In order to survive,

an institution must be relevant. What contribution can the Church make to the modern world, influenced by virtual technology. In other words, is the Church relevant?

In many of the videos, we explored the shortcomings of the virtual world and the technology that spurred it. These are: the imprisonment in a virtual world; the danger of life losing its meaning; the pursuit of perfection; and the exclusivity of the virtual world.

Firstly virtual technologies imprison users in a virtual world. Apps are designed to hook people in and to compel people to keep using them. Thus most people spend most of their waking hours looking at a screen. I refrained here from saying ‘looking at a screen rather than engaging in the real world.’ Because the virtual world is real for users and is useful. However human beings, as of 2021, are not all mind. They are bodies, and spirit and soul. They need to engage in the physical world as well. Technology creates possibilities and eases our burdens but should not imprison us. Technology should be at our service, not the other way round. The word *robot* originally meant ‘serf worker’ or slave, however when we use these apps and machines, one can’t help wondering, to paraphrase Shakespeare, “which is the master, which the slave?”

One reason religion in general, and the Church in particular, has been inept in handling the pandemic that has compelled all in-person worship to cease, is because religion is a very physical affair. The Church (its rites, laws, doctrine, spirituality, and practice) all compel human beings to face the reality in which they live.

Drawing people from the imprisonment of the virtual world is a function in which the Church would demonstrate its relevance, by using these implements and putting them in their right place as tools and not as ends in themselves. Companies use apps to keep people hooked in. Ideally the Church should be able to use the same technology to draw people out. Like an atlas meant, not for us to stare at it but to lead us to real destinations. There are many ways to do this, and one instance of this is the app *Click to Pray*. It could be improved upon, but ideally,

in inviting people to pray for very real concerns around the world, the app draws us out of our private world, and we are suddenly aware that there are people around the world dying because of their faith, people starving, being trafficked, and so on. Hopefully such a daily practice of clicking and praying for intentions of others, then draws us out of our virtual world to get our hands dirty and help.

The second danger is that arising from life losing its meaning. One of the most important functions of the Church, and some would say its most important function, is to give meaning to life. Human beings are animals that have to make meaning out of life, for without this, life is mere drudgery, a long process of performing mindless tasks from birth to death.

It is curious that a function of technology, which is to free us from drudgery to pursue higher things, would unwittingly lead us into the very drudgery it seeks to free us from. In eliminating challenges from our lives, technology leaves us empty. It is into this breach that the Church must leap because humans are always seeking meaning, and for as long as the Church provides it, the Church will always be relevant. Again, the Church does this by using the tools virtual technology provides. The USCCB app for daily readings and reflections is an instance of this.

The final danger of the virtual world is one I think is its greatest, and one where the Church can make its greatest contribution. I have summed it up in one word: “exclusivity,” but I can further break it down to two concepts: truth and empathy. Not only does the virtual world, powered by virtual technology, remove people from physical contact with each other, it is also capable of restricting the people we interact with virtually more efficiently than the most exclusive golf club. When we interact with a limited and specially selected group of people, two things are compromised: truth and empathy.

People, if left towards their own devices, tend to gravitate towards those who agree with them. In a group like this, it is opinion and not truth that matters. This is why, the modern age of

information has seen a surprising increase in fake news. In the past people accepted the advice of health professionals almost without question, now, in an age when doctors have better tools and more information, their advice is wholeheartedly rejected. In my country Zambia, against the advice of doctors most people refuse to take the COVID-19 vaccine because of the proliferation of conspiracy theories about it. The strange thing is that all of them have had vaccinations against polio and many other diseases but have illogically decided that the COVID-19 vaccine is sinister. The Church has always been a place where people could confront uncomfortable truths about themselves as individuals and as a society. The truth has been the means to making people better. In this age in which the truth is being compromised everywhere, the Church can rise to the challenge.

The Church has also been the space in which people who are radically different from each other can meet. There are such things as black churches and white churches, middle class churches and working-class ones, but ideally there is the one Church with all these members. As such, the Church encourages empathy for the other. The virtual world with its exclusivity does not. Lack of empathy, one can arguably say, is what drives many of the ills of the world: poverty, war, hunger. Sufficient empathy could end these.

#### THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE VIRTUAL WORLD TO THE CHURCH

I constantly remarked in my reflection papers during the seminar that virtual technology (and the world it powers) was an overall good thing for humanity. I have no nostalgia for past ages and am a firm believer that every age is generally better than the one which precedes it. The history of humanity is the history of progress. Human beings are not beasts of burden, technology makes human beings more fully what they are meant to be.

There is no doubt for me that virtual technology has a contribution to make to the life of the Church as it has made to other areas of human endeavour. From the seminar, two ways in which

virtual technology can enrich the Church stand out for me. The first is in the democratisation of truth, and the second is in the preservation of the gospel in a new and exciting manner.

One way of looking at the history of humanity is by seeing it as a history of progress. Central to this progress has been the availability of truth, information, or facts, largely through an increase in literacy and the corresponding ease of access to books. Access to information empowers people and reduces the risk that they may be abused, or their rights trampled upon. In countries with written constitutions, governments are hesitant to abuse their citizens, and in countries where these constitutions are in the hands of a literate and confident public, it is all but impossible for government to rule through coercion. If this is important in truths regarding secular life, it is even more important in eternal truths, which religion deals with.

In the gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples, “I do not call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master does, but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from my father, I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15).

The Church should be a body of equals, brothers, and sisters in Christ. Clericalism in the Church has led it to being a body of priests governing lay people. This is largely the result of truth or knowledge having, inadvertently, been the preserve of people in Holy Orders, so that priests become not servants of the People of God, but their masters.

One consequence of the revolution brought about by virtual technology is the ease of access to information and giving the users more agency. This is something the Church is sorely in need of. Making use of the tools of virtual technology should, ideally, be something that should empower lay people.

First of all virtual technology can be a very affordable means of ensuring that many lay people receive an education in theology and canon law (I include canon law because only when we

are aware of the law, can we be safe from abuse, and if the law is defective, we have the means and the knowledge to advocate for change).

Secondly, virtual technology make the Church as transparent as it was meant to be. Covering up sexual abuse, embezzlement and other shortcomings of the institutional Church are more difficult in an age of information, and this is just as it should be. Not only does this enable the Church to deal with these problems but ensures that they are avoided in future, it thus becomes an instrument of the Church's reform.

Finally, the democratisation of information makes participation in the Church's governance easier in an age in which we are still trying (and failing) to rediscover the synodality of the early Church. Expense is often an issue in gathering people together. Video conferencing could solve that problem. Modern technology also makes the governance of the Church clearer and more transparent. It enables people to have a stake in the governance of the Church. This would make the Church truly what it is meant to be. Often when people speak of the Church, they mean the hierarchy. Participative governance would make the Church truly a body of equals.

The Second contribution of virtual technology is in the preservation and recasting of the gospel. In the video on virtual ritual, it was pointed out how the evangelists committed the gospel of Jesus to writing from what was previously an oral tradition. In doing so, they preserved the gospel and significantly aided its propagation. The written gospels were at the heart of the spread of Christianity and are still relevant today. How much more effective would virtual technology be in the service of faith?

The second opportunity arising out of this contribution is that of theology. Theology helps us make sense of our faith, and as our lives change from generation to generation, good theology gives us old insights in a new way and perhaps even new insights, for God, and the faith, are inexhaustible treasures always revealing themselves in new ways. The virtual age presents the

Church with a challenge and an opportunity. Most people are no longer able to relate to faith, concepts and ideas expressed in antiquated ways. This is a challenge, but it is an opportunity to creatively present the faith in a way that resonates with a modern public. This is the right age for virtual theology, and virtual catechesis.

### WHAT I HOPE TO DO IN MY FUTURE MINISTRY

I began this reflection with Benjamin Franklin's quotation regarding the certainty of death and taxes and added change to this list. Everything else is uncertain, including what my future ministry would be. What I could talk about is the things I should like to characterise any future ministry I might have arising from the insights I have had in the seminar.

Firstly and most importantly, I would like my ministry to be characterised by a personal as well as a communal dedicated study to the theory and practice of virtual theology. I believe theology is the bedrock that should inform what we do in our ministry (how we minister to people, teach, preach, and even practise our faith). As this is a virtual age, and as theology must be contextual, so also should our theology be a virtual theology. The challenge is the infancy of the notion.

Secondly, any ministry I participate in, should benefit from the twin contributions of virtual technology to the Church: empowering people as well as presenting the gospel to the world in a manner that is relevant.

Finally, I would like my ministry to be characterised by bringing what has enriched the Church and what virtual technology may lack. This is using virtual technology (apps and so on) to draw people out into the real world to confront the truth and encounter the Other. A fine example of this is the *Click to Pray* app. I would make an improvement if I could on it. There are apps, for example, that count the number of steps a person takes every day. These apps are useful for exercise. They take the person out of the house, but the person is intent on walking or jogging and hardly has time to appreciate the world around them. An ecclesiastical app would have to

take people out of the virtual world and plunge them into the real world to savour it, enjoy it, and make it better.

## CONCLUSION

The Church in the Modern World or the Modern World in the Church? If the Church is incarnational, then I think the answer is both. Both can learn from and enrich one another. The Church should avoid the temptation of rejecting modernity altogether because that is the path to becoming irrelevant, as well as to embrace modernity without critique, that too would be another path to irrelevance. As with most things, the best way is the middle way.