

## **TECHNOLOGY AND THEOLOGY: AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP**

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### **Abstract**

This article is a critique of theology in general. In this cyberspace age, we can no longer gloss over the ubiquity of the internet in our lives. The internet has transformed our lives across all generations and occupations in varying degrees. Theology and theologians are not exempt from this great ongoing transformation. We need to face it in order to be relevant to people. First, the identity of theologians has been affected by the internet and theologians have to negotiate their identity. They have to take advantage of this ubiquitous internet in theologizing to the public. Second, theology has to be transformed from being anthropocentric and elitist to being cyberspatial and democratic in public conversation. We need to allow freedom and right of the people to express their thoughts and ideas responsibly and to provide spaces for cries and voices of the people in their search for democracy and change.

### **Etymology of Theology**

The word "theology" comes from Greek, which is the combination of two words, namely, "theos" and "logos". As we know, Greek was a widely spoken language as a lingua franca in the Mediterranean world and would eventually become the official language of the

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Byzantine Empire. Historically, the Greek language holds an important place in the history of Europe, loosely defined as Western world and Christianity, in particular, Catholic religion. In fact, Greece was the birthplace of Western culture as its seminal culture. Greek was also the language in which many of the foundational texts of Western philosophy, such as those of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were written. Moreover, the Christian Bible was written in Koiné Greek. Thus, Greek language constitutes the discipline of classical study. The ancient Greeks pioneered in many fields that rely on systematic thought such as philosophy and theology in pursuit of order and hierarchy. Thus, Greek culture had a powerful influence in which reason provided the foundation of modern Western culture.<sup>1</sup>

Theology's etymology is ambiguous. The etymological combination of two Greek words (theos and logos) has created an ambiguity in the discipline of theology because it can mean "word of God" or "word about God".<sup>2</sup> The proposition "of" and "about" is not insignificant because it provides the origin of the word — literally from God, the Father or from theologian, the man. The determination of origin is crucial. The origin gives the person an authority to speak in behalf of God or a discipline. If we take theology as the word of God, then the origin of the word will be God. However, God does not speak to people directly, but through the Scriptures written by men. Moreover, if we take theology as the word about God, then God becomes the topic and supposedly the clergy, especially the theologian, is the spokesperson or expert who speaks about God. This authority of the spokesperson justifies the division of the church into clergy and laity, teaching church and listening church. We know that the teaching church refers to the magisterium of the church that defines the dogma, and the listening church includes the rest that would listen to the teaching and ascent to the dogma. However, we know that language is a human creation of the speech community, and not a divine revelation from heaven. In this sense, theology is the word about God constructed by theologians who construct a body of knowledge about God known as theology as they reflect God in the Bible and in tradition. Thus, theology is a word about God expressed in human language.

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<sup>1</sup>Basil Studer and Angelo Di Berardino, "Introduction," in *History of Theology: The Patristic Period, Vol. I*, Angelo Di Berardino and Basil Studer, ed., Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996, 1-16.

<sup>2</sup>Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Systematic Theology: Task and Methods," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives, Vol. I*, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Calvin, ed., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 4-9.

## Discourse of Theology

Historically, theology is dominantly theocentric (God) and anthropocentric (Man) in content constructed within the context of ecclesiastical authority and medieval institution. In the scholastic theology, beings are hierarchically arranged according to its perfection and excellence. In this order, God occupies the apex followed by Jesus Christ who is God-made-man and humanity who is saved by the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. In this theology, the focus is on the relationship between God and man and the salvation brought about by the saving act of Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup>

In the curriculum, theology as a discipline in the university is placed within the Liberal Arts or Humanities Department. This discipline emphasizes the study of classical antiquity and human rationality in forming a citizen to be functional in society using speculative methods in its inquiry. The aim of these disciplines was to produce a virtuous, knowledgeable and articulate person. In this development, the humanism in theology is reinforced and perpetuated. As we know, humanism emphasizes the value of human beings and capitalizes on rational thought. During the Renaissance period in Western Europe humanist movements attempted to demonstrate the benefit of gaining education from classical sources as the *ad fontes* or back to the sources as the basis of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, theology due to its being dominantly theocentric and anthropocentric framework becomes ambivalent in its relationship to the emerging technology. In this framework, technology is conspicuously absent in the discipline. Though technology is present, it is rendered invisible and taken for granted in theological discourses. This state of affairs made technology marginalized or even excluded in the consciousness, research and scholarship. Thus, theology remains concentrated on the dyad of God and humanity relationship as a natural scheme of beings. Technology is precluded because it is an artificial human invention and therefore it is far removed from that dyad. The separation between natural and artificial plays a crucial role in theological construction. From a humanist viewpoint, technology is merely instrumental and therefore inessential and peripheral. Although technology is ubiquitous, theology generally remains indifferent in its standpoint and treatment of technology.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985, 1-14.

<sup>4</sup>Patrick W. Carey and Earl C. Muller, ed., *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges*, New York: Crossroad Publications, 1997.

<sup>5</sup>Mary E. Hess, *Engaging Technology in Theological Education: All That We Can't Leave Behind* Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

## **Absence of Technology**

In the hierarchy of beings, technology is excluded in theological discourses. Scientifically, technology is an invention of practical knowledge produced directly by people and indirectly by God because the raw materials in making technology come from nature as the creation of God and the invention comes from the ingenuity of the scientist. Technology being artificial (invented by the hands of man) and not natural (created by God as the author of nature) is glossed over in theological discourses. The binary logic (nature, culture, natural/artificial) that operates in our theological worldview is responsible for the artificial separation between nature and technology. Since technology is apart from God in creation, theology focuses on God and humanity and, in effect, undermines, if not dismisses technology in its discourses. Theologians socialized in the theocentric and anthropocentric framework are also unprepared to tackle the relationship and intertwinement of theology and technology in their theological discourses.<sup>6</sup>

Nature, in the broadest sense, is equivalent to the natural world, physical world or material world. The word *nature* is derived from the Latin word *natura* which refers to the essential qualities and intrinsic characteristics of the created world.<sup>7</sup> The transformation of nature effected by people in this conceptualization of nature is already an artificial invention that falls outside the direct God-humanity relationship since humanity not God mediates in the transformation of nature (God-made) into culture (Humanity-made). This nature/culture separation divided the sciences into natural and social sciences and privileges the natural over the social sciences. In this scheme, the relationship between theology and technology is oblique, if not incompatible, in theological discourses.

## **Relationship to Technology**

In the interaction between theologian and technology, a relationship of distance is created. This distance is effected by the indirect relationship of God with technology and the direct relationship of humanity with technology. Since theologian relates both to God and to humanity, technology is only treated obliquely.

This distance is characterized by a consideration of technology as merely instrumental. As instrumental, technology is only a means to

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<sup>6</sup>See Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion*, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

<sup>7</sup>See George S. Hendry, *Theology of Nature*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980.

an end. Thus, theologian uses technology as a means to his or her work as an academician in the university, scholar in the organization, researcher in an institution. Thus, theologian uses the computer to encode his or her theological reflections for publication or lecture. Thus the computer is merely a means to finish an article or research. After finishing the paper, theologian can leave the computer and proceed to the classroom or conference. Sometimes, he/she brings his/her computer in the classroom or conference to use it in his/her lecture and talk or to aid his or her lecture or talk. In instrumental technology, the place of technology is diminished while the position of theologian is elevated because only the performance of the theologian is highlighted in the process or activity. Thus, the means and ends are separated as though they can be easily divorced or readily detached at any time.

However, there is also another way of conceiving technology — constructionist view. In constructionist view, people construct the meaning of technology. In our example, the theologian constructs the meaning of technology for him/her. Thus, he/she considers the computer as a means to his/her successful career or profession as a professor or scholar or she treats the computer as an entertainment in boredom and solitude. The difference between instrumental and constructionist is that the intention of the inventor of technology may not coincide with the intention of the user since in constructionism, it is the user, not the inventor, that determines the meaning of technology in the way he/she uses it. Thus, a technology is not only an instrument to an end, but also a companion in the room, a facility in work and leisure in boredom. Thus, it is the user who determines the value or significance of technology.

However, in contemporary discourse, technology is neither an instrument nor a construction; rather it is a discursive practice.<sup>8</sup> In discursive practice, technology constitutes the user. Technology is not something external to the user that he/she can detach or separate himself/herself from as though the user remains the same, nor the user only determines the meaning of technology as though technology is a passive recipient of human construction. But technology constitutes the user. By constitution, we mean that technology not only affects the user occasionally and externally but transforms him/her in the process or in the activity. Thus, discursivism focuses on practices as a

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<sup>8</sup>Tim Jordan, *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet*, London & New York: Routledge, 1999, 1-19.

domain of analysis that approaches the study of the user of technology. As a discourse, technology governs the behaviour of society in which people are placed and in which they are affected. These practices, understood as a way of acting and thinking, constitute the users.

Moreover, the interaction between user and technology is characterized by power relations.<sup>9</sup> These power relations are not one-sided but dispersed. In this way, relationship can either be subjection where the subject (user) is subjected to another — technology; or subjectivation whereby the user recognizes himself/herself in technology. If we view the relations along subjection, then we see the user as subjected to and controlled by the power of technology whereby he/she submits himself/herself to the power of technology. However, if we view the relations along subjectivation, then we see the user as interpellated or hailed by the power of technology and resembles technology in that relationship. In discursivist view, both the subject and technology exert power relations since they exercise power to each other. As Foucault would say: where there is power there is resistance. This is shown in the way the user of social media participates in social networking in the digital world. The user and cyberspace are placed in a network of power relations whereby both of them exert power to each other. The social media does not completely determine the user since the user can also intervene in the social networking by expressing his or her opinions and resistances in the cyberspace such as in blogs, tweets and others. There is a mutual interplay between the user and the technology in the social media. Thus, that constitution does not necessarily mean complete determination by technology that deprives the user of his or her power. Since power relations are dispersed in a network, the user can exert his and her power in the cyberspace by exercising his or her power of choice and decision in participating in the social networking.

### **Identity of Theologian**

Mark Prensky divided the digital users into two broad categories, namely, digital natives and digital immigrants.<sup>10</sup> The digital natives are born into the digital age and so immersed into the digital world, while the digital immigrants are alien to or ignorant of the digital age and need to learn this technology. The digital natives can easily use

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<sup>9</sup>See Michel Foucault, *Knowledge/Power: Selected Writings and Other Interviews, 1972-1977*, New York: Pantheon, 1980.

<sup>10</sup>Mark Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, 9, 5 (October 2001) 1-6.

the internet simply because they are born into that world, while the digital immigrants need extra efforts to learn the new language of the digital world. Thus, the digital natives are already constituted by the digital world since they are born into it, while the digital immigrants are partly constituted and slowly enmeshed into it.

We can say that in the digital divide, theologians belong to the digital immigrants. Like physical immigration, theologians have to move from their original place to an alien or new location. In that movement, there are forces at work that push and pull the theologians in relation to the digital world. This movement is inevitable and irreversible since the digital world is undergoing a tremendous progress and we are openly consuming its products. Such movement can be ambivalent since they entail mixed feelings of excitements and pleasures, on the one hand, and discomforts and pressures, on the other hand. In the beginning, the movement may not be that easy and harmonious but as theologians plunged into the digital world, they can easily engage into it.

As theologians immigrate in the digital world, they are inevitably transformed by technology in the process. They cannot hold on to the traditional privilege they occupied by merely reading books and journals alone in the library or in the room. In the digital world, theologians can do research from the websites and read these reading materials on the screen. Theologians become dependent on the internet not only because the materials are easily accessible, but also because the technology is convenient in writing his or her works. For example, just compare the use of typewriter and computer, or the websites and the libraries. We know by experience that computer and internet use is better in serving our needs as scholars and researchers in our fields.

However, theologian does not only use the computer for research as a scholar, but other activities as well. The use of computed connected to the internet is not only for research in writing a paper or preparing a lesson in class, but it is also for social networking with friends using the skype or for uploading pictures and activities to the facebook or for writing blogs or tweets to websites. In addition, he/she can also listen to music, view youtube videos or watch DVDs from the internet. In front of the computer connected to the internet in the room, theologian can do various activities simultaneously: he/she can write paper, chat with friends, listen to music and view videos. Thus, theologian experiences what is called malleable

identities simultaneously or not moving from being a scholar, chatter, music lover and youtube viewer.

In a way, being immigrants, theologians experience dual or split identity brought about this digital age because they have to occupy two simultaneous worlds. This split identity is not a liability but an asset because theologians benefit from the rich experience of both worlds and understand the peculiarities of each world. Having those two worlds, theologians can shift worlds and occupy two worlds. Moreover, being participants in the digital world, theologians develop having malleable identities in these activities and interactions. Since theologians can engage in simultaneous actions in the digital world, they need to be malleable or flexible in relating to these activities and interactions. In our example, theologian can engage in writing an article but s/he can also break from his/her activities and shift to other things such as listening to music or watching a movie or chatting with friends or she can do all these activities simultaneously without being disturbed from his or her main activity of writing.

This digital identity (split or malleable identity) should not be construed as a psychic disorder or abnormal engagement, but a fact of life in the digital world of technology. The user is no longer defined in terms of centred consciousness characterized and unified by one self-defining identity or identity-grounding centre. In digital identity, the user is not centred and unified, but instead dispersed and multiplied in various activities. Such identity can encompass many different, perhaps even contradictory, activities brought about by this engagement with digital technology and interaction with virtual community that forges the self over time, as well as the activities in which s/he participates. Since the user is engaged in different activities in response to the social contexts in which s/he finds himself/herself at a given moment, no one activity is a priori or necessarily central, self-defining or true than any other.<sup>11</sup>

### **Emergence of Cyberculture**

Cybertechnology has become a culture from the use of computer networks for communication associated with the internet.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>See Jayne Gackenbach, ed., *Psychology and the Internet: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal and Transpersonal Implications*, Massachusetts: Academic Press, 2007.

<sup>12</sup>See David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, ed., *The Cybercultures: Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London & New York: Routledge, 2000.



Cyberculture combines the traditional notion of culture and the informational notion of cybertechnology. Culture implies the idea of a group having an identifiable symbolic world. However, cyberculture implies the idea of heterogeneous groups, both known and unknown, forming a virtual community. Thus, cyberculture includes numerous new technologies used by diverse people in various places in the cyberspace. As the boundaries in terms of location and people, the term "cyberspace" is used flexibly to refer to the culture that emerges from activities and interactions happening in virtual communities. Moreover, since technological advancement is ongoing, cyberculture does not only describe the present state of affairs but also anticipates the future state. We are in an age of information where we are swamped by knowledge from the internet.

In cyberculture, anybody who has access to the internet can join the communication. The digital world is slowly reaching out to many people around the world and democratizing the space in societies. People can freely log on into the internet and join the cyberspace. In effect, the cyberspace dethrones the privilege of the experts that monopolize the information or knowledge. In cyberspace, the space is already de-clogged from the dictatorship and mastery of experts paving the way for prospective users to participate in the communication. Democratization is the expansion of the space and the exercise of freedom. Users are free to search the webs and visit the sites anytime and anywhere: they can create facebook, upload videos and write blogs. In a way, they have a degree of control and are given a leeway in this technology because they can do activities and choose websites according to their tastes and preferences. Thus, the cyberspace promotes a democratic culture that reorganizes and restructures our world. We can no longer live without the digital world of the internet because in many ways, we depend on it and therefore we can no longer reverse the direction of democratization.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Considering the price of cybertechnology (computer unit and internet connection), cybertechnology caters to the needs and leisures of the elite class in society. Since they can afford to acquire this technology, the rich class can have an edge in this information age adding to their symbolic capital. Thus, the poor class is deprived of this information age and is dependent on the rich class for information. The poor class can only afford the internet cafe but not to own their own computer and internet technology. In this case, a split is inevitable between those who are included in technology and excluded from technology. The rich class (the information-rich) takes advantage of this cybertechnology that further exacerbates the dismal condition of the poor class (the information-poor). In effect, the rich class

Theologians are not spared from this ubiquitous cyberculture. They are also users of the internet and consumers of technology. Although they are immigrants, they are being socialized into it. In fact, they are dependent on the internet for communication and research such as in conferences and publications. They also use the internet in making their powerpoint presentations and preparing their lectures. However, in the democratization of the cyberspace, theologians cannot claim authority and monopoly of knowledge production and information dissemination. They are one among many groups of participants in communication and information. They are no longer the experts that can control the space of knowledge and claim ventriloquism in the world. Being participants, users speak their minds and communicate their thoughts in the cyberspace. People can immediately react and openly comment on your thoughts. Expertise in a cyberculture is diminished while participation is increased. Thus, cyberspace encourages participation in the network or internet.<sup>14</sup>

### **Toward Cybertheology**

Cybertheology is a combination of cyberspace and theology. Its coinage can be uneasy since technology is broached in a humanistic discipline of theology. Cyberspace is not only an instrument of theology or construction of a theologian but a discourse in a network of relationship. In this sense, technology is an agent or partner in this network. Theologian is immersed and embedded in ubiquitous cyberculture characterized by digital technology. Theologians cannot remain the same in the digital technology. They are slowly transformed by this culture in the process. In this sense, theologians should adapt to cybertechnology and participate in the cyberculture.<sup>15</sup> As immigrants, theologians should recast the medium

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outsports the poor class in this information technology that would make the poor more materially and informationally deprived. See *Cyberspace-Cyberethics-Cybertheology*, Eric Borgman, Stephan van Erp and Hille Haker, ed. *Concilium*, vol. 1, 2005.

<sup>14</sup>Zizi A. Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age*, Cambridge & Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2010.

<sup>15</sup>In the poor countries, the digital world is not yet widespread and the poor are deprived on this benefit. In the absence of a democratized space in information technology accessible to the poor people, theologians should bring their issues and protests in the cyberspace. In this case, the poor's words and images are heard from the cyberspace that provides them a space in discourse. Theologians can disseminate their words and images and Theologians should remain in contact or in solidarity with the poor so that the poor who are deprived of the access and use of the internet and network can be represented. Theologians become the representatives of the poor

and the message, the vocabularies and the images of theological discourses relevant to the digital world. Participation is not merely the use of technology as an instrument or construction, but as a discourse in a network. Theologian can fall into technophobia in the sense that he/she fails to enter into cyberculture by distancing himself/herself or by shunning away from cybertechnology.

In the digital age, theologian can be transformed into a cyborg that embodies human and technological qualities not only because s/he owns some gadgets but because cybertechnology restructures and transforms his/her life.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, theologian is an ensemble of human and technological characteristics. Just imagine a theologian invited to participate in an E-conference using skype. S/he uses the computer connected to the internet and logged on into the skype. S/he dons the earphone and the microphone and begins to speak to virtual audience. S/he talks to an audience occupying a different place and sometimes different time. Moreover, a theologian can upload his/her E-conference videos to the youtube or articles to the E-journals. S/he can reach to many avid users and potential readers or she may have attracted more prospective followers.

This participation in the cyberculture does not mean that theologians are absorbed or ensnared into the digital world and swayed and engulfed into the current of cybertechnology. Participation means that theologians become users of cybertechnology and realize that they are participants in the cyberspace. They cannot monopolize the discourse in the digital world because they are only one group among many users who are liberated and empowered to participate in the cyberspace. Moreover, they have to accept that, in one way or the other, cybertechnology has transformed or altered their identity.<sup>17</sup> They cannot claim that they are unmoved and unaffected by cybertechnology because they are also users and consumers of technology.

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who push their struggles without having the sole right to arrogate their voices and images.

<sup>16</sup>See David Bell, *Cyberculture Theorists: Manuel Castells Donna Haraway*, London & New York: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>17</sup>The invisibility of the body has been a point of contention between the humanist intellectuals who assert the value of embodiment and the post-humanist intellectuals who celebrate the power of invisibility. Humanist intellectuals want to defend embodiment because the body together with its context is significant in any relationship and interaction while the post-humanist support the disappearance of the body in favour of virtual reality in information age. See Katherine N. Hayles *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Theologians being immigrants and having the two worlds can offer reflective capacity to the digital natives. Reflection presupposes that theologians know the digital world and in knowing it, they can enter into a deep reflection of the cyberculture.<sup>18</sup> Theologians can lead and facilitate reflective activities and interactions with the digital natives so that they can be able to discern the impacts of cybertechnology and to analyze the cyberculture in their lives. Since the digital natives are immersed and embedded into cyberculture, the digital immigrants knowing the two worlds can judge its consequences. Thus, theologians are not deprived of their contributions but still occupy a crucial position in the cyberculture. They can inject reflection into the everyday topsy-turvy activities and interactions in the cyberculture and lead the users and participants into a critical consciousness. Although reflection is led or facilitated by theologians, it remains to be a learning process done in a participatory setting. The cyberspace is not the monopoly of experts such as theologians but calls for the active participation of people who can exercise their agency in the cyberspace. They can join forces with netizens in social movements for greater democratization. Democratization is the active participation of users as agents of social change.<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the cybertechnological world, theology cannot remain within the discourse of God and humanity; it must include the discourse on technology as human invention from the creation of God. The binary logic operative in the epistemological framework dividing natural and artificial, human and technological should be rethought and abandoned in order to free our thought from constraints and to embrace technology in the common world of human and technological relationship as partners and not aliens in theological discourses in the digital world.

Theologians should view the cyberspace world as a network of relationships where people can participate in various activities and interactions in the social media of networking. Participants take

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<sup>18</sup>See Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg, *The Future of Thinking: Learning Institutions in a Digital Age*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010.

<sup>19</sup>The problem is that the effect of technology to users is only known after sometime and therefore they are generally ignorant. Thus, there is a need for an on-going discussion and debate on technology to protect the users. They need to transform technology that serves their welfare instead of being subservient to technocrats since they are the direct users and consumers.

advantage of the cyberspace to share their world to virtual communities. Thus participants expand not only their actual encounters but also their virtual communities where people can freely interact with one another and engage into creative activities. The democratization offered by the cyberspace to the participants attracts people to log on into the digital world. Users can express their thoughts freely and disagree with your opinions candidly.

Cybertechnology is not merely a novel instrument of communication which enables theologians to upload theological discourses in websites but a partner in conversation that constitutes their identity. Cyberspace is a challenge to theology and theologian that need to embark into technology if he/she wants to be relevant and contemporary. Theologians in a cyberculture have to read and discern the words and images of many people in the network or internet. They cannot just listen among themselves because they cannot claim their privacy as a group in this network and they cannot assume superiority of knowledge in the marketplace of ideas and opinions in the network or internet. In fact, theologian can learn from the words and images in the network and internet. Sometimes you find the ideas and opinions in the network or internet intelligent and wise. Theologian can join many virtual communities and communicate their knowledge to these communities.