

CASTING OUT INTO THE DEEP: EVANGELISATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE ONLINE

Sony Sebastian CMI[♦]

Introduction¹

“The purpose of evangelisation is the interior conversion of the personal and collective consciousness of people, the activities in which they engage and the lives and the *milieu* which are theirs.”² This is an excerpt from the *magna carta* of evangelization, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Pope John Paul II referred to the modern media as the first *areopagus* of the modern age.³ More recently, the *Lineamenta* of the next Synod of Bishops, to be

[♦]**Sony Sebastian**, a CMI priest, is, at present, completing a doctorate in Mater Dei Institute of Education, a college of Dublin City University, Ireland, on “A Qualitative Study of Youth Evangelisation Using the Internet”. He is an expert in both quantitative and qualitative empirical methods of analysis using modern software packages, namely, SPSS and Nvivo. As part of an academic colloquium between various universities in Ireland and UK, he presented a paper on “Evangelisation of Young People Online” in the Oxford University, in 2008. Email: spalathra@gmail.com

¹This study paved the way for the development of a web portal, www.cybersouls.ie, in order to explore the possibility of the above theory. Here, Faithfriends, who represent the Church, are offering their accompaniment online to Cybersouls. Young people who want to deepen their faith online are identified as Cybersouls. In this project, the fabric of faith development, termed Scrolls, provides the substance for the interaction between these two parties, namely Faithfriends and Cybersouls, making use of the multimedia and interactive opportunities available on the Internet. A qualitative empirical analysis of the data of interaction thus obtained in this web portal for a period of 100 days is being carried out, using Nvivo, as part of the research at present by this researcher.

²Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, art. 18.

³“After preaching in a number of places, St. Paul arrived in Athens, where he went to the Areopagus and proclaimed the Gospel in language appropriate to and

held in October, 2012, in Rome, also points out that, "The means of social communications and the computer revolution represent one of the Church's great challenges."⁴ The digital culture has become a new forum of public life and social interaction. In this context, regarding young people as 'cybersouls', this paper explores some deeper and contemporary possibilities of presenting Jesus Christ online.

The opening section takes the concept of *noosphere* developed by the process theologian Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), and applies it to the Internet. Drawing on de Chardin's work, the Internet is considered as a space which connects human consciousness in a way that leads to a collective reflection. The next section considers the Internet as a space of 'being with'. This concept is examined in more detail in the following section, establishing that interactivity is a salient characteristic of young people in this postmodern age and also on the Internet. The developing of social networks is then investigated from the point of view of connectedness of consciousness. The final section explores the opportunity for faith friends to present themselves online, like a virtual *guru*.

The *Noosphere* and the Internet

In his theological writings, de Chardin envisioned an evolutionary space called the *noosphere*. Defined as the sphere of the mind, de Chardin envisioned it as a global consciousness that can bring harmony to humankind. Cobb draws on de Chardin's idea in attempting to create a 'theology of cyberspace'. Barlow, co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, also equates the present Internet with the *noosphere*.⁵ This entails looking at the Internet as a means of bringing humans together to form a unified community.

De Chardin envisioned three stages of development in the universe: the biosphere; the *noosphere* and the Christosphere or Theosphere. The biosphere is the earth's living envelope whereas the *noosphere* is its thinking envelope. De Chardin's description of the *noosphere* suggests a prototype of the present Internet:

understandable in those surroundings (cf. Acts 17:22-31). At that time the Areopagus represented the cultural centre of the learned people of Athens, and today it can be taken as a symbol of the new sectors in which the Gospel must be proclaimed. The first Areopagus of the modern age is the *world of communications*, which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a 'global village'. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, (December 7, 1990) art. 37(c).

⁴Nikola Eterović, 'the *Lineamenta* of the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops', 2011, para. IV, 3.

⁵Cfr. Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, New York: Peter Lang, 2005, 58.

There was something more: around this sentient protoplasmic layer [around the biosphere or physical world], an ultimate envelope was beginning to become apparent to me, taking on its own individuality and gradually detaching itself like a luminous aura. This envelope was not only conscious but thinking . . . in an ever more dazzling and consistent form, the essence or rather the very soul of the Earth.⁶

The concept of *noosphere* is upheld by Campbell, Cobb, Barlow, and Bauwens.⁷ A deeper understanding of this concept is considered important, as it is very pertinent to this study.

De Chardin's Vision: A Prototype of Evangelisation Online

In de Chardin's vision, *noosphere* emerged after the biosphere through 'increasing technical efficiency'⁸ to *totalise* mankind. It comprises the existence of Earth's thinking envelope and its contours, transformation through reflection and psycho-social convergence, accelerating the shift towards ultra-human states called planetisation.⁹

De Chardin is viewed as a process theologian. In line with the views of the scholars mentioned above regarding his vision of the *noosphere* and its similarity to the global entity of the Internet, I consider that the convergence of consciousness is a possible outcome of the Internet. De Chardin also contemplated a human phenomenon of co-reflection and a co-conscientizing to underpin the apparent commonplace superficiality of the Earth's technico-social disposition. In his opinion, this co-reflection, with decisive importance for both our 'understanding and our will',¹⁰ is moving in the direction of a complexity-consciousness of planetary dimensions.¹¹

Mooney's reflection on de Chardin's vision is in line with the working of online modules such as 'threading' and associated individual reflections posted on a topic which make a collective reflection possible:

What Teilhard had in mind, therefore, when he speaks of the 'planetary maturation of mankind', is a certain collective act of

⁶Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, London: Collins, 1978, 32.

⁷Cfr. Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online*, 57-59.

⁸. . . the noosphere eventually emerges - through increasing technical efficiency . . ." Thomas Aykara, *Cosmic Consciousness. A Comparative Study on Teilhard de Chardin and Sri Aurobindo*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1997, 33.

⁹de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, 29-32.

¹⁰Understanding and decision - Reflecting upon online activities, the power to know, the power to choose and the power to decide, have been given to an individual who is browsing. In my opinion, these activities of the mind seem more important in online interaction.

¹¹de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, 86.

reflection, something which is quite credible if we once concede his analysis of evolution and admit his law of complexity-consciousness.¹²

This is the point of “the progress in the complexification of matter being matched by a corresponding progress in consciousness.”¹³ But De Chardin finds a danger in this process: “left to itself, our consciousness (however intense it may be in each one of us) of sharing in a planetary Flux of co-reflection is capable of building up the sort of religion of mere ‘evolutionary humanism’.”¹⁴ There is a deepening of interiority (which may be also called growth of consciousness), according to the growth in complexity of matter. The energy coming out of the developed interiority is not necessarily only good as it can also cause “a growth in the possibilities of evil.”¹⁵

The world can only avoid this danger if humanity can make up its mind about the human phenomenon of co-reflection in order to find its full expression and its true place in the Christian phenomenon. It is a movement from the physical grounding of knowledge to a mystical plain. De Chardin states that “the time has come for Christianity to develop a precise consciousness of all the hopes stimulated by the dogma of the Universality of Christ when it is enlarged into this new scale.”¹⁶ Being aware of the hardships, he comments: “how can we conceive that Christ ‘is immensified’ to meet the demands of our new Space-Time, without losing his personality.”¹⁷ As the Internet connects the consciousness of young people, building online networks may be an opportunity for the Church to evangelise young people in a profound way. This possibility is discussed next, in the light of de Chardin’s vision.

From Hyper Text to Hyper Being: ‘Being with’ Online

“My thought belongs with my other thoughts, and your thought belongs with your other thoughts. Whether anywhere in the room there be a mere thought, which is nobody’s thought, we have no means of ascertaining.”¹⁸ The wisdom of the philosopher William James captures the concept behind hypertext, that is, there is a

¹²Christopher F. Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ*, London: Collins, 1964, 47.

¹³Donald Gray, *The One and the Many. Teilhard de Chardin’s Vision of Unity*, London: Burns and Oates, 1969, 90.

¹⁴de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, 91.

¹⁵Gray, *The One and the Many*, 92.

¹⁶de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, 93.

¹⁷de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, 93.

¹⁸Erich Harth, *Windows on the Mind: Reflections on the Physical Basis of Consciousness*, Sussex: John Spiers, 1982, 195.

marked difference between a page in a book and a page on the Internet. The growth in the technology of hypertext on the Internet has opened up new frontiers, linking human beings together. It can be labelled the technology of hyperself or hyperperson in web 2.0.

In a similar vein, this paper explores the possibility of a cybersoul. By 'cybersoul' I mean people connected like hypertexting online, exhibiting their spiritual affinity or identity. (Specifications are not detailed here; rather the possibility of such a connectedness is theorised and presented for reflection.) If de Chardin's 'appearance of life in evolution' is attributed to this point of the evolution of the Internet, it may be referred to as a critical point of 'hominization'.¹⁹ This denotes the latest development of individual human presence in virtual communities where an individual seems to have achieved power in the media, unlike in the past.

Reality of the Virtual

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and freshness of a dream.²⁰

Syneidesis is the Greek root of the word consciousness. According to Dewart, it stood for "the knowledge obtained through consultation with someone who has privileged access to confidential or generally unavailable information."²¹ This was in contrast to the mere understanding for which one depends on no more extraordinary channels than one's own resources. The reliability of this *inside information* depended on the authenticity of the source. Later on, Dewart says that it came to mean any knowledge obtained from consultation with oneself. The conscious experiencer is, as a consequence: a) able to understand and appreciate the reality of the real; b) capable of experiencing his own reality; c) able to create a positive identity for himself after appreciating both his reality and that of the world.²² Here consciousness is constituted through the interaction of the self with the reality of the real.

¹⁹Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ*, 39.

²⁰William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," ed., Ernest De Selincourt, *Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, 1904, 460.

²¹Leslie Dewart, *Evolution and Consciousness: The Role of Speech in the Origin and Development of Human Nature*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989, 45.

²²Leslie Dewart, *Evolution and Consciousness*, 60-61.

In relation to online experience, these findings about consciousness may be questioned by those who log on to the Internet, looking for some information. A person who searches the Internet may be able to get more knowledge about almost everything online rather than actually having those objects in front of himself/herself. More information about the constitutive elements of an object and its nuances may be gained from the Internet than from interacting with the reality of the object. The knowledge landscapes of the Internet may provide you with the wheel, so that you do not have to invent it. Then the wisdom behind the method and process of experiencing one's own reality in relation to interaction with the world and the created identity of oneself through this interaction, may have to be looked at from the point of view of online experience as well. Here the reality of the virtual becomes the norm of constituting consciousness.

McQuail identifies the following dimensions that are relevant and help differentiate 'new' from 'old' media: the degree of interactivity; social presence; autonomy; playfulness and the degree of privacy.²³ These can be considered as some essential elements to be taken into consideration by the Church in order to present itself effectively in the mosaic of the Internet when interacting with youth.

The Postmodern Experience of the Self and Interactivity

In sketching the profile of the self in action, Schrag begins with the celebrated Cartesian phrase, *cogito ergo sum* – I think therefore I am. According to him, the variation in the experience of the postmodern self transforms the phrase into 'I choose therefore I am'. A further 'deconstructive redescription' of the experience of the self amends this into 'We interact, therefore we are.'²⁴ Detweiler and Taylor confirm this in *A Matrix of Meanings*: "The postmodern person yearns for community and connectedness."²⁵ "Community is constitutive of selfhood. It fleshes out the portrait of the self by engendering a shift of focus from the self present to itself to the self as present to, for, and with the other."²⁶ This seems to be true in the case of the Internet also; we interact virtually therefore we are.

²³Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, London: Sage Publications, 2000 (4th edition [1983] reprinted), 65.

²⁴ Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self and Postmodernity*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

²⁵Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Popular Culture*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005, 78.

²⁶Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity*, 78.

Postmodern Youth and Interactivity

In analysing the French word *conscience*, Sheldrake states that the meanings of both 'consciousness' and 'conscience' in English are contained in it. Also intangible social influences may be referred to as the collective conscience of a community, according to Sheldrake. The influence of collective conscience was a major consideration in the work of Carl Jung, William McDougall and Sigmund Freud. It transcended individual lives, being passed on through generations, and existed as a hidden social force.²⁷ This postmodern age, this collective conscience does not seem to apply with regard to some young people as traditions do not seem to be transmitted through the generations. Therefore in my opinion, a more tangible presence of the Church is needed in order to interact with the young person on a one to one level. This may be a way forward for the Church.

Jean Piaget's, observations on young people are instructive regarding their experiences online:

Young people become able to think not only about concrete objects and actions but about abstract relationships like ratio, probability, justice, and virtue. They become aware of the form of arguments rather than their content, and can tell whether a piece of reasoning is valid or not, quite apart from their personal knowledge or feelings about the subject. They become able to hypothesise, to classify according to logical principles and to investigate problems in a systematic fashion.²⁸

While the teachings of the Church are founded on revelation, young people in the contemporary world are more informed by the logic of the secular sciences. Therefore questions raised by contemporary youth need to be viewed by the Church as being valid and important. The virtual presence of the Church may need to create spaces of friendship to listen to youth.

The atmosphere in which religion is learnt, since it is taught in school together with the other natural sciences, may not enable young people to understand the spirit of faith and the logic of revelation. In addition, measures of the natural sciences are normally applied also to divine knowledge. Therefore the whole methodology, structure and the atmosphere in which faith is taught may, in my opinion, need to be reviewed. The phenomenological philosopher, Edmund Husserl

²⁷Rupert Sheldrake, *The Presence of the Past*, London: Collins, 1988, 247.

²⁸This is about the final stage of Piaget's four major levels of mental development in children - between the age of eleven and fifteen, Norton Hunt, *The Universe Within: A New Science Explores Human Mind*, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982, 206.

(1859-1938), considered that “Man’s life, his very spirit, is being studied according to the methods of natural science, with the effect that nature and spirit are considered equal realities, and with the ensuing danger that the spirit is naturalised.”²⁹ Given this reality, a new mode of thought needs to be developed on the Internet and adapted in order to counteract the effects of secular knowledge based on naturalism and its logic when interacting with young people to share faith. A methodology needs to be developed that is appropriate for the sharing of information regarding supernatural realities. Could the Internet help the Church in taking “another road” (Lk 2:12) in order to evangelise young people?

Social Networking and Youth

In my opinion, what young people want from life is, first of all, fun and then excitement. The key word among young people is ‘fun’. They do not take part in anything if there is no ‘fun’. However, on the online networks, there is active participation between young people in order to create fun, using their own creativity and the ‘raw materials’ provided online which can create an atmosphere of fun. What are those ‘raw materials’ available online to produce fun? They include the possibility of uploading music, videos, the opportunity to ‘talk’ and ‘block’ as well.

Excitement is a word used by a young person to represent his/her expectations about life. Boredom seems to be the opposite of it. Entertainment can provide excitement for a young person. It is a time when somebody is either involved in an action or observing some action where one is able to forget about oneself. “Spirituality is primarily practical; it looks to action, to love in action. We achieve union with God by an ongoing series of decisions that open up the mind to consciousness of the divine presence.”³⁰ If the Church is able to provide opportunities for young people either to take part in this action of mystical union with God or journey with others who hold similar interests, this can generate instances of excitement. Young people expect and experience fun and excitement in life. In my opinion, these expectations of excitement and fun are material expressions of one person’s longing for a mystical experience. In other words, their longing for the ultimate is reflected in their longing for the world.

²⁹Alice Ramos, “Human Life and the Primacy of Contemplation,” ed., William E. May and Kenneth D. Whitehead, *The Battle for the Catholic Mind. Catholic Faith and Catholic Intellect in the Work of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars 1978-95*, Indiana: St Augustine’s Press, 2001, 405.

³⁰David Granfield, *Heightened Consciousness: The Mystical Difference*, New York: Paulist Press, 1991, 148.

Social Networking: Welcome to the tribe! This helps young people to be concrete about their relationship with their friends. It helps them to be direct and clear about relationships. Some things which they are not able to articulate in a face-to-face interaction can be expressed without inhibition in the online 'talks'. Social networking is a world where young people are more comfortable. The natural 'log on' to the Internet and consequent social networking sites may be compared to 'initiation ceremonies'. The online interaction has a whole new language which attracts the young. This language is almost alien to most of the older generation.

The underlying principles behind the concepts, it seems, have yet to be put under the microscope. Some considerations are:

- a) the independence young people enjoy because of a space they own online;
- b) an iconic simulation of their real life interactions where they are able to experiment and learn the boundaries and horizons of relationships in their own privacy;
- c) objectification of one's own self online where some interactions are made known to the world around and the rest end up in private spaces;
- d) the absence of a parent to monitor; just because the parent does not know the 'language' and is absent in effect, may give young people the opportunity to tread on their own, without inhibition; and
- e) questions of identity of the person who is interacting; usefulness, realness and intensity of relationships online, are also to be ascertained.

The physical connectivity of the Internet throughout the world, its ability to provide personal representation and participation and its ability to manage the interactivity with accountability, can make online interaction feasible.

"The mind begins with the data of sense and consciousness proceeds through insight and judgement to the mystery that we call God."³¹ The data of sense that can be received in an online relationship is mainly visual. Online relationship is only a part of the means through which data is received into the consciousness, since we live in this world. But it happens that the information on my profile acts like a repository as I can access it and retrieve it whenever I want to wherever I am. This profile and information moves with me wherever I move in this world. Friends also move along and their spaces are available for me to write my messages or comments. Once I accept another person as a friend I

³¹David Granfield, *Heightened Consciousness*, 17.

give permission to the other person to write on my 'scrap' or 'message wall' and *vice versa*. The reality of another person is in one way present to me more frequent or on a 24X7 basis online. There are a lot of agreements/conditions and limitations to this presence.

Consciousness Connected

As a magnet attracts particles of steel, the Internet brought together a number of spheres of human living to the information super highway. 'Mosaic', the first ever browsing software, as its title indicates, means an assortment. It was described in the *New York Times* in December 1993 as 'the first window into cyberspace'.³² Is the Church represented in the mosaic of the convergence of cyberspace? Is cyberspace opening a window to the world of the young? Convergence on the information super highway brought together a complex mixture of various areas of human existence.

'My space' is a space of my self. Facebook is where I project myself. I look at this personal representation of myself everyday. I change my profile. I add new inspirations of photos, videos, etc. on to it. I am able to go back to it, change it whenever I want. In my opinion, a personal space represents and reflects a conscious self. Like human consciousness, it may not expose all that is in the consciousness of a person. Since this exposition of the self is occurring in a public space, it may be presenting only that which I feel is presentable to others. It may also be the case that one is able to objectify one's personal self in the *tabula rasa* of a personal page of the Internet. Here the word *tabula rasa* is used to mean a clean slate or tablet from which the inscription can be erased any time, ready to be written upon again. On a blank page I create an identity for myself, write my own profile, post photos which represent myself. As in the process of interaction with the objects of the world, my identity evolves. In this online space, my identity is symbolised digitally and made visible to others as well. This also becomes a space of my interaction.

On the monitor, if the icon of the Church is missing in the mosaic of various icons of what is readily available, it is the Church that is going to miss out. Over the centuries of evolution, the Church has become a matrix of many cultures and numerous spiritualities. This 'many-ness' within the 'one' Catholic Church may well be enabling it to understand, journey with and welcome the postmodern generation who are fed on the 'many-ness' around them. By 'many-ness' here I mean also the influx of knowledge available at the tip of the finger.

³²Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *The Social History of the Media. From Guttenberg to the Internet*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, 244.

By availing itself (not just availing itself of) on the Internet, the Church can become visible and accessible to that generation.

Interiority and the Internet

William James argued that “the only states of consciousness that we naturally deal with are found in personal consciousness, minds. . .”³³ A subject is conscious when operating minimally in the dream state, normally in the waking state, or optimally in the mystical state. A subject is more or less aware of its various levels of consciousness: experiencing, understanding, knowing, feeling, deliberating, and choosing with freedom and responsibility.³⁴ In my opinion, a person who has logged on to the Net is not just at the minimal level of consciousness but at a more active, open and higher level due to her/his choice to log on. This is also because there is a basic alertness of the brain with its visual readiness and openness of the self looking for friendship, movement/activity and excitement. Harth builds upon James’ argument noting that, “We know of no consciousness that is not based in a brain.”³⁵

Therefore my argument is that, in an online interaction, there may be more opportunity to ‘talk’ to the brain without the distractions of the senses. There may be more clarity in thought since it is written in an intelligible language. Reflections (as in meditation) on a communicated matter may then bring questions in mind. Since the matter can be retained and retrieved, clarifications may be received promptly with reference to the available data. In my opinion, the state of consciousness of a person who is interacting online may be sometimes compared to the stage of a person in the growth process towards enlightened consciousness. The description of some qualities of such a person who is on the journey of super consciousness, as found in *Gita*, is described by Vyas: “Sense-objects cease for him, who does not enjoy them with his senses; but the taste for them persists. This relish also disappears in the case of the man of stable mind when he sees the Supreme.”³⁶

Even if this describes a person who has almost attained a mystical experience, online information sharing may open up opportunities of enlightenment through knowledge. This thought may interest the behavioural scientists who value the importance of sensations and

³³Erich Harth, *Windows on the Mind Reflections on the Physical Basis of Consciousness*, Sussex: John Spiers, 1982, 195.

³⁴Granfield, *Heightened Consciousness: The Mystical Difference*, 7-8.

³⁵Harth, *Windows on the Mind*, 195.

³⁶R.N. Vyas, *From Consciousness to Super Consciousness Fundamentals of Indian Philosophical Psychology*, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1984, 135.

neural mechanisms. Therefore, initiating instances of interaction, as described above, leading to stimulation of the mind can open up research opportunities founded on understanding the characteristics of the phenomenon of online interaction.

Faith Friends Online

The transition from normal consciousness to an enlightened consciousness is a creative process and involves movement. This final destination of achieving the unity between the self of God and the self of human is the goal of Catholic thought. Mysticism is common to a lot of religious traditions and stands as the starting point of interaction between them. The unifying factor can be mysticism accepting the individual differences in their evolution and practices. Therefore the language of mysticism can be a starting point of evangelisation online which may be of interest also to other religious traditions. Mysticism may also speak to all because it is peaceful, tolerant and eco-friendly. However interaction on the Internet is not embodied but electronic. Even then, in this context, the Internet evangeliser need not necessarily be concerned about online sacramentality, since mystical presence is not necessarily a result of sacramental celebration. This does not mean that mystical experience is completely free of embodied activity. Online interaction can share information regarding mystical experiences which can stimulate the experience in human consciousness to prepare for contemplation.

Deikman (1968) raises an important issue:

The content of the mystical experience reflects not only its unusual mode of consciousness but also the particular stimuli being processed through that mode. The mystic experience can be beatific, satanic, revelatory, or psychotic, depending on the stimuli predominant in each case.³⁷

The point I want to make here is that the Church can provide the information which can act as stimuli. If the Church is not providing enough to stimulate people to be in communion with the presence of the supreme friend, Jesus Christ, there are a lot of other stimuli available around them in the world. Young people's consciousness will easily be stimulated by what is readily available to them, which may eventually develop a mystical experience in them that, as mentioned above, is different from the beatific or divine. As the Sufi scholar, Indries Shah has rightly pointed out, "It is said that when a horse can

³⁷Arthur J. Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," in ed., Robert E. Ornstein, *The Nature of Human Consciousness A Book of Readings*, San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1968, 233.

not find grass, it will accept hay. For want of the green grass of Truth they accepted the dry hay with which he filled their mangers."³⁸

Online Interaction and Faith Friends

According to Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic, there is a communication imperative. As human beings we are born to communicate and we are driven to maximise our communication satisfaction and interaction. This means that we invariably circumvent any practical or technological obstacles which might otherwise prevent us from having the kind of relational fulfilment we desire. Therefore it is not a matter of what technology affords or permits us to do but of how we appropriate the technology and make it do what we want it to do.³⁹

The new culture is fascinated with interconnections and with personal interiority. It values diversity and convergence in thinking. If we are integrating orality into culture again, an excessive focus on private and visual reading may give way to a more interpersonal sense of encounter. This will be one of the many strands of postmodernity and of its possible greater openness to the religious dimension.⁴⁰

The process of developing interiority may be also looked at from the Buddhist tradition as well as other mystical traditions. Buddha believed that one can overcome the causes of sufferings by right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. In the traditional Buddhist setting, a student seeks refuge to a lama. A lama initiates a new student in a ceremony. Nicholas-Hays explains that, "Going to refuge is a symbolic way of acknowledging that we are alienated from the true self and that we are entrusting ourselves to the guidance of the Awakened-Mind within us."⁴¹

Also in Hindu thought a person who seeks "must necessarily approach a *guru* who is characterised by composure of mind, self-control, love, etc. Even one that is well-versed in the *sastras* (doctrines of truth) should not set about seeking Brahma-knowledge by himself."⁴²

³⁸Indries Shah, "The Legend of Nasrudin," in ed., Robert E. Ornstein, *The Nature of Human Consciousness*, 283.

³⁹Crispin Thurlow, Laura Lengel and Alice Tomic, *Computer Mediated Communication*, London: Sage Publications, 2004, 156-232.

⁴⁰Michael Paul Gallagher, *Clashing Symbols*, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2003, 36-38.

⁴¹Nicholas-Hays, *Journey into Consciousness*, 52.

⁴²William M. Indich, *Consciousness in Advaita Vedanta*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980, 112.

However, more doctrine is not usually enough. The Eastern texts insist on the necessity of being guided by a *guru*⁴³ (dispeller of darkness), for safety's sake as well as in order to attain the spiritual goal. In western religion, a spiritual "advisor" serves as a guide and teacher. The presence of a motivating and organising conceptual structure and encouragement of a teacher are undoubtedly important in helping a person to persist in meditation exercises and to achieve the marked personality changes that can occur through success in this endeavour.⁴⁴

According to Granfield, a term which captures the process of mysticism used by Catholic theologians such as Lonergan, Rahner and Schillebeckx is 'mediated immediacy'. "Our mental life is largely one of mediating immediacy through meaning."⁴⁵ Online social networking can also be seen, in this sense, as mediating the immediacy through friendship by representing one's personality profile through electronic symbolisation. This may be achieved through the online sharing of music, videos and other information of offline life.

Online interaction itself may provide an opportunity to simulate the above awareness of a universal self and personal self. The role of the Church would be to mediate divine energy to those who log on to the site. This mediation may be achieved in the following ways:

- 1) By the online presence of faith friends who act as persons representing the Church, who journey with the person, who may stimulate the person to a journey forward through interaction;
- 2) By the online representation and interaction of other young people with similar interests which may increase the momentum of the journey;
- 3) By posting instances of other vibrant and exciting journeys occurring in other parts of the world;
- 4) By imparting the wisdom the Church has accumulated as an ambassador of the Kingdom of God over the centuries to those who journey along the information super-highway; and

⁴³Spiritual Science Research Foundation Inc., "Who is a Guru: A Spiritual Perspective"[online].<http://www.spiritualresearchfoundation.org/spiritualresearch/spiritualscience/guru/#21> [accessed on 4 the April, 2008].

⁴⁴Arthur J. Deikman, "Deautomatization and the Mystic Experience," 219.

⁴⁵Granfield, *Heightened Consciousness: The Mystical Difference, The Mystical Difference*, New York: Paulist Press, 1991, 43.

5) Through their online presence, a faith friend is representing the supreme friend, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it is suggested that adapting the Good News to the audience of the cyber world is a moral responsibility of the Church because a generation – online society not society online – has already migrated to the Internet. This is a community which has adapted its life style to cybernetics. I am envisaging a generation here which has lost touch with the worshipping community of a parish. Considering the matrix of spiritualities which the Catholic Church has developed over the centuries, it seems that this community finds itself distant from the oral (homilies) and textual (Bible) descriptive traditions. Also, fundamentally, they do not like to be told what to do. Initiating a space for interaction, with more opportunity for them to act, can be a way of invoking self awareness and responsibility. In this era, the Church's duty also becomes that of descriptive witnessing (through multimedia), hopefully to progress to prescriptive responsibility. This descriptive witnessing of the Church can be based on sharing the story of Jesus Christ, the Church and the current stories of conversion, as providing guidance on mystical prayer.

Conclusion

The theological vision of Teilhard de Chardin and his concept of *noosphere* were considered in the opening section of this paper. The connection between the *noosphere* and the Internet was explored. This shed light on the hominization of the Internet. This was followed by a detailed analysis of the participants of this new medium which identified young people as its natives, with their own language and culture. In the next section the existence of this virtual network was categorized as opening doors to the consciousness of youth. Then it was explained how the friendship of the Church can be offered to young people online. In considering the possibilities of evangelisation of postmodern youth in the context of web 2.0, de Chardin's words seem appropriate:

This is still, of course, Christianity and always will be, but a Christianity re-incarnated for the second time (Christianity, we might say squared – Christianity²) in the *spiritual energies of Matter*. It is precisely the 'ultra-Christianity' we need here and now to meet the ever more urgent demands of the 'ultra human'.⁴⁶

⁴⁶de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, 93.