DIGITAL AWAKENING
Religious Communication in a Virtual World

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Abstract: This paper explores the religious presence and possibilities in the virtual world. An analysis of communication progress leads to the present scenario of new media environment. Based on the idea of revelation and a system of autopoiesis, religion appears like a closed communicator. Religion's communication needs to be placed within the context of evolving new media environment. Basing on McLuhan's theory of extension, religious narratives need new forms of presence in the digital world. When it comes to diffusion of innovation (Everett Rogers) the state of religion appears precarious. From a communication perspective adoption of innovation by religion can come under the category of '*laggards'* and '*luddites'*. The transference of religion`s presence from the real to the virtual demands new innovative and participatory models to serve the digital natives.

Keywords: Autopoiesis, Innovation, New Media, Religious Communication, Social Media Lessons, Virtual World

1. Introduction

We live in the information world, where technology is shaping our everyday life. In a book titled *Born Digital* the authors refer to the new generation as digital natives.[1] The influence of the digital world on the real world comes very often as a surprise

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[1]John Palfrey, and URS Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*, New York: Basic Books, 2008.

and an awakening in our lives. The life implications of digital natives, in a cyber-world are becoming more and more beyond one's control. The things we take for granted such as the birth of a child in a hospital, education, health care services, applying for licences and so on leave behind a digital foot print, making us natives of this virtual world even without our full consent.

This question of who we are in the virtual world can be applied to the realm of religious practise. Religion as an existential reality of this netizens has its role and significance in this new environment. The faithful carry with them the traits and trends of religion into this virtual environment. In this new media environment religion is in need of a digital awakening. This paper tries to understand the notion of religious communication and the role of religion in the new virtual media environment.

2. Major Landmarks in Communication Progress

To understand who we are with regard to religious practice in this virtual environment, there seems to be a need to place ourselves in the context of where we are in the process of communication. We need to find out where we are in this evolution and growth of communication media. In the oral traditions of the tribal cultures, with the invention of alphabets the written forms of communication evolved. The writings done on stones, or papyrus or any other media gave the possibility for propagation of any ideology. The form of one to many found a new medium in the evolution of printing press. Printing revolutionised the institutionalised church with reformation and counter-reformation paving way for bible and other religious literature being printed in local languages.

The next major step was the invention of telegraph. This very idea of wireless transmission through radio waves took new forms in telephone and radio. The advent of electronic transmission changed the communication scenario. The invention of television revolutionised the communication scenario and the lifestyles of people. It brought to your living rooms the news and entertainments of the world. With these

new forms of mass communication, the progress of media reached new heights. The next major step of revolution in communication was the internet. It opened up the possibilities of communication beyond human imagination. Even now the society is figuring out its vast potentials in individual, group, or mass communication forms. The advent of media platforms by integrating all the previous electronic forms into one small device such as smart phone is still creating new waves in society including religion. The impact and effects of such new forms of communication is still under evaluation and study.

In this process of growth, these newer platforms of communication even allow some groups and communities to leapfrog some previous forms of communication. For example, people who have never used telegraph or telephone in their life, now use cell phones as part of their daily life. Communities who have no access to power and television are able to connect to the internet through their smart phones. The newer media often allow them to bypass certain steps of the evolutionary process. Religious communication in the virtual world has to be placed within this context of growth and leapfrogging.

3. Context of Religious Communication

Most of the monotheistic religions consider themselves as based on revelations. As such they communicate what God has revealed and God is the primary communicator. This implicates more or less to a closed system of communication.

One idea to understand such a form of communication is the theory of autopoiesis, according to which parts of a system interact with each other in ways that continually produce and maintain the parts and their relationships: "… autopoietic systems are networks of productions of components…, through their interactions, generate and realize the network that produces them and constitute … the boundaries of the network as components that participate in the realization of the network."[2] Even though the terminology autopoiesis comes from

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[2]Humberto Maturana, "The Organization of the Living: A Theory of the Living Organization," *Cybernetics Forum* 2&3, 1981,16

biology, it has been applied to various fields including communication. The theory of autopoiesis clearly distinguishes between the reproduction of the system as such and the structures according to which this reproduction takes place. In order to 'survive' an autopoietic system constantly has to produce further elements. If this (re-) production stops the system disappears.[3] Autopoiesis presupposes a recurring need for renewal.[4]

If we apply this concept to the revelation character of religious communication, it is more of a self-reliant model. Only revelation can reveal. Religion cannot invent its own revelation, nor can it create new forms of revelation. But as a self-reliant model of communication, it has to undergo the recurring need for renewal for survival. This appears to be more meaningful within the context of virtual communication. For religions to communicate within the virtual world, they need to invent new forms of communication. For religious presence to be alive and not stagnant, religion as an autopoietic communicator has to produce newer forms of communication.

4. Understanding the New Media Environment

To respond effectively to any medium, including new media, one needs to understand what it has to offer. Looking at various theories of communication, the Toronto school of communication thought, headed by Marshal McLuhan seems worth analysing in this context. The famous dictum proposed by Mcluhan is "medium is message."[5] For McLuhan media are the extension of human senses. Thus telephone is an extension of hearing, television is an extension of seeing and so on. As such media is the message and media users are the content. Using the

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[3]David Seidl, "Luhmann's Theory of Autopoietic Social Systems," *Munich Business Research Paper*, 2004, 1–28.

[4]Luhmann, "Classics: the Autopoiesis of Social Systems," *Journal of Sciocybernetics* 6, 2008, 89.

[5]Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message*, New York: Bantam Books, 1967, 123.

terminology used first by Harold Innis, McLuhan brought to the attention that world has become a global village.

McLuhan suggests that there are four characteristics of any new medium as it evolves. This he calls the media laws. These laws affect any new media as it "accelerates; obsolesces; retrieves; and reverses."[6] For example, electronic medium as a new medium has these four characteristics:

a. Accelerates: It accelerates asynchronous, multi-tasking forms of communications beyond time and space. It enhances efficiency and provides opportunity to communicate in different environments.

b. Obsolesces: It diminishes the significance of all forms of broadcast media of one to many.[7]

c. Retrieves: It tends to retrieve certain tribal forms of crowdsourcing. The new electronic medium brings in newer dimensions to older form as it provides the ability to create and contribute.

d. Reverses: There are some reversals in the process. There is too much information available in too little time leading to information overload.[8] Besides this new media environment can create a sense of loss of autonomy to individuals and a chance for increased isolation. There are also questions on quality with information overload.

According to McLuhan, these media laws can be applied to any media that evolves in the field. Evaluate the smartphone revolution happening in the world. As an all-in-one device, the acceleration process is often beyond our imagination.[9] Whether

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[6]Marco Adria, "*Human Communication*," Lecture Notes, Edmonton: University of Alberta, May 20, 2009, 24. *<https://vista4.srv.ualberta.ca>*

[7]Adria, "*Human Communication*," 25.

[8]Howard Rheingold, "Virtual Communities: Exchanging Ideas through Virtual Bulletin Boards," *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, 1, no.1, 2008, 5. <https://www.google.ca/#q=virtual+communities+exchanging+ideas+through+virtual+bullettin+boards>

[9]Gabriel Casper and Diana Scearce, "Working Wikily: How Networks are Changing Social Change," W*orking Paper*, Palo Alto:

it is the use of Facebook or Twitter or WhatsApp, communication has gone beyond boundaries of time and space. The case of Facebook groups for the sake of right of girl child in India, in the wake of increased violence is a good example. There are also certain reversals: it is reported that the increased involvement with smartphones is creating more accidents on roads, attention span in people is decreased and often the quality and trustworthiness of information is questioned.

The question of religion's presence in this changing environment is very challenging. As Christopher Hale from millennial magazine points out, "social media allows Catholics in their 20s and 30s to express the views of a demographic that the secular press sometimes ignores."[10] To be an effective communicator, religion is left with no other choice but to adapt. Thus the characteristics of a new media environment bring us to the question of adaptation. If religion sticks on to the traditional forms of media or obsolete forms of media environment for continued presence in this new environment the experience of religion by netizens will be close to nothing.

5. Responding to New Media

People have responded in various ways to the innovation of new media. Adaptation of new technology by understanding its character is often the basis of success. Everett Rogers through his theory of 'Diffusion of Innovation' gives us some insights into how people adapt to the new technologies in the world.

He defines the diffusion process as one "which is the spread of a new idea from its source of invention or creation to its ultimate users or adopters" and the adoption process as "the mental process through which an individual passes from first hearing about an innovation to final adoption."[11] For example when Twitter as a new media emerged, many were not aware of

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Packard Foundation & Monitor Institute, January 2008, 12. <http://www.workingwikily.net/Working_Wikily.pdf>

[10]Michael O'loughin, "Social Media Take Off," *America*, April 2013, 8.

[11]Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovation, 4th ed.*, New York: The Free Press, 1995.

the scope and possibilities of this new platform of communication. But in the so called *Arab Spring,* many young people found this new communication platform as a significant tool in letting the world know about the happenings and to connect with their associates. Adaptation of such a technology made a significant role in the very unfolding of *Arab Spring.*

Rogers classifies adopters of an innovation as follows: real *innovators* form only 2.5%; *early adopters* form 13.5%; the *early majority* is 34%; the *late majority* is 34%; and there are *laggards* at 16%.[12] A close look at the classification reveals that majority of the population adopt a wait and see approach when it comes to adaptation. When you combine the first two groups of innovators and early adopters, we find that only a meager 16% of the people jump into a new bandwagon of any new technology at the beginning of its invention. The question to explore is where do religion as an institution fit into?

Religion has responded in many ways to innovative technologies. When you scan the early literature from the printing era, you can find that a vast majority of that literature is dominated by religions. In the era of radio and television, the presence of religious talk show hosts and tele-evangelists cannot be denied. People such as Cardinal Newman and Billy Graham made their strong presence in the broadcast media.[13] But the percentage of such religious presence in any public media is nearly insignificant.

Religion often perceived as non-progressive and closed systems of communication may often fit into the cross section of laggards and luddites of society. A laggard is one who lags behind the pack in progress. Whereas as luddites often revert to older state of being instead adopting newer technological innovations. To find out where religions stand, there is a need to

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[12]Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovation*, 5th ed., 2003 in Volker Hoffmann, ed., *Lehrveranstaltung: "Knowledge and Innovation,"* Module Reader, 2011, 37–50.

[13]Stewart Hoover, "*Media and Religion,"* Whitepaper, Colorado: University of Colarado at Boulder, 2008, 14.

audit the response of religions to technological innovations.[14] When we bring the five categories proposed by Rogers, namely: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority and laggards into new media context and place religion within its parameters, it requires that religion needs a conscious effort to build up a culture of early adoption to keep up with the demands of the virtual world.

6. Social Media Lessons

The new social media environment has provided the society with new lessons. Characteristics of this new media environment can show religions where it should be heading. The creation of new social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia, YouTube, Instagram, etc. has brought new avenues for people to communicate. We are seeing newer forms of communication on the internet with the advent of these social media. The following are some of the characteristics of the new media environment.[15]

a. Generativity: There are new ways of productivity possible on the internet through social media.[16] This new opportunity of generativity by any participant in the medium is something unheard of. Zittrain defines it as "a system's capacity to produce unanticipated change through unfiltered contributions from broad and varied audiences."[17] He further explains generativity as, "how a system might grow or change over time as the uses of a technology by one group are shared with other individuals,

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[14]Mark M. Gautier, and Mary L. Gray, "*Catholic New Media Use in the United States,*" *Survey Findings*, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University, Centre for Applied Research in Apostolate, November 2012, 1-123. <http://www.usccb.org/about/communications/upload /Catholic_New_Media_Use_in_United_States_2012.pdf>

[15]Gow Gordon, "Introduction to Social Media Lectures," Lecture Notes, Edmonton: University of Albert Lectures, May 2009. <https://vista4.srv.ualberta.ca>.

[16]Gordon, "Introduction to Social Media Lectures," Lecture 2.1.

[17]J. L. Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, 70.

thereby extending the generative platform."[18] Social media platforms are paving way for new forms of generativity. The generative model of Wikipedia was an eye opener for traditional Britannica model of knowledge creation.[19] Religion needs to step into these new generative platforms where people can contribute.

b. Group Forming: Human beings as social beings want to belong to a certain group whether be it religion, nation or ideology. As Shirky points out,

> ... human beings are social creatures – not occasionally or by accident but always. Sociability is one of our core capabilities, and it shows up in almost every aspect of our lives ... Society is not just the product of its individual members; it is also the product of its constituent groups.[20]

This fundamental aspect of human sociability is seeing new forms in the new media environment. Beyond physical boundaries, people are connected at international levels with their interests, hobbies and ideologies. People are coming together for a cause, for charity, and even for revolutions.

c. Creators: Social media has paved way for new breed of creators. Though there might be questions on quality versus quantity, skilled versus amateur, the social media environment has opened up avenues for common people to be producers, actors, singers, etc. – to be creators. YouTube has created new celebrities and stars who may not be known to the world if not for this new opportunity on the media.

d. Participation: We are seeing new forms of participation in societies.[21] Whether it be political election platforms, cooking ideas, child care, or education there emerges a new participatory culture among people who have access to these media. It has its impact on society in its decision making.

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[18]Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*, 80.

[19]Gordon, "Introduction to Social Media Lectures," 2.1.

[20]Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2008, 14.

[21]Gordon, "Introduction to Social Media Lectures," 2.2.

As Howard Rheingold notes, "a participatory culture in which most of the population see themselves as creators as well as consumers of culture is far more likely to generate freedom and wealth for more people than one in which a small portion of the population produces culture that the majority passively consume."[22] Within the context of evolving religious experience being reshaped by these new media environments, religion needs to create communication platforms where people are able to participate more actively. Consider this idea to be meaningful; creating a participatory culture in religion's communication scenario can only improve the religious capital of any religion.

e. Collaboration: The very idea of collaboration may not be new for society. The social media environment is creating, however, new ways of collaboration among its participants. The classic example is the case of Encyclopedia Britannica versus Wikipedia. When Britannica tried to create its content through experts on the web, the number of pages within a time period was very limited in comparison to the creation of content on Wikipedia an open source platform which engaged anyone who was interested to contribute.[23]

This new collaborative environment is involving people in the process of knowledge creation. Religion as part of this new virtual environment needs to explore the possibilities using these collaborative platforms. Whether it is for charitable purposes or sharing religious experience, such collaborative platforms can be evolved to create involvement by netizens.

7. Question of Religion in the Era of Social Media

Religion is facing new challenges in the western societies where the presence of the social media environment has become

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[22]Howard Rheingold, "Participative pedagogy for a literacy of literacies,"2013: 218, in Aaron Alan Delwiche & Jacobs Henderson, *The Participatory Cultures Handbook,* New York: Routledge, 2013: 215–219.

[23]Antonella Elia, *An analysis of Wikipedia digital writing*, Conference of the European Chapter of the Association for Computational Linguistics, 2006: 16-23 <https://www.aclweb.org/ anthology/W/ W06/W06-2804.pdf>

ubiquitous. People look at religion differently in many societies. According to Hoover, "religions today are both historically rooted and contemporarily fluid. They are both institution and doctrine on the one hand and belief and practice on the other."[24] Though people still claim to be spiritual the increasing trends in many societies are against institutionalised religions. The institutionalized religions face challenges in the realm of identity and digital divide.

a. Issue of Identity: In the evolution of human cultures, we find that the medium of communication has given special identity to a group of people. "The Greeks had invented a medium, the phonetic alphabet, which… made it possible for men to have for the first time in history a sense of private identity. A sense of private substantial identity – a self – is to this day utterly unknown to tribal societies."[25] Evolution of written forms communication created newer forms of identities to societies.

In the words of Zijderveld, "spiritual identity is based on a metaphysical perspective on life and reality. It is composed of social, cultural and religious sources that provide a framework for human capacities, aspirations and ideals. Today spirituality is not institutionalised; it is open and fluid."[26] According to Hoover in technologically advanced societies, "people are increasingly uncomfortable identifying with "religion," which they define as a package combining institutional and clerical authority, and more at home with "spirituality".[27] People claim themselves to be spiritual. With increased individuality and privacy, as Zijderveld points out, "the self has become a sacred object. Searching for a spiritual framework can happen on the huge spiritual marketplace where forms of traditional religion

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[24]Hoover, "*Media and Religion*," 18.

[25]McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium is the Message*, 81.

[26]Theo Zijderveld, "The Construction of Spiritual Identity in Cyberspace," Dissertation, Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2008, 10. <http://www.theozijderveld.com/cyberpilgrims/Cyberpilgrims_theo _zijderveld.pdf>

[27]Hoover, "*Media and Religion*," 5.

and new age compete for attention."[28] In this new virtual world people are searching for a new identity based on the new media environment. This search involves even a new spiritual identity as part of their self.

b. Digital Divide: Another challenge is the need to acknowledge the digital divide that exists in our society today.[29] Even though majority of the people have access to the virtual world, there still remains a huge number of people who have no or limited access to the virtual realities. Increasing number of middle class in the world is moving up the economic ladder with increased accessibility to the internet and the virtual world allows them to have parallel existence. Here access and virtual possibilities lead them to the issue of identity as we saw in the previous discussion. Apart from their physical self, virtual world provides them with an opportunity to search and create a new identity, often private and personal. But this opportunity is not yet universal because of the divide.

It is in this context the religion has to communicate. As Hoover narrates, the question we need to ask is no more how religion can adapt technology but rather how the interaction between these two are resulting in newer forms of communication and experience.[30] Religion cannot shy away from the new media environment, if it wants to make its presence felt in the virtual world.

As Hoover rightly points out rather than considering this situation as a choice or an option between technology and religion, religious scholars need to take upon this issue of interaction. Both have the power to transform each other. From these interactions with a new media environment at hand there is something new that is emerging.[31] The call is to identify new media environment as a complimentary reality to religion`s

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[28]Zijderveld, "*The Construction of Spiritual Identity in Cyberspace*," 21.

[29]Barry Wellman, "Connecting Community On-and Offline," 2. <*http://groups.chass.utoronto.ca/netlab/wpcontent/uploads/2012/05/Connecting- Community-On-and-Off-line.pdf* >

[30]Hoover, "*Media and Religion*," 18.

[31]Hoover, "*Media and Religion*," 17.

existence. We cannot opt for one or the other. As media people and people with religious practise, we cannot make a choice between the two and neglect the other.

8. Conclusion

Religion needs a new dialect and environment to communicate in the new media environment. A simple transference of religious practices into the virtual world may not be enough. A simple transference often involves only content transfer. There are thousands of sites providing content such as books, prayers, information, dogma, etc… But people may not be happy with content providing media environment in an information providing website. In line with the social media lessons we can assume that the people are looking for religious experience in the virtual world characterised by participation, community and generativity.

So as religions meaningfully and willingly encounter the virtual world there should evolve new forms of communication, forms that can keep the identity of religions but at the same time providing new platforms of encounter and experience to its participants. Keeping in mind the challenges of identity and divide, religion can bring new experiential platforms to the virtual world where the netizens are searching for a new identity. We can look for other platforms that already exist in the virtual world for inspiration.

One seemingly so called secular and strange platform where religion can look for some insight in this regard is the online gaming sites. Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORpG)[32] sites such as WOW (World of Warcrafts) had over nine million people signed up.[33] These multi-media gaming sites with millions of participants spending hours of their time, money and energy from around the world can be an

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[32]C. A. Steinkuehler, "Cognition and Literacy in Massively Multiplayer Online Games," J. Coiro, M. Knobel, C. Lankshear, and D. Leu, eds., *Handbook of Research on New Literacies*, Mahwah NJ: Erlbaum, 2008, 611-634.

[33]Zijderveld, "*The Construction of Spiritual Identity in Cyberspace,*" 53.

environment to evaluate.[34] Beyond boundaries, caste, creed, colour, and religion people come together as 'members' to collaborate and work together for an 'experience'. There are some experiential aspects that function as the core principles for these sites to function.

As "participants in virtual worlds collectively create cultural resources for the construction of members' identities, not through shared geographical location, nationality, or other demographics per se but through shared social, (virtual) material, and discursive practices."[35] They create a sense of community and affinity. As people are searching for self-realisation in religious experience, the environments in these games provide people with cyber self-realization.[36]

Religion needs to further analyse and study such media environments to figure out how it could establish such presence in this virtual environment. Based on our analysis of the history, growth and challenges of the field we can assume that new ways of participatory religious experience must evolve to get connected with the *netizens* of the virtual world.

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[34]Aaron Delwiche, "Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) in the New Media Classroom," *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 9, no.3 (2006), 160– 172.

[35]Steinkuehler, "Cognition and Literacy in Massively Multiplayer Online Games," 13.

[36]Zijderveld, "*The Construction of Spiritual Identity in Cyberspace*," 62.

BOOK REVIEW

Joshy V. Paramthottu, *Dialectics of Religion, Politics and Ethics in Ghandi and Taylor*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2013, pages 436, ISBN: 978-81-89958-83-1.

The title speaks for itself. If you have any interest per the title, you will want this intense volume for your library and for on-again, off-again readings. But, be patient, it is "heavy reading." Enjoyable by a non-Philosopher such as this reviewer, but be prepared to pick it up and set it down, as the Spirit moves you. Hence, I firstly need to tell you about the contents, and by then you will really know what to expect; albeit I will afterwards provide personal comments.

The Preface and Foreword can be skimmed, but not so for Chapter Titles. Look at them carefully: Chapter 1 "Pluralism, Secularism, Modernity, and Self-Identity," 25pp. Chapter 2 "Diversity-Authenticity-Holistic Identity: A Taylorian Perspective," 150pp. Chapter 3 "Diversity-Authenticity-Holistic Identity: A Ghandian Perspective," 298pp. Chapter 4 "Convergences and Differences of Taylor and Ghandi: *Agapic* (Unconditional Love) and *Ahimsic* (Non-Violent) Epochsfor the Pursuit of *Satya* (Truth)," 79pp.

An extensive Bibliography, a Glossary of Sanskrit Words, an Index of Terms-Clarifications and the usual volume's Index complete the contents. Especially useful, at least to this Reviewer, is the Glossary of Sanskrit Words; just read and see.

Included in each Chapter is an Introduction and a Conclusion section; both have more than just a few words; so, if you do nothing more, read them carefully.

Having some earlier experience with readings of both "Protagonists", which were voluminous in numbers and contents (just check the Author's Bibliography, 28pp), you can put them all away and substitute with this volume by Dr Paramthouttu. We professionals have more than enough to read, unless of course you teach or research as the author does; and even then you will appreciate the conciseness of his new volume.

A somewhat subtle inclusion is the Author's presentation of the Gandhi and family historical background. This discussion was easy reading and precluded a further search effort to know about a world history personality; always helpful to know the persons as well as their writings. In contrast, Taylor is a present-day person and accessible for his public presentations, but read this volume first.

Dear reader, you might wonder why I am rather succinct rather than doing a real critique of such a multi-year work effort by Dr Paramttottu. Just read and make up your own appreciation. You will be pleased; I assure you.

Prof. Dr Vincent Murphy
Geophysical Consultant
Weston Seismological Observatory