LIVING IN CYBERSPACE
Video Games, Facebook, and the Image of God

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My home town, Cold Spring Minnesota, is just a few miles from Garrison Keillor's mythical Lake Woebegone. It's the sort of town where neighbour's look in on each other and doors are often left unlocked. As in Lake Woebegone, the children are all above average. A few years ago, one of those children, 15 year old Jason McLaughlin, brought a .22 calibre Colt semi-automatic to school and shot two of his classmates. As with similar school shootings at Columbine, Paducah, Springfield, the media was quick to note that the boy had been an avid video game player. This could, however, go without saying. In a survey of 778 students in grades four through twelve conducted in December 2003, the National Institute on Media and the Family found that 96% of the boys reported playing video games regularly.[1] A 2007 study of students in grades 3 to 5 showed that boys play video games an average of 14 hours per week, while girls play an average of 4-5 hours. Tween (those ages 8 to 12) and teen boys average 16 hours and 18 hours per week, respectively.[2] Adult players also add to the $10 billion a year industry; the average gamer is 34 years old.

While the guys are playing video games what are the girls doing? Some are playing video games too. Tween girls average 10 hours and teen girls average 8 hours of play per week. On-line social networking plays a much larger role in the social world of young women. MySpace has over 200 million members, most in their teens or twenties. Facebook claims more than 500 million users in all age groups. A recent survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 64% of

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[1]David Walsh, Douglas Gentine, Jeremy Gieske, Monica Walsh, and Emily Chasko, *Mediawise Video Game Report Card*, National Institute on Media and the Family, December 8, 2003, 3.

[2]Study by Harris Interactive, http://www.metrics2.com/blog/2007/04/04/ video_game_addiction_81_of_american_youth_play_85.html

American high-school students, both boys and girls, frequently post content on some on-line social networking site.

Marshall McLuhan was remarkably prescient when he wrote in 1964: "The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology."[3] McLuhan notes that every extension of our abilities, particularly a technological extension, either amputates or modifies some other aspect of that ability. In other words, our technology shapes us, refining some abilities and curtailing others. Video games and Facebook shape us and shape our understanding of the world, of ourselves, and of God.

What vision of ourselves, the world, or God do we find in cyberspace? To answer this question I will step out of the virtual world for a moment and ask what the Bible tells us about who we are and what we are here for. And there's no better place to start than "In the beginning," in other words with *Genesis* 1. According to the *Genesis* what defines who we are and what we are to do is the fact that we are created in God's image. Interpretations of what this image is have varied over the centuries, yet most can be categorized in one of three ways: as a property that is a part of our nature, most often associated with reason, as a function of what we do, specifically our exercise of dominion over the earth, or as the relationships we establish and maintain.[4] While property interpretations have dominated historically, twentieth-century theologians have focused their attention on function or relationship.

A functional interpretation sees the image spelled out in Genesis 1:26: "'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'" In this view, what

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[3]Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1964, 7.

[4]Some have looked for the *imago Dei* in a quality of the human being, such as our physical form (Gunkel), the ability to stand upright (Koehler), our rationality or intellect (Aquinas), our personality (Procksch), or our capacity for self-transcendence (Niebuhr). Others have thought of God's image as dynamic, rooted in human actions such as our dominion over the animals (Caspari, von Rad). A third approach defines the image as emergent in the interrelationship of two beings (Barth, Brunner). See Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984, 147-48 for a summary.

we are what we do. Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad, in his commentary on Genesis, writes: "Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God's image, as God's sovereign emblem. He is really only God's representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God's claim to dominion over the earth."[5] This approach has come to dominate the field of Biblical exegesis. We are actors, independent agents in the world, in imitation of God's agency. Video games, immersing the player in a world of action and control, espouse this view of God. But this view has limitations. Exactly what functions are we called to do? How do we know we are acting as God's agents and not on our own narcissistic and sinful behalf?

To answer these we need the second approach which sees the image of God as arising in and through our relationships. This places the centre of our humanity in a corporate rather than an individual context; what matters most are the relational bonds between us. One of the most influential proponents of a relational interpretation was Karl Barth. According to Barth, the image of God is identified with the fact that the human being is a counterpart to God.[6] Barth roots his interpretation in a different portion of the Genesis text: "Let us make man in *our* image" (Genesis 1:26) and "male and female he created them" (1:27). Barth interprets the plural in "Let us make man" as referring to the triune nature of God.[7] The Christian understanding of the Trinity presupposes a God who embodies relationship within God's very self. We image God when we too give ourselves over to relationship. Thus no one person can be the image of God; we only image God together. As the African proverb puts it "I am because you are."

Barth also notes the primacy of relationship in the life of Jesus, in whom he sees human nature as it was intended to be. What Barth sees as

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[5]Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A* Commentary, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 58.

[6]Barth lists and denies the variety of substantive and functional interpretations in vogue at his time: "The fact that I am born and die; that I act and drink and sleep; that I develop and maintain myself; that beyond this I assert myself in the face of others, and even physically propagate my sperm; that I enjoy and work and play and fashion and possess; that I acquire and have and exercise powers; that I take part in all the work of the race; and that in it all I fulfil my aptitudes as an understanding and thinking, willing and feeling being – all this is not my humanity," Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume 3: *The Doctrine of Creation*, Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958, 249.

[7]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 182.

significant about Jesus is his relationship with God and with other humans. Barth notes: "If we see Him alone, we do not see Him at all. If we see him, we see with and around Him in ever widening circles His disciples, the people, His enemies, and the countless multitudes who never have heard His name. We see Him as theirs, determined by them and for them, belonging to each and every one of them."[8] Barth suggests that what matters is not so much what a human does, but what sort of relationships we are a part of.

In video games we experience a primarily functional understanding of the image of God. In simulation games, such as SimCity or Farmville, the player builds and controls a virtual environment. This control is purely external. Here we have a creator god, yet one who is unable to enter into covenantal relationship. In games, such as the Game of Life, the player imitates a Deist god, who sets up the initial laws of the world and then sits back and watches what unfolds; in others, the player can take a more interventionist role, but it is still an external role, that of a *Deus ex machina*. On the other hand, the player is certainly present within the environment of first person shooters, such as Doom, Halo, or Grand Theft Auto. However, this presence is barely relational. The role of the first-person shooter is that of lone actor in a dangerous world; the premise of these games is a back-story based on revenge. Thus we have a player who imitates a vengeful god, the bringer of a harsh justice to a dark virtual world.

In neither type of game is control or power understood in a relational manner. The danger here is that video games promote a propensity to view oneself, and God, as alone, rather than in cooperation and covenant with others. God and self are understood in terms of power. But as Reinhold Niebuhr notes, "There is a pride of power in which the human ego assumes its self-sufficiency and self-mastery"[9] and this will to power lies at the root of much sin. Individual mastery is precisely the goal of the video game world. To do, and to do better and better. But to see the self only in terms of mastery is ultimately destructive. Chris Magnus, police chief of Richmond California, attributes some violent crime in the United States not merely to gangs, easy access to guns, drugs, and poverty, but also, in part, to video game playing: "there's a mentality among some people that

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[8]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 216.

[9]Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996, 188.

they're living some really violent video game... We seem to be dealing with people who have zero conflict resolution skills."[10]

There are, of course, multi-player games, which do add a relational component. However, the players must often make decisions too quickly for them to be in any real sense collaborative. In the end, alliances formed by players are frequently instrumental, often shifting, and prone to betrayal. The goal is paramount, more important than the quality of relationships. This is a functional world.

So what about Facebook? If the world of video games is ultimately functional, surely the world of social networks images a relational God. It does, but with some caveats. According to a recent study from the University of Texas, Austin, Facebook makes us more sociable. It allows us to stay in touch with far-flung family and friends, to share news and photos, even to organize uprisings against the government as we have watched recently in Tunisia and Egypt.[11]

Sites such as MySpace or Facebook seem to encourage utter transparency. It is amazing what sort of personal information many users post, from intimate musings to pictures of drinking binges or romantic encounters. Researchers who surveyed Facebook users at Carnegie Mellon commented, "One cannot help but marvel at the amount, detail, and nature of the personal information some users provide, and ponder how informed this information sharing can be."[12] For young users, such transparency can be dangerous. 40 percent of the users surveyed at Carnegie Mellon posted their class schedule, and about one in four posted his or her address. Other users post their cell phone numbers, e-mail address, and even their sexual orientation. One-third of teens using social networks reported that they had been contacted by a total stranger and a significant number felt threatened by this contact.[13] For older users, misjudgement regarding transparency carries other risks. A survey of employers conducted at the University of Dayton found that 40 percent said they would consider using a Facebook profile as one source of information in their hiring process and several reported rescinding an offer of employment based on what they saw on the

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[10] Kate Zernike, "Violent Crime in Cities Shows Sharp Surge," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2007.

[11] http://www.utexas.edu/news/2010/11/22/facebook_research/

[12] Christine Rosen, "Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism," *The New Atlantis*, Summer 2007, 24-25.

[13] Aaron Smith, "Teens and Online Stranger Contact," Pew Internet and American Life Project, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/223/report_display.asp

Web.[14] College deans and advisors have disciplined students for underage drinking or other infractions that they found advertised on students' pages.[15] Even if a student herself would never think of posting such a picture on her own page, anyone with a cell phone at a party might snap a picture and post it, often without thinking of the consequences.

On the other hand, while seemingly transparent, social networks are not the unvarnished truth. Accomplishments and personal quirks are all too easy to exaggerate and exaggeration can quickly turn into duplicity. Gossip that might be checked if passed in the real world gains a life of its own. Rushworth Kidder, founder of the Institute for Global Ethics notes:

What's lost in the shift is a kind of reciprocal correction mechanism. What's missing is the in-person pushback from friends and adults that operates through thousands of visible and linguistic hints, telling young people what works and what doesn't. Calibrating their identities along a scale of courage that runs from timidity to bravura, young people rightly ask themselves, "Am I too brash or too fearful?" Face-to-face interaction sends back highly nuanced and helpful answers.[16]

A recent message by Pope Benedict for World Communications Day, while commending the network of relationships found in the digital world, notes that sociability in cyberspace is no substitute for real life. He writes: "The truth of Christ is the full and authentic response to that human desire for relationship, communion and meaning which is reflected in the immense popularity of social networks." Yet he also warns that one must ask "who is my neighbour in this new world" and avoid the pitfall of being available online while "less present to those whom we encounter in our everyday life."[17] A young woman who spends her evening on Facebook is not spending that time interacting directly with family or friends. Rather than hanging out in the living room or the mall, she is alone in her room. In a two year study of high-school students, researchers found that those who increased their internet use not only decreased time with family and friends

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[14]Smith, "Teens and Online Stranger Contact" [online].

[15]David Eberhardt, "Should Institutions Respect Students' On-line Privacy on Facebook?" *Journal of College and Character*, October 4, 2005.

[16]Rushworth Kidder, "The Hypocrisy of MySpace," *Ethics Newsline*, July 10, 2006.

[17]"Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age" http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/document s/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110124_45th-world-communications-day_en.html

but also showed a greater tendency toward loneliness and depression.[18] "Friends" on a social network do not play the same role as friends in the physical world. On-line communication is often truncated to short posts and tends to be more superficial. Without the clues given by tone of voice, body language, and the clarifications that are easy to make quickly in a face to face conversation, we are reluctant to move to the same level of intimacy and self-revelation.

Social networks can also encourage self-centeredness and narcissism. Quentin Schulze notes that the Internet fosters individualism at the expense of community: "For many people, the real lure of cyberspace is personal expression, not mutuality."[19] Sociologist Duncan Watts notes, "If I had to guess why sites like Facebook are so popular, I would say it doesn't have anything to do with networking at all. It's voyeurism and exhibitionism. People like to express themselves, and they are curious about other people."[20]

Normally we call someone a friend precisely because we share something with that person that we do not share with others. Yet for too many, "friends" in a social network is a numbers game indulged in to promote one's social status. According to Christine Rosen, "Friendship on these sites focuses a great deal on collecting, managing, and ranking the people you know."[21] Many Facebook users list hundreds of friends. Some sites also encourage users to rank their friends, adding another venue for the cliquishness and popularity contests all too common in adolescence.

Careful and loving relationships lie at the heart of all religious traditions. On-line communication can be one way of maintaining and fostering such relationships. However we need to use the medium thoughtfully and not to overuse it. Truly intimate relationships are still best fostered through face to face contact. Karl Barth considered authentic relationship to have four characteristics. First, we must be able to look the other in the eye. What Barth means by this is that true relationship acknowledges the other while aware that the other is distinct from the self.

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[18]Christopher Sanders, Tiffany Field, Miguel Diego, Michelle Kaplan, "The Relationship of Internet Use to Depression and Social Isolation among Adolescents," *Adolescence*, Summer, 2000.

[19]Quentin Schulze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002, 182.

[20]John Cassidy, "Me Media," *The New Yorker*, 15 May 2006, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/05/15/060515fa_fact_cassidy?currentPage=all .

[21]Rosen, "Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism," 27.

Relationship is entered into in a spirit of mutuality, not to enhance one's own status. It is also entered into in a spirit of self-disclosure. This calls for an authenticity that the Web does not preclude, but also does not encourage. Second, we must speak to and hear one another. On-line communication can be one vehicle for this, but we must recognize that without the actual sound of the other's voice we must be even more careful in how we "hear" the other's words. Third we must render mutual assistance to one another, and we must do this gladly.[22] This often requires proximity; it also opens one to vulnerability and a certain amount of risk. Christine Rosen quotes a young woman who writes, "I consistently trade actual human contact for the more reliable high of smiles on MySpace, winks on Match.com, and pokes on Facebook."[23]

Both social networks and video games can be places of encounter. The key is that we must encounter more than ourselves there; these on-line venues need to take us out of our narcissistic preoccupations and into the world of the other. Just as the Christian God is not a solitary being, alone in the universe, but are three holy persons in eternal loving communion with one another, so we image the divine when we experience that same loving communion. The lone actor in a first person shooter, with his focus on power misses this communion. So does the young person who relies on tweets and status updates to define what friendship is.

The world of cyberspace can hone skills, can connect us at great distances, and can help us explore ourselves and the world around us in new ways. But it must be entered with care. When used unthinkingly or overused, our digital pastimes make it all too easy for us to evade the world of true relationship, to settle into a world of self-aggrandizement and distraction, and to miss the true image of God in which we were created.

[22]Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 250-263.

[23]Rosen, "Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism," 31.