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From ICT to TCI : Communicative Theology(ies), Pedagogy and Web 2.0

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1   Introduction

Let me begin by noting that I am a Roman Catholic layperson who teaches full time in practical theology and religious education at a Lutheran seminary in the middle west of the US. The challenges that I face within theological education and the research that I do in the service of that arena are focused on the tensions and conflicting dynamics of religious experience and religious identity formation within media cultures. Perhaps my biggest professional challenge has to do with helping specific people to develop specific religious competence in a world of many religions and many cultures. Digital media make the definition of what "religious competence" is, very complicated, and they also make it immediately obvious that Christianity is only one option amongst many.

While in the past it might have been possible in my context to believe that Christianity is the only true way to God, now we might venture that claim as an assertion, but it is clearly no longer a "given," a way of life that is assumed and not questioned. Religious educators live, learn and lead in a world in which "dialogues in diversity" are at the core of our being, not simply a pretty bumper sticker. There is no way to live in this world and *not* be aware that there are multiple religions. I would go several steps further: there is no legitimate way to be a Christian in the very specific communities within which I live and teach, and not know how to be a good dialogue partner with other people of faith from religions beyond Christianity.

But what do I mean when I say that?

Let me give you a concrete example. Eboo Patel is the executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, based in Chicago, IL. Recently, at a talk in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, he noted a headline – "Muslim extremist murders Christian pilgrim" – and pointed out that most people read that headline as Muslim | Christian. Patel believes that people need to start reading that line

instead as extremist | pilgrim. "If we read the line Muslims against Christians ..." said Patel. "We are all going to be lost."[1]

Religious education – at least in my context – involves shaping people for community, introducing them to the ways of the community, and helping them to claim an identity within that community. Yet any such community is already embedded in multiple other communities. We speak, within my seminary, about helping our students to bridge the "Sunday/Monday divide" – by which we mean that religious practice needs to be about far more than Sunday morning worship. If, in that context, we educate for exclusive, extremist identity then we are creating major problems. If we educate for open, searching identity on the other hand – that of a pilgrim, a seeker on a journey – we are instead participating in God's creation.

This shift in how we think about, prepare for, educate in, and nurture specific Christian identity is thus the focus of my work, and in this context I want to talk about how that process is embedded in media cultures, and how that embeddedness carries new opportunities, as well as old dilemmas.

2   ICT and related dynamics

2.1   Authority ...

The first step in this story is to talk about some of the ways in which key elements of religious identity construction, of religious formation, are changing in the wake of the impact of new digital tools. Let me list just three: authority, authenticity, agency.

That ICT (internet communication technologies) contribute to a flattening of authority structures is a fairly straightforward claim, and one that has been echoed recently in a variety of publications. Perhaps the most vivid example I could share from within the US Roman Catholic church can be found in Clay Shirky's book *Here Comes Everybody*. In Chapter Six of that book Shirky tells the story of two separate waves of outrage over child sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church in Boston. In the first wave, in the early 1990's, the outcry did not spread widely, and Cardinal Law – the presiding bishop at that time – could ignore it. By 2002, however, when the next wave of outrage erupted, new tools – online newspapers, email, and social networking to name just three – resulted in sustained and tangible opposition which eventually led to Cardinal Law leaving Boston for good. Shirky's

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[1] TURTINEN, MELISSA, Eboo Patel: Youth, Religious Pluralism, at: http://pushthefuture.wordpress.com/2008/06/17/youth-religious-pluralism-eboo-patel/ (status: June 4, 2009).

argument – one for which I could provide numerous additional examples from other contexts – describes the ways in which these digital tools flattened authority structures, and created the possibility of coordinated opposition.[2]

The Roman Catholic church is a hierarchical church, and its documentary polity means that digital tools can have authority flattening effects as church documents are immediately made accessible throughout the world on the Net rather than gradually filtering from the Vatican to Bishops' conferences to priests to laypeople. Similar stories can be told in other religious contexts. What is happening politically with young evangelicals in the US would be another concrete example, where previous generations of evangelicals looked to the specific, almost charismatic authority of certain leaders, and now younger evangelicals are building a variety of looser, more organic institutions using web-based tools.[3]

2.2 Authenticity ...

These tools carry with them the authority of the environments within which they function, and much of that authority rests in what certain commentators have called the "authenticity of experience." Contrary to some claims that the web is a disembodying context, David Weinberger notes:

> "What is the greatest betrayer of a lack of authenticity? A voice without affect, without passion: a computer program. The knowledge worth listening to – that is worth developing together – comes from bodies, for only bodies (as far as we can tell) are capable of passionate attention, and only embodied creatures, their brains and sinews swaddled in fat and covered with skin, can write the truth in a way worth reading. The bodiless Web is fat with embodied knowledge that could only come from the particular people – smart, wise, opinionated, funny, provocative, outrageous, interestingly wrong – to whom we're listening. Indeed, that's why we're listening."[4]

There is a growing recognition within various parts of the Christian community that this concern for authenticity, far from being a negligible or trivial claim is indeed one of the more pressing challenges facing churches.[5] Ask a

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[2] SHIRKY, CLAY, Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations, New York 2008.

[3] A good example here is: TAYLOR, BARRY, Entertainment Theology: New-Edge Spirituality in a Digital Democracy, Grand Rapids MI 2008.

[4] WEINBERGER, DAVID, Small Pieces, Loosely Joined: A Unified Theory of the Web, Cambridge MA 2002, 145.

[5] Let me note that when I use the terminology "the Christian community" it is more for convenience than anything else, as there are a vast array of Christian communities, many of whom would not necessarily recognize each other as being part of the same community, no matter how broadly construed.

professor of Christian worship what constitutes authentic worship and they will likely give you a nuanced and lengthy response, some significant portion of which will depend upon the appropriate and proper utilization of specific ritual elements. Ask a layperson what constitutes authentic worship, and you will elicit a vast array of responses, often the common element being some kind of affective dynamic. These are strikingly different understandings of what constitutes "authenticity" and in a world where authority must be built and embraced, rather than asserted and accepted, authenticity becomes a key element of that epistemological architecture. Finding ways to engage experience with both respect and critique – particularly the affective and physical elements of that experience – becomes a crucial task.

The further and further we venture into a world such as this one, with its multiple digital tools, many of which now found in miniature form in hand-held devices such as the iPhone and other versions of mobile computing, the more people of faith within Christian contexts (and I would venture to speculate, other religious contexts as well), will desire, search for, and even need to find, ways to draw on and inscribe their authenticity using those tools. One key to that performance is to recognize the shared and participatory nature of cultural production.[6]

2.3 Agency …

As Sheila Greeve Daveney notes:

> " 'the people' are not just passive consumers or meaning, values, and practices devised by the powerful. They are the producers of culture on multiple levels, including through their resistance to elites, their creative appropriation and reconfiguration of the cultural productions of the powerful, and, not the least, through the creation of cultural meanings, practices and identities that are their own. In all this, popular culture has emerged no longer as that to be disdained or overcome but as the domain of creative cultural contestation and construction."[7]

It is this recognition of production and performance that has nourished a fertile new arena of theological study, that of practice-focused theology.[8] It

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[6] This kind of participatory engagement may be one element behind the spread of Twitter, where even some pastors are encouraging the use of the digital text service in the midst of worship, see: http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1895463,00.html (status: June 4, 2009).

[7] DAVANEY, SHEILA GREEVE, Theology and the turn to cultural analysis, in: BROWN, D. / DAVANEY, S. / TANNER, K. (eds), Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Culture Analysis, Oxford 2001, 6.

[8] I am referring here, in particular, to the work begun under the aegis of the *Practicing Faith* movement led by Dorothy Bass, but perhaps the wider work of organizations such as the *Association of Practical Theology* would be another example.

is also the nub of the third element I'd lift up here, that of "agency" within religious practice. As a media literacy educator, I've learned over time that it is far more effective to have my students create and perform in various media – learning how to tell their own stories in digital video, for instance – than it is simply to critique commercial production. A primary element of that pedagogical effectiveness can be traced to the ways in which creation, production and performance of meaning embodies personal and collective agency so much more clearly and in multivalent ways than simply listening to, and by extension, accepting as adequate, verbal explanation. Religious educators who work with children know this deeply, but so, too, do religious educators who accompany adults on the complex and often doubt-filled journey of faith formation. It is not enough to support adults in broadening and deepening their grasp of specific theological doctrines, if in turn those doctrines are not also embodied in their daily lives.

Much of the "practices" literature is particularly compelling in its voicing of theological engagement with daily life within the US context, but in a rather peculiar omission – given the widespread nature of engagement with media – it has often neglected to interrogate media culture practices. I suspect one reason for that neglect has been a nearly unanimous conclusion that media culture, specifically mass mediated forms of popular entertainment such as movies, television, radio shows, and so on, that media cultures are a hegemonic force of consumer commodification foisted upon passive audiences. As such there is no point in engaging them as anything other than something to be resisted. But that understanding of popular media cultures ignores the participatory nature of story-telling and story-sharing, not to mention nearly two decades of media studies research which underlines the complex and multifaceted way in which people make meaning with media. Passivity is the *last* word to be used in characterizing the nature of communicative practices within media cultures.[9]

For now, note that dynamics of authority, authenticity and agency are shifting amidst media cultures. In the next section of this paper I will argue that new digital tools make these dynamics at once more visible, and more amenable to cultural intervention.

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[9] An excellent introduction to that media studies literature from an informed theological perspective is MITCHELL, JOLYON, Media Violence and Christian Ethics, Cambridge 2007. See also BENKLER, YOCHAI, The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom, New Haven 2006.

3   Web 2.0 and social media

What is Web 2.0? What constitutes "social media"? The best description of social media that I know of is a little piece of video that describes them in terms of ice cream production and sales.[10] In a print essay such as this I can only reference the video, but at the heart of its argument is the depiction of the impact of individual home ice cream makers on a village whose primary industry was an ice cream factory. The one factory dominated production, and in doing so produced only three flavors. The advent of individual home ice cream makers led to a flourishing of different flavors, many of which only one or two people found palatable (think pickle ice cream), while other flavors found small and loyal markets. Eventually the townspeople discover ways to share their individual opinions on specific flavors, and new communities emerge around them, with membership shifting such that many people find themselves active in multiple, loosely joined affiliations.

The video makes its argument using the example of ice cream, but it's fairly easy for me to draw analogies to processes such as the creation and publication of religious curriculum materials – a central concern in my arena. In the US religious materials used to be produced by big, central church publishing houses – some of which still exist. Local churches were a kind of captive market, and purchased the materials produced by those institutions, whether or not the materials worked well locally, were in the languages necessary, represented people well, and so on. Now all of that has begun to change. Just about every church is creating their own materials to some extent, and recently new digital tools have made it possible for people to share them widely.

Imagine the confusion and apprehension of the large publishing houses – most of which are arms of national denominations. How could these materials be theologically appropriate? How can local churches shun their officially approved materials in favor of others? And perhaps more deeply but more quietly, how will we survive if we no longer have a captive market?

On the one hand, these concerns could be heard/read as the concerns of a dying industry, particularly common to print publishing. But on the other hand, it has been the publishing arms of the national denominations that have traditionally supported religious educators in a variety of ways, not simply by writing curriculum, but also through training, networking, and other forms of institutional support. Increasingly a wide group of pastoral leaders

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[10] The video is entitled "Social Media in Plain English" and is produced by Common Craft. It is available via their website: http://www.commoncraft.com/socialmedia (status: June 4, 2009).

(religious educators and pastors among them) are also raising questions about the theological and process content of locally produced materials. What kinds of options exist to mitigate or manage these concerns? Are there processes to reinscribe authority in ways that do not violate the authenticity or agency of local communities – and individual persons – but actually engage and support them?

Similar kinds of issues were once raised by the advent of television, and at the time religious communities tended towards one of two responses: either to embrace wholeheartedly the new medium, simply "porting over" their existing content, or to work at "inoculating" people against content in the new medium. Think "Christian broadcasting" and "media literacy" (in their older forms).[11] Neither response was particularly helpful in the long run, but both are still being tried today in relation to Web 2.0 media. Another option based more organically on the Web2.0 tools, however, is also emerging, namely, publishing/sharing sites such as *FeAutor* and *MyCatholicVoice*[12]

These sites take advantage of software that makes it possible for people to upload files easily, and then for others to find and download files. In other words, the process that used to be managed via a variety of "file transfer protocols" requiring rather arcane knowledge of code, has continued to be streamlined in such a way that anyone who can find a file on their own computer and select it, can likely publish files using these sites, making the files available widely. Given the ease with which people can manage files in this way, a key question that emerges is: who will control what kinds of content are published in a given space? In other words, issues of authority become once again very relevant in architectural terms – that is, in the very structure of the coding of the site – as well as in more general terms. Different kinds of sites manage this question very differently.

An early attempt to construct authority in a religious context through digital media was instituted at a site initially named *GodTube,* which at least in 2007, was the "fastest-growing new site on the web" in the US context.[13] While the site appeared to share a lot in common with *YouTube*, in many ways it was very different for it was actually a closed space with a specific

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[11] See, for example, Hess, Mary, From trucks carrying messages to ritualized identities: Implications of the postmodern paradigm shift in media studies for religious educators, Religious Education 94/3 (1999) 273-288.

[12] www.feautor.org, http://www.mycatholicvoice.com (status: June 4, 2009).

[13] As reported by comScore (see: http://www.physorg.com/news113153071.html, 11/1/07, status: June 4, 2009). Such designations are notoriously unreliable, as web metrics are still being figured out. Nevertheless, this site clearly was growing rapidly enough that various news organizations were taking note.

set of theological commitments. Every contribution published there was first "vetted" by human beings, who applied an explicit theological policy. Indeed, part of its attraction as a "safe" space for Christians (a claim that featured prominently on the site at its inception) was that it was a space in which Christians did not need to encounter conflicting interpretations, plausible challenges to their identity, or pretty much anything else that might contradict a very specific understanding of Christianity. The site managed the issues of authority by implementing a direct theological statement, and a team of editors who ensured that any content published was congruent with that statement.

While *GodTube* grew very rapidly, it's unclear whether such a process was sustainable in the rapidly changing landscape of people's attention. *God-Tube* morphed into something very different in 2009, re-naming itself *Tangle*, and limiting its terms of use statement to standard non-infringement claims. All of the Christian theological claims were removed from its policies, with only the vague statement – "The Company will make commercially reasonable efforts to provide a safe, family-friendly environment for its Users" – remaining. At this point the site seems to be trying to move beyond the *YouTube* nature of its original inception, and instead become a portal for a variety of kinds of content, as well as social networking for Christian bands, groups, ministries and other organizations who participate in the ever shifting and expanding arena of "Christian publishing and entertainment." Whether it succeeds or not will rest in part on the extent to which it can provide an experience whose authenticity and agency lends it sufficient authority to be credible in the communities the site seeks to serve.

Another attempt to build authority within this landscape grows out of a collaboration between several denominational publishing houses in the Roman Catholic context. The site *MyCatholicVoice* (www.mycatholicvoice.com/) is a joint venture of a number of Catholic publishers, with a distinguished advisory board. Much of the content on the site has been developed by these publishers and is made available digitally for sale for personal use. This site also encourages users to upload materials in a variety of formats, noting that any item uploaded "will go through our review process to ensure it meets our Terms of Use," although its terms of use statement is rather vague with respect to content claims. The site stresses that:

> "Our users expect our site to be safe – so MyCatholicVoice strives to provide an online environment that is safe and respectful. We welcome dialogue, discussion and diverse points of view, yet require that users adhere to our terms of service and the policies re-

It may well be that the site assumes people will be drawn to either the "From the Bishops" content, or commercial content, for such safety. While most of the current content on the site appears to be derived from these standard publishers, the site uses a variety of social tools (ratings, commenting, open uploads) to invite broader content creation. This site essentially relies on the established authority of hierarchical leaders and publishing houses to grant it credibility. It is a brand new site, so there is not much to document yet in terms of activity, but my hunch is that it will succeed or fail – again, like *Tangle* – based on the extent to which it provides opportunity for participants to exercise agency in ways that allow them to perform authentically.

While each of these sites invites submission of materials from the public, one of the key attractional claims is that they are *safe* sites -- a claim that suggests danger exists in confronting difference beyond the boundaries defined as "safe."

Yet a third attempt to engage religious practice with Web 2.0 tools is that of *FeAutor* (www.feautor.org).[15] *FeAutor* is a site that eschews talk of safety and prefers instead to empower its users with a wide assortment of reviewing, ranking, and tagging tools. It was created by a group of volunteers who connected via a World Council of Churches consultation on music and copyright, and it is a site that – at least for the moment – is completely free of commercial elements, with all content requiring the use of *Creative Commons* licenses. *FeAutor* is a relatively new site that few people have found and few are using yet (at last check, there were only 254 users registered, although people have registered to contribute to the site from 27 different countries). Like *MyCatholicVoice*, *FeAutor* accepts contributions in a variety of formats – video files, text files, powerpoint files, audio files, software, and so on. Unlike *MyCatholicVoice*, *FeAutor* automatically publishes any contribution offered – reserving only the right to take down entries that violate specific laws. *FeAutor* also very explicitly attaches a *Creative Commons* license to each contribution published there.[16] *FeAutor* is clearly embodying

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[14] This quotation is taken from the "about us" segment of the site: http://www.mycatholicvoice.com/info/about (status: June 3, 2009).

[15] Let me note, by way of disclaimer, that I have been very involved with the group of volunteers across the Americas that are developing FeAutor.

[16] Creative Commons licenses are legal licenses that function within existing copyright regimes, while automatically granting certain kinds of uses. They exist in a variety of formulations along the spectrum between "all rights reserved" (what we traditionally have understood as copyright) and the public domain (where no rights are reserved). They are also electronically linked, so that it is a trivial task to attach one to a given piece of work and in

the practices of Web 2.0 spaces most directly, but again – will it provide the kind of opportunity people are seeking? Can a religious space that is wide open, with peer ranking and other egalitarian authority mechanisms, feel sufficiently authentic to be credible?

On a spectrum bounded by closed content on one end, and widely open content on the other, *Tangle* might be at one end, *MyCatholicVoice* in the middle, and *FeAutor* at the opposite end. While in some ways these sites can be seen as similar, their architecture is actually quite different, with authority being built through a variety of mechanisms ranging from an active human review board, to publisher-edited content, to open reviewing and ranking mechanisms. These are clearly structural decisions the sites' creators have made, which are then implemented in the software coding.[17] But they are also decisions that carry clear theological implications.

4   Practice-focused theology and Christian identity

Let me turn now to these implications, which I make not to assert that they are definitive or prescriptive for people beyond Christian community, but rather as an example of the ways in which Christian theology is challenged by digital technologies and can be renewed by them. Let me begin by noting that the most recent decade of Christian theological research has been particularly rich in the arena known as "practical theology" or the theology that grows out of and is deeply embedded in human practices. As Christian Scharen notes, this is a theology which must "develop, sustain and legitimize reflection on Christian faith not simply as a set of propositions to believe, commandments to obey, or rituals to perform, but as an orienting force that impacts every aspect of daily life."[18]

As such, practice-focused theology is particularly interested in the ways in which popular *practices* shed light on faith, and the God who draws human

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doing so, also make the piece more easily accessible to net-wide search mechanisms. These licenses are not as radical as the work that is currently being done on free culture (free as in "freedom," not as in "free beer"), but they do create a proactive mechanism within existing law for artists to promote the sharing of their materials. In that way they support a notion of agency that is both closely linked with a creative artist's individual creativity, but which also recognizes the integral element of community, of audience, of sharing that is bound up with creation.

[17] For more on the ways in which software architecture structures a site's functionality see LAWRENCE LESSIG's *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. Available in an online, revised version here: http://codev2.cc/ (status: June 4, 2009).

[18] SCHAREN, CHRISTIAN, Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership, Grand Rapis MI 2008, 5.

beings into relationship through faith. As noted early in this paper, however, this stream of theologies has *not* paid any kind of sustained or creative attention to the myriad ways in which people engaged mediated culture. Theologians who *have* focused on media have tended, until very recently, to emphasize negative aspects of mass mediated culture and to work with an understanding of media that is very instrumental. Thus you have theologians and pastoral leaders condemning various kinds of popular culture, warning people away from some and steering them towards specific kinds of popular creativity. As Scharen notes, there have been frequent attempts to paint a "bold dividing line between the sinful world and the holy church, between saved persons and those who are lost."[19]

What such a bold dividing line has done, however, is underscore a specific theological position that is *not* so much that of mainstream Catholic or Lutheran theology, as just two examples. Here again Christian Scharen is instructive:

> "The view of sin such a position depends upon suggests that sin manifests itself in sinful acts, acts that a Christian does not commit because of the gift of grace. In order to seek a context in which one can live this new life of holiness, such Christians eschew the world and create their own subculture with versions of 'worldly' activities now baptized by explicit Christian values. One can easily see the whole world of contemporary Christian music as such a reaction: the baptized can still embrace the sound of electric guitars, but with wholesome lyrics that teach of Christ and his benefits. This view totters on the edge of making the claim, 'You are saved by grace, now go and prove it.' With this view comes the ever present danger of 'backsliding' into the life of sin and the sinful acts that accompany it."[20]

Further:

> "The problem is that in this view, too much depends on our ability, and too little on the power of evil and of God. On the one hand, if sins are merely acts, we don't take proper notice of the basic fault of human life that the Reformers of the 16th century called *incurvatus in se* or the self curved in on itself. Misunderstanding the deeply sinful nature of our human existence then allows an overly optimistic sense of how easily such a fault can be overcome simply by trying to hide from bad things. On the other hand, if grace merely gives Christians the power to act rightly, then it limits grace to both a sort of shallow 'motivation for doing good' and to a help for Christians alone."[21]

Let me see if I can make this point even more clearly: the notion that we, as Christians, ought to be producing and living in Christian enclosures oriented to "safe" Christian materials not only denies a deeply Christian understanding of the sinful nature of human being itself – a sinfulness we confess Christ died to redeem us from – but it also denies the transcendence of God,

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[19] SCHAREN, Faith as a Way of Life, 102.

[20] SCHAREN, Faith as a Way of Life, 102-103.

[21] SCHAREN, Faith as a Way of Life, 103.

and God's very ability to create and transform the world. The move towards a Christian identity based on exclusivity, a move that all too easily becomes extremism, ultimately is a move that denies God, and God's presence in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Christian Scharen again:

> "The idea is not that we simply baptize popular culture as filled with God; some of it is truly awful. Rather, we should simply trust that God's grace is broad enough to be working in the world, in and through arts and culture, and our ability to see the depth present there should allow us to sit and listen fully, deeply, with a generous spirit. C. S. Lewis put it this way: 'The first demand of any world of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way...

> Finding the connections between faith, art, and culture comes not from narrowing, but from expanding and deepening, our engagement with worlds beyond our own."[22]

This is why a site like *GodTube* had the potential in its early incarnation to be so pernicious, and a site like *FeAutor* holds out such hope. It is also why I made the claim at the beginning of this paper that the digital tools of a Web 2.0 world hold enormous potential for renewing and refreshing faith. If we can begin to trust that God is indeed active in Creation around us – and in creative activities amongst us – and if can claim and articulate what we mean by such trust, we may indeed have a vital reason for pursuing theological inquiry in a Web 2.0 world.

Late in May of 2009, for example, Pope Benedict 16th released a statement for the celebration of the 43rd Day of World Communications. He noted, in part, that:

> "While the speed with which the new technologies have evolved in terms of their efficiency and reliability is rightly a source of wonder, their popularity with users should not surprise us, as they respond to a fundamental desire of people to communicate and to relate to each other. This desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings and cannot be adequately understood as a response to technical innovations. In the light of the biblical message, it should be seen primarily as a reflection of our participation in the communicative and unifying Love of God, who desires to make of all humanity one family. When we find ourselves drawn towards other people, when we want to know more about them and make ourselves known to them, we are responding to God's call - a call that is imprinted in our nature as beings created in the image and likeness of God, the God of communication and communion."[23]

The Pope's reminder of the essentially communicative nature of our relationship with God, and indeed of God within Godself, is also a key element of a river within theology that is being called "communicative theology." In

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[22] SCHAREN, Faith as a Way of Life, 104-105.

[23] See: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/ documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day_en.html (status: June 3, 2009).

the remainder of this paper I will argue that communicative theology offers a particularly robust and compelling way to engage the shifting dynamics of "authority, authenticity and agency" so pronounced in new media cultures.

5   TCI and communicative theology

Communicative theology is a form of theology that begins from a clear affirmation that God is a Trinitarian God who is deeply relational and communicative *in Godself.* This is a claim that funds the theological position with tremendous authority, but at the same time opens up room for engaging differing understandings of authenticity and agency. How so? To begin with, communicative theology argues that the *process* by which, or in which, one does theology is both intimately and integrally connected to the content and substance of that theology. The authors of a recent book on the topic write explicitly that it is

> "a method where the source of its assertions can be identified... there is a critical correlation between content and form in communicative theology, that is highly relevant to context as well..."[24]

Let me take each piece in turn. From the standpoint of authority, communicative theology *builds* authority rather than simply assuming it can be asserted. As Scharer and Hilberath write, it is a movement from "assent" to "truth", to recognizing that one is "entrusting oneself to God's 'communicatio' and 'communio.'"[25]

Perhaps an image might be useful here. Parker Palmer, who writes frequently about what is involved in this kind of obedience to truth, uses two images by way of contrast. The first depicts what he calls the "objectivist myth of learning":[26]

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[24] SCHARER, MATTHIAS / HILBERATH, BERND JOCHEN, The Practice of Communicative Theology: An Introduction to a New Theological Culture, New York 2008, 20-23.

[25] SCHARER / HILBERATH, The Practice of Communicative Theology, 75.

[26] This figure, and the following, are taken from PALMER, PARKER, The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life, San Francisco 1998, 102-106.
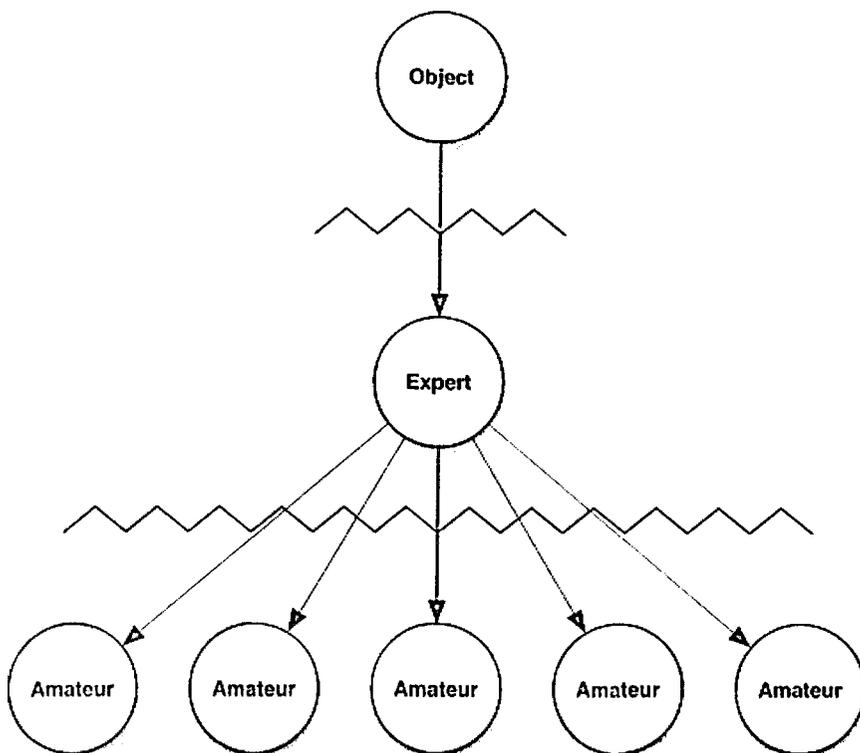
This image of knowing places an "expert" as the mediator between the object to be known, and the amateur knowers. Information flows in only one direction, and must go through this mediator. The baffles in the diagram make clear that communication is not even minimally dialogical, let alone deeply relational. This is an epistemological position that demands, at a minimum, "assent" to the authority of the expert. Palmer has a contrasting diagram, however, which he labels "the community of truth":
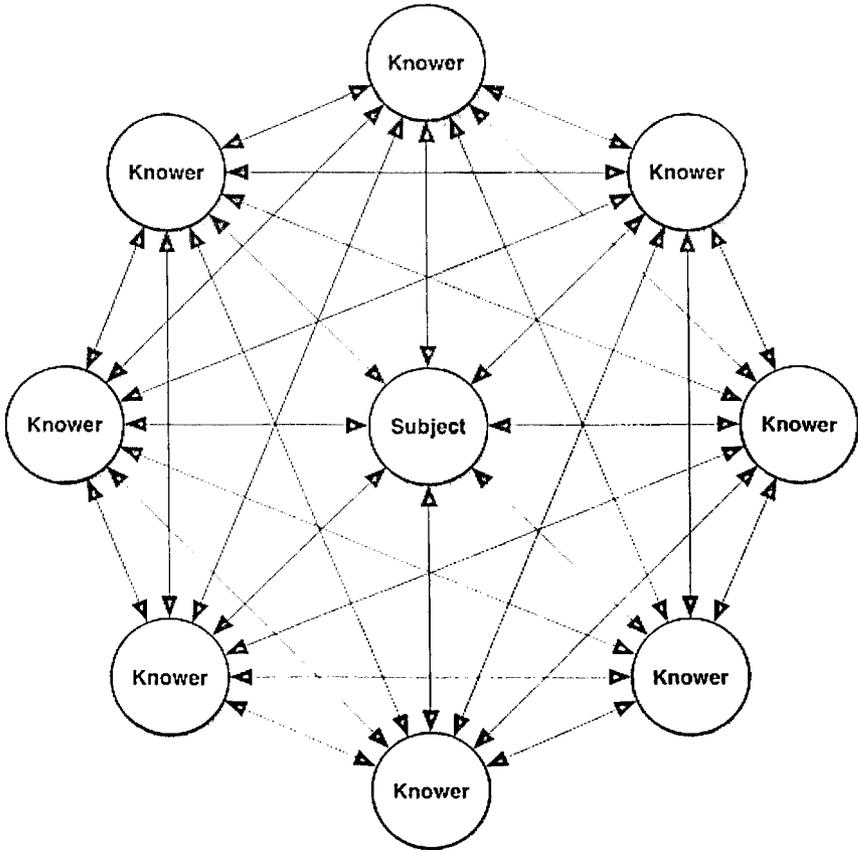
This image suggests, instead, that knowing is a process that is deeply relational, and that it requires a community within which one comes to know. It also names the center of the knowing as "subject" (vs. the "object" of the earlier diagram), which already implies more agency on the part of the truth to be known, as well as the knowers.

Sometimes when I bring out this diagram to share with my students, they immediately object to it, since their first inference is that the "teacher" inhabits the role of "expert" in the initial diagram, but is somehow nowhere to be found in the second diagram. My counterclaim is that actually the expert in the first diagram may be the teacher – a model that is routinely in place in

the academy – but there is no obvious reason why an expert must be adept at teaching and supporting learning. And in the second model, while the teacher may not be visible in a discrete position, the teacher might best be understood as the person and/or institution which shapes the learning space such that each knower remains in relationship with each other and with the subject at the center of their knowing.

It is this latter model – with each knower in relationship with each other and with the active subject – that best captures my understanding of how communicative theology attempts to function. In designing spaces or processes that work with this kind of theological engagement, communicative theology draws on the wisdom of a practice labeled "theme-centered interaction" or TCI. Theologians use TCI to structure a dynamic practice that:

> "moves from the I, the We, and the It to form a triangle encompassed in a Globe ... the individual subjects – the "I" factor – participate in the We and are oriented toward faith (It) as their response to the communication of God in the ambivalent situation marked by the Globe ..."[27]

It's difficult to describe this process in print, for it is a dynamic exercise of moving amongst multiple positions of knowing. The "I" of the individual subject, for instance, is only one element of the process. Note the way in which this description builds authority out of a dynamic process of attending to often very disparate positionalities, while holding them together with respect for their specific integrities. The very process is itself communicative, and thus embodies the theological claims it makes. As Hilberath and Scharer note:

> "communicative theology can be understood as a process that directs its 'gaze' – in the sense of theological hermeneutics – toward the communication event ... [it is] shared and

To borrow a very old slogan – "the process is the goal." And in so doing, the process invites experience to build authority. But the experience is not simply unreflected or individual experience, it is, instead, shared, dialogical, relational experience built from the movement amongst these differing positionalities. There is attention paid, for instance, to what it requires to "be one's own chairperson" – a phrase which captures the significant degree to which people participating in a theme-centered interaction are asked to be mindful and sufficiently self-differentiated to engage in a shared process. How often, by way of contrast, do small group discussions in a classroom become simply naïve renderings of opinion, defensive posturing, or some other form of performance rather than deep engagement with the subject at hand? Here again, Palmer's diagram is useful because it points to the necessity of keeping the subject in focus. There is much which speaks to "authen-

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[27] PALMER, The Courage to Teach, 92.

ticity" in learning here, but it is not simple or unreflective experience. As the Scharer and Hilberath write:

> "TCI advocates the notion of "selective authenticity." The rule of communication is "as authentic as possible and as selective as necessary." In communication, according to TCI, it is important to develop a feeling for authentic self-expression appropriate to a given situation. ... Only someone who can communicate while holding inner and outer factors "in balance" is in a position to protect him-or-herself and others from an inappropriate "soul striptease" on the one hand and from a defensive distance keeping on the other."[28]

There are multiple ways in which digital tools, and more specifically, the kinds of software that make possible what we are calling "Web 2.0," allow this kind of selective authenticity to be visibly embodied. A review and ranking system, for instance, like the one built into *FeAutor*, both invites people to share as they feel appropriate, and yet also invites the community to read across time to determine which criteria ought to become most pertinent. This is *not*, however, a process that promotes safety through instrumental or transmissive means. Indeed, one key claim that communicative theologians make is that:

> "the processes shaped towards eliciting and identifying this revelation must of necessity be open, communicative and oriented towards the borders, the edges, the spaces in which disturbance, perplexity and conflict arise ..."[29]

This emphasis on engaging truth in the very heart of perplexity and conflict is an ancient art whose practice we have almost lost in the midst of the either/or dichotomies of much current cultural practice. It is most assuredly *not* a practice which flourishes where concern for safety predominates.

Of course, there are ways to use materials found at a closely controlled site like *GodTube* was, to open people up, to expand and deepen engagement with worlds beyond our own. And no doubt there are ways to use materials from the *FeAutor* site to opposite effect. That is why the final element of my argument – that of agency – becomes so crucial.

As communicative theologians argue, the very ways in which we look, in which we listen, in which we receive, in which we "get ourselves out of the way" – to use C. S. Lewis's words – are constitutive of theology. If we are to live into the 21st world of digital technologies in ways that live and breathe and move with God we must do so theologically. And we must do so fully engaging dialogue and diversity.

Christianity can be understood as a practice of living into paradox ("baptized into death," and so on) at the edges, rather than in the smoothed over middle

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[28] PALMER, The Courage to Teach, 160.

[29] PALMER, The Courage to Teach, 155-156.

or the artificial polarities of the ends. Indeed, as H. Anderson and E. Foley write:

> "The spirit of reconciliation, which enables us to enter a world of contradiction, is the same disposition that allows us to embrace paradox without needing to resolve it. This is a spirituality that thrives only in paradox, between the mythic and the parabolic, around the human and divine story, and in the tension of the individual and communal. It is a spirituality that is nourished by the ambiguity of mighty stories and dangerous rituals. This experience of ambiguity is inevitable because pluralistic living is a permanent part of contemporary human society. If we are to flourish in this society, we need to learn how to tolerate opposing forces, both within and without."[30]

How does one articulate a process, let alone a pedagogy, for living in this kind of paradox? I believe that communicative theologians offer us a pragmatic path for doing so. There is far more that could – and should – be said about the process of communicative theology. While these theologians are articulating a very specific way of doing theology that relies on theme-centered interaction, their underlying assumptions have resonance with a number of differing theologies over the years and around the globe.[31]

As long as my students – who, it is important to note, are training to be pastors and lay pastoral leaders – stay caught up in images of theological and religious education that are bound into transmissive notions of teaching and learning that privilege hierarchically structured notions of authority, and passive accounts of learning, as long as they seek to create "safe" Christian spaces for their youth to inhabit, rather than imagining what is possible through collaboration and participation, they can't quite "get" what communicative theology is about. But consider the kinds of interactions that spaces such as *FeAutor*, as just one example, makes possible.

Here is a space where people are free to share, invited and welcomed even, to share their creative articulations of where and how and why they are finding God. They are invited to listen to and to look at other articulations and in doing so to tag and review them, thus participating in a larger conversation. Users of the site can bookmark their favorites using social bookmarking services with which they are familiar in other contexts, and they can "listen in," even apprentice to, other guides. They can lurk on the site, observing the "edges" if you will, and then they can dive in and publish their creations in those spaces.

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[30] ANDERSON, HERBERT / FOLEY, EDWARD, Mighty Stories and Dangerous Rituals, San Francisco 2001, 180.

[31] BRAD HINZE, in his introduction to the book to *The Practice of Communicative Theology*, outlines a number of theologians whose work has resonance here. I would add the recent work of Jolyon Mitchell in the field of media studies and Christian ethics, to that list.

I have no idea if this particular space will "catch on" enough to be popular, but its very architecture conveys something of the religious commitments of the people who created it. *FeAutor* says that it is a "free, multilingual and open space to share religious resources." It does not specify further what any of those terms mean. The people who created and to date have populated the site with content, are Christians, but the site in no way assumes that one must be a Christian to use it, or that the content published there is Christian. In sharp contrast to *MyCatholicVoice,* the original *GodTube,* and other similar services, there is no up front editorial board eyeing every contribution to determine if it matches the theological norms of the site. Instead, anyone can publish there, and the minute a contribution is received it is publically available.[32]

At the same time, however, there are very clear theological commitments that led to its creation – commitments articulated in the recent document *Love to Share: Intellectual Property Rights, Copyright and Christian Churches* which came out of the World Council of Churches.[33]

At the beginning of this essay I noted the following quotation from David Weinberger, a thoroughly secular philosopher of the web:

> "What is the greatest betrayer of a lack of authenticity? A voice without affect, without passion: a computer program. The knowledge worth listening to – that is worth developing together – comes from bodies, for only bodies (as far as we can tell) are capable of passionate attention, and only embodied creatures, their brains and sinews swaddled in fat and covered with skin, can write the truth in a way worth reading. The bodiless Web is fat with embodied knowledge that could only come from the particular people – smart, wise, opinionated, funny, provocative, outrageous, interestingly wrong – to whom we're listening. Indeed, that's why we're listening."[34]

There is a greater claim embedded in such a statement that a communicative theologian could lift up – that is, that the only theology worth attending to is that worth developing together in these bodies which are capable of passionate attention and which are embodied through the creative gift of God, who grants us our creaturely selves.

Web 2.0 tools now make the possibility of such development more globally accessible, and do so in ways unimaginable just a few short years ago. Rather than vitiating our Christian truth claims by hiding in so-called "safe" spaces that render us vulnerable to extremism, we need to move outward as

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[32] The only exception to that rule are the pieces that are published through groups, where the group exercises editorial control over what goes up in its name (groups like Red Crearte, for instance, which has a space on the site).

[33] This document is available online at: http://www.feautor.org/id/12060144352 (status: June 4, 2009).

[34] WEINBERGER, Small Pieces Loosely Joined, 145.

pilgrims on a search for God in the midst of communities and communication, in the midst of differences and tensions, seeking amidst the dynamic dance of the I and the We, the IT which we confess, all the while conscious of the globe in which we dance. Communicative theology, participatory social media – these two rivers come together in a vivid way that make this kind of dynamic dance not only possible, but readily present and available.