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Toward a Religious Ethics of Information Communication Technology

Abstract:

This paper deals with how religions formulate ethical responses to the challenges arising from information-communication technology. For over forty years the Catholic Church has constructed an official teaching that attempts provide a consistent and universal perspective for making moral judgments about these technologies and the communications media they enable and sustain. Because of its stature and size as world religion and because its moral understanding has attempted to keep pace with the rapid development of ICT, the Catholic Church's views have particular significance and can be taken as an artefact and model of how religion responds to the moral challenges posed by modern technology. This paper will examine how ethics and religion come together in Catholic teaching, discuss certain problems arising from that approach, and conclude with suggestions for a future religious ethics of ICT.

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Introduction

Religions promote values for individuals and for the societies in which they live. It is natural that religions have something to say about the ethical implications of the technology on human moral life. Modern technology has posed successive challenges to religious-ethical thinking not simply because of the use or abuse to which it can be put, but because of what Hans Jonas (1984) has described as the altered nature of human action. Religions are legitimately concerned with how technology impacts on the way people view the world and make value judgments; they need also to be aware of the impact of technology on how people view religion and morality. Religions may no longer rest on a naïve sense of their own credibility as moral authorities. If they hope to mobilize their own members, find common ground with other religions, and influence the global forces that structure, animate and constitute the global world wide web of information and communication, they will need a multi-dimensional hermeneutic, an ethical method that is open, inclusive and inductive.

The Roman Catholic Response

The Catholic response to the challenges of a rapidly developing confluence of media, technology, and information-explosion emerges in several pastoral-ethical documents. They reflect three concerns: the impact of technologically driven changes in public and social communication on the Church's mission, the development of communication and public opinion within the Church, and the ethical questions raised by an altered form of digitalized and globalized communication. This paper deals only with the final concern.

A period of optimism

An official Catholic ICT-ethics begins with the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965). Among the challenges the Bishops addressed was that presented by technology-mediated communication – “the press, the cinema, radio, television,” and other such media, through which mass audiences

are reached.⁴⁷ The Council recognized that a new reality – multiple messages from multiple sources – was shaping the consciousness of Catholics and threatening the Church's traditionally powerful voice in an emerging worldwide communications network.

Of primary concern was the right of the Church (and of religion) to not be excluded from the new media systems. The ethical warrant for this claim lay in a three-fold argument, that (1) the formation of public opinion is an essential right of human beings, (2) which implies the right of access to information, and (3) truthful information is information that does not exclude religion. This position is based in “the absolute primacy of the objective moral order,” the natural law, established by God, that reveals humanity's supernatural finality.

A series of directives, aimed at media producers, church leaders, governments, professional associations of media workers, and consumers, especially parents, establishes a pattern of seeing media in terms of producers-regulators-users.

Communio et Progressio (1971) provides the theological framework for a Catholic ethics of ICT. Its starting point and foundational principle is the *purpose* of social communication: to build a responsible and responsive world community. Developments and applications in media technology must be evaluated by this goal, which is hierarchically ordered to God's “plan for [humanity's] salvation.”⁴⁸ The doctrine of the Trinity is applied analogously as a paradigm and heuristic for understanding the nature and goal of human communication. “[T]he bondedness and community of man – the highest purpose of every act of communication – is rooted in and modelled by the highest mystery of the eternal community in God.”⁴⁹ From this derives the universal ethical obligation to ensure that the media are used in the pursuit of truth and to create the conditions necessary for fostering “that mutual and sympathetic understanding that leads to human progress.”⁵⁰

⁴⁷ *Inter Mirifica*, n. 1.

⁴⁸ *Communio et Progressio* (1971), n. 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibd.*, n. 8.

⁵⁰ *Ibd.*, n. 18.

The moral measure of ICT lies in its use, either to "multiply contacts within society and to deepen social consciousness"⁵¹ or undermine the formation of a just and equitable world community. *Communio et Progressio* applies general principles of the Church's doctrine of social justice to the quality and purpose of communication as impacted by ICT. The model of media apparent in both documents is instrumental: technology-machines/tools-producer-product-recipient.

Taking stock

As ICT develops, access broadens, and restrictions become porous, the opportunity for exchanging and viewing objectionable materials grows. Alarmed by the "worldwide revolution in the perception of moral values," and the "the major role in the process of individual and social change" played by the media,⁵² *Pornography and Violence in Media: A Pastoral Response* (1989) adopts a more judgmental discourse. This document invokes traditional ethical values and calls on various societal groups to defend human dignity, evaluate products and attitudes, and encourage the production and use of materials that "respect the common good and promote sound human development."⁵³ Without reference to the loss of boundaries inherent in the technology itself,⁵⁴ the Vatican finds fault in widespread weakening of traditional morality. The ethical role played by new ICT in this process is shortened to one of carrying images and content to be judged by established (natural law) criteria.

In what may be taken as a counterbalance to the anxious tone of *Pornography and Violence* (1989), *Aetatis Novae* (1992) acknowledges the dynamic and all-pervading aspect of ICT. The statement highlights ICT's positive role in the political reconfiguring of Europe and its power to cause "a fundamental reshaping of the elements of which people comprehend the world about them and

verify what they comprehend."⁵⁵ To insure the positive use of ICT, a sense of solidarity (a hybrid of social justice and compassion), enlightened consumption and regulatory policies should guide its development and application.

Both documents raise serious ethical questions, from availability of immoral content and lack of regulation of IT systems to depersonalization of communication and cultural colonialism. The ethical norm proposed is functional, measuring the applications of ICT against "the role, which, in the providential plan of God, the media are intended to play in promoting the integral development of human persons and societies."⁵⁶ These statements see the Church as apart from the media, maintaining "a linear and instrumental view," reflective of its own interest in the technologies for disseminating religious information and proclamation.⁵⁷

Toward establishing ethical standards

In its latest stage of ethical responses, the Church calls for self- and governmental regulation of ICT, as a means of bringing it in line with the hierarchically ordered purposes of a God. *Ethics in Advertising* (1997), *Ethics in Communications*, (2000), and *Ethics in Internet* (2002) continue with an essentially instrumental paradigm of ICT as neutral tools. Missing in these statements is an appreciation for the complexities of the Internet and its technology, of the protean-like reality and metaphoric meaning of cyberspace, and of the difficulty of locating ethical responsibility where users and producers are not easily distinguished. Ethically problematic areas (such as manipulation of the public, destructive patterns of consumptions, digital divide, governmental filtering, and privacy-security) affirm and are reaffirmed by the statements of international bodies. However, the generality of appeals to human dignity and the common good, as necessary "conditions for grounding one's vision, taking a stand, and action remain rather vacuous."⁵⁸

⁵¹ *Communio et Progressio* (1971), n. 8.

⁵² *Ibd.*, n. 1.

⁵³ *Pornography and Violence in Media: A Pastoral Response* (1989), n. 23.

⁵⁴ Svantesson, 2005.

⁵⁵ *Aetatis Novae* (1992), n. 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibd.*, n.9.

⁵⁷ de Feijter 2007, Helland 2005.

⁵⁸ de Feijter 2007, p. 63.

Analysis of the Roman Catholic Approach

The Catholic response to ICT is fundamentally positive, approaching the technology as means that can be used to benefit the human person and community. The dominant model of media is one of neutral tools, instruments, used to strategically and purposively convey messages. Ethical norms, extrinsic to the technologies themselves, are applied to formulate moral assessments and provide direction for responsible action. The norms, derived from a religious worldview that privileges the concept "social communication" as an ethical starting point, depend on the Christian narrative and vision of society for their interpretative principle. But there are inherent shortcomings in this approach, which limit the Church's ability to influence public ethical discourse.

Little (if any) empirical research is available to demonstrate to what extent the Vatican has influenced the ethical development of ICT or ascertain its effect on the attitudes toward or use of ICT among Catholics. Religious ethical statements are meant to be normative (influencing judgments) and reformatory (changing behaviours). A reasonable assessment of the Church's potential to move ICT effectively to fulfill its moral potential must take both these aspects seriously. The Church statements see ICT as a means and opportunity for humankind to take decisive action toward human development and international cooperation. The Vatican's reading of media and ICT is morally sensitive both to areas such as violence, pornography and racism, and to concerns of privacy, security and criminal activity. It raises issues of social justice and inclusion, such as the digital divide, cultural domination, and community identity.

The nobility of these interests is not in question. What will be beneficial for religious ethicists, however, is to inquire into the form of ethical discourse employed by a particular religious grouping. In this regard, the Church's response to ICT is problematic in several aspects: (a) the appeal to a religious meta-narrative, (b) an instrumental appraisal of ICT, and (c) an authoritarian and deductive approach to ethical valuing.

Appeal to meta-narrative

The Vatican's ethical evaluations are situated within the conceptual framework of *social commu-*

nication, a concept prior to modern ICTs and whose meaning is unaltered by their novelty. The Church, accordingly, seeks new ways to apply established values of social order and purpose rooted in natural law anthropology, construed within a particular religious discourse and narrative tradition.

Social communication as the pivotal interpretative concept, theologically interpreted by analogy to the Christian doctrines of the Blessed Trinity and Creation, presents a vision of media, their purpose and function that privileges a particular religious heuristic for understanding the ethical issues. As a basis for ethical dialogue and collaboration, meta-narratives or macro-level theories are problematic, because they "tend to abstract from particular cases, to impute rationality on actors' behalfs or posit functionality for their actions, and to be order-driven."⁵⁹ They raise the suspicion of a post-modern audience and impede the creation of an intercultural space of ethical response to a worldwide phenomenon that raises consciousness of diversity and difference.

Structural-functional perspective

An instrumentalist description of what characterizes Internet communications betrays a structural-functional approach that applies traditional ethical frameworks to realities that have outgrown them. While acknowledging the Internet fundamentally reshapes "the elements by which people comprehend the world about them, and verify and express what they comprehend,"⁶⁰ the Church construes the Net and ICT as tools. "The media do nothing by themselves; they are instruments, tools, used as people choose to use them."⁶¹

Technology mediated information/communication is treated as "out there." In the foreground stands function: first, within the structural concept of social communication; then, as function within the structure of human community; finally, within the dynamic structure of the nature and action of God. This construct resists Greenfield's and Yan's (2006) insistence that we "see the Internet as a new object of cognition, neither a concrete arte-

⁵⁹ Misa 1994, p. 119.

⁶⁰ *Aetatis Novae* n. 4.

⁶¹ *Ethics in Communication*, n. 4.

fact nor a visible social partner, but a gigantic complex network of networks...a hybrid of artificial (e.g. computer screens and key board), social (communications with people), and mental like systems (e.g. invisible virtuality).⁶² The structural-functional model lags behind the emergent ubiquity of computing. It remains "abstract and under-developed" and of "limited value."⁶³

Today we are challenged not primarily by the message-bearing capacity of ICT, but by a movement to computerize our lives, guided by "a euphoric and uncritical vision of the merger of flesh and machine in the wireless modes of the 'digital nerve.'"⁶⁴ Kroker sees the ICT future as "the forced integration of every facet of human experience into [what Bills Gates has termed] the 'digital nervous system',"⁶⁵ "a downloadable, ready to install, virtual memory: a cyber panopticon plugged into the flesh circuits of human subjectivity."⁶⁶ This kind of vision, itself open to ethical questioning, claims the same moral high-ground – improved health-care, education, politics, commerce, communication and freedom itself – as that staked out in the Vatican documents.

The new ICT puts into question the assumption: "that a firm, reliable boundary exists between humans as organism and tools regarded as material aids to activity."⁶⁷ In a world where "many computers will share each of us,"⁶⁸ totalizing digitalized and global networks broker the relationship of humans to the world. If ethics for the Information Age has realistic hopes of shaping the development and applications of those technologies, we must not only rethink our assumptions about ICT, but move beyond the instrumental view.

⁶² Greenfield and Yan 2006, p. 393.

⁶³ Svantesson 2005, p. 40.

⁶⁴ Kroker 2004, p. 105.

⁶⁵ *Ibd.*, p. 105.

⁶⁶ *Ibd.*, p. 107.

⁶⁷ Winner 2004, p. 21.

⁶⁸ Weiser and Brown 1996, p. 1.

Authoritarian deductive approach

The teachings of the Pontifical Council are part of the ordinary *magisterium* (teaching office) of the Church. They do not claim infallibility, but expect Catholics to treat them as authoritative. This genre of communication is self-referencing, deriving from the claim to ethical expertise, based on "a tradition of moral wisdom rooted in divine revelation and human reflection."⁶⁹ While calling for dialogue about the application of church teachings, they exhibit scant evidence of openness to the worldviews and values of others.

Also, the ethical approach is deductive, the concept of social communication, understood in light of the divine communication in the trinity and with the world serving as its universal premise. Does "social communication" as an ethical category adequately cover what is happening in ICT as it expands, for example, into robotics and biometrics?

In a context of increased global awareness and moral sensitivity, an authoritarian model is obsolete. Precisely the technologies in question have brought about an informed 'laity' with its own sets of hopes and anxieties, whose moral concerns, although "unspecific and inchoate,"⁷⁰ cannot be dismissed as self-interest or naïveté. Their uneasiness in face of an altered state of human relations or the digitalization of life, although removed from the language of the professional ethicist and outside a religious-authoritarian context, is no less ontological or religious. Religious ethics that does not reflect a richer understanding of the full range of human ethical response to technology will appear disconnected from the historically unprecedented technological developments they assess, as well as from the lives of the citizens they wish to influence.

Toward a religious ethics of ICT

"We live in a contested and morally ambiguous age."⁷¹ The "global spread of awareness about moral problems ranging from human rights to the environmental crisis to problems of war and eco-

⁶⁹ *Ethics in Communication*, n. 5.

⁷⁰ Deane-Drummond et al. 2001, p. 24.

⁷¹ Schweiker 2006, p. 138.

conomic justice and medical advancements" cuts across traditional cultural and religious lines, causing a re-evaluation of moral and religious reality in the minds and practices of secular societies and traditional religious groupings. Access to information and borderless communication reveals the vitality of religion across the globe, but also its conflicts.⁷²

Given the problematic character of Catholic teachings, how can an ICT ethics be religious and still communicate with the larger world? For religious ethics to communicate in a technologically shaped, information society it must understand itself in light of "the character and interaction of the religious and other cultural and social forces"⁷³ that shape modern consciousness. We experience ourselves "as interdependent parts of a complex network, not as isolated items that must be supported in a void." Moral knowledge arises not from the application of religious truth to experience but, like all knowledge, within "a network involving all kinds of lateral links, a system in which the most varied kinds of connection may be relevant in helping us to meet various kinds of questions."⁷⁴ The speed of invention, the importance attached to information and communication, and the amount of money, time, and energy invested in being "plugged in" means that no single approach is sufficient to grasp the moral reality of ICT.

In navigating the precarious waters between fidelity to a particular creedal source and ability to contribute credibility to human understanding and valuing, religious ethics must embrace a "multi-dimensional hermeneutic."⁷⁵ This two-pronged hermeneutic: (1) allows a religion to "know" ICT in ways that take it beyond a univocal religious perspective, and (2) offers clues to a different kind of theological response that reshapes its faith-grounded concept of the good and of the nature of human experience. A religious ethics must be able to move freely among "the practices, linguistic forms and ways of life"⁷⁶ of other religious, ethnic and mass mediated cultural meanings and

values, to give witness, as it were, to its own beliefs in the world as it is, not as it would like it to be.

How are religions to articulate an ethics that contributes to a public discourse of serious and respectful cooperation and that "create[s] a reflexive space of reasonable claims advanced and redeemed in response to basic human questions."⁷⁷ How can they make the lateral links that are constituent of understanding and responding to questions of common human interest, without abandoning their faith perspective? A future religious ethics of ICT will be an ethics that is:

- Inclusive – not imposing its worldview but discovering it in the human situation.
- Open – not announcing its position but arriving at it through communication.
- Inductive – not standing apart from the reality it interprets, but engaged with validating its own religious truths in the experience of the world.

"Insofar as people are parts of the networks, to say that 'technology' causes social change is really to say that people – through the sociotechnical networks they create and sustain – cause change."⁷⁸ Understanding people within the mesmerizing unfolding of ICT is the challenge religions face in making ethical sense in today's world.

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⁷² Schweiker 2006, p. 138.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁷⁴ Midgley 2003, p. 25.

⁷⁵ Schweiker 2006, p. 143.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁷⁷ Schweiker, p. 142.

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