

Christoph Stückelberger:

Chances and Challenges of ICT for Religious Ethics, its Networks and Power Structures. With an outlook on Globalethics.net

Abstract:

Underlining the twofold characteristic of ICT this article deals with chances and challenges of ICT for religious ethics and practice. Chances are: access to information and argumentation; broader access to different traditions around the globe and to history of the own tradition; deeper understanding of other religious and non religious ethics through easier access and exchange. The challenges considered are: relativism, pragmatism, syncretism, opportunism. Both chances and challenges are related to the case of Globalethics.net. A final reflection is focused on changes in (religious) power structures on ethics: they are illustrated by three different models of generating ethics. This contribution closes by emphasizing the necessity of responsible ethics.

Agenda:

The twofold characteristic of ICT.....	48
ICT is not more than a technology	48
ICT is more than a technology	48
Effects on religious ethics and religious practice.....	49
Chances for religious ethics and practice.....	49
Challenges for religious ethics and practice	49
Methodological shifts in ethics.....	50
The truth is concrete and contextual	50
Chances and Challenges of international Ethics Networks. The case of Globethics.net	50
Goals of Globethics.net.....	50
Challenges of Globethics.net	50
Changes in (Religious) Power Structures on Ethics	51
The "Catholic" model: top down ethics	51
The "Protestant" model: bottom up ethics	51
The "Pentecostal" model: "google" ethics	51
For transparency in power structures.....	51
Summary: Responsible Communication	52

Author:

Prof. Dr. Christoph Stückelberger

- Professor of Theological Ethics at the University of Basel www.unibas.ch
- CEO of Globalethics.net, Geneva, Switzerland www.globalethics.net
- ☎ + 41 - 22 – 791 60 43, ✉ stueckelberger@globalethics.net, 🌐 www.christophstueckelberger

Relevant publications:

- Stückelberger, Christoph, Mathwig, Frank (2007). Grundwerte. Eine theologisch-ethische Orientierung, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag.
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Prayer online is booming, especially in the US. Religious internet sites are well visited. "Godtube"¹ as answer to "Youtube" has 351'000 registered members. One can post a prayer on a prayerwall (photo of the wall of an old church) like in a church, underlined with meditative music.² – Religious action groups struggle for social justice and human rights of minorities on the internet and organize urgent email actions³. TV chains spread Sunday worship around the globe. Muslim communities are rapidly increasing internet presence and muslim internet directories are enlarging their content⁴.

"Religion on the Internet" is not a new, but an increasing phenomenon. It first of all provokes the following questions: what do we mean by religion? The personal faith in God, a transcendent power? The institutional form of religion as religious communities such as churches? Religious educational systems such as theological faculties? Religious publications, blogs on faith issues, worship on TV? The globalization of religious communication?⁵

The same range of questions comes up when dealing with the following issues "ICT as an ethical challenge for religions": Which form of ICT? ICT for which religion and which part of a specific religion? What kind of ethical challenges?

The twofold characteristic of ICT

ICT is not more than a technology

Information and communication technologies are first of all technologies. Which means: The ethical challenge for religions is similar to the one for

¹ www.godtube.com (June 2008)

² <http://www.godtube.com/prayerwall/>

³ E.g. the urgent appeals of the Asian Human Rights Commission, founded by the Christian Council of Asia. www.ahrchk.net, and its coalition of groups from various religions for human rights <http://www.rghr.net>.

⁴ <http://www.2muslims.com/directory>

⁵ Arthur, Chris (1998).

energy technologies, biotechnologies, medical technologies, agricultural technologies etc. Each technology is – ethically speaking – ambivalent. Not one is excluded from it. (Almost) Each technology can be used to serve people and to improve their lives and human dignity⁶, and it can be abused for personal interests, for the exploitation or oppression of other human beings or nature. The root of this ambiguity lies in the fact that each technology is the fruit of human activities. Human beings are – at least according to the Christian anthropology – able to do good and to do bad and therefore per definition not perfect. Human "sin" and "guilt" is an expression of the fact, that we are not able to do only good – and are not even able to know in a definite way what good is. The reason why no technology can be perfect but is ambivalent, lies not in the technology itself but in its inventor and user, the human being. No man-made technology exists independently of human beings, not even a robot, on the contrary, technology always remains in relation and dependency of them.

The first answer to the question of "ICT as an ethical challenge to religions" is therefore: ICTs are the same challenge as every technology. The same ethical benchmarks are valid: A technology is ethically speaking negative when it a) destroys life and b) increases injustice, dependence, war, exclusion, egoism, environmental destruction, irresponsible behavior and conflicts. A technology is ethically speaking positive when it a) supports a life in dignity for everybody, b) increases the implementation of fundamental values such as justice, freedom, peace, participation, community, sustainability, responsibility and reconciliation.⁷

ICT is more than a technology

Each technology also has its specific ethical challenges. Four specific chances and challenges of ICT are: a) they deal with information. In an information society, information is one of the most powerful instruments of human action and to

⁶ Plou, Dafner Sabanes (1996).

⁷ These values are developed in Stückelberger, Christoph/ Mathwig, Frank (2007).

overcome poverty⁸; b) the same for communication. The way, communication is organized, has a very great influence on all sectors of life; c) the specificity of ICT to speed up all processes (speed becomes a key advantage in the market. To overcome time limits is one key motor of ICT and key factor in human action today) and d) to overcome space limitations, being able to be accessible all over the world via mobile phone.

In extreme, ICT – and the Internet is the symbol of it – means and aims at access of *"Everything for everybody everywhere at any time in any form with any method"*.⁹ The positive side of it is an enormous increase of equal access, of participation, of freedom of decision, of transparency, of online communities etc. The question mark comes up with the still huge digital divide in spite of all networking¹⁰ and with the question, if this corresponds to the reality of life and the goals of human existence. "Everything for everybody everywhere at any time in any form" is not an ethical goal in itself and negates the fact that still many aspects of life cannot overcome limits of time and space. The ethical goal is *"The right thing for the right person in the right place at the right time in the right form with the right method"*. Let us develop this thesis.

Effects on religious ethics and religious practice

Chances for religious ethics and practice

ICT substantially increases the access to ethical information and argumentation. Access to different moral traditions and ethical value systems around

⁸ Information and Communication Technologies and large-scale poverty reduction. Lessons from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean (2005).

⁹ "Ethical Challenges of Ubiquitous computing" was the theme of Vol 8, Dec 2007, of the International Review of Information Ethics. Ubiquity in the large sense includes the six "every": issue, person, space, time, form, method.

¹⁰ Scheule, Rupert M./ Capurro Rafael/ Hausmaninger, Thomas (Hrsg.) (2004).

the globe as well as to the history of the own tradition has become much broader. This can increase mutual understanding of other religious and non religious ethics and deepen the own conviction.

The same applies to religious practice. In many cases spiritual life is strengthened by internet access to prayers and texts of the Holy Scriptures, videos and songs, case studies of encouraging behavior etc. The worldwide first "Internet pastoral Care Service" started in 1995 in Zürich/Switzerland, followed by the first "SMS Pastoral Care". The service of a team of trained protestant and catholic pastors could complement, not replace!, other services such as pastoral care in direct physical encounters or via telephone. The founder told me that the experience shows a specific complementary chance for people who prefer written instead of oral conversation and look for anonymity.

In past centuries, small chapels were built along trade routes, giving the traveler a chance for a meditative break and recreation. Later, religious communities built chapels along highways, in airports and now also in main railway stations. Centers for pastoral care and prayers or virtual libraries and discussion forum for ethical orientation on the internet as the modern "data highway" are therefore a logical continuation of past efforts and a creative use of these new tools.

Challenges for religious ethics and practice

But of course, if we speak about ethical ambivalence of each technology, it is also the case for ICT related to religions. "Religion on the internet" supports not only understanding and participation, but also relativism, pragmatism, syncretism, opportunism and fundamentalism. "Everything for everybody everywhere ..." can be interpreted as "everything goes" and "all is relative" or religious values can be mixed in syncretism. Relativism and syncretism often provoke fundamentalism as a harsh reaction. This may be one of the great challenges of the Internet in the future. The social platforms such as facebook or Youtube can not only increase international communities and intercultural understanding, it can also provoke "religious wars" or conflicts on the internet as some new tendencies seem to show, as when likeminded religious groups build mass movements. The challenge therefore is how to increase the responsible use of these tools without restrict-

ing freedom of expression. The responsibility of social network users and of website masters is similar to the responsibility of journalists and other media producers. Broad participation means, that everybody becomes a potential expert. Self-responsibility and quality control systems therefore become ethically crucial in these self-organizing systems.

Methodological shifts in ethics

Classical ethical orientation is mainly built on texts and verbal argumentation. In the modern media world, images play a central and still increasing role. This development from scripts to pictures¹¹ needs methodological reflections and leads to hermeneutical shifts. The wave of publications on the role of emotion and intuition in leadership as well as in ethical orientation is an expression of the tendency that logical and rational arguments become only one method to express positions and to convince others.¹²

The truth is concrete and contextual

The incarnation of God in real life and the implementation of ethical values in behavior is a core conviction of many religions. For Christian Faith, "truth is concrete"¹³. God incarnated himself in Jesus Christ. Not in abstract, but in one concrete human being, by chance a man, at a specific time in history in a specific place with specific parents and a specific message to his time. This contextual faith is combined with the invitation, to spread the good news of liberation to the whole world. This was the early Christian movement of globalization.

The religious and ethical challenge therefore is, the question of how the ultimate vision of the one humanity, symbolized in the open global internet society and its confession "*Everything for everybody everywhere at any time in any form with any method*" can be combined with and transformed to "*The right thing for the right person in the right place at the right time in the right form with the right method*". The theological term for this contextualization of truth is "kairos", the Greek word

for "the right time", the time of truth and "salvation". Time in theological-ethical terms is not a neutral entity. The "real time" is the time, when truth appears and love happens. If I am able to say the right word to the person I love at the right moment at the good place and with the adapted emotion, then love can grow. For Christian faith, it is the gift of the Holy Spirit which enables to catch the "kairos". God's spirit is not an abstract feeling, but it is the very precise ability to do the right thing in the right moment. In this sense, kairos-ethics is a technique and an "art" at the same time.

Chances and Challenges of international Ethics Networks. The case of Globethics.net

Goals of Globethics.net

Globethics.net (GE) is a global network on applied ethics, founded by the author in 2004 as a global platform with individual and institutional participants and an international secretariat in Geneva. "Ethical reflection+action for responsible leadership" is the motto. It aims at "a) knowledge sharing through access to ethics information and know-how, b) networking to combine contextual and global ethical perspectives, c) empowering people and institutions in their efforts for ethical behavior and structures, d) training people for responsible leadership" (GE presentation 2007). These goals show the attempt to combine global values and networking with contextual values and networking. It includes faith-based and non faith-based persons and institutions.

Challenges of Globethics.net

Three main chances and challenges can be briefly mentioned in the context of this article: a) Globethics.net is an open thematic network and at the same time needs an institutional identity. How can we invite everybody who shares the broad goals to participate in great autonomy and at the same time have a clear profile which makes a network attractive and fruitful?; b) Social and also ethical global networks like Globethics.net need to find the balance between horizontal, decentralized self-organization without control (or only minimal formal control) and vertical centralized top-down input (in organizing working

¹¹ Well described by Wiegerling (1998), 51-152.

¹² See Stückelberger, Christoph (2008).

¹³ Sölle, Dorothee (1967).

groups, launching conferences etc.) as well as vertical bottom-up input from participants (e.g. upload documents to the common platform or the global digital library which will be started in September 2008, combined with a review committee); c) to balance the search for common global values which is needed for common action and interaction in a globalized world, with respecting and strengthening cultural, religious and linguistic diversity and contextual values which are crucial for human dignity and identity.

These challenges show the task of also dealing in a responsible way with the ambiguity of ICT in the context of ethics. ICT is a huge chance for broader access – the GE library will include a vast amount of full text documents on ethics free of cost for participants which is a modest contribution to fair access to information on ethics. But a responsible use of this information needs self-responsibility and training, learning processes and difficult quality control in a global context.

Changes in (Religious) Power Structures on Ethics

The most radical changes provoked by ICT in the information society are probably the changes in power structures¹⁴ which also influence the power structures of ethical discourse and decision making. In a very general way, one can distinguish three models:

The “Catholic” model: top down ethics

The top-down model of ethics (clearly visible in the ethical decision making of the Vatican, but also existent in other confessions, religions and non religious value systems) declares values and moral behaviors to follow top-down, “ex cathedra”, with or without prior participatory processes and in accordance with the hierarchical church structure. This model predominates in closed or totalitarian societies, but is criticized and difficult to maintain in open democratic societies with participatory discourses.

The “Protestant” model: bottom up ethics

The bottom-up model of ethics (practiced in Protestant churches, but also in other confessions, religions and non religious value systems) develops values and moral behaviors bottom up, from the discourse on the parish level up to synods and church declarations. Because of the participatory process, the results are pluralistic, with much freedom of expression but often contradictory and with a lack of unity. It corresponds to the Synodal, bottom up democratic structures of protestant churches. It is a vertical model like the bottom up model. This model predominates in democratic and open societies and is criticized by closed or authoritarian societies such as orthodox or Islamic countries.

The “Pentecostal” model: “google” ethics

The third model – I call it “Pentecostal model” – seems to be neither vertical bottom up nor vertical top down, but horizontal: the Pentecostal spirit leads people in their decision without central structures but extended “congregational”, decentralized autonomy. The manifold expressions of the spirit – for outsiders in a random way – leads to self-organization, but also local “kingdoms” and lack of coherence and control. It is a kind of “google” ethics: a fast growing movement with random content, not centralized initiatives and expressions. “Google” or “Pentecostal” are used as expressions of the decision-making structures in a modern open global information society.

For transparency in power structures

Where is the power, which decides on these three models? In model one it seems clear, in model two also, but decentralized model three seems to be free of power structures. Everybody and nobody has the power. But experience as well as philosophical, political, religious and feminist analysis tells us that each human interaction is also an interaction with power structures, visible or invisible, transparent or covered. A Pentecostal congregation often has very strong power structures even if it is negated. The Google search system is far from being objective and neutral. Behind it's mathematical forms are values and decisions. The company has a power structure and strategy.

ICT is an ethical challenge for religious and secular power structures. ICT and social or ethical networks represent a chance to develop a lot of

¹⁴ Nethöfel, Wolfgang (1999).

decentralized, horizontal structures with much room for self initiatives. But behind are often very strong power structures which from an ethical perspective must be made transparent. Only transparent power can be controlled, accountable and shared power.

Summary: Responsible Communication

Responsible use of Information and Communication Technologies are of great benefit for billions of human beings and a service instrument also for the ethical tasks and goals of religious communities. Responsible use and therefore responsible communication means to

- benchmark ICT as every other technology by the ethical values you defend;
- increase fair and equal access to information and communication especially of deprived people;
- empower people to participate responsibly in communication networks;
- protect people through legal instruments and education from being affected by irresponsible communication¹⁵;
- combine rational and intuitional/emotional methods;
- combine global and contextual perspectives;
- make power structures transparent and accountable;
- transform "everything for everybody everywhere at any time in any form with any method" to "The right thing for the right person in the right place at the right time in the right form with the right method".

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¹⁵ Ziegler (2000), p. 31f.