

Spirituality in the Post Human Age: Digital Technologies and Screened Divinity

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Abstract

In the beginning, our premise is that the acceptance of our need for practical spirituality could minimize the post human age unfavorable consequences. More than once in history have humans been taken aback seeing that what had masqueraded for a blessing eventually turned out to be a ghastly disaster. The digital technologies that surround us, have undoubtedly blessed our lives in many ways, apparently improving them significantly. The devices I am and will be referring to, are also known as smart phones, television, computers, laptops, what we might know today as our intelligent extended selves or the most favorable static entertainment. Some of these have embedded in them, online social networks, dictionaries, movies, commercials, live broadcasts and the world wide web, which seems to have limitless accurate information regarding any thought that might come through one's mind. These mindless and conscienceless companions are highly accessible and seem to have a strong impact, not only on human interaction, but also in regards to human beliefs and values

Keywords: *Post Humanism, Digital technologies, Spirituality*

Introduction

Digital technologies have apparently provided humanity with more possibilities of connection with one another, yet the effect seems reversed. The very nature of digital technology, had, as its initial scope to bring people together regardless of the physical location. The reviewed outcome seems surprisingly inverted. Even when humans are physically together, they are absorbed by digital technologies, preferring online connection with others.

“Swamped by millions of images and a host of different situations in the media in general, people lose their peace of mind, their self-control, their powers of contemplation and reflection and turn outwards, becoming strangers to themselves, in a word mindless, impervious to the dictates of their intelligence” [1].

One has as much need for recognizing the importance and existence of their own spirit, as for the material self. According to most religions of the world, the soul is the only thing that survives death, which is an

unavoidable fact. Soul to soul interaction and connection could be perceived as sometimes more important than material needs, indifferent of religion or belief. This, being demonstrated by our need for belonging, love, a significant other and family in favor of material belongings. Therefore, it is admitted, that life includes a spiritual dimension, which could be translated and experienced through religion. My question is how can we still connect truthfully with other spiritual beings around us when digital technologies have become the filter through which we communicate, the translator that facilitates our understanding of the world, the digital slave who carries out our everyday tasks? How is spirituality being deprived of its force and effect on spiritual beings? These questions are facing us today.

Man, arguably has much need for spiritual sustenance, as he does for the material essentials. Proven materiality cannot be the factor, which establishes recognized existence; an elementary example could be

the air. It cannot be seen, but humanity would not survive without a significant quantity. Comparable with God and the need of recognized Divinity that cannot be seen, but spiritual beings depend on a spiritual connection with something greater, more powerful, which gives meaning and value to a human soul.

Andrew Newberg, neuroscientist and leading neurotheology researcher alongside Mark Waldman and their research team, after intensive neurological studies on the human brain, while actively experiencing religious practices, endorse, that active and positive spiritual belief improves the human brain, altering the area that controls mood, sensory perception, and the notion of self. The result of a second study found that “frontal lobes play an important role in modulating emotions, engaging cognitive processes, and developing a sense of self. Neuroimaging studies have generally shown increased frontal lobe activity during meditation practices suggesting that meditation may promote beliefs and help reinforce specific religious or spiritual ideals. In addition, meditation techniques often result in alterations in the state of consciousness of the individual”[2]. Other researchers found, that “it is also possible that over time, repetitive meditation practice might produce permanent changes in the state of the brain with respect to consciousness”[3].

Following Edward Taub’s neuroscientific behavioral studies as well as other scientific experiments, a similar conclusion was reached, declaring: “it is not just repeated physical actions that can rewire our brains. Purely mental activity can also alter our neural circuitry, sometimes in far-reaching ways”[4]. Therefore we can understand how important the actual practice of religion through meditating exercises, also called praying is, and how our lives and general state of mind can be rewired. Nevertheless, what role do digital technologies play in this case? Are they not an aggressive distraction, in most cases, provoking damage to one’s ability to focus?

Meditation, which relieves the mind for a while, from the external influential factors,

is deeply affected by digital technology, for example: the constant need to verify social media or the impact of millions of images cornering the human brain. A study “revealed that human attention span has fallen from an average of twelve seconds in the year 2000 to just eight seconds today. Humans now, have a shorter attention span than a goldfish, which is nine seconds average. The decrease of which was seen across all age groups and genders” [5].

Neuropsychological research demonstrates that visualizing television alters, especially, the cognitive capacities of a human being. Not only is the process of learning disadvantaged, but the logical and analytical thinking, as well as discourse and the capacity to express ideas, creativity and even the development of intelligence diminishes. Among other regions, television greatly affects the prefrontal cortex, which is the most developed part of a human brain, where superior mental processes are mediated, as well as the executive functions of the cortex, which differentiates the human being from the rest of beings [6].

Furthermore, as of recent, humans live under the impression that by simply spending time in front of the television, they will enrich their knowledge and could develop capacities of understanding and of communication. Contrary to this belief, an interactive, lively participation to existence is necessary, thus developing a subjected personal dimension, which does not take place in the case of television viewing.

The same author reveals that, according to researchers, even animals develop their brain or capacities, which concern existence and their survival in the world, conditioned by an interactive environment experience. The human is more than that, it is a person and being such, interaction, is essential, not only with the surrounding environment, but also with other humans, through movements of the tongue and through thought of this dimension of personal and conscious subject [7].

In consequence, digital technologies have an effect on humans by seizing what is

essential, the interactive lively participation to life and to spirituality, placing religious tradition somewhat in the arms of memories, or of a non-existing past. Which brings us to a comparison with Sigmund Freud's concept of "screened memory" and the interpretation of it as a memory, which has never happened even though it seems like it took place moments ago? Somewhat like the projection of Divinity in the post human age. In this context, the contemporary perception of God is a sort of spiritual allegiance as an identitarian feature. In a world where personal, experienced moments are excessively "immortalized", published on social media, the inner being remains desolated. Feeding the integrated online machine with our intimate experiences, with important pieces of our private thoughts, in constant comparison with others, produces a feeling of "plasticized relations" [8] and lack of authenticity, generating a need for identity.

Thus, resulting a fabricated search for allegiance to a screened divinity, which, is not perceived as a real spiritual pillar for the inner being, but yet another prime material to be delivered, to be exposed and followed. The spiritual danger of perceiving Divinity as a memory, which has never happened, is the denial of authenticity of the real existence of God, which leads to the inability to contemplate, meditate and pray.

The undeniable outcome resulting from religious practices like praying and meditating is shaped by a strive to connect with and feel something real, greater, more powerful and loving than oneself. In contrast, in the post human age the hyperlinked life is connected to our spiritual life, thus, we now have a type of spiritual digital experience, where the soul's privacy is used to being pressured to deliver publications daily. The deficit of interiority is caused, by the addiction to publish and post "how you are feeling" every moment of the day.

Meditation's positive consequence is conditioned by the action's privacy and interior contemplation without short distractions. Gloria Mark, a professor of informatics at the University of California,

Irvine, who studies digital distraction found that, if a person is focused on one task, in our case praying "it can take some 23 minutes to return to the original task [9], after being distracted by digital technologies. Thus, we can extrapolate the difficulty with which one returns to the initial focused state of mind, revealing the effect digital technologies also have on religious practices today.

Recently, spirituality seems to be separated from its Christian original womb, from where even the name originated and is used to show an entire domain of impressive signs and psychological experiences. The Christian Orthodox understanding of spirituality excludes this sense which mass media governs where a spiritual being is perceived as only a cultivated being, artist or over glorified celebrity. I am referring to spirituality through the Christian Orthodox understanding [10], which can also be defined as having ontological character.

The oldest definition given to spirituality which is still common today, even though less active than in the past, is that which confers it, the meaning of self-control. Our mental extended support, which gathers vast amounts of information and artificially seems to expand our memory capacities leaves very little room for self-control. This vast amount of information attracts humans, due to their innate desire for knowledge, resulting a certain dependence. Constantly feeding the human's need for information, digital technology reduces the liberty of man. The very definition of an addiction, of dependence is the lack of free will. The human is forced to strive to resemble and perform as much as the product it depends on, feeling insecure of its own capacities. The aim of digital technology corporate giants is to bring humanity to a high consumption of technology, to a degree of addiction. The more humanity depends on them, the more they are worshipped, the more profit they obtain.

As Christian Orthodox representative, Archimandrite Aimilianos, from the Abbot of the Holy Monastery of Simons Petras states: "Technology per se is not, of course, harmful, being the fruit of reasoning and intellect of

Man, who was formed in the image of God. But when, unrestrained and unbridled, it rushes headlong towards its destination, then it becomes luciferous, though not bearing light but rather pitch darkness. The danger for us is the absence of accountability in the way which technology is administered and exploited, a way which has as its aim the stifling domination of human life and the solution of problems by technical means, regardless of moral and metaphysical principles.

The majority of the faithful of the Church confess that they do not manage to pray, to concentrate and cast off the cares of the world and the storms of spirit and soul which are to the detriment of sobriety, inner balance, enjoyable work, family tranquility and constructive social life. The world of industrial image degenerates into real idolatry [11].

Our "faith" in technology is sustained by the comfort it provides us, it connects us to others, it helps us avoid uncomfortable situations by using short texts, it gives us vast amounts of information, in the shortest time, it is an unconditional support in almost all activities. To prove the unconditional faith in digital technologies, humanity places in the hands of even the youngest ones, these mindless companions, training the generation of the future to be constantly looking down [12].

On the contrary, God, through prayer, meditation, and an overall Christian lifestyle, encourages an upright physical posture, which is to be looking up, towards the sky, towards Him, whereas digital technology forces us to look down towards the ground regularly. This, not only affects our general state of mind, it could also generate depression, as well as create physical discomfort and inevitable spinal column deterioration.

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Digital technologies lead humans towards a greater appreciation of the speed and efficiency they offer, rather than the patience and kindness which God and religious practices encourage. They shape the way we perceive the world and experience our life. The devices we use to transfer our thoughts to others and even to ourselves play an important role in the way we later on understand our actions and analyze them. A digital tool used to transfer a coded message to another being, can, not only be controlled by a third participant wanted or not, but also modify the sense due to its impersonal structure. An early theory and belief on how the tools we use to communicate our thoughts, shape our perception of reality by modifying it, is given to us by Fredrick Nietzsche. After beginning to use the typewriter, he found that "there was a new forcefulness to it, too, as though the machine's power-its "iron-was, through some mysterious metaphysical mechanism being transferred into the words it pressed into the page"[13]. His best friend, Heinrich Koselitz, acknowledged that and wrote to him explaining how his own work, his thoughts in music and language often depend on the sort of materials used. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche who was a German philosopher, cultural critic and poet, answered that the "our writing equipment takes part on the forming of our thoughts [13].Should we also acknowledge that the post human age equipment takes part in the shaping of our individual thoughts?

The consequence, the slow and systemized decadence of spirituality, through the overuse of digital companion species is a truth humanity should take into consideration. Digital technologies have given us abundance but left us in want and spiritual emptiness. Paraphrasing the great Charlie Chaplin "More than machinery we need humanity, more than speed we need kindness and gentleness" [14].

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