Innovations

Technologically Mediated Religious Innovation and Distribution in the time of Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic remains the killer disease that plagues humanity in the century. The exponential rate of mortality is high enough to have killed millions of people across the globe. With delays in medical resources and the scarcity of vaccines especially in developing countries like the Philippines, it can be assumed that the number of casualties due to the disease infection is still significantly higher. In remedying the situation and the desire to contain the spread of the virus through physical transmission, the governments around the world unanimously agreed to regulate the mobility of the public and implement restrictions on social gatherings. Religious practices are not exempted from abrupt disruption. The paralyzes brought about by the pandemic challenged the religious institution as well as the religious public to devise new ways and means to exercise their religious conviction and practices amidst the public health measures. Technologically mediated communication becomes the vehicle and the image of religious rituals and practices worldwide. Steaming services using social mediahave become the prevalent option in delivering religious services to thefaithful. This paper aims to (1) demonstrate the necessity of social media platforms in religiouscommunication during the pandemic and (2) argue that a proper disposition (gelassenheit) to technological devices is essentially required in response to the technological enframing (ge-stell) which reduces both the person and things as standing – reserve (bestand).

Keywords: 1.Enframing, 2.technology, 3.social media, 4.pandemic, 5. religious practices, 6.gelassenheit.

I. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has far reached social implications of disrupting not only the economic life but also altering the religious rituals and practices of humanity (Baker et al, 2020). The entire period of the pandemic and the restriction on physical distancing challenged the religious communities to adopt digital or social media platforms for teaching and preaching. This has been the topic of discourse by many scholars of religion (Huygens, 2021,Campbell and Evolvi, 2020,Evolvi, 2021, Helland, 2016, Hutchings, 2017) and

wasonly intensified during this present health crisis(Capponi & Araújo, 2020, Dein et al., 2020, Przywara et al., 2021), Sabaté Gauxachset al., 2021), and Vekemans 2021).By tradition, religious ceremonies and rituals are communal in practice, which directly violates the health requirements for corporeal distancing. In response the World Health Organization (WHO) issued an Interim Guidelines on April 07, 2021, specifically addressed to all religious leaders and communities to consider the use of all digital platforms in facilitating the observance of liturgical practices in every faith community while religiously following the restriction of religious gatherings and physical distancing (WHO, 2017; 3).Social media becomes a powerful tool for reaching out even the remote community (World Vision Foundation Inc). It has shifted the religious practices throughout the world to adapt and maximize the digital platforms in delivering their religious ceremonies and rituals to the community (Yoku, 2020&Gauxachs, 2021). This new platform uses by the church to continue their apostolate provides hope and solace to the people of God who are deeply afflicted by the present pandemic ((Campbell & Sheldon, 2021;3).

Despite the disruption brought about by the COVID-19 in the major activities and practices of the church in the Philippines, the church designed a social media platform, the *Catholic liturgical televisuality* intended to revitalize the spiritual well-being of the believers. This televisual technology aims to continue the church apostolate by providing spiritual nourishment to the people of God through the Gospel and liturgical services (Sanchez, 2020).For instance, the Association of Major Religious Superiors of the Philippines (AMRSP), a group of consecrated religious women in the country, made use of this media platform the TV Maria and Radio Veritas to continue their ministry of evangelization and spiritual formation (A Global Sisters Report, 2021). On the other hand, the birth of community pantries in the country owes its existence and popularity to social media. Through community pantries, the spirit of generosity and kindness of the people of God shines forth (Renus and Galang, 2021) which somehow resembles one of the miracles performed by Jesus in the Gospel, the multiplication of bread.

This unforeseen digital platform of the church was already articulated by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI during the 47th World Communication Day on May 12, 2013. The message of the Pope highlights the role of the social media networks as the new spaces of evangelization, the portal of truths and faith, and the new *agora* from which a spiritual dialogue is made possible(Benedict, 2013).

Moreover, paralyzes brought about by the pandemic challenged the religious institution as well as the religious public to devise new ways and means to exercise their religious conviction and practices amidst the public health measures. Technologically mediated communication becomes the vehicle and the image of religious rituals and practices worldwide. Steaming services using social media have become the prevalent option in delivering religious services to the faithful.

This paper aims to (1) demonstrate the necessity of social media platforms in religious communication during the pandemic and (2) argue that a proper disposition (*gelassenheit*) to technological devices is essentially required in response to the technological enframing *(ge-stell)* which reduces both the person and things as standing – reserve *(bestand).*

I. The necessity of social media platforms during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic of the century is a nightmare for humanity. The worldwide death toll from the coronavirus forces most countries to enforce health protocols to mitigate the more devastating effects of virus infections. Such health protocols affected not only the economic life of humanity but as well as the social and religious life. The implementation of physical distancing resulted in a gap between the individual and their religious community. Although challenging, the impact of these rapid changes from the mode of traditional community worship into online virtual communication created a monumental impact on the faithful community who were longing for peace and security.

Thus, the restriction of mobility motivated the institution to adopt new platforms for delivering religious practices to the faithful. The COVID-19 pandemic forcesreligious institutions and the community to accelerate on digital social media platforms (Campbell 2020; Koeze and Popper 2020; Lowenthal et al. 2020; Pew Research 2020; Statista 2020a, 2020b; Sabate et al., 2021). This shift towards virtual worship was even intensified during the height of virus infections (Binder 2020; Casero-Ripollés 2020; Fischer 2020; Igartua et al. 2020; Sabate et al., 2021).

The impact of the pandemic according to Sułkowski (2020) changes the traditional religious public gathering towards an intensified mediatization and virtual communication just to facilitate the continuity of religious services which plays a vital role during this time of uncertainty. This mediatization was driven by the desire of the faithful to continue their religious practices despite the challenges of the pandemic. Although the existence of mass media already immerge as a consequence of modernity was institutionalized because of its integral role in various institutions in bringing out the information to its constituents as fast as possible (Przywara, et al., 2021). This intensification of social media in religious practices becomes a necessity and an urgent call of the time as Hoover remarks (2011) creates a dialectic relationship. This dialectic relationship between religion and social media and the mediatization of faith and religious practices has been an active instrument of uplifting the spirit of the faithful community amid the threatening effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common mediatization of religious practices includes televangelism and the maximization of internet access in delivering synchronous and asynchronous online religious services (Przywara, et al., 2021). The pandemic of the century shifted the physical to virtual from which social media becomes a digital space and a sacred place for spirituality.Dickenson (2015) remarks on Facebook as the new agora of communication and spirituality. The demand for smartphones during the pandemic can be attributed to the popularity of this platform (Galang, 2009). The availability and accessibility of all these platforms stimulate the motivation of humanity to continue living and fighting despite the uncertainties of time due to the global health crisis. The impact of all social media platforms shed light amidst the darkness of the time brought about by the pandemic. The need for religion and God exponentially increases, thus Bentzen (2020) remarks that the word prayer becomes the most searched word ever on Google.

This symbiotic relationship between the church and technology was reinforced by the pandemic from which social media, websites, an online community act as a channel for religious liturgical services in response to the disruption of the church corporeal worship in adherence to the existing health restriction imposed by the authority (Parish, 2020). The Vatican City during the peak of infection in 2020 celebrated most of the papal Masses using the online platform telecasts globally. This was attended virtually by a million believers thus, according to Glatz (2020) and Lubov (2020) the Pope's liturgical service on Easter Sunday reaches an approximate audience of 8.1 million households. This religious disposition of the faithful brought about by fear and anxiety of the uncertainty of the time deepens the communion of believers in an online

community that humanizes during adversity and enhanced a strong relationship that may be lacking in the physical world (Parish, 2020).

II. The enframing of technology

The influence of technological devices in one's life is undeniable. Humanity has evolved where technology reaches every aspect of human lives. Unquestionably, technology contributed much to the development of humanity from the unpleasant time–consuming tasks to an accelerated pace of life (Wrathall, 2019;13).Scholars in the field of technology and even health are anxious about the detrimental effects of technology on health as well as the consciousness of the people. It is also a fact that this field was not given so much attention in philosophical discourse until Martin Heidegger initiated a systematic analysis of it in his work entitled *"The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays"* (1977). This work is based on a philosophical discourse on technology specifically on the nature of revealing that is destructive to humanity. This concept is *Ge – stell* translated as "enframing" which categorically indicates how the human person frame or positions the resources of the world as absolutely an object for the disposal of the person. In like manner *Ge – stell* can also mean the reduction of a person into an object in the service of a technological system or devices. The above thesis of *Ge- stell* is significant in the analysis of technological devices such as the accessibility of social media for religious services during the COVID-19 pandemic (Merwin et al., 2019; 1).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forces humanity to follow religiously the imposed health protocols to flatten the curve of infection. The church and its traditional liturgical services were temporarily suspended which resulted in a shift towards the use and necessity of social media platforms. What is in question here is the possible reduction of both the person and the object. A manipulative reduction reduces both entities into a concept of an object, a resource, or a standing reserve. This way of framing the entities is negative hence it creates a gap of reducing entities into an object at the disposal of the human person. In a *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972) Adorno and Horkheimer argue that understanding the object on the framework of instrumentality is a form of domination, thus subjecting it to the disposal of the person does not only violate the intrinsic value of the object but also distorts the very person of the subject (Adorno & Horkheimer,1972).

Social media during the pandemic plays a vital role in sustaining the morale of the person who was anxious about the uncertainty of the time. The social media platforms such as radios, television sets, smartphones, the internet, computers, Facebook are not simply technological devices within a stockpile of technology but a system or network of connections from which a meaningful relationbetween the human person and the object can be inferred ((Merwin et al., 2019; 6).

Thus, technological devices can be an opportunity to open new possibilities in this, case, an essential instrument for religious services. This can be the saving power of technology that opposed the danger of being completely lured into the technological attitude (Botha, 2003). This saving power from the allurement of technological devices is possible as Francis Bacon remarks because the human person can always regain the clarity of mind and purity of action or possess the preternatural gifts of the first parent before their expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Dusek, 2006; p.41).

It is undeniable that the social media platforms during the pandemic crisis helped in the shaping of human nature. The mediation of these platforms provides a distinctive outlook of humanity against the pessimism of the time (Kaplan, 2009). It does not only construct the personal identity of the person rather it

gives hope and solace amid the excruciating pain brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pope Benedict, 2020).

The demand of time calls for the essentiality of social media platforms to uplift the morale of isolated humanity. Here the essence of the social media platforms reveals not a threat to the dominating power of technological devices rather of hope in the growing light from which grows the salvation of humanity (Rojcewicz, 2006; 213). The necessity of social media platforms during this time of crisis seems irresistible but the person can still choose to be free from the destructive imposition of technological devices. This is the saving power of humanity concerning the massive use of social media platforms during the pandemic. Heidegger calls this *"Gelassenheit"*, a therapeutic attitude, a detachment, or means *"to let go"* of worldly things and adhere to the heavenly calling. The experiences and accessibility of the social media platforms during the time of crisis reveal the attitude and disposition of humanity that both say "no" to technology (lets go of it) and also says "yes" to it (lets technology go on) (Rojcewicz, 2006; 214). This disposition of humanity towards technology is possible as posited by Heidegger because the human person by nature is contemplativefrom which the meaning of Being and its relation to beings is disclosed (Rojcewicz, 2006; 217). This contemplative thinking enables the person to understand the proper relation of man toward things. Thus, contemplative thinking eventually led one to the spirit of detachment which opposed the denial, withdrawal, or flight from the technological devices rather the recognition of the system as a network of communication from which derived its meaning and purpose. Heidegger remarks on this in a passage of *"Discourse on Thinking".*

> Yet if in this way we simultaneously say "yes" and "no" totechnological objects, will not our relation to the technological worldthen become ambiguous and unsure? Quite to the contrary. Our relation to the technological world will become wonderfully simpleand serene. We will let technological objects into our daily world andat the same time leave them outside; i.e., we will let them take theircourse as things that are nothing absolute but are instead always dependent on something higher. I would use an old term to name thisattitude of a simultaneous "yes" and "no" to the technologicalworld: detachment with things(Heidegger, 1966).

The religious services mediated by the social media platforms during the pandemic are inspired by this way of contemplative thinking, a serene state of mind attained through releasement from the dominating power of the will and allurement of technological devices towards a proper indwelling relation through which the horizons of religious inspirations delivered by this platform is determined (Davis, 2019;134).

This confirmsthe social teachings of the Church on the relation of the human person to technology. In an inspired encyclical of Pope Paul VI entitled "*Populorum Progressio:* On the Development of Peoples, the pope acknowledges the instrumentality of technology in the development of humanity and in improving the quality of life. Thus, technology cannot only be treated as technology *per see* because through it the human person was able to liberate material limitations and thus fulfill God's command of stewardship (Paul VI, 1967: 434). The liberating power of social media platforms is unquestionable during the COVID-19 crisis. Through it, humanity has been rescued from the misery of isolation and health protocols. The physical limitations were transcended and the desire for participation and communion with God and the human family was made possible and accessible because of the social media platforms (Paul VI, 1967; 437).

III. Conclusion

The changes brought about by the pandemic affected every aspect of human life including religious practices. The restriction imposed by the authorities in flattening the curve of infection forces every institution to suspend public gatherings of people. This restriction is no hindrance to the desire of humanity to continue their religious worship which at the moment becomes the only source of hope and inspiration. Here, the contribution of the social media platforms becomes vital in virtually redirecting and connecting the faithful community. Technological devices become the handmaid of humanity in communicating God and one another through liturgical services offered by each religious congregation. Thus, Heidegger remark that it would be shortsighted and foolish to attack technology for they even challenge humanity to ever-greater advances (Dreyfus & Spinosa, 2003; 5). The presence of technological devices during the pandemic proves that humanity can remain faithful to themselves as disclosers of being. Heidegger in a passage describes this relationship:

> We can affirm the unavoidable use of technicaldevices, and alsodeny them
> the right todominateus, and so towarp,confuse, and lay waste ournature
> (Heidegger, 1966; 54)

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