

## THEOLOGY 2.0: BLOGGING AS THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE<sup>†</sup>

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*“There are books in which the footnotes, or the comments scrawled by some reader’s hand in the margin, are more interesting than the text. The world is one of these books.”*

—George Santayana<sup>1</sup>

In a well-known book, we find a whole raft of arguments about the dangers of new communication technologies. The new technology will change the way we understand truth; it will change the way we use language; it will erode our memories and our relationships; it will take the “soul” out of language and turn language into a mere “image,” a deceitful apparition of true understanding. In short, this new technology is not merely a useful invention; it is something that threatens the very fabric of our society. The text I am referring to is, of course, not a book about the internet: it is Plato’s *Phaedrus*, written in the fourth century BC, warning against the transition from an oral culture to a culture of writing.<sup>2</sup> Poised between two worlds, Plato perceived that literacy was not merely a convenient new technology, but a practice that would usher in a new way of being-in-the-world. Our very humanness would change under the impact of this technology.

Plato was right to see that new technologies introduce new assumptions about knowledge and authority, new forms of human interaction, new habits of reading and writing, new modes of economic exchange, new ways of forming community and identity, new methods of organizing the world. In this essay, I want to analyze the contemporary Web 2.0 environment—focusing especially on blogging—and to

<sup>†</sup>The central theme of this paper emerged from conversations with John Oldmeadow about print culture; I am greatly indebted to him, and also to readers of my blog who have discussed and critiqued some of the ideas developed here.

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1. George Santayana, *Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies* (New York: Scribner, 1922), 124.

2. Plato, *Phaedrus*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 274b–279c.

explore the way in which new web technologies are shaping our interior human landscapes and changing the way we practice Christian theology.<sup>3</sup>

Is Web 2.0 merely a neutral medium through which pre-formed theological ideas are transmitted? Or does the whole shape of theology begin to change under the impact of these new technologies? These questions are of great personal interest to me, since I am both an academic theologian and someone who participates daily in the Web 2.0 environment. In mid-2005, I started one of the earliest theology blogs (there are now hundreds); over the past four years the blog has had two thousand posts, over a million visitors, and countless thousands of comments—all discussing theology in one way or another.<sup>4</sup> At a conference I attended recently, a doctoral student told me that, at his own institution, blog-reading had become part of the mainstream student culture. Blogging was a marginal activity just a few years ago; for many students, blogs are now just as much a part of the day-to-day discussion as any of the “official” theological texts in the curriculum. This raises interesting questions and challenges for contemporary theology. What does it mean for theology when blogs go mainstream—when blogging is no longer just a fringe activity, but a practice woven into the fabric of students’ theological formation? What effect might this strange new form of discourse have on the future of theology? A significant proportion of current doctoral students around the world are interacting with blogs; on a daily basis, their theological thinking is being practiced in this web environment. This means that a couple of decades from now, our seminaries and divinity schools may be filled with theological educators who have been shaped in some way by this medium. What, then, will theology look like in the future? How might the Web 2.0 environment be changing our ways of thinking, learning, reading, and interacting?

These are some of the questions that I want to explore here. I will argue that theological discourse is indeed beginning to change under the impact of these new technologies and new forms of human interaction. I will argue that blogging is not merely a new medium for exchanging information, but a new practice of self-formation—a new way of working on the self, of forming community and identity.

### I. Technologies of Writing

Plato’s insight in the *Phaedrus* is confirmed in modern historical studies of the cultural transitions from orality to literacy, from writing to print, and from print

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3. The term “Web 2.0” has been used since 2004 to describe the second generation of internet technology. While websites originally served as repositories of static information, the Web 2.0 environment is characterized by interaction, networking, collaboration and dynamic user-generated content. Typical Web 2.0 technologies include blogs, wikis, tags, mashups, and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

4. The blog is Faith and Theology: <http://faith-theology.blogspot.com/>.

to the mass production of books. In his 1982 work, *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong argued for the unique power of linguistic technologies in shaping the human self. “More than any other single invention,” he argued, “writing has transformed the human self.”<sup>5</sup> Writing must be understood here as a technology, as a *practice* that structures the way we relate to the world and to each other. Back in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan famously announced that “the medium is the message.” A medium like text or television, he argued, functions not as a neutral channel through which ideas are transmitted, but as an “extension” of our humanness. The development of a new medium has the most profound and far-reaching effects on the structure of human consciousness and the organization of human societies.<sup>6</sup>

In oral cultures, the word is an occurrence in the present between one person and another; the spoken word occurs always within a broader social context. But writing is a solitary practice, and the written word appears simply in the context of other words.<sup>7</sup> In the written word—as Plato perceived—there is no flexibility, no to and fro between speaker and listener, no dialogical process of clarification, amendment, and revision. In written culture, literary production becomes a profoundly personal activity.<sup>8</sup>

Prior to the printing press, the modern distinction between private and public had not yet been invented. A work was written and the manuscript copied by hand, in order to be circulated to a small number of people within the writer’s own “private” world. With the invention of the printing press, however, literary production became a “public” act. James O’Donnell notes that it was Thomas More, early in the sixteenth century, who first used the English word “publish” to describe his literary activity; the division between private and public was introduced by the printing press. For the first time, one could now write for strangers, for an anonymous public audience. It’s here that “the ‘author’ was born.”<sup>9</sup> The fixity and permanence of the printed word produce ideals of “verbal perfectability, style, and the idea of ownership.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the modern idea of the author emerges in a clear form only in the works of the seventeenth-century writer John Milton. Milton’s poetic and prose works are pervaded by a preoccupation with authorship, with the

5. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), 78.

6. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

7. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 101.

8. This point holds even if we accept Derrida’s censure against any romantic idealization of the primacy of speech over writing, and against the idea that speech somehow enables unmediated personal presence: see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

9. James J. O’Donnell, *Avatars of the World: From Papyrus to Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11.

10. Sven Birkets, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (London: Faber, 1994), 159.

writer's spiritual ownership of his literary productions. He signs his title pages "The Author John Milton;" he includes frequent autobiographical digressions, narrating his own development as an author; he reflects critically on the diverse genres in which he works; he is anxious about the relation between his own originality and the literary citation of authorities.<sup>11</sup> Here, it is clear that print culture—the capacity to write for an anonymous public—produces a new relation to oneself, to language, to society, and to tradition.

It is interesting to note that in the Web 2.0 environment, the circulation of one's writing is not usually described as publishing, but as "posting." There is a curious historical reversal here: for now the private/public distinction, created by the printing press, begins again to vanish. With technologies like blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, one's "private" thoughts are immediately manifest, immediately "publicly" available. The word is not carefully crafted into a fixed, perfected form; it is plastic, flexible, and dialogical. Here, the word is uttered not simply within the context of other authorial words, but in the lived context of an ever-changing interactive community.

In oral cultures, the individual is the locus of truth and meaning; in print cultures, truth comes to reside not in individuals, but on the page.<sup>12</sup> But in the world of Web 2.0, the locus of truth is again shifting decisively: here, truth resides neither in the individual nor on the fixed objectivity of the page, but in the community. Just think of a collective, self-correcting project like Wikipedia, or of the way technologies like tags and mashups allow vast numbers of users to classify the world in new ways.<sup>13</sup>

We are living, then, in a historic moment "when the media on which the word relies are changing their nature and extending their range to an extent not seen since the invention of moveable type."<sup>14</sup> What might this mean for the future of Christian theology? Before addressing that question, I want to focus a little more closely on the way in which our selfhood can be shaped by practices of *writing*.

## II. Technologies of the Self

In his later works, the cultural historian Michel Foucault explored the history of self-forming practices, those practices by which the human self is constituted.

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11. See Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), x.

12. O'Donnell, *Avatars of the Word*, 141.

13. On the importance of Web 2.0's new systems of classification, see Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: Penguin, 2008); together with the less sanguine analysis of David Weinberger, *Everything Is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008).

14. O'Donnell, *Avatars of the Word*, 9.

Socrates spoke of “the care of the self,” the need to attend to oneself and act on oneself in particular ways, so that one can be formed into a subject. The care of the self is a practice of *askesis*, a disciplined work of self-transformation through the cultivation of body, soul, thoughts, and conduct.<sup>15</sup> Foucault calls such self-forming practices “technologies of the self,” and he traces these practices from ancient Greece and Rome to Christian antiquity.<sup>16</sup>

Foucault’s analysis shows that practices of writing lay at the heart of this care of the self. One took care of oneself by “taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks.”<sup>17</sup> Such writing practices cultivate a particular kind of selfhood. Around the turn of the second century, the Stoic philosopher Epictetus taught that one should meditate (*meletan*), write (*graphein*), and train oneself (*gumnazein*).<sup>18</sup> As Foucault observes:

Taking care of oneself became linked to constant writing activity. The self is something to write about, a theme or object...of writing activity. That is not a modern trait born of the Reformation or of romanticism; it is one of the most ancient Western traditions. It was well established and deeply rooted when Augustine started his *Confessions*.<sup>19</sup>

In its ancient form, this practice of self-writing was not, as one might expect, concerned with philosophical questions or spiritual experiences. Primarily, you worked on yourself by attending, with meticulous care, to the ordinary details of everyday life. Your writing records your moods, your reading, your social interactions, and your conversation. The experience of oneself is thus “intensified and widened” through this practice of writing, and in this way “a whole field of experience opened which earlier was absent.”<sup>20</sup>

Already we can see fascinating continuities between ancient writing and the use of language in our Web 2.0 world. Consider the following passage from a website—one could find similar examples on any number of websites:

15. Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

16. See especially his *History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, *The Care of the Self* (London: Penguin, 1988); “Technologies of the Self”; and *Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

17. Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 27.

18. Michel Foucault, “Self Writing,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 1, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 208–9.

19. Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 27.

20. Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 28.

I slept somewhat late owing to my slight cold, which seems now to have subsided. So from 5 a.m. till 9, I spent the time partly in reading... and partly in writing.... Then, after paying my respects to my father, I relieved my throat, I will not say by gargling..., but by swallowing honey water as far as the gullet and ejecting it again. After easing my throat I went off to my father.... Then we went to lunch. What do you think I ate? A wee bit of bread, though I saw others devouring beans, onions, and herrings full of roe.

A painstaking account of the most insignificant details of daily life: is this not what one finds everywhere in the Web 2.0 environment? Sites like Facebook and Twitter are often condemned on exactly this score: they encourage a trivial narcissism; instead of cultivating real thought and reflection, they produce a dreary obsession with the minutiae of daily life. Surely, such websites are making us shallower and stupider—so the complaint goes. Just look at the passage above: what could be more insignificant, more trivial, than an account of one’s morning gargling?

But I have deceived you. The passage just quoted isn’t really from a website: it’s a letter from Marcus Aurelius to his master Fronto, written around 145 CE.<sup>21</sup> And I have quoted only a brief excerpt. The letter continues with similar attention to detail: he relates verbatim a conversation with his mother; then he describes his work, his evening bathing, and his supper. Then he concludes the letter: “After coming back, before I turn over and snore, I get my task done [*meum penso explicio*] and give my dearest of masters an account of the day’s doings.”

Foucault cites this letter as typifying the importance of writing in the Hellenistic period.<sup>22</sup> The emphasis here is on “what you did, not what you thought”; such writing prefigures later Christian writing practices, though monastic writing came to stress the interior life more than external physical routines. In any case, in such writing the significance lay not in the importance of the events recorded, but in the practice of writing itself. One writes in order to shape oneself. Lucilius asks Seneca to review and record the details of each day, “to give an account of each separate day, and of the whole day too.” As Foucault observes, then, the important thing was “to recount one’s day – not because of the importance of the events that may have marked it, but precisely even though there was nothing about it apart from its being like all the others;” in this way, one testifies not to any particular activity, but to an entire way of being, a form of life.<sup>23</sup>

In such letters—written in a moment of quiet reflection at the end of the day—one finds the basis for the Christian practice of daily examination of conscience,

21. For the full text of the letter, see *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, ed. R. B. Rutherford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 128–29.

22. Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” 28–29.

23. Foucault, “Self Writing,” 218–19.

written reflection on the inner life of the soul. Early in the third century, Tertullian used the term *publicatio sui*: Christians are to publish themselves.<sup>24</sup> And in the fourth century, Athanasius writes:

Daily, therefore, let each one take from himself the tale of his actions both by day and night.... And as a safeguard against sin let the following be observed. Let us each one note and write down our actions and the impulses of our soul as though we were going to report them to each other.... Molding ourselves in this way, we shall be able to bring our body into subjection, to please the Lord, and to trample on the devices of the enemy.<sup>25</sup>

This is writing as a technology of the self—one of the most deeply embedded practices of Western societies. You write in order to mold yourself and transform yourself. With such writing, it is not the content that matters so much as the mere act, the *askesis* of writing. You record yourself, write yourself, publish yourself.

### III. Blogging as a Technology of the Self

The two different histories that I have briefly sketched—a history of speech and writing, and a history of writing as a self-forming practice—should make one thing clear: blogging is not merely a medium, a channel through which information is communicated. It is fundamentally a *practice*, a *technique*, a work that cultivates particular ways of being and particular forms of human sociality.

What does it mean for theology to be practiced under the conditions of this new technology? How might theological discourse be changing within the environment of blogging? And what kind of self, what kind of communities, will be formed through this practice? These are complex questions, and any answer will necessarily be impressionistic and provisional. But I want to sketch a number of observations and suggestions here, drawing primarily on impressions from my own experience in the world of theological blogging.

#### A. Speed and Flexibility

Anyone who uses the internet regularly will know that it's a technology that speeds up our lives. In cyberspace, things happen quickly. Indeed, as Graham Ward has

24. Tertullian, *On Repentance*, 10, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896–1903). See also Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," 42.

25. Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, §55; in *The Life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980). On self-formation in Athanasius, see also Paul R. Kolbet, "Athanasius, the Psalms, and the Reformation of the Self," *Harvard Theological Review* 99:1 (2006), 85–101.

argued, the internet is the culmination of the modern city:<sup>26</sup> it is the proverbial city that never sleeps, unceasingly active and busy and alive. This fast pace shapes the way bloggers write.

Writing for my own blog is not generally planned and considered in advance. I don't take a ponderous walk to decide what to say, nor do I draft a text and then carefully comb over it with successive stages of revision and refinement. In blogging, the goal is not to produce a polished text, but to initiate discussion. And so the speed of writing draws closer to that of conversation. In conversation, speech may be faster than thought (so that one overhears one's own thoughts for the first time); a similar phenomenon occurs in blogging. A blog post isn't generally the expression of a preexisting idea: it is itself the instantaneous production of thought. One does not think first, and then write it all down; one is already connected to a community, already "live," and so one simply initiates discussion, raises a question, and experiments with language and ideas.

And since a blog is always already live, there is often only a very short time lapse between the written post and the response. A discussion of considerable sophistication might unfold within just a few hours. I have had the experience of proposing some new idea, then rethinking it in light of the ensuing discussion, and then finally relinquishing the idea altogether—all within a single afternoon.

Compare this to the conventional academic model: you write a journal article over an extended period of solitary research; a year later the article appears in print; in another year or two someone might publish a critique; two years later, your response to the critique is published. This is still a scholarly "conversation," but the conversation moves so slowly that one is unlikely to have a sudden change of mind: one's published ideas are more likely to become fixed and entrenched merely on account of the passage of time. But the immediacy of blogging begins to mold theology into a more flexible, provisional form of discourse. Unlike the printed word, this discourse does not need to become fixed and permanent; instead, as James O'Donnell notes, it can "continue to grow, amend itself, ramify, and become more subtle and more true in response to its readers and to its author's continuing experience."<sup>27</sup> The erosion of the private/public distinction becomes important here. One no longer "publishes" and defends an authoritative statement; instead, one participates in a continuing conversation in a collective enterprise of learning and inquiry. Again, O'Donnell observes that in such an environment theology becomes "a form of continuing seminar," a process that foregrounds dialogue, accountability, and self-correction.<sup>28</sup>

26. Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000).

27. O'Donnell, *Avatars of the Word*, 10.

28. O'Donnell, *Avatars of the Word*, 136.

### *B. Scope and Participation*

The immediacy of blogging also means that the scope of theological discussion becomes much wider. The high degree of specialization within academic theology means that theologians might only ever write about one person or one topic throughout their entire career. (One finds this frequently, for example, among experts on “classical” figures like Augustine, Aquinas, and Barth.) This is understandable, since most scholars today have neither the time nor the institutional support to master more than one area of specialization. But the speed and flexibility of blogging means that, in this domain, everything is open for theological analysis, everything becomes a possible occasion for thought, discussion, and experimentation. An event in the news, a rock concert, a new novel, etc.—the blog is a setting in which such things can be explored through the imaginative resources of Christian tradition. On my own blog, one can find discussions of everything from Led Zeppelin and exorcism to comedy and pornography; from Rowan Williams and Pope Benedict to Kurt Cobain and Al Pacino.

Such wide-ranging theological experimentation is of course no substitute for the sobriety of scholarship; and as long as there are PhD programs, and students to fill them, we hardly need fear the disappearance of academic specialization. But it is nevertheless worth reflecting on the remarkably wide scope of theological discourse in the Web 2.0 environment. The fact that one’s writing is not understood as a fixed artifact means that one is free to write about many things without first achieving scholarly mastery over all these different domains. In this respect, theological discourse begins to inch closer towards the work of pastors and clergy, who are constantly challenged to utilize their theological resources in order to address new, unanticipated problems and situations.

Moreover, the change in scope introduced by blogging concerns not only the range of topics discussed, but also the range of people who are able to participate in the discussion. It would certainly be an oversimplification to invoke clichés about the “democratization of knowledge” on the web. (There are still very specific social and economic conditions necessary before one can participate in web discussions; it is no coincidence that the vast majority of blog-readers are found in North America, Britain, and Europe, while a continent like Africa is scarcely represented at all.) Nevertheless, it is true that blogging opens up the field of theology to a much wider range of participants. One of the most promising developments of recent years is the large number of pastors who are now regularly involved in theological conversations on the web. A basic problem in theological education is that it often ceases after seminary. Pastors themselves can hardly be blamed for this, since we haven’t generally had the institutional apparatus capable of encouraging and cultivating an ongoing process of theological formation. This lack of institutional support is perhaps one reason why so many clergy have now become enthusiastic participants in Web 2.0 theology discussions.

In any case, there are encouraging signs that Web 2.0 technologies may be narrowing the divide between church and academy—a divide that has long had a deleterious effect both on the ministry of pastors and on the work of professional theologians.

### C. Reading Together

Blogging is not only a new technology of writing and conversation, it is also a new way of *reading*. In Christian antiquity, reading was a social activity, not a wholly private one. One of the earliest recorded incidents of silent reading is found in Augustine's *Confessions*. Augustine relates with astonishment Ambrose's habit of reading in silence, a practice he had never witnessed before: "When he read, his eyes scanned the page and his heart sought out the meaning, but his voice was silent and his tongue was still."<sup>29</sup> Centuries later, reading as an oral and auditory social practice still remained the norm. As Alberto Manguel observes, medieval writers "assumed that their readers would hear rather than simply see the text," and their texts "repeatedly call upon the audience to 'lend ears' to a tale."<sup>30</sup> Only in the tenth century did reading practices start to become typically silent and solitary.<sup>31</sup> By the modern period, the internalized nature of reading had become self-evident, so that a literary critic like Harold Bloom can now simply define reading as the love of solitude,<sup>32</sup> while George Steiner can argue that the busy sociality of modern life is destroying authentic reading, since it is obvious that "serious reading excludes even one's intimates."<sup>33</sup>

In the world of Web 2.0, the ideal of the solitary reader is waning fast. Blogging is nothing if not a kind of *reading-together*. It is the formation of a new kind of community of reading. No longer is reading an activity reserved for private study: that carefully crafted space where thought is cultivated under conditions of silence, leisure, and economic privilege.<sup>34</sup> To read a blog is to participate in a collective reading process: on any given day, we read the same post, the same thread of comments and responses. Such reading is far removed from solitude, since here reading is understood primarily as the stimulus to conversation, criticism, and discussion. Such reading is not so much an end in itself as the means to a particular form of community. The very act of reading theology thus becomes a collective project.

29. Augustine, *Confessions*, 6.3.3.

30. Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (New York: Viking, 1996), 47.

31. Manguel, *A History of Reading*, 49–51.

32. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 485.

33. George Steiner, "The Uncommon Reader," in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1996* (London: Faber, 1996), 16.

34. On the private study, see Steiner, "The Uncommon Reader," 12.

Although I don't share Steiner's cultural pessimism or his heavy investment in the Victorian ideal of leisurely private reading, I think he showed remarkable insight when, as early as 1972, he lamented the decline of solitary reading. Young people today, he observed, "read against a musical background or in company. Almost instinctively, they resent the solipsism ... implicit in the classic act of reading. They wish to shut no one out from the empathic tide of their consciousness."<sup>35</sup> All this in 1972: one almost feels as though he was prophesying the invention of blogs!

#### D. Individualization and Coolness

These new forms of reading-together may lead some observers, like Sven Birkets, to warn against the "waning of the private self." Birkets fears that the internet is creating "a process of social collectivization that will over time all but vanquish the ideal of the isolated individual."<sup>36</sup> The claim that cyberspace is eroding individuality is, however, exaggerated. What we see in the Web 2.0 environment is not only the formation of new social collectives, but also precisely the accentuation of individuality, choice, and identity. This is not a paradox: social collectivization and group identity go hand in hand. Just think of the names of major Web 2.0 sites and technologies: MySpace, YouTube, iTunes.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in my judgment one of the most worrying features of the Web 2.0 environment is its rapid and widespread cultivation of a new tribalism—the formation of niche groups organized by highly specified identity-markers.

To some extent, this is characteristic also of theological blogging communities. By reading the right kinds of books, cultivating certain tastes and preferences, subscribing to particular theological positions, one marks oneself out as a member of the community. A person whose tastes lie completely outside the group's boundaries will probably be excluded. There was a recent example of this on my own blog when a reader was greeted with ridicule for posting a sympathetic comment about the popular novel *The Shack*: an incident like this discloses the (usually unnamed and implicit) boundaries of communal identity.

This trend has been incisively analyzed by Marxist theorists, as part of the essential logic of late capitalist societies: we now purchase and consume not merely products, but *identities*, symbolic forms of belonging. The books I read, the music I listen to, the clothes I wear—these are the means by which I participate in a particular social group. As Slavoj Žižek puts it: "What we are buying on the market

35. George Steiner, "After the Book?" in *On Difficulty: And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 197.

36. Birkets, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, 130.

37. As noted by Katie McGowan, "Examining Popular Thought and Ontologies around the Internet's Effects on Knowledge," from the blog A.D.H.D. (3 March 2009): <http://katiemcgowan.wordpress.com/2009/03/03/does-google-remake-us-examining-popular-thought-and-ontologies-around-the-internet-s-effects-on-knowledge/>.

less and less are products (material objects) that we want to own, and more and more life-experiences,” participation in specific lifestyles and identities; what we’re really paying for is this “experiential commodity.”<sup>38</sup> The logic of late capitalism thus drives an ever-greater proliferation of niche identities, each with its own specific market. It is thus no coincidence that, in the Web 2.0 environment, the eclipse of solitariness is directly related to an intensification of individual identity.

What does it mean for theological discourse when participation in a theological community becomes a form of niche identity? This is one of the most troubling features of contemporary theological blogging. Many people have told me that they started reading Karl Barth as a result of reading my blog. While I am always pleased to hear stories like this, I cannot help wondering whether the decision to read such books is motivated, at least in part, by a desire for greater social cohesion, a more intense symbolic belonging to the community that talks about Barth?

I may as well condemn myself with a personal anecdote here: prior to blogging, I had never taken any special interest in the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder. But Yoder is a regular talking-point among many of the best theology blogs, the blogs whose perspectives I most identify with. So I recall one day, on a sudden whim, buying nearly all Yoder’s works from an online bookstore, and hastily devouring them over the next few weeks. The motivations for this sudden immersion in Yoder were no doubt complex. Certainly I wanted to grasp Yoder, to understand my blogging friends, to be able to participate more fully in their conversations. But my decision to read Yoder was doubtless also motivated by the mere fact that Yoder is cool, that his books help to mark out a particular form of group identity. It was important to read him for the same reason that it’s important for many bloggers to enjoy art house films and to prefer Macs over PCs.

This raises important questions. What does it mean for Yoder’s works—what does it mean for theology—when a person buys and reads these books in order to be cool, in order to belong to a group? I suspect coolness today plays a much greater role in the formation of the theological students than we typically realize. Even if this seems like a relatively benign trend, it could have far-reaching consequences for the way theological discourse evolves in the coming years, both because of the economic imbalances represented by coolness—one must *purchase* coolness via an array of new products—and because of its inherent faddishness, its constant pursuit of the latest New Thing (which is not necessarily the same as a pursuit of truth).

On the other hand, there is clearly much to appreciate in the formation of online theological communities. The social dynamics here should remind us that theology is always meant to be a community-forming discipline. Its aim is not so much the articulation of timeless truths as the formation of faithful communities.

38. Slavoj Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, ed. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2007), 229.

Take, for example, Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: a work that didn't merely codify the beliefs of a preexisting reformed community, but actually helped to produce and to shape such a community. Theological discourse aims at the formation of faithful community; and for all the faults of blogging, one certainly finds here an example of the capacity of theological conversation to cultivate ecumenically diverse yet theologically coherent forms of community.

### E. Play and Irony

A final observation: blogging is an extraordinarily *playful* activity. One of the most striking effects of Web 2.0 technologies is the erosion of the once-rigid division between work and play.<sup>39</sup> Many people read and interact with blogs while they're at work; but this interaction itself is an act of play rather than work. Even in my case—where the theme of my blog is directly related to my employment—I see blog-writing not as part of my work, but as a playful diversion, even if it is sometimes a remarkably productive diversion.

This playfulness is embedded in the whole discourse of blogging. Even where a serious and difficult text is being discussed, the conversation is typically characterized by lightness and merriment. We might learn from the discussion, but we have learned through play more than through work. An example of this from my own blog is a long-running series of posts by Kim Fabricius, a reformed pastor in Wales: the posts take the form of “ten propositions” on various topics such as sin, sexuality, politics, baseball, and so on. They are marked everywhere by wit and frivolity, yet I have heard many people say that their theological thinking, or their preaching, has been influenced by these posts.<sup>40</sup> One catches a glimpse here of what Karl Barth called the jollity of theology. When we speak truth, it should make a “joyful and pleasant sound;”<sup>41</sup> “the theologian who has no joy in his work is not a theologian at all.”<sup>42</sup>

Of course, there is also a troubling side to such playfulness: one sees this wherever a serious question or critique is brushed off with a friendly witticism, instead of being seriously engaged; or where our talk about God becomes marked by an ironic distance. John Webster is rather too severe when he describes irony as “a sickness of the soul,”<sup>43</sup> but he is surely right to see that ironic detachment is by no

39. See O'Donnell, *Avatars of the Word*, 138.

40. The posts are catalogued at <http://faith-theology.blogspot.com/2006/09/propositions-by-kim-fabricius.html>, and also revised and published as Kim Fabricius, *Propositions on Christian Theology: A Pilgrim Walks the Plank* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2008).

41. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/2 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009), 803.

42. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2/1, 656.

43. John Webster, “Biblical Reasoning,” *Anglican Theological Review* 90, no. 4 (2008), 751. I thank Dennis Hou for this reference.

means identical with joy, and that an ironic stance may be hard to reconcile with the kind of intense subjective involvement which theology demands.

On the whole, however, I think it is an encouraging turn of events that, in this environment of playful thinking, theology is no longer an elite activity reserved for qualified professionals. An academic once told me that he doesn't watch television anymore; instead, he sits down with a glass of wine and reads theology blogs. The medium is the message: there is something inherently *fun* about blogging, even when the subject-matter is serious and demanding.

### *Concluding Unscientific Prognostication*

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben once observed: "There are no authors today who could console themselves by thinking that their work will be read in a century (by *what kind* of human beings?)."<sup>44</sup> The emergence of new web technologies, coupled with the formation of new online communities, raises sharply this question of "what kind of human beings" might exist a century from now.

In these reflections on blogging, I've tried to underscore both the promising features and some of the more worrying developments. And I have argued that blogging is not merely a new medium; it is fundamentally a new practice, what Foucault called a technology of the self, a new way of forming the self and of cultivating community.

It is always perilous to indulge in prognostication, since, if history teaches us anything, it is that the future usually turns out to be a far stranger place than we could imagine. But I suspect web technologies will play an increasing role in the way theological discourse evolves in the future. And if I have any hope from all this, it would be that, as a result of blogging and similar practices, theology would become a somewhat *friendlier* discipline. A discipline marked less by narrow specialization and professional self-interest, and more by the friendliness of community, inquisitiveness, and open conversation—so that the whole "style" of theology becomes more like a conversation or a seminar than a lecture or monograph.

And I hope this friendlier theology will open into a larger and more expansive domain of discourse. Larger in the kinds of people it includes—not only scholars, but pastors, laypeople, students, curious non-believers, and others. And more expansive in its domain: so that theology is not merely specialized rumination on a small number of pre-defined topics, but an adventurous and always unpredictable exploration of God's strange and surprising ways with the world.

44. Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 73–74.

## RESPONSE TO “THEOLOGY 2.0: BLOGGING AS THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE”

Robb Redman\*

Writing has always been a vital form of Christian communication, both with God and to others. And different norms and conventions have shaped the way writers think and write. It will surprise no one to note that Augustine, Luther, Kierkegaard, and Donald Miller have different writing styles that to one degree or another reflect their times as well as their aims.

The emergence of social networking has produced a new medium of writing and theological discourse. Along with many of us, Ben Myers wonders how this medium will shape the way we think and communicate. He rightly points out that it is naïve to assume that blogging—or any technology, for that matter—is merely a neutral conduit for thoughts and ideas. The manner of communication affects its content, or as Marshall McLuhan famously put it, “the medium is the message.”<sup>1</sup>

So what about blogging? Can it be a means for serious theological exchange? Or does it trivialize discourse, as some media critics contend? Opting for a cautiously positive assessment, Myers sees both opportunities and challenges to this new medium. So do I.

On the one hand, social networking *by itself* does not spell the end of meaningful reflection and communication. Overwrought criticisms of the shallowness and banality of blogging are amply offset by examples of thoughtful and insightful blogging. On the other hand, Myers is right to urge caution in the face of the uncritical and hyperbolic boosterism of social networking’s advocates. By itself, social networking will not undo the damaging dualisms and rampant individualism of the Enlightenment project. There is something to the point that a technology is only as productive as those who use it.

Myers’ excellent article prompts several immediate responses. First, blogging supplements rather than replaces traditional modes of theological discourse, such as books, journal articles, classrooms, and conferences. The history of technological innovation suggests that new modes of communication technology expand discourse across the board. For example, television was initially thought to be the end of both radio and movies, but since the 1950s both media rebounded and actually increased in popularity. Digital technology has not made books and

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1. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

reading obsolete; overall, book sales are up sharply from the previous decade. Gadgets like Amazon's Kindle reader and Apple's iPad may mean we cut down fewer trees to make even more books. Not surprisingly, most bloggers do not see themselves in competition with existing modes of theological reflection. A large number of posts are book reviews or responses to articles in journals or papers at conferences.

Second, blogging seems better suited to some types of theological reflection than others. In particular, the theological blogging I come across seems to take a more eclectic approach to theology. This is a good thing. Years ago, Karl Barth drew a helpful distinction between *regular* and *irregular* dogmatic theology. Regular dogmatics is systematic and comprehensive, and takes the form of a complete account of Christian doctrine. Barth, Aquinas, Calvin, and Schleiermacher represented the epitome of regular dogmatics. Irregular dogmatics, Barth suggested, is more occasional and topical. Bloggers today reflect the efforts of irregular dogmatists like Athanasius or Luther to articulate individual doctrines in fresh ways that relate to the pressing issues of the day.

In a similar vein, blogging seems to encourage more integrated approaches to theological reflection. Good theological reflection sees connections between Christian truth and life wherever they are to be found. There are plenty of sites devoted to Christian commentary on popular culture: movies and television, music, literature, leisure activity, and more. This work at uncovering the deep spiritual yearnings and perspectives in our culture is helpful, particularly to us preachers and teachers seeking to build bridges to our neighbors and neighborhoods. The temptation here, however, will be to promote what C.S. Lewis termed a "Christianity and" approach to theological reflection that implies that the gospel is somehow incomplete until it is related to the issues of the day.

Third, Myers points out that blogging is personal. And how! Blogging sites allow bloggers to post photos and other media along with their writing that make more of their lives accessible to their "readers." In this way, social media further blurs the traditional distinctions between our professional and our personal lives that have been dissolving for some time. Twenty years ago, business guru Tom Peters breathlessly announced, "Work is personal." While some employers worry about staff that uses company computers and time to update their Facebook sites, there is a flip side; more and more people identify their work as the primary source of personal identity, ahead of even marriage and parenting. And the fascinating and troubling fusion of work and personal life is there for all to see on the Web.

Samuel Johnson is supposed to have said, "Reading maketh a man broad, speaking maketh a man ready, but writing maketh a man exact." We could add to this list, "Blogging maketh a person immediate." It is true that social media offers an instant outlet for reflection; however, I'm still wondering if instantaneous theology is a good thing. While many bloggers rush to have the first word on a given topic, I wonder if the result isn't more like "thinking one's confusion out loud." I've come

across many posts that were timely but also negated their impact by being poorly thought-out and badly composed.

Finally, Myers seems to assume that theological reflection is primarily, if not exclusively, personal reflection. To be sure, theology is nothing if not personal. But there is an ecclesial dimension to theology that seems to be missing in Myers' account. I have in mind there the same concern that led Karl Barth to rename his account of Christian doctrine from *Christian Dogmatics* to *Church Dogmatics*, and to criticize Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* for its privatizing of faith and theological expression. Theology is first and foremost the work of the Church before it is the work of a theologian.

In fairness, Myers hints at this larger framework with his notion of blogging as a "kind of reading-together" and with his lament at the narrowness of online theological communities. I concur that blogging can be a valuable tool in restoring the ecclesial dimension to a new "style of theology" that is friendlier, and more inquisitive and open. At the same time, the renewal of theology in our time requires more than that; it will require a renewal of *theologians*—that is the work of the Spirit that produces burning hearts in pursuit of the living God and a deeper understanding of their identity as members of the Body of Christ, the Church.