

“Is God online or offline?”¹

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Nowadays, it is impossible at all to think of the world without Smartphone, laptop, tablet, and the Internet. Digital media becomes part of our everyday life. We use them for communication, we rely on them in seeking for information, knowledge, and insights, etc. Through digital media we engage in social interactions and/or religious activities provided online. All these somehow lead to form individual’s identity and possibly change the view of belief as well as the way people live out the faith, the spiritual life.

Believing is an individual matter, a personal response to God, a commitment to the community of the faithful, and also a demand of involvement in social life. All these aspects make out the spiritual life of a believer. Under this perspective, some points that seem relevant to me will be presented in the context of online communication, online religion, online community. The simple question is that: Is God online or offline? In other words: Can we meet God online or it is only possible in offline reality?

Spiritual life and individual way of dealing with digital communication

Normally, we use our bodies, voice and gestures in communication. These all together represent our self and show who we are and what we intend to do. More or less, in computer-mediated communication, the language we use, precisely the style of language, the group we choose, the design of individual website we select, the content we put on it, etc. somehow reveal the identity of our self. Especially, the way we present ourselves online, says also who we are. In the same way, this shows also what we believe.

In traditional religious communication, we form our religious identity due to the participation in our community and in other social networks; this is offline. In the context of living in a community and communicating with other members, individual learn the faith by joining religious education in catechetical classes, and in catholic school. We deepen our faith by celebrating the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. We express our faith in various religious and social activities. In this context, we get our spiritual foundation.

Nowadays, involved in computer-mediated communication, we are facing constantly an influx of information. We discover different social contexts, a cultural plurality of modernization, and also a religious pluralism. There is a variety of religious experiences, insights, and practices communicated online. This situation leads to the phenomena that religious identity has changed from being a ‘given’ to becoming ‘a choice’.² In digital worlds, individuals are challenged to search

¹ This title is adopted from the article which Johannes Röser has written for the magazine “Christ in der Gegenwart” (Christian in Here and Now), No. 19/2016.

² Cf. Heidi A. Campbell ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 50.

out of a big deal of opinions, ideas, experiences of different social contexts, life styles and trends. The 'right things' that are fitting to his/her own life which may give meaning to that individual will be chosen. This process of identity formation is found in continuously challenging situation day by day, because new flow of information is incessantly delivered. The individual is forced to revise all what s/he has gained in the past, related to his/her own biography or identity, eventually figures out a new life concept in new situation. I had worked for young people in my home diocese. During the time, I observed that young people, nowadays, become more attentive to individual biography. They are more interested in personal narrative that inspires them and elicits them to reflect more on their own life, even they live also in other relationships. A friend of mine, working in my diocese, started opening a forum online where people can enter and share their religious experiences. This was considered as a way leading to the Church. I introduced the young people to this online forum. They heard from some narratives. They chose some inspiring points for their life. However, whenever I spent my time and gave my ears to them. They opened themselves to me and reveal many undiscovered aspects of their life.

Religious Online Community – a Substitute for Offline Community?

By the early 1980s, numerous discussion groups came into existence which pursued special interest. As the participants of these groups continuously and loyally contribute to develop and sustain them, they together built up a community online. The new forms of community were described as "virtual community" based on the Internet.³

So, "virtual community" refers to groups of persons who due to same interests join together in order to create, nurture and contribute to relationships, based on computer connection. Campbell uses the definition of "virtual community" that refers to "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." So, online community is there, "when members are prepared to emotionally invest in a group."⁴

As new forms of "virtual community" increasingly appear, researchers pay attention to them with questions:

1. What is happening online?
2. How might these social aggregations be seen as communities?
3. What effect does life online have on individual and group identities?

By the late 1990s, researchers sought to address the online trends toward the "privatization community." So, they went to analyze the effects of community life online. Following questions come under consideration:

1. What kind of online community are there?

³ Cf. Campbell, 58.

⁴ See Campbell, 59.

2. Facing the existing and continuously emerging online communities, how should we understand conventional community?

In this context, they began to tease out the different roles and structures within online community in order to analyze how these influenced the extent to which members become involved in that community. They included also investigation of the direct connections between online and offline community.

Further, researchers try to look at the networks people build, the organizational identity, and the interactivity in new media in order to find out how the Internet both influences and reflects trends within the larger social sphere. The main reason for participating and getting involved in an online community is that people seek there for answer of specific need.

Recently, studies on online community focus on questions about:

1. To what extent can offline religious communities and structures influence online of community?
2. Is there any interconnection between online community and their offline counterparts?
3. If there are some indicators of interconnection, how do offline counterparts influence or elucidate online community?

I have to note that most of these studies on online community were conducted under the perspective of social science. However, some studies on religious online community were also implemented; all of the researchers mentioned in the book of Heidi Campbell performed their surveys among neo-pagans, among Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, or protestant.

Similar to the social phenomena of online community, there exist also religious online communities. There are indications that people join certain online community in order to seek for information, knowledge and insights regarding spiritual or religious issues. The increasing number of participants in online religious community raises the question about the concept of offline community, what does it mean to be part of a faith community. This leads to new interpretation and deepen the understanding of a faith community.

At first sight, offline community consists of people who are bound together through geographic, static affiliation based on needs and familial ties. By contrast, online community appears as loosely bound, dynamic networks of relations based on shared interests and preferences. They seem to be as loose social networks with varying levels of religious affiliation and commitment.⁵

Many of the concerns about online community have been spotlighted in research and critiques of televangelism and the “electronic Church.” Raised questions are:

1. Can technologically mediated relationships be defined as a legitimate form of community?

⁵ Cf. Campbell, 64.

2. Computer mediated communication may allow for social interaction, but it may not produce truthful or authentic relationships.
3. Are religious worships which are performed online like the one celebrated in an offline community?
4. There is a fear that participation in a media-created community cause people to log in, log on, and drop out of offline community.
5. How do people live out that, what they perceive in online community, in offline context?

Nowadays, we see that there are several online services provided by the Catholic Church, officially or based on initiative of religious individuals or groups. People can visit the websites, read the news about the Church in the world; they also get information related to faith. They can know more about faith, about the sacraments, sacred things, the saints, teachings of the Church on specific issues which they learned in the past only on basic level. In some websites people can hear from experiences other have made in living faith; they can get insights related to spiritual life. Some websites provide online worships, allow people to entrust them their concerns so that they pray for the intention of the visitors. Some offer online forum for people that they can share their personal experience about faith with other, but this is limited. In other words, people who enter the Internet for seeking for information about the Church, for knowledge and insights about faith, may widen their horizon. In some extent, they may deepen and enrich their own spiritual life.

The question now is: Is God online or offline?

God is relationship; a relationship of self-communication between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father personally communicates all what is good, what is true, and what is beautiful to the Son; in a word, he communicates what he is to the Son in a personal way. The Son, in a very personal way too, receives this 'Self' of the Father with an attitude of honor and thankfulness; in a word, the Son communicates to the Father his 'Self' in the way that the Father can see how grateful he is and how deeply he appreciates the personal gift the Father has given to him. The Holy Spirit unites these two 'SELF-communication' in one 'personal atmosphere' which harmonizes the two different kinds of self-communication what we call communion. There, the three divine persons live and share with each other divine life. In this perspective, God is relational, communicating, and loving. The divine relationship is, therefore, dynamic, real, life-giving. Out of this fullness of the divine life, we are created in God's image and likeness. For this reason, we are able to live in relationships, we are able to communicate with each other, and we are able to make our relationships alive (giving life).

Further, we learn from the Evangelist John an essential fact of our faith. We read there in the first chapter of the Gospel of John (Jn 1:1-14):

1. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, was in the beginning with God: Trinitarian SELF-communication

2. Through the Word of God, all things were made: God communicates his Word – things come into existence.
3. It is life and light: God communicates his Word so that life will be able and strengthened
4. It was sent (communicated) from God: God personally speaks to man through the Son
5. And the Word became flesh: this is real, authentic, offline.

The Incarnation, the SELF-communication of God happens in our concrete history: real, authentic, offline. It is not only Word, but person in real body of human beings. He is now tangible and understandable. People, when communicating with him, can see, listen, feel who he really is, even those who do not share the view with him, who become angry about his message. The relationship God shows and offers to human beings is analog.

Empathy, love, hate, rage, compassion, grief, sorrow, joy etc. are analog. All these aspects belong to life, and are manifested in relationships; they are given and perceived offline. We live, not digital and we die, not digital. We are also not digitally created. We believe, we hope, we love existentially, with body and soul. When the going gets tough, you need real people who are really there with you. We have the freedom to choose and communicate things that support or destroy life. This is again offline.

We can go to the Internet to get information, knowledge or insights about faith. We can download useful Apps for individual use in order to widen our horizon in order to get help for enriching and deepening our faith. We may engage in online discussions to share our view about faith. These all are digitally facilitated. Sometimes you have received many beautiful words or quotations of great personalities or saints, and you are asked for tipping “Amen” or sharing to others in social networks online (some people hope for getting more ‘likes’ in Facebook for example), but after all these, God wishes to arrive and dwell in our heart. This need a personal response with all its consequences. This happens offline.

According to Johannes Röser, a German Journalist and publicist, when it comes to the point, we also celebrate our life, at its up- and down moments, not digital. We can only celebrate faith offline in close physical presence, praying, becoming silent, crying; this we do in individual or collective way. Despite many playful presentations of digital confessionals, computer-animated candlelight, What-App-prayer, and Twitter-Pope’s messages, the real way of living our faith happens solely offline, analog.⁶

Regarding online worshipping, we have to look again at the real authentic Incarnation of Jesus Christ, “the Word became Flesh”, as we know it is a real authentic SELF-communication. From there, we can say: Sacraments are sacraments. Jesus in the sacraments, the real symbol of the real God, wants to reach the human person, in its real body and soul. The sacraments, when we celebrate them in a community of the faithful, aim at reaching and touching our whole body, mind, sentiments, brain and intellect. They demand of the recipient a personal response to the

⁶ Johannes Röser, “Gott online – Gott offline”, Christ in der Gegenwart, (Freiburg, Germany No. 19, 2016), 208.

gift that God has given through them. Through the sacrament, God will touch our whole life with his love, he will imprint his love in our heart and from there, he will strengthen our life and fill it with his Holy Spirit.

Ones again believing is an individual matter, a personal response to God, a commitment to the community of the faithful, and also a demand of involvement in social life. Our spirituality may elucidate things communicated online, but it is only lived out and really expressed offline, analog.