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An Anthropology of *Singularity*? Pastoral Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality in the *Annus virtualis* and Beyond¹

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1. Introduction

In the award-winning film, “The social network” (2010), the origin, development and far-reaching significance of Mark Zuckerberg’s *Facebook* are highlighted. In the film, one of the characters, Sean Parker, refers to the Facebook phenomenon as “[t]he true digitalization of real life” (nilesfilmfiles.blogspot.com. 2011:02).

Taking into account that film has developed into an important technological and visual expression of meaning (Graham, 2002; Louw, 2008), it seemed necessary to take note of how the advancement of technology is portrayed. With the accent on possible future developments in “performing the faith” (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 4), as well as on giving expression to the dynamics of life – since life “is about change” (Astley, 2002, p. 21) – the aim of the research was to trace the contours of the “true digitalization of real life” and the pastoral perspectives for an embodied spirituality.

Since we are living in a world where “the spirit of technology pervades the whole of culture” (Schoorman, 2003, p. 13), the challenge of addressing this quest is further demarcated through the acknowledgement of the fact that we currently find ourselves in a world characterised by “the new social structure of the Information Age”, which constructs “a culture of virtuality in the global flows that transcend time and space” (Castells, 2006, p. 381). The demands that are made upon our time as a result of this culture of virtuality challenge us to examine “the impact of twenty-first-century technologies – digital, cybernetic and biomedical – upon our very understanding of what it means to be human” (Graham, 2002, p. 1). The contours of this contribution are however not only to be found within the meaning of the present age of virtuality, but also wants to map the considerable scholarly discussion regarding the movement toward a state of posthumanism (Lunceford, 2009). When the term ‘posthuman’ is used, the condition referred to by writers and intellectuals, “who envision a day when humans will virtually merge with their technology, thereby creating a new and superior posthuman species” (Waters, 2006, p. x), is brought to

¹ This is an extensively reworked, updated and edited version of my earlier published article *An embodied spirituality: Perspectives for a bodily pastoral anthropology*, which was published in 2008 in *Acta Theologica*. 28(2):118-132.

mind. Within this broad domain of interest, questions relating to forms of embodiment therefore play an important role in the quest for relevance, especially taking into account that “[t]o enter virtual reality is to cross a threshold where physical and temporal limits are suspended” (Waters, 2006, p. 52).

In the evolving understanding of our age as the *annus virtualis* (Joubert, 2010, p. 48) – and in thinking ahead into the future – the traditional lines of demarcation are being eliminated (Barna, 2011, Kindle edition). A futuristic possibility exists of “scanning our consciousness into computers”, enabling us to “enter a virtual existence or swap our bodies for immortal robots and light out for the edges of space as intergalactic godlings” (Time, 2011, p. 27). This links up with Graham’s (2003, p. 32) observation that “technological advance is reshaping what it means to be human”.

Taking this evolving understanding as a point of departure for a critical reflection on the scientific fields of practical theology and, in particular, pastoral care – as well as futures studies, *inter alia* – the domain of interest is not only reflected upon, but recent and future developments are also taken into account, paving the way for the motivation of an interdisciplinary discourse. The research on which this contribution is based is characterised by a philosophical analysis of relevant concepts leading to theory building. In coherence with the theme of the contribution, the documentation of research is delineated by making use of the metaphor of internet connectivity and associative networks of meaning (Müller & Maritz, 1998) as a possible expression of the “technologization of nature” (Graham, 2002, p. 2). Connecting to the internet evokes the expectation of encountering landscapes of meaning – some in the form of old, familiar territories, while others comprise uncharted virtual horizons that await the exploring visitor.

2. Loading

The term ‘loading’ evokes the experience of a webpage being downloaded and loading onto the computer screen. A virtual experience is commonly facilitated by connecting to the internet, thereby creating ‘cyberspace’, which refers in this context to the “symbolic, imagined space between nodes on the network that allows new selves and new worlds to be created” (Garner, 2004, p. 16). In using the metaphor of the internet, I do not wish to imply that this is the only expression of technological advancement. Rather, it is an expression of the current “medium-is-the-message” world (Carr, 2010, p. 1). Graham (2002, p. 4) explains the world of shifting realities:

Just as the boundaries between humans, animals and machines are eroded, so too are distinctions between the virtual and the real. New digital technologies have reconfigured taken-for-granted patterns of physical space, communication and intimacy.

My particular approach to the theme of the article is reflected in the understanding that “anthropology is essentially a hermeneutical problem” (Louw, 1999, p. 157). In this approach the emphasis falls on hermeneutical methodology, in which spirituality as a universal human concern in the quest for transcendence and meaning is investigated in terms of a variety of religious traditions and scholarly disciplines (Schneiders, 2005). It is from this point of view that an investigation of the meaning and implications of the futuristic concept of ‘singularity’ is conducted, in terms of the following definition:

The ultimate goal for transhumanism is to attain what is called the 'singularity': a point in the (not too distant) future at which the rising curve of technological progress reaches its peak. According to transhumanists, the singularity will signal a radical qualitative change in the nature of human/machine intelligence – a transition into super intelligence and omnipotence (Graham, 2003, p. 38).

The foregoing perspectives could possibly be evaluated by making use of perspectives from a dogmatologically informed anthropology (Staley, 2011). However, in contrast to a dogmatological anthropology, a pastoral anthropology focuses on understanding human beings in their recovery (therapy), as well as on accompanying them in their search for meaning in life (Louw, 1999). In a previous research contribution (Van den Berg, 2008), it has already been indicated and confirmed that when perspectives on an “embodied soul” are negotiated for the purposes of pastoral care, these perspectives serve to emphasise, *inter alia*, that identity can be understood in terms of a so-called “bodily identity” (Murphy, 2006, p. 141), thereby accentuating a positive perception and experience of the body (Ganzevoort & Veerman, 2000). The implication of this in a possible description of a pastoral anthropology is thus that corporeality “confronts us with the realities of vulnerability and affliction”, and that this very vulnerability “is deeply embedded in our bodily existence” (Van Huyssteen, 2006, p. 320). The implications of these accents will then need to be re-evaluated and re-articulated within the developing understanding of singularity, and as part of the world of the *annus virtualis* and beyond, where the possibility of a “transition from *Homo sapiens* to postbiological *Homo cyberneticus*” (Graham, 2002, p. 9) is envisaged.

As the cyberspace visitor would know, it is always possible to re-visit previous domains by using the backspace option. Re-visiting previous domains will hopefully contribute not only towards the evaluation and re-articulation of the possible further development of the current debate, but also towards the opening up of additional space for evolving vistas of meaning.

3. Backspace

I remember a time when, in the process of rethinking the meaning of anthropology for pastoral care, I reflected on the work of a German anatomist, Gunther von Hagens. During the late 1970s, he developed the so-called plastination technique, revealing inner anatomical structures (Van den Berg, 2008). One of the images portrayed a praying man holding his heart between his hands. To my mind, this image not only depicts the intimate relationship between body and soul, but also metaphorically points to an embodied understanding of spirituality in pastoral care. This insight occurred a few years ago, and at the time I thought that this comprised a new understanding of a bodily spirituality. These days, I find myself in front of the computer, thinking about embodiment in virtuality, where “much human interaction” currently “occurs in a bodiless world” (Herzfeld, 2010, p. 125). As if this were not enough, it is further anticipated that singularity, merging the human being with the machine, will allow “human beings to transcend some of their perceived limitations” (Garner, 2004, p. 16). Understandably, this possible scenario challenges the expectation as to how spirituality will be embodied in an era of singularity. In this regard Dean-Drummond (2005, p. 365) has already pointed out the importance of “[q]uestions about human identity – such as, who am I? Where do I come from? What does the future hold?”

Travelling in the space created by a post-foundational practical theology (Müller, 2005) – with longitudes and latitudes of modernity and post-modernity – where various perspectives from science (Deane-Drummond, 2005) are entertained, cognisance is taken of the post-modern ‘anthropological approach’ to spirituality, as explained by Schneiders (2005, p. 26):

This approach is rooted in the recognition that spirituality is an anthropological constant, a constitutive dimension of the humanum. Human beings are characterized by a capacity for self-transcendence toward ultimate value, whether or not they nurture this capacity or do so in religious or non-religious ways ...

If, in terms of the above, spirituality is regarded as an “anthropological constant”, it becomes an even more challenging quest to reconsider how this “constitutive dimension of the humanum” is to be embodied in an era of singularity. In order to investigate this phenomenon, the overlapping domains of practical theology as a housing discipline for pastoral care, and futures studies as a housing strategy, with a view to sustainability, will be further explored.

4. Domain

It is of the utmost importance to check the domain of the website associated with the specific visit of the internet user in order to ensure the validity of the content that is being downloaded. In this regard, it is also important to cognitively outline the coordinates of the visit associated with this research. In order to navigate through the research territory, I make use of evolving perspectives articulated from the interdisciplinary discussion between practical theology and futures studies.

4.1 Practical theology

I have purposefully opted for a type of practical or public theology, emphasising the role of religion (and spirituality) in life and in all her manifestations, in order to gain a better understanding of society (Ganzevoort 2006:151). In the further development hereof, a specific “theology of the praxis” is presupposed, in which “practical theology takes the praxis as its source and starting point” (Ganzevoort, 2008, p. 10).

Research indicates that many new developments have taken place in recent decades within the field of practical theology (Dreyer, 1998) and in the formulation of pastoral theory (Ganzevoort, 2001; Louw, 1999; Louw, 2003), with particular emphasis on pastoral therapy (Immink, 2003; Scholtz, 2005; Stone, 2001). During the twentieth century, pastoral care began to undergo particular evolutionary developments. A kerygmatic, therapeutic and – since the seventies – new, hermeneutic phase, can be distinguished, in which theology and therapy occur in a bipolar relationship (Foskett & Lyall, 1988; Scholtz, 2005). In the development of pastoral theory, different paradigmatic movements can be identified (Ganzevoort, 2001; Louw, 1999; Louw, 2005). Firstly, there is a movement away from a one-sided preaching model to a participatory pastorate, in which the pastor is instrumental in guiding people to the discovery of God’s involvement in their lives. The fact that the context is being taken into account is important in this movement. Also important is the shift away from the one-sided professional approach, and the replacement thereof with mutual caring on the part of

believers. There is also another movement away from a therapeutic pastoral model to a hermeneutically oriented pastorate, in which emphasis is placed on

... the endeavour to read, understand and interpret texts within contexts. Hermeneutics underlined anew the importance of our human quest for meaning [... and] the importance of compassion: the dimension of pathos in theology (Louw, 2003, p. 54).

In this regard, the discipline of futures studies not only enables us to be cognisant of our current world; it also develops the ability to read the possible contours of a coming time and world.

4.2 Futures studies

The recognition of the general human capacity to approach the future – which includes specific alternatives and choices and which is formed, *inter alia*, by structures, perceptions and forces – in a strategic and purposeful manner, falls within the domain of research and study (Lombardo, 2008; Slaughter, 2001). In terms of this view, “the idea that changes are real and that humanity is in charge of its own fate” (Time, 2011, p. 27), as expressed by the singularity movement, is not only emphasised, but also resonates with futures studies.

The objective of this approach – and also of the broader field of futures studies – would thus naturally be “to contribute toward making the world a better place in which to live, benefiting people as well as plants, animals, and the life-sustaining capacities of the Earth” (Bell, 1997, p. 3). In my opinion, it is important to take cognisance of these challenges, and to address them, since they determine accents of relevance, sustainability and strategy. The focus in futures studies thus falls on “increasingly find[ing] ways to integrate futures literacy with futures strategy” (Slaughter, 2001, p. 415).

Falling within the focus field of the domain of futures studies is the movement of transhumanism, in which advanced technologies are portrayed in the pursuit of human perfection: the construction of artificial intelligence to augment intellectual functions, as well as the use of biomedical transplants, prostheses, genetic modification and cryonic preservation to stave off the effects of disease and ageing.

Entering the uncharted terrain of “extremely rapid developments in both science and technology” leads to an awareness of “possibilities for radical revision of concepts of humanness in the future” (Murphy, 2010, p. 21-22). In this regard, even the theologian would do well to take the words of Korowai to heart, namely that inventing “is a lot like surfing: you have to anticipate and catch the wave at just the right moment” (Kurzweil, 2010, Kindle edition). By way of analogy, it is therefore understandable that – in terms of the central metaphor in the documentation of the research – I will need to make use of the Forward button in the search for new markers for an embodied spirituality in this uncharted and ever-unfolding terrain of virtuality and beyond.

5. Forward

As pointed out earlier on, the general human capacity to approach the future in a strategic and purposeful manner is one of the focus areas in the domain of research and study (Lombardo, 2008; Slaughter, 2001). It also resonates well with the central metaphor of virtual connectivity associated with the delineation of the research.

The addressing of the challenges outlined above will entail, *inter alia*, the application of futures strategy in a manner that is relevant and sustainable. With this aim in view, the following observation by Graham (2011, p. 30) is worth noting:

We are therefore presented with two contrasting representations of the effects of genetic, digital and cybernetic technologies on the way we live, work, communicate and even reproduce. The coexistence of fear and fascination may be an indication of our uncertainty as to the future trajectory of human engagement with technologies: as promise, or endangerment; as mastery, or extinction. It brings forth the question of whether 'technology' represents a diminishment of human uniqueness, an attenuation of healthy political and civic associations, a narrowing of cognitive horizons, even the obsolescence of Homo sapiens itself, or whether the digital and biotechnological age will propel humanity towards greater knowledge and prosperity – from Homo sapiens to Homo cyberneticus.

A closer consideration of the possible meaning of the contours of a *homo cyberneticus* for an embodied pastoral anthropology in the *annus virtualis* and beyond is part of the exploration that comprises the focus of the next section.

6. Refreshing

Taking the digital embodiment of real life as a metaphor for the current state of affairs, and thinking ahead into the future, I focus in this chapter on the possible meaning and mapping out of an embodied spirituality.

In this regard, I will use the concept of singularity as a guiding metaphor for the last part of this contribution, mapping out the space in which thoughts and perspectives on a future dispensation and the meaning thereof for a pastoral anthropology can be articulated. Raymond Kurzweil, the father of the Singularity movement, comments as follows:

Understanding the Singularity will alter our perspective on the significance of our past and the ramifications of our future. To truly understand it inherently changes one's view of life in general and one's own particular life. I regard someone who understands the Singularity and who has reflected on its implications for his or her own life as 'singularitarian' (Kurzweil, 2010, Kindle edition).

Taking these perspectives into account, I wish to accentuate the importance of construing a more bodily-oriented theological anthropology and spirituality for pastoral care, embodying a new understanding of engagement with different scientific domains. As a background to this thesis, it is important to understand that “[o]ur bodies determine much of the nature of our interaction with the world around us. We experience the world through our senses, act within the world through our voices and movements. Our perception is limited by our physical abilities” (Herzfeld, 2010, p. 119-120).

With reference to the *annus virtualis* and beyond, it has been pointed out that it seems unfortunate that “very few works in pastoral theology pay special attention to anthropology. A specific anthropology is often implied, but without giving an explicit description or an exposition on how this anthropology influences counselling and therapy” (Louw, 1999, p. 17). The Cartesian dualistic reading, implying a distinct division between body and soul, and which was regarded for a long time as the only standard (Ganzevoort & Veerman, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), was even further expanded by others who

proposed a trichotomy between body, soul and spirit – while there were also those who postulated that only the spiritual exists (Murphy, 2006). Clearly, if the initial reading of the traditional dichotomy between body and soul is endorsed, the implication is that “we are essentially disembodied Souls not of this world [...] focused on transcending all the things of the world” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 564). In the context of the modern world, this reading has become even more outdated. It seems appropriate – and imperative – that an informed pastoral anthropology should be developed and explicitly described as part of an orientation towards the *annus virtualis* and beyond.

Russel (2005, pp. 338-339) indicates that, in the light of the foregoing, questions such as the following become relevant and important:

What do advances in artificial intelligence have to tell us about human nature? One way to respond is by asking whether embodiment makes the difference between human intelligence and computers ... And what do computers tell us about our capacity for spirituality?

In answering these uncharted questions, broader perspectives of connectivity with the theme under investigation might open up new vistas and domains of meaning.

7. New domains and connectivity

Finding ourselves in the *annus virtualis* – and in an era beyond – the discovery is made, in the well-known words of Marshall McLuhan (Kurzweil, 2010, Kindle edition), that although we have built the tools, we are now being built by them. Regarding this observation, Kurzweil (2010, Kindle edition) points out that “[t]his is not because humans will have become what we think of as machines today, but rather machines will have progressed to be like humans and beyond. Technology will be the metaphorical opposable thumb that enables our next step in evolution.”

Considering the meaning of the above for the articulation of a spiritually embodied anthropology in the *annus virtualis* and beyond, two introductory perspectives on identity and community are discussed below.

7.1 An “embodied soul” anthropology/spirituality requires a particular view of God informing a new identity

Elaine Graham (1999, p. 419) sketched the new horizons of posthumanism:

New, digital and biogenetic technologies – in the shape of media such as virtual reality, artificial intelligence, genetic modification and technological prosthetics – signal a ‘posthuman’ future in which the boundaries between humanity, technology and nature have become even more malleable.

With this new vista in view, it is understandable that in the development of science, a reciprocal influence between the description of God concepts and an anthropological description (Webster, 2003) must be accounted for (Soskice, 2001). Regarding the reciprocal relationship in the formulation of possible alternatives, Du Toit (2006, p. 1259) says the following:

God concepts change as the notion of humans as images of God changes [...] God’s image as described in divine revelation is expounded by science in the terminology of genetic mapping, cognitive science and socio-biology.

If one takes the perspectives that have already been offered in the research seriously, “an abstract *imago Dei*” (Stone, 2006, p. 1147) is avoided, and one discovers that

... the image of God is not found in some intellectual or spiritual capacity, but in the whole embodied human being, ‘body and soul’. In fact, the image of God is not found in humans, but is the human, and for this reason imago Dei can be read only as imitatio Dei: to be created in God’s image means we should act like God, and so attain holiness by caring for others and for the world (Van Huyssteen, 2006, p. 320).

As pointed out earlier, a pastoral anthropology aims to understand and assist the human being in his or her search for meaning in life (Louw, 1999), and to offer support when he or she is confronted with the reality of affliction, and of the vulnerability that is “deeply embedded in our bodily existence” (Van Huyssteen, 2006, p. 320). This entails, *inter alia*, assisting the person in coming to terms with this vulnerability, through a deeper understanding of his or her identity as an “embodied soul” – but also through a positive perception and experience of his or her body as a “bodily identity” (Murphy, 2006, p. 141).

In negotiating and translating the meaning and implication of the above for an era of virtuality and posthumanism the questions are then about “a God that has no physical body that can fill the vast expanse of space yet dwell in one’s heart [...] Posthumanism does not remove this paradox; rather, it removes God from the equation and demands that we transcend the flesh without divine aid” (Lunceford, 2009, p. 93). Precisely for this reason, but also – in particular – for the purposes of describing a possible “embodied soul” pastoral anthropology, the accents of the so-called eschatological theologians in pastoral care are important, and will continue to be so (Lester, 1995). For one thing, these accents offer the possibility of reflecting on a theme such as the resurrection and how it could be further imbued with pastoral meaning, not merely as the “re-clothing of a ‘naked’ soul with a (new) body”, but rather as “restoring the whole person to life – a new transformed kind of life” (Murphy, 2006, p. 23). These perspectives need to be further entertained in the debate between a better future existence confirmed by Christ and His resurrection and posthumanists seeking to transcend embodied existence (Staley, 2011, p. 240).

7.2 An “embodied soul” anthropology/spirituality recognises relationship networks

Following the contours of virtuality and a possible era of posthumanism, the challenging trajectory of mediated relationships questions the physical immediacy (Lunceford, 2009). It is agreeable that in a pastoral “embodied soul” anthropology particular emphasis should also be placed on the human being as a relational being, because “our bodies constitute the very possibility of engagement with one another in this world or any other” (Murphy, 2006, p. 140). This is indeed necessary if it is assumed that what is presupposed here is the traditional meaning of “soul”, referring to “the quality of positions and attitudes that people take within the dynamic network of relationships” (Louw, 2005, p. 18).

The practical implication of the embodied spirituality described above would be for example the reconsideration of perspectives on sexuality. Shuman (2005, p. 405) contextualises these perspectives, acknowledging that

[w]e cannot learn properly to value the gift of sexual love and so learn to be good and faithful lovers, until we learn to be good and faithful friends; we cannot be good and faithful friends until

we understand that our friendship with each other is fully established and perfected by our being made friends of God.

To illustrate how this meaning could possibly be further negotiated as part of an “embodied soul” spirituality for an era of virtuality and beyond anthropology, Lunceford (2009, p. 92) claims that “[o]ur views of the body, specifically as it relates to the soul, have implications for how we function sexually”. These accents, among others, would therefore be helpful in the process of reconsidering a comprehensive description of a pastoral anthropology for use in for example pastoral therapy models applicable to an era of virtuality. These travelling coordinates represent markers for ethical reflection on aspects that need to be thought through for the purposes of further research in pastoral care. The following observation by Lakoff and Johnson (1999, p. 566) may serve as a guideline for a possible formulation and articulation of such ethical reflections, and the implications thereof:

An embodied spirituality requires an aesthetic attitude to the world that is central to self-nurturance, to the nurturance of others, and to the nurturance of the world itself [...] It requires pleasure, joy in the bodily connection with earth and air, sea and sky, plants and animals – and the recognition that they are all more than human, more than any human could ever achieve. Embodied spirituality is more than spiritual experience. It is an ethical relationship to the physical world.

8. Conclusion: Disconnecting and re-connecting

Just as one has the option of disconnecting and reconnecting to the internet in establishing connectivity, the aim of the research was to document certain perspectives but also to open up some new possibilities for further research. The connection established through the research indicated that in the era of virtuality and beyond, new pastoral perspectives for a possible anthropology of singularity would be an imperative.

It would seem that the traditional anthropological understanding of what it means to be human needs to be revisited and adjusted in the light of technological advancements at various levels. This challenge is constantly increasing in the light of rapid technological advancement and its implications for the identity of humankind. Indeed, the *annus virtualis* (and beyond) will not only confront us with the question as to what it means to be human (Herzfeld, 2010), but also how to respond regarding a relevant pastoral understanding.

The value and the further development of this research, to my mind, lies in the (re)discovery of “the shared epistemic resources and problem-solving abilities of our various research strategies”, in which researchers – also in pastoral theology – receive the freedom to escape from “being the fideistic prisoners of these research traditions” (Van Huyssteen, 1998, p. 162). Therefore, in the re-evaluation of a possibly more spacious pastoral anthropology and spirituality in the *annus virtualis* and beyond, it seems necessary to enter “a safe kind of epistemological space” in order “to step beyond the limitations and boundaries of our own religious and disciplinary contexts” (Van Huyssteen, 1998, p. vxiii). In these perspectives, the accent falls on incarnating and moulding a particular view of human beings and their social relationships and contexts within a virtual world and beyond, asking questions about the “evolution of the soul” and the “evolution of the capacity for spirituality” (Russel, 2005, p. 337-338).

As stated earlier, in what might be a limitation with regard to formulating possible pastoral perspectives for anthropology of singularity, the possible scope of future technological accents is vast. Future research might indeed further explore specific domains of interest and their meaning for a pastoral anthropology in order to portray real life in true digital format.

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