

- During this web seminar, we will reflect together about our different digitization experiences and try to analyze them.

What did we gain ? What did we lose ? What has changed ?...

The aim of this short theological input is to open up lines of thinking for a theological understanding of our digitization experience. I will suggest a few biblical and theological inputs which hopefully could help us to read theologically what we experienced by using digital means in situations in which we were used to interact physically.

- First of all, what we experienced this past year makes me feel like Emmaus disciples (Luke 24,30-31). This, probably because, among the numerous things one cannot do via screens, one is to share a meal... :

*“ When Jesus was at the table with them, He took bread,
gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.
Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him,
and He disappeared from their sight. ”*

All along the walk with His two disciples, Jesus was discussing with them, but they didn't recognize Him ! And now that they recognize Him, He disappears !

Was Jesus there or not ? And if He was, how was He there ?

I often had this impression after a Zoom aperitif with my friends...

We can also think of Magdalena who doesn't recognize Jesus at first and wants to touch Him (John 20), or Thomas (John 21) who needs to see and touch to believe...

It seems to me that we all experienced that kind of situation with both a feeling of presence and the frustration of absence. An experience of situations when boundaries become blurred and fluid, between presence and absence. Like Emmaus' disciples, like Magdalena or Thomas, **are we called to believe that virtual, non-physical presence is equivalent or even better than a physical one ?**

- During this time of the COVID pandemics, we went through different periods : may be we started being lost, and then discovering with interest new methods, testing new technics with the beginner's curiosity. We then became more or less skilled using these tools, but soon we also discovered their limits...

We all know that attending a show, a concert, a lecture or a game via Internet is not the same than to be physically present in a stadium, a movie theater or a concert hall, sharing our emotions with other spectators we don't know but with whom we share sounds, movements, smells, etc. Similarly, watching paintings or sculptures in a museum amongst other

visitors cannot be the same experience as looking at masterpieces alone with a computer.

Of course, via screens distance barriers can be abolished, as we are currently experiencing. But at the same time, screens make our communication more difficult :

absent is the feeling of the bodies in the group, one miss looking each other eyes into eyes... and moreover one see oneself on the screen !

We all experienced that, and we all know that human communication is far more than exchanging words. Even into a single conversation via screens, we all know the amazing number of communication components which are lost compared to a “face to face” conversation.

On the other hand, we are well aware that Zoom or other Internet platforms helped us to preserve our professional or social networks during the pandemics... Teleworking even opened new efficient ways to work and to teach... and it offered opportunities to integrate new participants who could not have taken part in our exchanges without these tools.

But digitization of our world also excludes vulnerable people who don't have access to these tools, whether because of age, technical or cultural capacities, or financial means...

There is then also an ethical concern we must have, namely : « *not to lose any of these little ones...* » as Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew's gospel (Mt 18,14).

- An other theological issue is that Christianity is a religion of incarnation. And this is not only because “*the Logos became flesh*” (John 1).

As you know from the first pages of the Bible, God “created” the physical universe and declared it good (Gn 1). And the second chapter tells us that mankind was created by God with clay.

Of course, we know that this a mythological way of speaking, but it tells us that from the Bible point of view the material world, our flesh, our physical life are seen as positive. Even with their limits.

And the way we deal with these limits is the spiritual question amongst all ! Sometime we say «we have a body», but indeed we are our body.

Now, in the official discourses, in the media, in the advertisements, we hear regularly praised the huge benefits offered by the digitization, extending to more and more areas.

As you know, less and less aspects of our life escape from this digitization, which invades all aspects of life, art, health, intimacy, up to areas that we thought being outside this shift.

For instance, we can think of translation from a language to another, which has made tremendous progress, or think of automatic writing up of newspaper articles. Why not soon an automatic writing up of the Sunday preach on demand ? Using an algorithm that would generate spiritual meditations according to criteria chosen by the client user ?

Most of the time, these promises of technological prowess go with a well understandable enthusiasm, but it also go with a less understandable absence of a critical distance.

More generally, the enthusiasm for the improperly called “artificial intelligence”, or even the enthusiasm for the transhumanist dream, leads some people to the expectation of the possibility to download one’s mind in the “Cloud” !

Without going up to this extremity, behind the concept of digitization, lies often the idea that it allows a better and less ambiguous communication, a more efficient artificial reflection to solve problems, and a better memory. These kind of expectations towards digitization often ignores that human reasoning and communication, with their complexity cannot be reduced to algorithms. Indeed, we think differently because our mind is incarnated in a body with its capacities and its limits. Our language is not only a transparent string of computer code ; its creativity and its ambiguities constitute its richness and it open up the field of interpretations. Similarly our memory doesn’t only stores data, but organizes and continuously processes them according to the events in our physical and spiritual life.

When we communicate with each other, we don’t only share ideas, we also share our humanity because we aren’t “pure spirits”. In other words, our thoughts are intrinsically interconnected to our bodily existence because we are made of flesh.

- These considerations evoke for me the “Gnosis”, a very ancient deviant current that, in Antiquity, Christianity shared with Judaism and other Mediterranean religions. Gnosis spread in the Mediterranean region in the first centuries of our era, at the same time as the Christian movement.

Gnosticism can be seen as mystical radicalization of Platonism or more precisely, Neoplatonism, which was very fashionable at that time. Neoplatonism undervalued the material world and the physical body. The human soul was considered as a divine spark, prisoner of a material body from which the only hope was to free itself to be able to reach the immaterial divine world which has generated it.

This conception has unfortunately widely contaminated the classical Christianity which developed in the first centuries with the belief in a supposed immortality of the soul.

Gnosis goes even further : The common belief of the numerous Gnosis variations is that the mean of salvation of the poor soul trying to free itself from its bodily prison, is ‘The Knowledge’. Hence, the name “Gnosis”, which means knowledge in Greek. The idea being that, through knowledge of esoteric mysteries, reserved to initiates, the believer would allow his soul to rise from one level to another through the skies. Some Gnosis have seven levels to reach the sky, but others can have as many as 365. One floor per day in a year! Accordingly, salvation is conceived as an escape from the material world.

In some gnostic texts, such as Judas' Gospel (Coptic manuscript 2nd/3rd c. restored at Bodmer Foundation in Geneva), the god of the other disciples than Judas (i.e. the Christians of the Great Church) is "the god of the Old Testament". He is a bad and inferior demiurge that had created the physical world. Indeed, in the gnostic perspective, only a nasty god could have created the material world.

Such a conception is radically opposite to the conception and to the anthropology of the Bible, where Creation, in its materiality, is declared good by the Creator (Gn 1).

- This brief introduction about a spiritual movement of the first centuries of our era and its weird mythology may seem inadequate for a webinar on digitization explosion in this beginning of the 21st century. However, you surely have understood what is my purpose in talking about Gnosticism.

My theological question would then be :

Beyond the fact that digitization indeed allows to do many things that were impossible before, is the fascination, and the quasi general and uncritical enthusiasm for digitization, the expression of a modern Gnosis ? A Gnosis that would seek the solution to humanity's many problems in a general dematerialization of human activities ?

Like a kind of a technological salvation through the virtual. A virtual using technologies –it should be said– technologies which are not so virtual nor dematerialized as one want us to think !

Is there not in this the refusal to accept our human finitude, that we share with all creatures ?

Of course, the wish to overcome this finitude has been the engine of many human progresses, and this is a good thing if these progresses are shared for everyone's good. And digitization is surely one of these progresses that must be shared.

However, as Christians and faithful to a God who has come to meet us "in the flesh", at the heart of human finitude, it is our responsibility to be vigilant towards fantasies of omnipotence and of full control that may be hidden in the technological promises of the digitization and more broadly of the convergence of NBIC (the acronym for the fields of Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information technology and Cognitive science).

Isn't it a dream very close to what Genesis presents in a mythical way as the promise of the snake, the dream of becoming like gods (Gn 3), or, in the New Testament, of becoming almighty, such as it is written in the episode of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness (Mt 4//) ?

To conclude : When using these apparently all-powerful digital tools, our question shouldn't be "how to become more powerful ?" But "how to become more human ?"