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Computer Mediated Communication and Spiritual Experience: On-line Discussion of the Numinous

by

Andrea Marie Matishak

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ABSTRACT

This thesis asks the question: what is the nature of the experience of spirituality in a computer mediated context? Both communications history discourse and phenomenological discourse enables a thorough analysis of this communication-based experience. The focus is both on the historical mediation of spiritual experience as well as the contemporary context for computer based culture. By tracing the historical mediation of spirituality, investigating the context within which computer mediation occurs, and focusing on a case study of a computer mediated discussion group, the intersection of computer mediated and spirituality is shown to be linked by social interaction. While social interaction in the newsgroup context is predominantly characterized by dischord, possibilities for true spiritual enlightenment do exist within the parameters of discursive consciousness.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my son, Davis. Maybe someday you will read it and laugh at how out-of-date it is.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

> [T]he numinous experience of the holy is present in virtually all cultures. People around the world report a sense of awe and wonder in the presence of powers that seem to transcend the human. The mystical experience of union with all things also has roots in preliterate cultures, and the meditative practices that encourage it are found in many cultures.
>
> Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*[1]

Computer technology has begun to permeate almost every aspect of life in the Western world. The spiritual realm is one area that seemingly would be resistant to the application and effects of such technology. In reality, computer technology and elements of spirituality have been intimately connected from the beginning of the computer age. From the earliest moments of computer technology, where one of the first "Internet" conferences had the epigram *"We are as gods and might as well get good at it."* [2] as their motto, to the naming of computer programs, to the use of spiritual themes to sell hardware, the creators and users of computer and information technology systems (CITS) have both revered this technology and in some cases, invested it with spiritual significance. Can computer technology, however, mediate "the numinous experience of the holy"? (Barbour, 1997, p. 265).

While notions of spirituality have certainly affected computer-based culture (cyberculture), it is more difficult to determine how CITS is influencing both individual spirituality and institutional religion. Basically, CITS allow for new or modified methods of communication. Therefore, observing these evolving communication patterns provides clues as to how other spheres of life might be affected.

1.1 Examples of Religion and Spirituality on the Internet

The experience of spirituality, mediated by CITS is manifested in various ways. At the broadest level, people use this technology as a tool to further their existing religious beliefs. For example, many evangelical churches use both television and the Internet as a way to advertise the "Word". By contrast, certain cyber subcultures believe that CITS are actually a conduit for religious experience. Dery (1996), who calls this type of spiritual interaction*Technopaganism*, recounts a story of a person who channeled energy through her computer, modem and phones lines into a friend's computer, healing the friend of a seizure (pp. 60-61). At the most superficial level, the spiritualization of CITS is fetishized, for example, by fostering religious sentiment to influence people to buy a product. IBM and Microsoft's advertisements feature everyone from Buddhist monks to Catholic priests in awe of this technology.

It is difficult to generalize this confluence of the theological and mechanical to one organic phenomenon because it is manifested in so many different ways. One of the most prevalent manifestations of spirituality on the

Internet is the mythological and religious rhetoric used in cybercultural discourse. Computer programs are named after religious mythological figures such as "daemons" and "avatars".[3] CITS give people the sense that they themselves have god-like powers. Cyber-wizards can create artificial intelligences and virtual worlds. Technological determinists believe that the technology has a certain inherent power because it apparently binds together lonely people into supportive communities, assists and improves the body through cybernetics, and predicts and calculates with an accuracy far beyond most human capabilities.

Computer culture discourse raises questions of eschatological importance that may have repercussions for spirituality. For example, this discourse asks whether life can exist in electronic form: in the same way that an artist lives on through their art, technology could conceivably record the essence of a person's thoughts and actions for eternity. Research is already being conducted on the possibility of implanting a memory chip in the brain that will do just that. In the area of artificial intelligence research, the possibility that the human brain could be "outperformed" by a computer poses serious problems for religious beliefs that see mankind as the pinnacle of creation. Finally, beliefs that implicate computer technology in the fulfillment of religious prophecy — for example, Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ — are potentially harmful to our sense of control over our technology as well as a tool for fear-mongering.

1.2 The Parameters of Discussion

Computer technology is ubiquitous in our society, therefore it is important to identify what people are actually believing and experiencing as a result of this technology and why. It is simple enough to document web sites with religious or spiritual content. What is not clear, however, is whether the use of computer technology is affecting spirituality itself. By placing the question within the context of history, this thesis follows the example of communications history scholars that have traced the co-evolution of religious institutions and communications technology. This thesis attempts to deepen the communications history approach, however, by adopting a phenomenological framework that can help answer the question: what is the nature of the experience of spirituality in a computer mediated context?

Thus, the central concerns focus on experience, mediation, spirituality and communication. This thesis examines how computer technology could possibly mediate individual spirituality, within a group experience. This will be achieved by first situating the topic within the relevant theoretical discourse: communications history and phenomenology. This entails an analysis of the literature, the scholars, the history and the issues that might illuminate this area of inquiry. This is followed by a case study that observes communication patterns on a newsgroup that discusses Christianity. Finally, the case study is analyzed in light of the thesis' theoretical frameworks and conclusions are drawn regarding possible implications.

1.3 Definitions

An obvious starting point in answering the research question is to define my terms of reference. These particular definitions are based on my understanding of the research question — what is the nature of the experience of spirituality in a computer mediated context — and are formulated with regard to answering that question. Therefore, the terms "experience", "spirituality" and "computer mediation" will be further explicated here.

1.3.1 Experience as a Phenomenological Concept

"Phenomenological" experience is taken simply to mean "lived experience." It can also be understood as "authentic" or "conscious" experience. Phenomenology, as first formulated by Edmund Husserl, attempts to determine the nature of universal being: how each individual experiences an external reality without the ability to share in the reality of the Other. Later scholars — Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Schutz — reformulated Husserl's theories in terms of language, space/time, existence and social interaction. Other important phenomenological terms for this thesis are *consciousness*, the *lifeworld*, and *stocks of knowledge*. These terms will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

1.3.2 Definitions of Spirituality

Religious notions and beliefs pertain specifically to ideas and feelings about human existence and purpose that are based on faith observances rather than scientific rationality or testability. Religious or spiritual actions are motivated

by the desire to reach a "higher" level of consciousness than the physical, palpable realm of everyday existence.

I do not want to participate in the theological debate that attempts to define religion and religious concepts. Edwards (1972) points out the difficulty of formulating definitions for the term "religion" as they inevitably work on an ideological and persuasive level. While my approach is a phenomenological one, it does not assume a phenomenology of religion definition as formulated by Paul Tillich:

> Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life (p. 7).

Edwards (1972) points out that Tillich's definition is broad enough to include atheism. This definition, however, might be useful to keep in mind while analyzing what is taking place on the Internet, and to a greater extent in our culture, where "ultimate concerns" can be golf, sex, or making money.

Following Barbour (1990), a more useful way of understanding religion for this thesis is that "authentic religious belief must always be seen in the context of the life of the religious community and in relation to the goal of personal transformation" (p. 23). The importance of defining religion as both an individual and a communal experience is vital in determining the phenomenological ground of spirituality.

My definition will focus on the experience of *individual* spirituality. The distinction between spirituality and religion is here defined as the difference between the micro and macro level, or the individual versus the institutional. The term *religion* refers to the religious community: where people practice their faith, their commonly-held beliefs, their form of leadership. *Spirituality* refers to the phenomenological *experience* of religion that is specific to individuals. Following Giddens, this thesis proposes that the two realms are linked by *social interaction.* Thus, both the subjective and the intersubjective, individual and group processes are important to understanding how social interaction plays a part in the computer mediated experience of spirituality.

1.3.3 Computer Mediation

Mediation, in this thesis, refers to the interface, or communicational mode, required for meaningful interaction. Short of telepathy, all communication is mediated by *something*: whether, language, signs, the newspaper or a telephone. Communications media impose their own parameters on the experience of communication. For example, medium theorists such as Meyrowitz (1985), have pointed out that "electronic media have altered the significance of time and space for social interaction" (p. vii). While McLuhan's aphorism that "the medium is the message" is dubious, his theory served to advertise the notion that the medium is sometimes as important as the message that is being conveyed. For this thesis the role of

computer mediation is paramount to understanding what is taking place in this relatively new dialogical venue.

1.4 Significance and Scoping

1.4.1 Significance

The significance of this research has already been intimated: changes in how we communicate may ultimately influence our spiritual beliefs and religious practices. Technological change has had important effects on religious life and spiritual belief throughout the ages. From the role that the medieval scriptorium played in preserving knowledge, to the massive influence that the printing press had on religion and religious beliefs, religious groups have often embraced the technologies available to them in order to communicate their spirituality.

For the moment, changes are noticeable only in fringe religious belief with the creation of new belief systems such as Technopaganism. The power of this medium should not be underestimated, however. The Heaven's Gate Cult, which ended in mass suicide at Rancho, Santa Fe, grew out of a group of computer technicians and programmers that believed technology to be organic to their belief system. Computer mediated communication has also raised a host of problems for the Church of Scientology whose "secret" doctrines were revealed by a member on the Internet. Finally, even religious groups that have been regarded as technologically conservative are participating in the computerized networking movement evidenced by the Vatican's website.

Religious change also has repercussions for ethical behaviour, which in turn affects society as a whole. At the same time, new technologies often prompt moral and ethical analysis. Today, computers present both challenges and opportunities for the physical and spiritual betterment of mankind. It is too early, however, to determine whether the interpenetration of computer technology and spirituality will also affect ethical sensibilities.

We are also witnessing a change in the function and foundation of religion. According to Habermas, the "desacralization of the lifeworld" in the West has been in process since the Renaissance. With the development of an economic marketplace we have seen a corresponding marketplace of beliefs that has produced a culture devoid of religious unification. Indeed, the fetishization of religious belief has both benefitted from and contributed to the growing religious pluralism of the West by offering products promising to assist those floundering in a sea of spiritual questions and choices, thus devaluing our sense of the sacred.

From a political perspective, the hegemony of Christianity is on the decline in the West. While this topic is beyond the range of my thesis, the realization that this belief system is in a "defensive position" has potentially important repercussions for Western culture and society. The situation of "being on the defensive" is also evident at the level of individual experience, where individual Christians find their faith condemned by the media and criticized by mainstream culture.

Finally, this research topic has academic importance because of the lack of reasoned inquiry into how electronic technologies and spirituality interconnect. In addition, this methodological approach, combining the two theoretical perspectives of communications history and phenomenology avoids the flaw of Innis and McLuhan who ignored the role of human agency in the use of those technologies and the intersubjective nature of communication.

1.4.2 Scoping

The research question situates my thesis within a long history of communication research that has attempted to understand the relationship between communications media and historical change. Various scholars have shown (Eisenstein, 1979; Innis, 1951; McLuhan, 1964, 1965; Ong, 1982; & Weber, 1930) how the printing press helped instigate the last great revolution in religious thought and experience. The printing of the Bible changed religious practice from a point-to-mass collective experience to an individual, interior experience. Before the printing press made widespread distribution possible, the Word of God passed through a long chain of mediation before it reached the Faithful (God to Prophets/Apostles to Bible to Priests to People). If we are indeed witnessing another communications revolution in the form of convergence and hypermedia, all spheres of life will be affected. This nascent spiritualization of CITS may offer clues as to how widespread use of CITS might eventually affect spiritual epistemology.

Communications history — or medium theory — does not "push the envelope" far enough, however. Phenomenology allows me to investigate the nature of communication between believers while *bracketing* the issue of religious belief itself. Following Husserl, phenomenological inquiry seeks to understand the nature of experience beyond mere empirical observation. A phenomenological approach was chosen as the appropriate theoretical orientation for the thesis because of the "open-minded" premise upon which it is built. This premise is that "phenomenologists make no assumptions about what is real or is not real; they rather begin with the content of consciousness — whatever that may be — as valid for investigation" (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990, p. 4). Considering that my topic was highly amorphous, subjective and non-traditional, I believe that the phenomenological position is sufficiently inclusive while remaining intellectually rigorous. For this reason, my methodology involves both personal participation with the phenomenon of spiritualization and observation based on the assumption of individual agency.

As consciousness is a central concern of phenomenology, I will also investigate the claim that cyberspace offers "a new venue for consciousness". This entails looking at the point where cyberculture — the subculture that has built up around computer technology — and spirituality intersect. In addition, the analysis of cyberculture permits an investigation of the "mythology" of spiritualization prevalent on the Internet. Finally, an introduction to cyberculture provides context for my case study, serving to

provide some insight into the lifeworlds of those participating in the discussion group.

Given the relative novelty of using computers for religious or spiritual purposes, this analysis is mostly apodictic: it seeks to illuminate one possible example of a computer mediated experience. Therefore, I have chosen a case study that allows me to observe a Usenet discussion group (or newsgroup) that discusses Christianity. This qualitative methodology corresponds to the phenomenological framework that privileges individual agency, the validity of experience and communication. A Christian newsgroup was chosen over another because of my relative familiarity with this topic. In addition, several scholars are already studying the formation of new religions on the Net (Brasher, 1996; Kinney, 1997; and O'Leary, 1996). Finally, although the subject of the discussion group is Christianity, the participants come from a range of religious backgrounds. This is an important aspect of how the technology enables communication across space, time and institutional boundaries.

As with any interdisciplinary research, a range of knowledge disciplines and theories could form the basis for discussion. It must be acknowledged that Postmodern theory, social systems theory, information society theory and process theology could all have provided a lens through which to observe the subject area. In addition, the distinction between a religious studies approach and a theological approach must be emphasized. If anything, my parameters would include the former while avoiding the latter where possible. While the newsgroup certainly discusses theological issues, my perspective focuses

more on sociological interest (religious studies) concerned with the social processes taking place rather than a theological interest concerned with doctrine, ethics, or morality. Above all, however, I attempt to concentrate on communication processes and issues.

1.5 Method of Inquiry

1.5.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this thesis takes direction from both phenomenology and communications history. The communications history perspective situates the thesis within a discourse that investigates the relationship between technological mediation of communication and social change. Scholars such as Elizabeth Eisenstein — who produced a detailed analysis of literary history centered around the time of the printing press — have proved that there is a connection between technological mediation, interaction and historical change. This perspective is the starting point for this thesis. Given that I am investigating a process that is still taking place, and individual opinion is still accessible, I have chosen to deepen this analysis with the application of phenomenological theory which allows me to analyze interaction at the level of individual agency.

The phenomenological orientation of this thesis is informed by the work of Alfred Schutz whose concept of "the lifeworld as the symbolically mediated background of shared meaning and the ground of social action" forms the focus for my analysis.[4] Anthony Giddens' structuration theory extended Schutz's concepts on the subjective level, while Giddens' macro theory

demonstrated how communications media are particularly powerful disembedding mechanisms because they provide "*guarantees* of expectations across distanciated time-space" and free communication from the constraints of place through the telephone, modem, television and radio (Giddens, 1990, p. 32). Thus, Giddens' ideas link back to the role of mediation on both the micro and the macro level making them particularly useful for this thesis. The work of Habermas (1984, 1990) also assists in making connections between individual communication processes and overarching systemic processes via his model of the "desacralization of the lifeworld." Habermas (1990) is also helpful in understanding how the subject negotiates crises.

1.5.2 Methodology

The phenomenological orientation used to analyze my subject necessitates a methodological approach that places experience at the centre of inquiry. For this reason, a qualitative research approach based on ethnomethodologically informed observation of social agents in interaction is the obvious methodological choice.[5] My method involves aspects of conversational analysis without the strict empirical focus. The intent is to provide some ground or examples to which a phenomenological analysis can be applied. In this sense, my methodology falls between the purely speculative focus of phenomenological theory (i.e. Schutz, Giddens) and the more empirical analysis of conversations as practiced by Goffman (1981) or Sacks (1984).

Observing the conversation of the discussion group enabled me to engage — at least superficially — with the lifeworlds of people who are participating in

this newsgroup, without affecting the communication processes taking place. My decision to observe rather than participate in the discussion is designed to avoid the possibility of bias entering the conversation and to preserve feelings of trust among members. Knowing that I am "watching" might affect how group members participate.

It must be noted that my decision to study this group in particular came as a result of research conducted over several months that included observing a number of newsgroups and considerable "surfing" of the Internet to find websites with religious or spiritual content. This search led me to what I considered to be both a representative experience as well as one that exhibited what Giddens has called "discursive consciousness." My choice will be explained further in Chapter Five.

1.5.3 Chapter Breakdown

Chapter Two is an introduction to the theories of communications history and phenomenology. Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan are highlighted as first generation theorists while Walter Ong, and Elizabeth Eisenstein are examples of second generation theorists. This is followed by a discussion of phenomenology, its roots and main proponents. These proponents include Alfred Schutz and Anthony Giddens, and Jurgen Habermas.

Chapter Three presents three forms of how spiritual experience can be said to be "mediated". First, I discuss how communication technologies have mediated spiritual experience through history — i.e. the Bible, the radio and

television — and how this mediation has affected individuals and institutions. Second, the role of symbols and signs in the mediation of spirituality is investigated. The third form involves the intersubjective process of mediation between people.

Chapter Four provides an introduction to the world of cyberculture focusing on the point where computer technology and spirituality meet. Central issues of cybercultural discourse are important to this thesis because of the claims being made regarding spiritual evolution. In addition, this look at cyberculture provides some context for understanding the lifeworlds of those participating in Internet discussion.

Chapter Five presents the findings from my case study. Part One includes a discussion of the group characteristics and the content of discussion. Part Two presents the analysis of the case study evaluated in terms of phenomenological theory and medium theory.

Chapter Six makes conclusions regarding the nature of computer mediated communication and spiritual experience and proposes some directions for future study.

A study of computer mediated communication and spiritual experience is both a pertinent and worthwhile investigation. Understanding how computer mediation affects communication processes might help explain how computer technology in general is implicated in contemporary social

change. The notion of spiritual experience, in particular, is a contentious issue both in terms of defining individual spiritual fulfillment and in terms of the greater social uncertainty regarding what the Millennium might bring. While the territory might be daunting — somewhat following in the footsteps of great scholars such as Husserl, Weber, McLuhan and Innis — the steps I take are guided by a deep and broad philosophical and historical heritage.

CHAPTER TWO

The Theoretical Frameworks: Communications History and Phenomenology

> In the beginning was the Word:
> the Word was with God
> and the Word was God.
>
> John 1: 1-2, The New Jerusalem Bible

In the beginning was the Word and after a while came the computer.[6] For some, the computer itself has become a holy tool: having wondrous properties, and promising many things. Religious use of communication tools is not a new thing, however. Every communication media from writing on clay tablets, through to script, print, radio, television and most recently the computer has been used to communicate a religious message or expedite a spiritual quest.

This chapter introduces the theoretical frameworks required to understand the relationship between communications media and spirituality from both an historical and experiential point of view. Put another way, the discussion of history, spirituality and mediation must first be framed within the discourses of communications history and phenomenology. This is important to understand how spiritual experience is mediated by communications technology both historically and today. This discussion

begins with an overview of communications history, tracing its roots and discussing its main proponents: Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong and Elizabeth Eisenstein.[7] A brief introduction to phenomenological concepts follows. This introduction will highlight the theories of Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, Jurgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens. The chapter will conclude with an explanation of how the two theoretical frameworks can cooperate in a research context.

While communication history and phenomenology may not seem initially to be compatible approaches, my intent is to demonstrate how the communications history perspective can be "deepened" through the application of phenomenological concepts. There are some existing linkages between the two discourses: for example, the focus on shifts in "consciousness" in communications history — put forth by McLuhan and Ong — can be seen as having phenomenological overtones. Combining these two perspectives will enable a better understanding of what it means to mediate spiritual experience. At the same time, history is an essential element in the formation of the "lifeworld." My project would be incomplete without an understanding of this historical dimension.

2.1 Communications History

The body of literature sometimes called, "communication history", "medium theory" (Meyrowitz, 1994), or "transformation theory" is a relatively new way of looking at the role of technology and communications in the shaping of culture. Jeffrey (1989) defines the communication history perspective as "the

intersection of culture and technology in social organization" (p. 3). This perspective is characterized by observation of trends and historical analysis, and often defines communication technology as "evolutionary", if not "revolutionary." The force behind the discourse is best understood as the evaluation of change. The communication history equation proposes that each new communication technology shapes cultural change. Heyer (1988) agrees that communication history theorists "are concerned with some aspect of the role that communication (as a process) and communications (as information technology) have played in historical change" (p. x).

Communication history is particularly important to this thesis as it provides a framework for the analysis of the role of communications technology in social change. To understand how this literature compliments my project I will reveal its roots, trace its history, and introduce the concepts put forth by its main players. Innis and McLuhan form what Meyrowitz (1994) calls the "first generation" historians/theorists, while Ong and Eisenstein are part of the "second generation." During this review, I will keep in mind the two sides of the communication history point of view. Communication history can be studied from the point of view of society, culture and institutions. In contrast, the same media can be evaluated from the point of view of individual consciousness, interaction and experience.

2.1.1 Origins of Communications History

Communications history can be subsumed under the larger body of literature that studies technology and social change in general. As a branch of this body of literature, communications history concentrates specifically on technologies used to transmit messages beginning with language itself and extending to virtual reality.

Heyer (1988) points out that despite what most communication scholars believe, "communications/history inquiry has been part of Western European thought since at least the eighteenth century" (p. xiii). Thinkers such as Kant and Rousseau, Marx and Tylor laid the foundations for Innis and McLuhan. Historical analysis of communications technology came from a range of disciplines as well. Philosophy, economics and anthropology provided material for communications history themes.

Several important studies in the early part of the twentieth century formed the foundation of communication history theory. Milman Parry's thesis that the Homeric Myths actually had their beginnings as oral epic poems caused a tremendous stir in literary and historical circles. His analysis of Greek texts raised awareness about how narrative is constructed in oral versus literate cultures. Eric Havelock's study *Preface to Plato* examined the effects of the alphabet on classical Greece, that turned Greek culture from an oral one, into the most admired of literate cultures. One of the earliest linguistic contributions to communications history came to be known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: *that language is not a neutral vehicle for transmitting*

information and experience, rather it encodes it in very specific ways, which differ from one group of speakers to the next (Heyer, 1988, pp. 137-38). H. J. Chaytor (1945) contributed the ideas that the invention of printing created a new relationship to text; that the idea of an author led to the concept of intellectual property; and that writing in the vernacular gave rise to nationalism.[8]

Several other knowledge domains, typically considered to be outside the realm of communication *per se*, also contributed to what was to become a certain way of understanding communication, technology and change. Gordon Childe, an archeologist, was among the first to recognize the importance of communication technologies.[9] Thorstein Veblen (1914) was an economist who "challenged the notion that economic laws were universal" (Czitrom, 1982, pp. 149-50). Goody and Watt followed in Childe's footsteps with their studies of oral societies.[10] Lewis Mumford, a sort of self-made academic and critic of technological progress, acknowledged the role of communication technologies, but focused more on technology in general.[11]

Drawing from many of these scholars, communications history, as developed by Innis and then McLuhan, first took shape as a distinctively Canadian perspective (Czitrom, 1982). Working out of the University of Toronto, their intellectual contribution to communication studies came to be known as the Toronto School.

2.1.2 The First Generation

Innis and McLuhan form what Meyrowitz calls the "first generation" of medium theorists. Their analyses focused on communications media itself, rather than the content of communication. They both took a distinctively 'Romantic' approach to history: interested in moments of transition or abrupt change, and somewhat nostalgic for the "paradise lost" of oral cultures (Theall, 1995, 1996). These first generation medium theorists laid the foundation for other scholars wishing to study communication media from a number of perspectives. Innis's historical perspective focused on the influence of technology at the level of society and institutions. McLuhan's approach focused on the level of the individual and sensory transformation.

Harold Innis

The accepted originator of communications history theory is Harold Innis. Heyer (1988) calls him "the cartographer of the history of communications" (p. 168). Innis' perspective is almost exclusively 'macro-level' which focuses on cross-cultural generalizations and large-scale pattern identification (Meyrowitz, 1994, p. 70). His macro-historical approach maps out how communications technologies play a role in social and political power struggles.

Innis' basic thesis is that all communication media are biased towards either time or space. Depending on the dominant mode of communication, the bias will *facilitate* the nature of that society's culture.[12] Time-biased media, such as hieroglyphics carved in stone, are difficult to transport and last a long time.

They result in small, stable societies that value tradition and are slow to change. Early Egyptian society followed this pattern. The inflexibility of these societies make them susceptible to challenge by space-biased media. Space-biased media are easy to transport and change, such as writing on papyrus or paper, and lead to large empires. The result is greater social instability because of the ability of more flexible forms of communication to influence change. The Roman empire was an example of a space-biased society.

Another one of Innis' key themes in the unfolding of history is the idea of "balance." He (1951) attempted to show that "in Western civilization a stable society is dependent on an appreciation of a proper balance between the concepts of space and time" (p. 64). He believed that one way to ensure balance was through oral communication. While McLuhan commended the oral tradition because of its "aural" quality, Innis believed that the importance of oral communication lay in its ability to prevent *monopolies of knowledge* from forming.[13] Oral communication, according to Innis, "involves personal contact and a consideration of the feelings of others" thus overcoming tyrannical tendencies (1951, p. 191). Monopolies formed when communication technologies enabled a particular group to hoard the knowledge of that society.[14] If knowledge was written down it became an object to be owned rather than shared. Whoever owned that knowledge could prevent others from having access and this gave the owners power. The imposition of technological means of communication is unbalancing because communication becomes removed, preserved and owned. Heyer (1988) points out, however, that Innis' interpretation of the oral is somewhat

idealized because inequalities of wealth and power were still typical in oral societies (p. 118).

Innis' work is important to this thesis because it laid the groundwork for looking at communications technologies from a dialectical point of view. His revelations permit historical comparisons of the use and effects of communication technologies. Although his theory was never meant to be a forecasting device, it does aid in understanding the present and anticipating what is to come.

Both Carey (1975) and Czitrom (1982) believe that Innis' propositions led to the conclusion that changes in communication affect "the structure of consciousness" (Carey, 1975, p. 35). While his ideas may have inspired this conclusion, Innis did not focus his efforts on the transformation of consciousness. McLuhan, Ong and the second generation medium theorists were to speculate in this direction.

Marshall McLuhan

While still classified as a "first generation medium theorist," McLuhan's focus shifts in the direction of individual sensory experience and cognition. Three aspects of McLuhan's legacy are important to this thesis. First, his style and popular appeal helped to advertise the communications history approach. Indeed, it was his charisma and convincing (and confusing) eloquence that has helped build many of the myths of cyberculture (see Chapter Four). Secondly, his notion that "the medium is the message"

offered an alternative to "effects" research, revolutionizing how communication was studied. Finally, his ideas regarding how perception and consciousness are distorted and transformed by media technologies is important to our conception of technology, how we develop it and use it.

McLuhan still addressed the macro-historical, echoing many of Innis' themes, but his approach was far more speculative (Jeffrey, 1989). The past, the present and the future were all under his scrutiny. Like Innis, his ideas are not grounded in empirical research, or philosophical theory. Rather, he readily admitted that his "probes" were meant to illuminate and uncover an emerging phenomenon rather than to prove a theory or formulate a law.

Many of his speculations, however, seem to have come true in today's computer age. The Internet hastened the creation of a "global village" and his aphorism that "the medium is the message" is so often quoted as to have become *cliché*. Theall's (1995) answer to the question of why McLuhan's words have been so prophetic is that McLuhan was in touch with the Modernist artistic milieu of his time. Theall points out that artistic perception enables forecasting of the next era of cultural and social values (p. 22).

Interpretations of McLuhan's ideas and influence have been almost as controversial as McLuhan's ideas themselves. Jeffrey (1989) deems this catalytic effect to be one of McLuhan's best qualities. His popular appeal lay in his controversial and pithy "probes." A great deal of ink has been spent on

analyzing his style to determine what exactly made him into the respected analyst of his time and the popular icon he is today. McLuhan himself wrote about his style, calling it a "mosaic" approach, a "collage" and an "*essai concrete*" (Theall, 1971, p. xvi).

McLuhan popularized the notion that communications media are just as important as the message that is communicated. He saw technology, communication media in particular, as "extensions" of ourselves. These extensions amplify or distort our senses just as if they were physically connected to us. In this way, different media bias different senses. Historically, according to McLuhan, we have seen a shift from predominantly aural sensory reception, in oral societies, to visual reception, in writing and print-based societies. Because of this close relationship between media and our senses, media also produce psychological effects.

McLuhan believed that the computer revolution would "retribalize" our society by restoring the balance to our senses. Getting somewhat carried away—as he often did—McLuhan predicted that:

> The computer thus holds out the promise of a technologically engendered state of universal understanding and unity, a state of absorption in the logos that could knit mankind into one family and create a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace. This is the real use of the computer, not to expedite marketing or solve terrestrial -- and eventually galactic -- environments and energies. Psychic communal integration, made possible by the electronic media, could create the universality of consciousness foreseen by Dante when he predicted that men would continue as no more than broken fragments until they

> were unified into an inclusive consciousness. In a Christian sense, this is merely a new interpretation of the mystical body of Christ; and Christ, after all, is the ultimate extension of man. (Playboy Interview, pp. 130-131).

Statements like these have led several critics to scrutinize McLuhan's religious beliefs, searching for insight into his character and ideas. Jeffrey (1989) believes that McLuhan's conversion to Catholicism was a major reason why he felt himself a "superior outsider" (p. 7). This sense reinforced his ability to "pattern watch" as he felt himself removed from the observed situation. According to Kroker (1984), McLuhan's Catholicism was important because it

> provided him with an epistemological strategy that both gave him a privileged vantage-point on the processed world of technology and, in any event, drove him beyond literary studies to an historical exploration of technological media as the 'dynamic' of modern culture. The essential aspect of McLuhan's technological humanism is that he always remained a Catholic humanist in the Thomist tradition: one who brought to the study of technology and culture the more ancient Catholic hope that even in a world of despair (in our 'descent into the maelstrom' with Poe's drowning sailor) that a way out of the labyrinth could be found by bringing to fruition the 'reason' or 'epiphany' of technological society (p. 62).

This interpretation partially explains McLuhan's belief that "the computer thus holds out the promise of a technologically engendered state of universal understanding and unity" because McLuhan's perspective is unabashedly teleological (Playboy Interview, pp. 130-131). He believed that our technological advances meant not only economic progress, but possibly moral and social progress as well. Thomas Aquinas' theory of "Natural Prophecy"

influenced McLuhan to adopt "a reading of history and its relation to that virtual, momentary social text (the present) which is dynamic and always undergoing change"; thus leading him to "foresee a world where communication will be tactile, post-verbal, fully participatory and post-sensory" (Theall, 1991, p. 2). McLuhan's utopian hopefulness for the future of technology and the plight of mankind prompted Kroker to label McLuhan a "technological humanist". This aspect of McLuhan will be revisited in Chapter Four when he is compared with Pierre Tielhard de Chardin.

While communications history — in the works of McLuhan and Innis — presented a novel approach to both the study of history and the understanding of communication, the framework suffered from a number of flaws. First, this approach has been criticized for its technologically deterministic flavour. Communications media are seen to be causal factors in history. Related to this is the failure, as Meyrowitz (1994) points out, to provide a "detailed attempt to link this theoretical perspective [medium theory] with analyses of everyday social interaction" (p. 58). Innis virtually ignored the role of human agency in his work. McLuhan came closer to addressing this issue by maintaining that critical consciousness was possible whereby the individual is able to transcend "narcissus narcosis" in an act of agency. Another criticism is that Innis and McLuhan's method lacked engagement with their subject. Czitrom (1982) points out that although Innis undertook extensive primary research for his Canadian economics research, his history of communication relied almost exclusively on secondary sources (p. 155).[15] Likewise, McLuhan's failure is owing to the literary heritage he

chose to support his claims. McLuhan was influenced by the New Critics, whose literary criticism focused only on the text itself, rendering cultural, historical and other issues irrelevant. Theall (1971) rightly reveals that McLuhan's theories needed "a very strong base and a strong theoretical orientation" in order to achieve credence and credibility (pp. 204-205). Communications history methodology could be said to consist of the detached observation of events. This is the same criticism leveled at phenomenology as practiced by Husserl and Schutz. Their method consisted of philosophical contemplation alone.

2.1.3 The Second Generation

A number of theorists have addressed a particular aspect of communications history. This includes Stephen Kern (1983), who, following Innis' formulations of space and time, traced the cultural changes at the turn of the twentieth century; Walter Ong (1982), who originated the idea of secondary orality as a result of computer communication; Neil Postman (1986, 1993) who has researched the effects of mass media on socialization, behaviour and learning, as well as the relationship between computer technology and community; J. David Bolter (1991) and George P. Landow (1992) who explored the changing notions of text in the electronic age[16]; Michael Heim (1993) who focused on "the metaphysics of virtual reality"; and Joshua Meyrowitz (1984) who formulated the distinction between first and second generation medium theory because:

> [e]veryday behaviour is susceptible to change by new media of communication because social roles are inextricably tied into social

> communication. Social identity does not rest in people, but in a network of social relations (p. 58).

Other scholars, although not explicitly communications historians or medium theorists, make communications history ideas implicit in their work. Almost all are united in their explicit or intimated opinion that changes in communication technology result in changes in consciousness. Communications history in the hands of many of the second generation theorists, becomes *transformation theory.*

In this section, I will investigate two "second generation" theorists Walter Ong and Elizabeth Eisenstein.[17] The works of Ong and Eisenstein were chosen in particular to further probe the relationship between mediation and spirituality. Ong's notion of secondary orality is important to computer mediated communication; while Eisenstein's scholarship on the printing press provides a pertinent example of an historical period that has similarities to our computer age.

Walter Ong

Walter Ong's (1982) work *Orality and Literacy :The Technologizing of the Word* explores the relationship between orality and literacy through the ages and between cultures. He proposes a "cultural-cognitive model" of how an oral society versus a literate society thinks, learns and functions. Ong's work is linked theoretically to McLuhan's because both proposed a connection between communication media, sensory perception and cognition. Ong elaborates on how McLuhan's "retribalizing effect" brought about by

electronic media — electronic writing especially — might indeed be possible from a cognitive point of view. He calls this possibility "secondary orality."

Ong conceptualizes various traits that result from an oral or literate culture. The "psychodynamics of orality" produce cultures that prioritize sound, are participatory, slow to change, and "close to the human lifeworld" (p.42). He contrasts the sound-filled experience of an oral communication mode with the sterile experience of text:

> Writing fosters abstraction that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle (1982, p. 43-44).

In an oral culture, ideas and opinions must be kept "alive" by frequent repetition for preservation. Ong seems to be implying that, in a literate culture, knowledge is not contested because it is not experienced directly. On the contrary, it would seem that the pursuit of knowledge becomes a more dynamic process in a textual culture where ideas can be scrutinized and tested. Dialogue and discussion continues in a literate world both in oral conversation and textual discourse.

In a like manner, Ong points out the power of orality, however, it is not just within oral societies that the spoken word is powerful (Pilotta and Mickunas, 1990; Eliade, 1959). The spoken word is the basic unit of intersubjectivity. Whether as a vestige of history, or as an element of the collective

unconscious, it also caries spiritual power as a representation of being. Ong (1982) points out that:

> The interiorizing force of the oral word relates in a special way to the sacral, to the ultimate concerns of existence. In more religions the spoken word functions integrally in ceremonial and devotional life. Eventually in the larger world religions sacred texts develop, too, in which the sense of the sacral is attached also to the written word (p. 74).

The introduction to this chapter refers to the power of words. Indeed, it is the "spoken" word that wields the most power in the predominantly oral culture into which Jesus was born. Even though these words have been written down, they retain the power bestowed by the original speaker. The Bible, to believers, is not in the same category as other books because it is divinely inspired, the word of God. Ong (1982) further elaborates the significance of the oral word and the sacred:

> In Christianity [...] God is thought of always as 'speaking' to human beings, not as writing to them. The orality of the mindset in the Biblical text, even in its epistolary sections, is overwhelming. The Hebrew *dabar*, which means word, means also event and thus refers directly to the spoken word. The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word (p. 74).

For this reason, one must be careful when making claims regarding how spirituality is affected by writing or printing— indeed any communication media. One cannot generalize about a book, for example, if that book is

believed to be sacred. The sanctity of the text adds a level of complexity to how it is used and perceived by believers.

In addition, Ong's work has contributed to the perception that oral modes of communication are better, because of the kind of consciousness orality produces, which has become an important myth of our time. It may be that oral modes of communication are "better", but not necessarily because of the sort of consciousness orality produces. This is the myth of orality that equates oral cultures with a sort of before the Fall existence. Oral utterances continue to be the standard against which all other mediation is measured.

Ong's notion of secondary orality is seen as an improvement over the linear, abstract, analytical and objective culture that literacy produces, as it "has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas [...] but it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print" (Ong, 1983, p. 136). This last characteristic differentiates Ong's notion from McLuhan's, because Ong's secondary orality is still very much a literate phase; while McLuhan's "retribalization" refers more to new forms of mediation such as television. Another difference is identified by Heim (1993) who comments that McLuhan's notion of a "retribalizing effect":

> lacks a poignant sense of loss or a feel for the trade-offs in finite historical transformations. Ong's version of cultural transformation has about it something of a grand Christian optimism, seeing in the

> global network [...] a way of reintegrating a fallen, fragmented humanity, creating a closer community (p. 69).

From the perspective of this project, Ong reminds us that the mediation of spiritual (Christian) experience begins with the spoken word. If indeed cognitive processes are altered by electronic media then Ong's work is important because his analysis provides valuable insight into how mediation from the spoken to the written to the electronic word take on different characteristics in the realm of the spiritual. Despite the many criticisms of Ong's theory, the above revelation remains central to this thesis.[18]

Elizabeth Eisenstein

While Ong's explanation of the shift form orality to literacy may lack substantiation, Elizabeth Eisenstein's thesis is backed by meticulous research. Eisenstein bases her study of the printing press mostly on intellectual history, however.[19] Her method is more akin to Innis' macro-level analysis, that investigates institutional change. Her thesis magnifies a portion of Innis' work. Ironically, it was McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that prompted her to write *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, because she felt that "symptoms of cultural crisis were being offered in the guise of diagnosis" (1983, p. x). Her main thesis is "how printing altered *written communication within the Commonwealth of Learning*" (Ibid, her emphasis, p. xiii). Her analysis of the printing press sheds considerable light on today's situation.

First, she maintains that the printing press, as *one* agent of change, had numerous and contradictory effects on western society[20]. Second, she questions McLuhan's postulation that the press instigated a movement from image culture to word culture. Third, her analysis of the institutional effects on religion proves how important the mediation of spiritual knowledge is in individual and institutional change. Fourth, she points out that the printing press brought the issue of textual mediation of God's word to the foreground. And finally, throughout she addresses the dialectic between science and religion and the contradictory uses and effects the printing press provided.

Eisenstein's scholarship confirms McLuhan's proposal regarding the printing revolution. She is careful to point out, however, that "print culture [is] *an* agent, not *the* agent, let alone *the only* agent, of change in Western Europe" (xiii); and reminds readers that "one cannot treat printing as just one among many elements in a complex causal nexus, for the communications shift transformed the nature of the causal nexus itself" (1983, p. 273). This conclusion must be kept in mind in the context of this thesis because the environment of change that surrounds spiritual experience cannot be explained by one or even a series of factors. The realization that *any* such analysis is infinitely complex is a caution to those who would simplify the processes taking place.

Eisenstein also disputes McLuhan's conclusion that the press instigated a movement "from image culture to word culture." She argues that the printing press "increased the function performed by images while reducing

those performed by words" (p. 37). Here she contrasts the scientific use of print with the religious use. Whereas scientific publishing relied increasingly on visual presentation of diagrams, maps, etc.; religious communication became increasingly textual. Initially, Protestantism was partly a reaction against the pictorial representation of spirituality. The iconoclasm of Protestant sects like the Quakers took this belief to the extreme. This is just one example of the contradictory effects of printing. Other scholars such as Gregor T. Goethals and Walter Benjamin have contributed to the debate regarding iconoclasm which will be discussed in somewhat more detail in Chapter Three.

Eisenstein's analysis of Christian religious belief follows Weber's lead in trying to understand the major upheavals of Christianity over the past few centuries and the concurrent social and cultural changes. The role of the printing press in this change, cannot be denied. Beginning with Luther who declared that printing was "God's highest and extremest act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward" the press has proved an essential tool in the "business of the Gospel" (Eisenstein, 1983, p. 147). This business of proselytizing achieved new levels on account of the press. It instigated an age of evangelizing among Christians rather than between Christians and non-Christians. The mass printing of Bibles in the vernacular which enabled the individual interpretation of the Word. Thus, the fundamental experience of Christian spirituality was changed drastically. As new Christian authorities appeared, denominations multiplied and the marketplace of Christian choice also increased. This oversimplified

explanation ignores the contradictory effects of printing, for as Eisenstein (1983) points out, printing ushered in the simultaneous rise of religious fundamentalism yet diversity of beliefs; pursuit of individual spirituality yet the weakening of community; increased access to the Bible through vernacular versions yet decreased "understanding".

This last point is important to spiritual experience, for the availability of Bibles brought the issue of textual mediation of God's word to the foreground. Vernacular versions meant not only that everyone could read the Bible, but also increased the probability of translation errors. It also saw an increased interest in the professional drive to produce an authoritative version. This introduced the debate over whether the mediation of God's word is even open to the possibility of errors. Does the Divine oversee typesetters? Biblical exegesis, while still a theological pursuit for the most part, also prompted the fragmentation of the Catholic community (Eisenstein, 1973, p. 272).

Finally, Eisenstein's narrative is interwoven with the awareness that the printing press played a major role in the dialectic between religion and science. It seems that printing served to fragment the former while it united the latter. She states that:

> Heralded on all sides as a 'peaceful art,' Gutenberg's invention probably contributed more to destroying Christian concord and inflaming religious warfare than any of the so-called arts of war ever did (1983, p. 155).

While the "study of nature was increasingly freed from translation problems, the study of Scripture was becoming more ensnared" (Ibid, p. 269). Indeed, Eisenstein (1983) concedes that this communication revolution "altered the way Western Christians viewed their sacred book and the natural world" (p. 274). Eisenstein is tentative about drawing further conclusions from this evidence: if read through a medium theory perspective, however, her analysis seems to support the conclusion that communication media do influence cognitive and epistemological processes, if not sensory ones as well!

As demonstrated in the thought of Ong and Eisenstein, both explored the relationship between communication media and change. While Ong hypothesized on the psychical effects that supposedly arise from various forms of mediation; Eisenstein searched for concrete examples of how the printing press was implicated in social upheaval and the evolution of beliefs. As they follow a communications history perspective, one criticism common to both their analyses is that there is little or no discussion of how human agency and intersubjectivity plays a role in their schema of change. In this sense, they are first generation theorists. One explanation for the neglect of this aspect is the fact that they study the historical record of human experience, which already places a vast distance between them and the experience of any individual. Nevertheless, both studies have provided important impetus for further scholarship in the area of communications history and cognition, in Ong's case, and a more systematic study of communications history claims in Eisenstein's. The application of

phenomenological concepts, however, can "sharpen" the analytical lens through which medium theory observes the phenomena of communication.

This brief introduction to communications history served to highlight the role of communication in social change as demonstrated by Innis, McLuhan, Ong and Eisenstein. In particular, the issue of the technological mediation of communication is shown by the preceding scholars to be central to understanding the communication process. In addition, communications history theory or medium theory gives some importance to the idea of consciousness, experience and communication in the work of Ong and McLuhan. Finally, it is noteworthy that these theorists all acknowledged the role of communications in the historical evolution of religious and spiritual experience.[21] To be able to understand, however, how mediation and spirituality intersect in a contemporary context, communications history does not suffice. In the next section, an introduction to phenomenology will help to "fill in the blanks" of the communications history approach.

2.2 Review of Phenomenology

Introduction

There is a strong link between phenomenology's interest in universal consciousness and the issue of sacred or spiritual experience. It is noteworthy that both communications history and phenomenology have been concerned with manifestations of the numinous through history. In its most general form a phenomenological approach provides insight into the nature of experience by examining the outward manifestations or visible features of

action.[22] First, a short introduction to the philosophical origins of phenomenology in Edmund Husserl's work will serve to set the stage for further discussion. Second, Schutz's reformulation of Husserl's ideas will introduce the idea of the lifeworld. Next Habermas' critique of the lifeworld concept will provide an alternative point of view that is grounded in communicative action. His attempt to link systems theory and phenomenological theory results in a useful model regarding the desacralization of the lifeworld in modernity. This concept provides an historical and phenomenological explanation for the increasing fragmentation and "powerlessness" of the sacred or spiritual in structuring our lifeworld. Finally, Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration will open the way for the application of phenomenological concepts to the arena of social interaction and the birth of ethnomethodology.

2.2.1 Origin of Phenomenology

Phenomenology has its historical origin in Edmund Husserl's critique of Immanuel Kant's distinction between *noumena and phenomena* (Capps, 1995, p. 110). Kant's project was to understand the processes of reflection or thought, which he believed consisted solely in the noumenal realm. This concern with the origin of thought can be traced further back to the Greek philosophers. Capps (1995) points out that :

> Plato's answer to the question: what abides when all else passes away? was a reformulation in which the abiding reality — reality's permanent substance — was placed in a transcendent realm, the world of eternal forms. In Plato's philosophy, the eternal forms represent an intelligible order that constitutes and gives structure to the world of particulars. The world of transcendent forms is normative: it

> stipulates eternal truths; it provides the permanent structure that is reflected in the world of particulars. *Becoming* mirrors *being*, of which it is a dimmer and not always reliable reflection. Thus this earliest comprehensive treatment of the relation of noumena and phenomena —prior to the Enlightenment era — gives intelligibility a decided metaphysical ordering (p. 111).

In contrast, Kant's explanation of the intellect displaced the metaphysical explanation with one that concentrated on a "mental" realm where "noumena is viewed more as a formal regulator of knowledge than as an abstract (or abstractable) level of dimension of reality" (Ibid, p. 111). It is important to note here that Kant's analysis of the intellect stemmed from his interest in religion.

Husserl turned his focus to the world of phenomena — the *Lebenswelt*, or lifeworld. He believed he could understand the process of consciousness by turning to this world of primary experience (Turner, 1978, p. 395). Husserl reasoned that only through experience do we come to know the world. Further, he argued that our experience of this reality is mediated by mental consciousness. The machinations of the lifeworld, the workings of consciousness, operate in the background of experience, however. Smoothly functioning, efficient interaction is possible because we do not need to attend to the issues of intersubjective uncertainty. That is, mutual understanding is possible because we take for granted that the Other experiences the same consciousness as we do.

Another central feature of consciousness is that it is intentional, always directed towards an object. This aspect, borrowed from Franz Brentano, is

described by the dictum "consciousness is consciousness of...", the ellipsis representing any object possible (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990, p. 8). This means that "every act of thinking implies an object thought about, and is a structural act" (Capps, 1995, p. 113). The intentionality of consciousness replaces the Cartesian explanation of reality as mutually exclusive categories of mind, and body, subject and object (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990, p. 9).

Husserl took this theory one step further in attempting to find the "essence" of consciousness, through a process of *radical abstraction*. His quest to understand "pure mind" is problematic, however, because it required that the observer somehow suspend their own lifeworld in order to remove oneself from the experience under observation. Interestingly, this position is similar to the one advocated by McLuhan. McLuhan believed he was able to escape the effects of "narcissus narcosis" — the numbing effects of communication media "whereby a man remains as unaware of the psychic and social effects of this new technology as a fish of the water it swims in" — that allowed him to observe communication processes from an unbiased position.[23] Both positions assume that observational transcendence is possible.

2.2.2 Schutz and The Lifeworld

Alfred Schutz linked the philosophical position of Husserl, with the sociological position of Weber and American interactionism (Turner, 1978, p. 398). Schutz modified the central method of phenomenology by replacing Husserl's ephemeral search for essences with observing people in actual interaction (Ibid, p. 399). While Husserl saw consciousness as the key to

understanding reality; Schutz believed the creation and maintenance of intersubjectivity was "the most important social reality" (Turner, 1978, p. 399).

In *Phenomenology of the Social World,* Schutz (1967) advanced the theory that we experience the social world as meaningful and that denying this fact, as positivism does, results in the destruction of the very facts under observation. This work also included a detailed analysis of Weber and the project of interpretive sociology. He approved of Weber's method of *Verstehen,* or "sympathetic introspection" because it is "the particular experiential form in which common-sense thinking takes cognizance of the socio-cultural world" (Schutz as quoted In Atkinson and Turner, p. 48). He believed, however, that Weber "failed to state clearly the essential characteristics of understanding (*Verstehen),* of subjective meaning [...] or of action" (Walsh, 1967, xxi). It was only in his posthumously published work *Structures of the Lifeworld* that Schutz & Luckmann (1973) provided a detailed (albeit unfinished) explanation of "understanding" in his analysis of the lifeworld.[24] The central theme of this work is that reality is a social experience. He established the key concepts of the stock of knowledge, typification, and interaction. I will elaborate on these concepts more fully, as they are important for the investigation of spiritual experience on the Internet.

Schutz & Luckmann (1973) defined the lifeworld as "that province of reality which the wide-awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in the attitude of common sense" (p. 3). In addition, the lifeworld is not private but

intersubjective, shared, social. The lifeworld is also "taken for granted" in the sense that we do not question:

a) the corporeal existence of other men;
b) that these bodies are endowed with consciousness essentially similar to my own;
c) that the things in the outer world included in my environs and that of my fellow-men are the same for us and have fundamentally the same meaning;
d) that I can enter into interrelations and reciprocal actions with my fellow-men;
e) that I can make myself understood to them (which follows from the preceding assumptions);
f) that a stratified social and cultural world is historically pregiven as a frame of reference for me and my fellow-men, indeed in a manner as taken for granted as the 'natural world';
g) that therefore the situation in which I find myself at any moment is only to a small extent purely created by me (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 5).

Schutz reasoned that people needed "a frame of reference or orientation with which they can interpret events as they pragmatically act on the world around them" (Turner, 1978, p. 401). He called this frame of reference the "stock knowledge at hand". Turner (1978) outlines the six distinctive features of this concept:

1. Stock knowledge constitutes a person's reality - stock knowledge is essential for pragmatic interaction.
2. Stock knowledge, like the lifeworld, is taken for granted. Note that stock knowledge *can be an object of conscious reflection*, whereas the lifeworld cannot.
3. As knowledge, stock knowledge is *learned* through processes of socialization.
4. While stocks of knowledge are unique to each person, in an interactive environment actors assume that stock knowledge is shared.

5. This leads to the presumption that we experience a common world. This presumption is thought to be what preserves order in the social world.
6. The above presumption results in actors using a process of "typification" to navigate social situations. (p. 401).

In the above, *typification* refers to the ongoing categorization of objects that takes place during interaction. Interaction, in the natural state, requires that objects are familiar and identifiable. Of course, not every situation or object encountered is familiar, so actors refer to "typical aspects and attributes of objects, persons, and events" stored in the stock of knowledge, that enables them to interact (Schutz and Luckman, 1973, p. 143). These type constructs are socialized, and may change or be revised if experience warrants it. When type constructs prove insufficient in explaining some aspect of a person's experience, then the individual's stock of knowledge is open to change. This is an important feature of Schutz's phenomenology in the analysis of the CMC spiritual experience.

Now, the taken-for-grantedness of the lifeworld is open to change. Schutz & Luckmann (1973) illustrated how if one encounters an element of experience that is "incongruent with the previous experience, we can say that the taken-for-granted nature of my experience *explodes*"(p. 11). One way that this occurs is if "the current experience may not simply be classifiable into a typical reference schema conforming to the situationally relevant level of types" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 10). A useful comparison is the human body that for the most part, functions without our being conscious of the blood flowing, the food digesting, and the chemical processes taking place. If there

is a physiological problem, however, these processes do not function smoothly and are manifested as an ailment of some sort.

When reality starts to run counter to experience, one is motivated to reconcile previous type constructs with "the horizon of the kernel of experience which has become questionable", according to Schutz (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 12). This can take place at a very basic level, where a temporary solution to the problem is found so that the individual can proceed with their activity. For example, the new encounter is simply categorized as belonging to some stock and left at that. On the next level, the question demands closer attention such that the individual is motivated to actually go beyond the current situation in looking for an answer. Finally, the individual might be motivated to seek "a new explication of the current experience and of the horizons surrounding it that have now become questionable, or of the schemata which have up until now been regarding as sufficient" (Ibid, p. 14). This is an example of "theoretical" thinking being applied to everyday situations.

Throughout, Schutz maintains that "a logical articulation of my stock of knowledge is not in any way reached through this" (Ibid, p. 14). In other, words this is what he means by the lifeworld being "nontranscendable." This theory pertains to "everyday life" where "the composite provinces of presuppositions remain for me, more or less opaque" (Ibid, p. 14). This is necessarily so if we are to be able to function meaningfully on a day-to-day basis. Unfortunately, Schutz's theory does not address the situation where

"under certain conditions my stock of knowledge as such can be questionable, together with the sedimentation processes through which typifications generally are formed, and thus the fact of a radical *crisis*" (Ibid, p. 12). The possibility of such a crisis is addressed more fully by Habermas.

Schutz's theory is useful for this thesis because he laid the groundwork for understanding experience in a communications context. His descriptions of the *lifeworld* and *stocks of knowledge* are directly applicable to the case study in Chapter Five. These concepts help to explain how understanding is achieved through interaction because of shared background experience.

In a sense, Schutz's contribution to phenomenology is comparable to Ong's contribution to communications history. Both provide a transition between the original theory — Husserl's phenomenology and first generation medium theory — and the next stage of theoretical development that includes the concept of intersubjectivity and agency. Ong's interest in the transformation of consciousness is lacking experiential grounding, just as Schutz's notion of intersubjectivity lacks a theory of communicative practice that would explain the jump from subjectivity to intersubjectivity.[25] However, Jurgen Habermas and Anthony Giddens extrapolate Schutz's theory further and help to explain experience in a communications context.

2.2.3 The Theory of Communicative Action

Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative action is helpful in understanding how communication technologies mediate spiritual

experience. He provides a "communication-theoretic" concept of the lifeworld which is based on Weber's notion of the desacralization of the lifeworld. In addition, Habermas addresses two issues that Schutz did not address: the role of communication media in social change and what happens when there is a "crisis" in communication. It must be pointed out, however, that Habermas' motivation stems from Marxist critical theory more so than from an interest in the philosophy of consciousness. This must be kept in mind especially with regard to his sometimes cold, analytical explanations of the sacred.

In his discussion of the lifeworld concept, Habermas (1984) draws on the following three approaches to the lifeworld: the phenomenological approach of Husserl and Schutz; the institutional approach of Durkheim and Parsons; and the socio-cultural approach of Mead. All of these approaches are insufficient, according to Habermas, given their particular "biases" towards either culture, or society or personality. He attempts to reformulate the lifeworld concept where "the key to his construction is the multidimensionality of the communicative action through which the lifeworld is symbolically mediated" (McCarthy, 1984, pp. xxiii-xxiv). Thomas McCarthy (1984) writes:

> To the different structural components of the lifeworld (culture, society, personality) there correspond different reproduction processes (cultural reproduction, social integration, socialization) based on different aspects of communicative action (understanding, coordination, sociation) which are rooted in the structural components of speech acts (propositional, illocutionary, expressive). These structural correspondences permit communicative action to perform its different functions and to serve as a suitable medium for the

> symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld. When these reproduction processes are interfered with, there arise disturbances in the reproduction process and corresponding crisis manifestations: loss of meaning, withdrawal of legitimation, confusion of orientations, anomie, destabilization of collective identities, alienation, psychopathologies, breakdown in tradition, withdrawal of motivation (p. xxv).

This rather bleak picture of social and subjective collapse that results from the interruption of communicative reproduction brings us to Habermas' theory of the uncoupling of system from lifeworld.

In formulating this analysis, Habermas owes much to the work of Weber (1930) who pioneered the concept of the desacralization of modern culture in the formation of capitalism. Supposedly, the rationalization of the lifeworld results in the steady loss of meaning and the bureaucratization of society. Habermas (1984) relates how in idealized, archaic societies, the lifeworld is collectively shared and homogeneous. In these societies, the dichotomy between mythical, (in Habermas' terms) or religious belief and scientific, or empirical belief does not exist because:

> mythical worldviews blur the categorical distinctions between the objective, social and subjective worlds and they do not even draw a clear line between interpretations and the interpreted reality. Internal relations among meanings are fused with external relations among things. There is no concept of the nonempirical validity that we ascribe to symbolic expressions. Concepts of validity such as morality and

> truth are merged with empirical concepts such as causality and health (1984, p. 159).

In contrast, modern societies have lost their homogeneity in the sense that economic and political action no longer require legitimization from the cultural reality. As a result, categories are made distinct and no longer interdependent, necessarily. Whereas once there was no distinction between the sacred and profane spheres, now the sacred has become separated from political and economic systems, and the lifeworld itself has been "desacralized."

Habermas (1984) adds significant detail to this theory based on the premise that "the rationalization of the lifeworld can be understood in terms of successive releases of the potential for rationality in communicative action" (p. 155). Habermas (1984) describes this process in an historical/dialectic progression. He begins by claiming that in archaic or tribal societies the lifeworld is homogeneous and collectively shared (p. 157). These societies are bound together by kinship ties and social order is preserved by "mythical interpretive systems [which] assimilate external and internal nature to the social order, natural phenomena to interpersonal relations, events to communicative utterances" (Ibid, p. 158). The next stage in social evolution entails a segmental differentiation of society involving the exchange of valuable objects and women for marriage purposes. When power becomes disengaged from kinship structures, "organizational complexity constituted at

the level of political domination becomes the crystallizing nucleus of a new institution: the state" (Habermas, 1984, p. 165). At this next third stage, power is no longer transferred via kinship but secured by political and judicial means. The fourth level arises out of the implementation of "steering mechanisms" — such as money — that allow for "depoliticized economic activity" guaranteed by "positive law" (p. 167). Habermas maintains that the preceding four stages are systemic explanations for social change, however, "every new leading mechanism of system differentiation must, however, be anchored in the lifeworld; it must be *institutionalized* there via family status, the authority of office, or bourgeois private law" (p. 173).

On the subjective level, the uncoupling of system and lifeworld "shifts the burden of social integration more and more from religiously anchored consensus to processes of consensus formation in language" (p. 180). This is the key element in the desacralization of the lifeworld that accompanies the uncoupling process. Habermas (1984) asserts that previous to the modern era:

> the legitimation load of ideologically effective worldviews were immunized against objections already within the cognitive reach of everyday communication. The immunization could succeed when an institutional separation between the sacred and profane realms of action ensure that traditional foundations were not taken up 'in the wrong place'; within the domain of the sacred, communication remained *systematically restricted* due to the lack of differentiation between spheres of validity, that is, *as a result of the formal conditions of possible understanding* (p. 189).

With increasing communicative freedom, and pressure towards legitimation of the sacred realm, religious consensus has eroded over the past few centuries. This "linguistification of the sacred" sees a corresponding rationalization of the lifeworld as "the authority of tradition is increasingly open to discursive questioning; the range of applicability of norms expands while the latitude for interpretation and the need for reasoned justification increases; the differentiation of individual entities grows, as does the sphere of personal autonomy" (McCarthy, 1984, p. xxii).

The last point to be taken from Habermas concerns the actual subjective communicative processes that accompany the destabilization of the lifeworld and the role of media in this process. Habermas (1984) describes how:

> the growing pressure for rationality that a problematic lifeworld exerts upon the mechanism of mutual understanding increases the need for achieved consensus, and this increases the expenditure of interpretive energies and the risk of dissensus. It is these demands and dangers that can be headed off by media of communication. The way these media function differs according to whether they focus consensus formation in language specializing in certain aspects of validity and hierarchizing processes of agreement, or whether they uncouple action coordination from consensus formation in language altogether, and neutralize it with respect to alternatives of agreement or failed agreement (pp. 182 - 183).

Habermas acknowledges the role of communication media in achieving consensus in a society dislodged from the consensus mechanisms of the sacred realm.

Habermas' (1984, 1990) work is helpful in understanding what is taking place in both computer mediated discourse and in the realm of the sacred. In particular, his reformulation of the lifeworld concept allows for an analysis of "dissensus": the central feature of our case study. Although his attempt to reconcile the lifeworld concept with systems theory is not adopted here, his modeling of the uncoupling of system from lifeworld is useful in providing context for our investigation into computer-mediated communication and spirituality. Also, the desacralization of the lifeworld, particularly the "linguistification of the sacred" is borne out by the case study. If Habermas is correct in assuming that communication media can play a mitigating role in achieving consensus, then computer mediated communication holds great promise for the spiritual discursive realm.

2.2.4 Giddens and Social Interaction

Whereas Habermas' work broadened Schutz's formulation of the lifeworld to account for systemic evolution; Anthony Giddens' theory of Structuration extends Schutz' theory in a different direction: interaction. Both theorists have been important for communications studies in the way that they award communication a central role in social processes. Giddens' (1984) research question in *The Constitution of Society* asks "What is at issue is how the

concepts of action, meaning and subjectivity should be specified and how they might relate to notions of structure and constraint" (p. 2).

Giddens' theory of structuration is important for my thesis in the way he develops the concepts of knowledgeable human agency, and practical and discursive consciousness. Giddens' description of the duality of structure provides a model for understanding how intersubjective processes both create and are created by the reflexive characteristics of communicative action.

While it has been established that this thesis attempts to focus on the intersubjective level rather than the level of systems or institutions — the micro versus the macro — a short foray into how Giddens attempts to unite these two ways of looking at society is useful for making conclusions regarding how the interpenetration of spirituality and computer technology might be seen in broader perspective. Giddens (1984) maintains that "the rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction" (p. 19). He calls this proposition the "duality of structure." The constraints of time and space are central to understanding the relationship between structure and action: "structures exist only in their instantiation in the knowledgeable activities of situated human subjects, which reproduce them as structural properties of social systems embedded in spans of time-space" (Giddens, 1984,

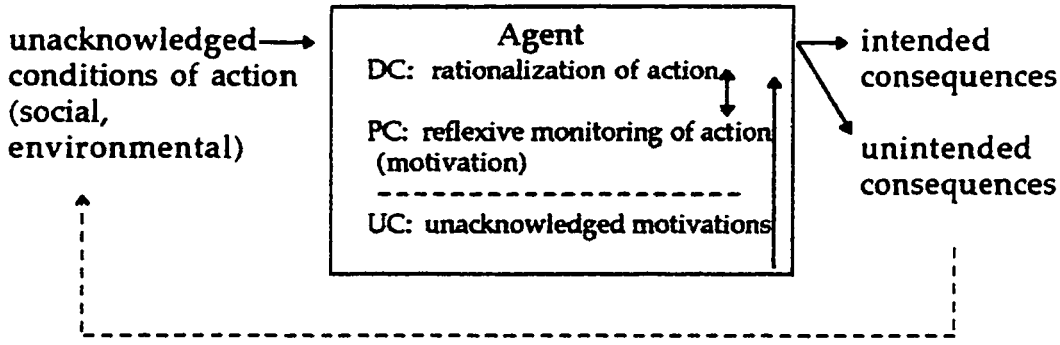
p. 304). Giddens outlines roughly how one is to go about making connections between the two aspects of structure:

> Transferring analysis from the situated activities of strategically placed actors means studying, first, the connections between the regionalization of their contexts of action and wider forms of regionalization; second, the embeddedness of their activities in time — how far they reproduce practices, or aspects of practices, that are long-established; third, the modes of time-space distanciation which link the activities and relationships in question to features of overall societies or to inter-societal systems (p. 294).

While structure, "recursively organized sets of rules and resources", is outside the constraints of time and space, social interaction is situated within time/space contexts (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). The relationship between structure and intersubjective interaction is a reciprocal relationship as "all social systems, no matter how far flung, both express and are expressed in the routines of daily social life, mediating the physical and sensory properties of the human body" (Ibid, p. 26).

To explain the theory of the duality of structure, Giddens (1984) represents the communication process in his "stratification model". The model presented below has been modified somewhat from Giddens' original. This model will prove important for my analysis in Chapter Five.

Fig. 2.1 Stratification Model of the Agent[26]



Giddens' (1984) model demonstrates how "actors not only monitor continuously the flow of their own activities and expect others to do the same for their own; they also routinely monitor aspects, social and physical, of the contexts in which they move" (p. 5). Giddens treats the motivation of action as separate from the rationalization of action because "motivation refers to potential for action rather than to the mode in which action is chronically carried on by the agent" (p. 6). What is most important here for our discussion is that the purposive nature of interaction produces intended and unintended consequences. Giddens qualifies that some unintended consequences feedback into the conditions of the action. This is an important issue for spirituality and computer mediated communication.

Giddens (1984) can be credited with advancing the theory that ordinary people possess knowledge and power in social settings. Contrary to some social theories (Structuralism, Functionalism) which portray humans as passive and helpless in the face of institutional, systemic forces, or unconscious forces, Structuration theory begins with the premise that "knowledgeable

agents" possess "agency": the ability and knowledge to carry out and explain day-to-day action. In addition, "agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing things in the first place" (Giddens, 1984, p. 9). The theory of knowledgeable agents allows Giddens (1984) to explain the link between action, motivation and power on the intersubjective level.

To explain the subjective level of action, Giddens (1984) distinguishes between two types of waking consciousness: practical and discursive consciousness. The former level relies on — how Schutz has described — the stock of knowledge and presumptions for interaction that enable agents to communicate and act without self-conscious reflection. Practical consciousness (PC) relies heavily on non-verbal communication modes to ensure mutual monitoring of interaction. Following Goffman (1981), the role of non-verbal cues i.e. facial expressions, pauses, intonation is emphasized in establishing trust between subjects. Discursive consciousness (DC) requires:

> the agent to 'think' about what he or she is doing for the activity to be carried out 'consciously'. 'Consciousness' in this sense presumes being able to give a coherent account of one's activities and the reasons for them (Giddens, 1984, p. 45).

Giddens insists that the two types are interrelated and there is no "bar" between them. Presumably, he means that the processes of practical and discursive consciousness mesh seamlessly in interaction wherein we only *thematize* (in DC) a few of the contents we process in PC. The unconscious level (UC), however, is separate from practical and discursive consciousness.

The unconscious may have bearing on the motivation of subjects but this motivation is not apparent to the subject herself.

Intersubjectivity, according to Giddens, is recursive, reflexive and purposive. Recursivity is more than simply biological "feedback" as Giddens tries to make clear. "Human social activities [...] are not brought into being by social actors but are continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they address themselves *as* actors " (1984, p. 2). Reflexivity is closely connected to recursivity as "it is the specifically reflexive form of the knowledgeability of human agents that is most deeply involved in the recursive ordering of social practices" (Ibid, p. 3). Giddens (1984) elaborates this concept further where

> [r]eflexivity hence should be understood not merely as 'self-consciousness' but as the monitored character of the ongoing flow of life. To be a human being is to be a purposive agent, who both has reasons for his or her activities and is able, if asked, to elaborate discursively upon those reasons (including lying about them) (p. 3).

Finally, Giddens (1984) does not neglect the role of power in human activity. In fact, "power is one of several primary concepts of social science, all clustered around the relations of action and structure. Power is the means of getting things done, and, as such, directly implied in human action" (Giddens, 1984, p. 283). Power refers to the ability of the agent to control one's own activities and also the ability to control the activities of others. The allocation of power in various forms also determines "the level and nature of

the 'penetration' actors have of the conditions of system reproduction" (p. 91).

These four factors are:

1) the means of access actors have to knowledge in virtue of their social location;
2) the modes of articulation of knowledge;
3) circumstance relating to the validity of the belief-claims taken as 'knowledge';
4) factors to do with the means of dissemination of available knowledge (Giddens, 1984, p.91).

All of these factors center around the possession and dissemination of knowledge. This ability to gather and disseminate knowledge is also the key to control in the computer mediated world of communication.

Giddens' theory of structuration is relevant to the research question first because it provides a model for understanding how intersubjective communication functions. Practical and discursive communication processes do take place in the computer mediated context, yet they are complicated by computer mediation. Computer mediation enables the distancing of communication in both time and space. The asynchronous, communicative effects of mediation, in Giddens' terms, can be seen as an *unintended consequence* of the communication process. Giddens' privileging of face-to-face communication also highlights how computer mediated communication is deficient in that it lacks the non-verbal cues of practical consciousness that help to build trust and convey meaning. Finally, Giddens' duality of structure provides model provides insight into how computer mediated communication of spiritual experience feeds back into the systemic structure.

2.3 How Communications History and Phenomenology can Benefit from Cooperation

Neither of the theoretical approaches chosen for this thesis can stand alone in answering the research question. Phenomenology is useful in providing a theory of the lifeworld and interaction. The phenomenological approach is not useful as a tool for examining history because it attempts to explain consciousness (experience) as the backbone of reality and this is very difficult to access in historical lifeworlds. Yet, Giddens (1984) maintains that "[t]he self cannot be understood outside 'history'" (p. 36). Communication history enables a reading of history that helps to contextualize experience. This approach, however, lacks a theory of interaction. A theory of interaction is supplied by the phenomenological approach. Both frameworks share a concern for, or realization that consciousness is a central element in understanding both present and past reality. They also share the realization that time and space are important mechanisms both in communications processes and in social processes. Time and space is a relevant consideration for this thesis because computer mediation distances communication in both time and space, thus altering the communication processes — from the face-to-face variety — in important ways.

The next two chapters attempt to provide context for the case study by informing the reader about mediation and computer culture.[27] Chapter Three focuses on mediation specifically, drawing upon communications history and medium theory to draw out important aspects of how spirituality can be mediated. The fourth chapter attempts to contextualize the lifeworld of subjects as they participate in a computer mediated community located within "cyberculture." The way that cyberculture and spirituality intersect is highlighted, in particular the claim that cyberspace is a "new venue for consciousness."

CHAPTER THREE

The Mediation of the Spiritual

"Operator, information,
Give me Jesus,
On the line"
Manhattan Transfer (1975). "Operator",
The Manhattan Transfer.[28]

Introduction

In the previous chapter, the field of communication history was introduced along with the founding theorists Innis and McLuhan. In general, these founders represent the two approaches to communication history: macro-level analysis that observes communication media from the point of view of society, culture and institutions; and micro-level analysis that focuses on perception and consciousness. Phenomenological theory deepens this perspective with the addition of the concepts of interaction and experience. The focus of this thesis is spiritual experience, mediated by computer technology, and linked through social interaction. Mediation is a central consideration because it is computer mediated communication that enables this interaction.

In this chapter, the discussion focuses on the *mediation* of spiritual experience. This area of inquiry is essential to my thesis because, as Thieme (1993) points out "forms which *mediate* religious experience often become

fused with the *meaning* of experience" (p. 356, my emphasis). The mediation of spiritual experience takes three forms.[29] Communication technologies are addressed first because these forms of mediation influence the other two categories of mediation. Communication technologies from the clay tablet to the computer mediate spiritual experience. Mediating technologies allow, most importantly, an event to be experienced irrespective of space or time. The central debate is whether the displacement of experience through technology alters — or destroys —the essential quality of the experience. In the realm of the spiritual, this is a vital concern. The second mediating factor is the symbol. Symbols such as words and images represent objects, ideas and actions that offer insight into the spiritual realm. Here the act of *interpretation* is the key to understanding and enlightenment. Interpretation, however, is also the basis for controversy. The third form of mediation takes place through spiritual guides and communities who act as mediators of spiritual action. Ritual and sacred activity is predicated on interaction. Social interaction plays a greater or lesser role depending on the nature of the spiritual experience. In turn, rituals, community formation and spiritual teaching are all affected by the imposition of communication technologies. The areas of community formation and spiritual teaching, however, will not be addressed in any detail as they lie outside the parameters of the research question.

The analysis of the three main areas of mediation focuses on understanding how each form of mediation plays a role in the experience of spirituality. The major themes that will be addressed are the dialectic between individual

(subjective) versus collective (intersubjective) experience; the claim that different forms of mediating technologies affect consciousness; and the evolution of spiritual experience in general alongside the evolution of communication technologies.

3.1 Technologies that Mediate Spiritual Experience

In the modern era, the history of the mediation of Christian spirituality has been a dialectic between individual and collective experience. While the mass production of Bibles enabled the interiorization of spirituality as an individual, solitary experience; broadcast technologies, such as radio and television, attempted to regain the mythical "collective" nature of religion. McLuhan and Ong both explained this process as an effect of the communications technologies themselves; however, the individual/collective dialectic can also be explained in terms of intersubjectivity. This section will discuss the shifts in spiritual experience that corresponded to the invention of communications technologies from the printing press to television. A sequential, technology-by-technology analysis will demonstrate how each communications medium has been implicated in spiritual experience since the printing press.

3.1.1 The Printing Press and the Bible

As mentioned previously, the printing press enabled the mass distribution of the Bible to lay people across Europe and into America. This event had major repercussions for religious practice and spiritual experience. It must be made clear, however, that the Bible itself was [and continues to be] in a category of

mediation unlike any other (Mullins, 1996).[30] Its status as sacred artifact made it the bestseller of Gutenberg's time. While a detailed analysis of the Bible is not possible within the confines of this thesis, a few main points need to be addressed. First, the notion of the sacred book needs to be made apparent. Second, the role that this book had in shaping individuality and thus interiorizing the spiritual experience is vital. Finally, the "can of worms" that widespread interpretation of this book introduced into the spiritual experience is tantamount to understanding the CMC situation of the present.

One of the effects of the printing press was to make religious texts, most importantly the Bible, available to lay people. Innis' (1951) theory of the monopoly of knowledge presupposes that improvements in communication result in increased secrecy and mystification. The opposite seems to be true when it comes to religious knowledge, however. While the Bible may have retained its sacred quality, it was no longer *secret*. Mass distribution of the Bible encouraged discussion of religious and spiritual issues replacing the broadcasting of lessons from authorized priests to passive people.

The attitude towards the Bible as a sacred object was altered, however, when the Bible became easily available (Mullins, 1996). Most major religions treat their sacred texts with special care, wrapping them in ornate covers, blessing them, and using the utmost respect when reading from them. The technological reproduction of the Bible contributed to the decreased "spectacle" surrounding the Bible as a sacred object, standardizing and simplifying its production. McLuhan proposed that the sanctity was

transferred to the printed 'words' themselves. He argued that the shift in the inherent sanctity of the Bible was more an effect of the printed form than of intellectual and religious movements of the time. He wrote that:

> [t]he new homogeneity of the printed page seemed to inspire subliminal faith in the validity of the printed Bible as bypassing the traditional oral authority of the Church, on one hand, and the need for rational critical scholarship on the other. It was as if print, uniform and repeatable commodity that it was, had the power of creating a new hypnotic superstition of the book as independent of and uncontaminated by human agency (1965, p. 144).

While the printing of the Bible made an unprecedented impression on the common (wo)man, enabling each person to see the words of God for himself or herself; McLuhan ignored the fact that the oral tradition of the Church would have continued — and still continues — despite printing. For example, participating in a religious community is still considered to be a vital aspect of religious practice. Church services take place in a face-to-face setting for the most part and are considered by Christian denominations to be the centre of the community experience, if not of spiritual experience. Historically, the difference that the printed Bible made was that for the first time, the spoken Word could be verified by the printed Word.

It was not just the availability of the Bible, however, that encouraged interest in it. People were interested in purchasing their own Bible because they believed the book was holy and contained the words and lessons of God. Without this aspect of human agency Protestantism could not have

developed. Together, Gutenberg's invention, Luther's theses and individual human agency can be seen as *transforming* religious practice. New venues for discussion were opened up as a result of the loosening grip of Catholic hegemony. Whereas previously, the Church represented the ultimate authority, in Protestant belief the Bible became the final Word. One of the outcomes of this new-found spiritual agency was the interiorizing of individual spirituality and the rise of the individual.

Weber, Durkheim and Mead laid the foundations for the sociological discussion of the individual in modern society.[31] Several scholars have investigated the relationship between literacy and individuality since. McLuhan (1962) proposed that "[p]rint is the technology of individualism. If men decided to modify this visual technology by an electronic technology, individualism will also be modified" (p. 158). Eisenstein (1983) went further than McLuhan in addressing the role that the printing press played in the rise of individualism. She proposed an "emergence of a new sense of individualism as a by-product of the new forms of standardization. The more standardized the type, indeed, the more compelling the sense of an idiosyncratic personal self" (p. 56). Roger Chartier located the transition to modern-day individualism not in the press, but in the method of reading that materialized out of the uniformity of print: from oral "reading" to silent, visual, personal reading (In Sweet, 1996, p. 24). Ong (1982) pointed out that print contributed to the notion of personal privacy, intellectual ownership, and the romantic notions of originality and creativity (pp. 130-33). Ivan Illich (1989) countered the glorification of the printing press with the hypothesis

that it was the alphabet itself, that changed the everyday notions of word and deed, and culminated in the modern notion of self. Many of the changes thought to be brought about by the press — particularly private, silent reading — had actually developed during the "scribal revolution" beginning around the twelfth century (in Flim, 1991). Nevertheless, the trend towards individualism grew during the era of the press. Marty (1996) pointed out that while religious leaders encouraged literacy this produced a better educated congregation with less loyalty to their church and religious beliefs (p. 95). Marty concluded that:

> [t]he encouragement of Bible reading and individual literacy efforts not only 'congregationalized' religion; it also helped 'denominationalize' it, and denominalization is a religious part of the rise of individualism. No longer was there reliance on a religious establishment; affiliation was no longer a product of fate or the accident of geography and governance. Now the consumer was in command, picking and choosing his prayers and ideology, often on the basis of utterly private reading (p. 104).

This statement confirms the communications history hypothesis that literacy had the effect of fragmenting communities. At the same time, however, new communities were also being built. While Catholicism may have lost a legion of faithful; Protestantism was built on the ability of the printing press to advertise the Protestant message. On the other hand, Marty also indicates that "the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers was never intended to lead to chaotic autonomous individualism. Christians were

supposed to do their reading in the context of a rather conformist and bounded covenantal community" (p. 104).

Finally, the printing of the Bible brought the recognition of the mutability of text to the forefront. At first, according to Eisenstein (1983), the printing press was believed to end error at the hands of inaccurate copyists. It was soon discovered, however, that the printing press had the capability of multiplying error at an alarming rate. She cites the "wicked Bible of 1631" where the word "not" was dropped from the seventh commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (p. 51). Translation of the Bible also raised issues of authenticity, as translation, by its very nature, is often a very subjective process. A Bible in the hands of every believer challenged the authority of the Church that had built its empire on the premise that its existence was sanctioned by that very word of God. In fact, numerous sects were formed on the issue of translation alone.[32] Finally, the layperson was introduced to the inconsistencies of biblical authority, for example between Old Testament law and New Testament interpretation, without the advantage of theological, philosophical or at very least, historical knowledge and training to decipher the holy text. Paradoxically, the collective result of the widespread dissemination of the Bible was an increasing uncertainty regarding biblical authority. This uncertainty remains one of the hottest topics in Christian discussion groups on the Internet.

3.1.2 Electronic Media: Telegraph to Television

The dialectic between individual and collective experience resurfaces when the first message is transmitted electronically. According to scholars of communications history (Chartier, 1989; Eisenstein, 1979; McLuhan, 1965; Ong, 1982), the invention of electronic communications media represented a shift in the individuating process that print had effected. This is a drastic oversimplification and a premature assumption, however. While electronic means of communication did allow for communication across space and time, the broadcast nature of most communication technologies [with the exception of early radio and telephone], has not ushered in a secondary orality.

These technologies did become tools for religious proselytizing, however, given that broadcast communication could reach large and disperse audiences. These media created audiences of faith separated by space but united in experience. Although audience members may not have had the ability to respond directly through the medium that communicated with them, they heard the same message, and experienced the same rituals.

Telegraph

While the telegraph did not have a direct effect on religious practice, it was a great moment in communication for various reasons. The first message transmitted via the telegraph was "What hath God wrought?" Sweet (1996) designates this moment as "the beginning of the electronic church" (p. 54). Religious rhetoric of the day described a communications technology that "promised a unity of interest, men linked by a single mind, and the

worldwide victory of Christianity" (Czitrom, 1982, pp. 10-11). The telegraph had a profound influence on journalism and the evolution of "news." It enabled the standardization of time (Kern, 1983). It was even believed to be the cause of an increase in "nervousness" due to the newly felt consciousness of time (Czitrom, 1982, pp. 19-20). These factors affected daily life profoundly, and by extension would have had repercussions for spirituality. The connection between the telegraph and spirituality is not a study for mediation, but rather a cultural relationship. The telegraph ushered in electronic communication and with it came a whole new *Zeitgeist*. The excitement over the first electric technologies increased interest and faith in a science that seemed boundless and helped lay the foundations for what would become known as the Modern era.

Telephone

Marvin (1987) berates the discipline of communication studies for ignoring the importance of telephony in the development of communications technologies because it is not considered a *mass medium*. She points out that "the telephone was the first electric medium to enter the home and unsettle customary ways of dividing the private person and family from the more public setting of the community" (Marvin, 1987, p. 6). For this study, the telephone provides an important comparison to computer-mediated communication because it also is a two-way medium.

Historians of communication technology are constantly revealing how patterns of response to new technologies are repeated with each successive

invention. The telephone was to enable the creation of friendly communities, an "epoch of neighborship without propinquity" (Marvin, 1987, p. 66). This utopian attitude is echoed by many computer enthusiasts. If we were to believe the scaremongers of the late nineteenth century, the telephone was feared to be a cause of domestic disruption because "new forms of communication put communities like the family under stress by making contacts between its members and outsiders difficult to supervise" (Marvin, 1987, p. 69). While we may laugh at what seems to be an overreaction; today, supervision of Internet use is a valid concern for parents whose children surf the Internet. Finally, class disruption was also forecast as the telephone enabled encounters between people from different social levels (Marvin, 1987, p. 85). A similar complaint arises from some Internet users today — especially in Usenet groups and chat rooms — where one has no idea with whom they might be corresponding. The indiscriminate nature of the Internet has prompted some groups to form Intranets to screen out undesirables. It is also interesting to note that the telephone was initially used as a broadcast medium to transmit concerts and sermons to listeners on the other end of the wire (Marvin, 1987). This use, however, was overshadowed by the more familiar person-to-person communications device. The Internet, too, has had far greater success as a point-to-point communication medium than as a broadcast technology. For example, a website without links — meant only to convey not receive information — is considered very bad form.

The ease of use and almost universal distribution of the telephone has made this technology into a model for other communications technologies. Illich (1973) calls the telephone a "tool for conviviality" because it does not require special training to use, is available to anyone and promotes self-realization and self-reliance. Telephone wires provided the model for the infrastructure of the Internet. The Internet, however, has not achieved the level of "conviviality" that the telephone possesses. While the Internet enables two-way communication; the price is much higher and the technical knowledge required much greater. Our society has become highly dependent on the telephone particularly in North America where distances between family members may be great (Rowland, 1997, p. 111). The assurance of affordable and universal use is never completely guaranteed, however. Given the extremely complex and competitive telephone market and the convergence of communications technologies, it is difficult to predict what technological conglomeration will emerge.

As to the question whether the telephone has made an impact on our spiritual lives, one has only to consider the role "help" and "prayer" lines play. Certainly, if it were not for the "personal" feeling of telephone usage these applications would not be successful. A suicidal person who calls a "help" line can receive the reassurance that they need simply via a faceless voice. Likewise, televangelist programs include prayer lines where viewers can dial in for guidance and support. Telephone communication has also proved essential in a society where families and communities are often separated by vast distances. In this case, telephony enables long-distance

support for family and friends that are far away. This function helps to preserve relationships important for individual well-being.

Radio

Although the telegraph was hailed as a spiritual invention; it was not until the invention of radio that the technology was put to religious use. [33] Sweet (1986) points out that, ironically, the first commercial religious broadcast, in the States, on KDKA radio almost did not happen because "the liberal rector refused to compromise his ministry with media", a common belief among fundamentalist Christians that persists today (p. 56).[34] Very quickly, however, religious organizations embraced the technology, owning one out of every fourteen broadcasting licenses (in the U.S.) by 1925 (Sweet, 1986, p. 56).

This initial phase of wireless radio has also been compared to the early stages of the Internet. Radio began as a challenging pastime for the amateur. Until the late 1920's, the medium was free, required a good deal of technical expertise, was unregulated and used as a two-way communication device (Czitrom, 1988). This interactive aspect was abolished through the cooperation of business and government who turned it into a broadcast medium. This move was partly out of necessity as the airwaves were becoming crowded. Advertising became the motivating force behind the regulation of broadcast radio in the U.S.

In Canada, however, religious broadcasting played a role in how the industry was regulated. When the International Bible Students Association — which later became the Jehovah's Witnesses — began broadcasting programs with abusive content, both religious organizations and the general public in Canada protested (Ellis, 1979, p. 2). When the Canadian government tried to

intervene by revoking their license, this stirred up protest from supporters of free speech. To remedy the situation, a royal commission was suggested.

The first Royal Commission of Radio Broadcasting, known as the Aird Commission, laid the foundations for Canadian broadcasting. The initial controversy over regulation centered around the issue of public versus private and whether radio should be provincially or nationally controlled.[35] The principle recommendation of the commission was:

> That broadcasting should be placed on a basis of public service and that the stations providing a service of this kind should be owned and operated by one national company; that provincial authorities should have full control over the programs of the station or stations in their respective areas (Raboy, 1990, p. 28).

It is interesting that religious broadcasting played a role in uniting Canada by providing the impetus for such legislation.

In a more direct manner, the electrification of the pulpit had the effect of uniting audiences across space and in time. Unlike the pamphlets and published tracts of the printing press, radio programs required that listeners listen simultaneously to the broadcast. Radio became a powerful proselytizing medium, Douglas (1991) asserts and it "promised a reconciliation between religion and the corporate-industrial secular world, for it was the first [electronic] technology that could bring religion into people's homes" (pp. 195-196).[36] Joel Carpenter, Dennis Voskuil and Quentin J. Schultze have analyzed the role of radio in shaping American Protestantism

(Sweet, 1986, p. 56). Evangelical Protestants took full advantage of the medium of radio, which also allowed them to make the easy transition to television (Sweet, 1986, p. 57).

Radio served as a particularly effective proselytizing medium "by creating the impression of a personal relationship between listener and broadcaster" (Schultze, 1991, p. 76). The cult of the personality played a large role in the power of the radio personality to acquire a following. Schultze (1991) gives the example of the radio evangelist Charles E. Fuller, whose popularity stemmed from his ability to communicate on a personal level with his listeners (p. 77). This trend is magnified with the medium of television.

Television

"Television is the problem child of communications technologies" writes Rowland (1997, p. 173). Since its invention, television has been the centre of controversies from advertising-based programming to TV violence. Televangelism could be considered the aforementioned "problem child's" very bad trait. According to Sweet (1986) "the study of televangelism is a field of such noise and confusion that one goes near it only with gloves, goggles and defoggers" (p. 63).[37] Nevertheless, the religious use of television, almost completely overshadowed by the spectre of televangelism, presents some compelling issues for communications. First, the visual aspect of television allows — even requires — a return to pageantry for religious broadcasting. Second, televangelism works to create the impression that television is unbounded by technological concerns i.e. that a one-way medium can become

a two-way medium. Finally, the psychosomatic effects of television raises some important questions regarding spirituality and the individual.

Television programming has developed a certain aesthetic to suit its use and technological format (Ellis, 1982, p. 111). Televangelism, according to Schultze (1991), has adapted to this medium both aesthetically and with respect to content. 'The medium creates a new version of Christianity based less on tradition, Scripture, or common experience and more on dramatic entertainment with popular appeal" (Schultze, 1991, p. 98). Thus, televangelists are often charismatic or respected personalities that either perform miracles or speak a common sense, understandable message. Schultze condemns the drive for continued funding of evangelical ministries for turning televangelism into a spectacle. The televangelists themselves argue that their message needs to appeal to a younger, modern, audience raised on television and accustomed to being entertained rather than trained or taught. Thus, televangelism often makes use of the morality play format, which simplifies complex religious issues and appeals to the lowest common denominator in delivering its dramatic spiritual message (Schultze, 1991, pp. 118-119).

Televangelism's dramatic appeal is heightened by its magical quality. Viewers are often fooled into believing that this medium has two-way capabilities. Schultze (1991) relates a conversation with a televangelist who admitted that "something magical happens when I speak to the camera. In my own head I know that it's just me talking. But somehow when people

watch me on a recorded program it's as if they think they're communicating with me personally" (p. 75). Another remarkable example where television is seemingly converted to a two-way medium is Benny Hinn's program "This is Your Day (for a miracle)". Pastor Hinn has the ability to heal the sick. On his television program, he regularly claims to "see" people sitting at home watching their television, who are in need of healing. He describes them in detail, names their affliction and tells them that God has healed them or wants to heal them. Viewers need to make two leaps of faith: first, that God has the power to heal through this man, and second that God has the ability to turn television into a two-way medium. If one believes the former, that Benny Hinn has the power of God behind him, then how can place or space be an hindrance?

What must be made clear, however, is that the power of the medium is evidenced in the ability to bring people into a virtual community of faith like never before. This community of faith, however, is not a retribalization, nor is it a secondary orality. We cannot be members of a tribe if we do not know our own tribe members. It is a unique form of audience participation where the spiritual experience may be shared, but is experienced individually. The retribalization that McLuhan envisioned would require a two-way medium that enables interaction. While evangelical television programs come close to creating virtual communities of faith, the two-way capability of computer mediated communication is what knits the threads of an audience into the net of a community.

The third consideration for the religious television experience is the psychological effect of television watching on viewers. Taking a cue from McLuhan, De Kerkhove[38] believes that television has a direct psychosomatic effect on viewers.

> "Each rapid-fire edit, each "jolt" provided by TV, sets up in our bodies what is known in clinical psychophysiology as an 'orientation response.' [...] Television, De Kerkhove, and others have argued, is designed to deny its audience that half-second response time and the subsequent resolution, and thus to maintain a high level of tension in which rational analysis is possible." (in Rowland, 1997, p. 185).

Perhaps this is the real reason why television seems to turn viewers into "zombies" or "couch potatoes." Kroker[39] also believes that "our bodies are actually being rearranged by media exposure."

While the above claims may lack empirical evidence, others (Postman, 1986; Rowland, 1997) argue more convincingly that television viewers are passive because the medium does not require participation. Rowland (1997) quips that "even the laughter is supplied" (p. 184). K. H. Jamieson (1988) argues that television does not promote critical thinking, but rather elicits emotions and feelings. Finally, L. Grossberg (1987) proposes that "TV is empowered precisely because we are comparatively indifferent to it even as it is in-different to us (it doesn't demand our presence yet it is always waiting for us)" (p. 35). If television really does have such soporific effects on viewers, then the question arises whether televised religious programs create lazy followers.

The unfortunate conclusion is that televangelism, only one of many religious uses of this medium, has overshadowed all other media in the popular imagination. It is important to note that Schultze's (1991) comments refer mostly to the televangelism of the 1980's. Christian television has not been able to recover from the televangelism scandals of that decade. These scandals have contributed to the devastation of the reputation of not only evangelizing denominations, but all of Christianity.[40] While electronic media may have the power to convert millions; in the wrong hands, they also have the means to repel millions.

The technological history of spiritual mediation follows alongside the history of communication. While McLuhan's and Ong's hopes for secondary orality may have been somewhat premature, their contribution to the understanding of spiritual experience is priceless. Almost every communication and information technology since speech has been implicated in the experience of spirituality because of the need to understand, share and interpret the knowledge and ways of the Divine. It is clear, however, that the technologies themselves cannot be held responsible for changes that might occur in our realm of experience.

Each of these technologies only mediate some form of spiritual action. The book, especially the Bible, records Christian history, philosophy and doctrine. In this sense, it is an *information* technology that enables the storage and retrieval of religious knowledge. The Bible functions on the level of individual readers; but it also contributed to the formation of communities,

especially the greater community of the Christian Church. Radio and television also mediate religious experience but function more as *communication* technologies versus *information* technologies. They mediate symbolic, ritual and collective experiences, yet lack the ability to mediate on an interpersonal level true spiritual engagement. These broadcast technologies have fostered audiences of faith, but fall short of enabling interaction on a community level. Computer-mediated communication shows promise for enabling both interpersonal communication and information storage and retrieval. In this way, it can function as both a resource and a mediating agent.

3.2 Symbolic Mediation

Communications technologies such as the printing press and television are relative newcomers to the spiritual scene. Symbols have been the primary messengers of spiritual truths since the first cave paintings. Today, the theory behind symbols refers to more than just crude hieroglyphics: symbols include everything from the alphabet to the digitized three-dimensional image. This section discusses the issues surrounding the symbolic mediation of spiritual experience. An evaluation of two categories of symbols — text and images — within Christian experience, is in order. These symbols are important for spiritual experience because of how they are thought to effect both communication and consciousness. Both words and images are primary technologies that have mediated spirituality since the Garden of Eden. The spoken, written, and now electronic word are also bridges between thought and action, as is the symbol in its infinite form. Searle (1969) first asked the

question "how do words relate to the world?" This chapter particularizes that question by asking how words and images relate to the spiritual lifeworld? The central role that words and images play in the communication process necessitates an examination of these concepts with regard to how the form affects the function of the symbol; how certain symbols are understood to be sacred; and how the evolution of the symbol is arguably related to the evolution of consciousness.

3.2.1 The Word and Spirituality

The symbol of the word assumes primary importance in Christian theology. In the biblical sense, the word is the tangible record of God's commands and Jesus' teachings. The word forms a bridge between deity and mankind. This is why Jesus is called the "Word" as he is a mediator between God and man.[41] It follows that anything that affects the "word" also affects this relationship. It is noteworthy that Jesus is also known as the "Way", indicating that the path to spiritual understanding is related to the understanding of the "Word." Many scholars have argued that the expression of the word whether in handwritten script or electronic text affects an essential aspect of our communication experience. A discussion of the "Word" as a symbolic mediator of spiritual experience, then, must address the claims regarding the evolution of the "word" which will allow an investigation of the theory that the form of the word affects consciousness.

Walter Ong (1982) is largely responsible for advancing the theory that the preservation of the spoken word, in material form, is the key transforming

moment for consciousness. Ong's (1982) "transformation theory" that "writing restructures consciousness" goes further than Innis and McLuhan in proposing that communication media have profound effects on consciousness (p. 82). "Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness" (*Ibid*, p. 78).[42] The cumulative result is that experience, in general, becomes a more subjective process, versus intersubjective, because the technology of writing removes us from direct human interaction.

While the word has undergone various material transformations through history, the word as a religious symbol has also evolved. On the linguistic level, the word is the basic unit of language that acts as a medium for meaning. This symbolic mediation is comparable to the word as a spiritual symbol that communicates God's commandments and grace. There is a great range of theological interpretations regarding the holy "Word" in Christian teaching. Ellul (1985) writes that "the only channel of revelation is the word" (p. 50). This bias, represented by the Protestant faith, discounts the biblical evidence that describes the many times God has spoken to prophets through dreams. Often the "Word" is used as a metaphor for the whole Bible. In addition, while many Christian teachers speak of the "living Word", this does not mean that it is a "mutable" or changeable doctrine. In one sense it is living because, as Ong (1982) points out, "the deadness of the text, its removal from the living lifeworld, its rigid visual fixity, assures its endurance and its

potential for being resurrected into limitless living contexts by a potentially infinite number of living readers (p. 81).

Ong's (1982) theory of the transformation of consciousness does have some basis in the shifting experience of the mediated word, "opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set" (p. 105). There is a felt difference between, for example, hearing a lecture and reading a book. Both experiences mediate or communicate information; each experience however, may partially determine how that information is understood and remembered.

Convincing evidence exists for how the "manner" in which words are preserved affects the whole communication process. Two examples from Eisenstein's (1983) research illustrate this point. First, an important effect of printing was the remarkable increase in the numbers of published books (p. 19). This simple fact resulted in profound changes to the economics of literacy. Books became more affordable and topics more diverse. Second, printing led to new writing conventions such as title pages, tables of contents and catalogues, making books more "reader friendly" (*Ibid*, p. 20-21). Eisenstein (1983) goes further in acknowledging that "the thoughts of readers are guided by the way the contents of books are arranged and presented. Basic changes in book format might well lead to changes in thought patterns" (p. 64).

Examining reading reception patterns shifts the focus from the technological realm to the subjective realm. For example, the reading process changed in conjunction with the shift to printed text. It is generally believed that, previous to print, passages were most often read aloud. The lack of punctuation and idiosyncrasies of handwritten script often necessitated that words be read aloud to make sense of them. Various scholars have demonstrated, however, that the skill of silent reading was acquired during the manuscript era by those who had access to reading material.[43] Printed text incorporated standardized type and punctuation helped to interiorize the reading experience, enabling quicker and silent reading for the rest of the population.

The change in reading patterns may also be related to change in convention, however. For example, *lectio devina* , a meditative way of reading that emphasizes slow and careful attention to the text, was a common practice among medieval Christian contemplatives well before the sixteenth century (Zaleski, 1997, p. 117). Illich[44] documents how changes to the alphabet, use of writing tools, and the importing of the skill of paper manufacturing contributed to what he calls the *scribal revolution*. Beginning in the 12th century, these innovations profoundly affected social practice, especially with respect to official documents. For example, the spoken oath was gradually overtaken by the written oath or agreement. Except in courts of law, the spoken promise is no longer sufficient to guarantee trust. The act of speaking does not carry the weight it did previously. Thus, written oath-taking, along with many other conventions that began to rely on writing, no longer had to

rely on physical presence, or the ephemerality of the spoken word. Such interactions could be mediated by the pen and paper.

If the experience of reading and the technology of writing removed us from one another, how did it affect the believer's relationship with God? Ong (1982) hypothesized that "writing makes possible the great introspective religious traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam" (p. 105). This is a somewhat ironic statement for these religions are all historically situated within primarily oral cultures. Keast (1995) takes a different position regarding Christianity. He proposes that "[t]he works of both Innis and Cochrane suggest, clearly, that God is manifest in human interaction. It is through human interaction that God may be apprehended and pursued, and that freedom may be affected. This human communication, oral communication, is the essence of Christianity" (p. 23).[45] Once again, the dialectic between individual and collective experience, represented by literacy and orality, is at the forefront of the debate.

The debate continues with the shift to electronic culture. There are those who consider electronic communication to be an abomination and print the only channel to God (Ellul, 1985; Heim, 1993; Illich, 1989; Muggeridge, 1977). These fears of technology and fears of change are echoed throughout history. Ong (1982) points out that Plato regarded writing to be similarly corrupting as many consider computers to be (p. 79). This is not to discount possibly valid objections to new technologies and a cautious approach to how they are used. Illich (1989) believes that computer technology has a totalizing influence that

is producing a "cybernetic mind" in contrast with the "bookish mind" created by books. The problem with the cybernetic mind is that:

> [...] if everything is indeed a system, what is the individual but a node, friendship but networking, the body but an object to be carefully monitored and controlled? What is the person but a cyborg and the universe but a huge computer? (in Flim, 1991, p. 51).

This results in the depersonalization of our culture, and our separation further and further from God. [46]

Heim (1993) also cautions that the profusion of information created by electronic communication has the negative result of supporting "the priority of system." (p. 17). Heim's analysis of hypertext reveals how potentially misleading this technology really is because it "emulates a divine access to things" (p. 38). This divine access is illusory as it does not really provide us with the instant insight of God; but rather, fools us into believing we can do anything, and know everything. This hubris leads to the transformation of epistemology and a distortion of reality which jeopardizes our ability to think. Heim's diatribe against cybernetic thinking emphasizes that all reality does not conform to the rules of a system. To reinforce this theory, Heim quotes Heidegger who wrote that:

> Maybe history and tradition will fit smoothly into the information retrieval systems which will serve as a resource for the inevitable planning needs of a cybernetically organized mankind. The question is whether thinking, too will end in the business of information processing.[47]

If computers enable a new way of thinking, and a new way of knowing, then the implications for society are tremendous. Heim is worried that if computers help us standardize, organize and typify, we will become unable to think critically. We will take on that "numb stance of the technological idiot" that McLuhan describes. The ultimate peril of cyberspace is that we "may lose touch with our inner states" (Heim, 1993, p. 81).

While Heim makes a valid point regarding the egoism of much of computer culture he assumes that changing our mode of communication will alter our ability to think. He also believes there is a connection between our ability to think, and our ability to *believe*— our ability to lead a spiritual life.[48] This argument, however, is untenable. No communication technology can destroy our ability to think. This would be a restructuring of consciousness far beyond the subtle changes that might take place as a result of changes in the modes of communication.[49]

Examples of such subtle changes are given in analyses of electronic text. Some postmodern theorists see limitless opportunity for the liberating possibilities of electronic text. Computer technology enables a more fluid approach to text than was possible with any previous communication technology. Scholars such as Bolter (1991) and Landow(1992) assert that electronic text alters the immutability of print, questions the authority of the author, explodes the idea of canon and generally upsets the hegemony of humanism. The ultimate result is that our ways of thinking will change. The non-linear interactivity that computer technology supports will usher in

a new age of freedom and love. Already these claims are outdated as they referred mostly to hypertext, only one aspect of computerized communication.

To understand the effects computerization might have on sacred texts one must keep in mind the power of faith. Landow (1992) questions whether "electronic versions of the Bible, like CD Word, that seem to be essentially democratizing similarly desacralize the Scriptures?" (p. 64). He points out that the electronic Bible would "demystify" biblical exegesis for the lay (wo)man and "enforce the presence of multiple versions" that denies the possibility of a unified and special text (p. 64). Perhaps this might be *one* outcome of electronic media; however, believers have overlooked the presence of multiple texts for centuries. This is a particular concern of scholars, not the faithful. As demonstrated in the previous section, the printing press also had a "demystifying" effect yet literal belief in the Bible still persists today.

Contrary to Landow's prediction, Biblical scholars and students might actually feel quite comfortable in a hypertextual world. This is because hypertext actually mimics the study of the scriptures. Bible reading has been "hypertextual" for a couple of centuries with the use of biblical concordances. Having the New and Old Testaments packaged together allows for easy reference between for example, Jesus' words and the scripture from which he is quoting (Baker, 1997). Charles Henderson, the "Pastor of the First Church of Cyberspace" points out that "In reading the Bible, as in surfing the Internet,

one learns to jump rather quickly from one point in time and space to another, and this happens because of the 'links' that the editors of both sacred text and hypertext have constructed" (Henderson, 1997).

Not all believers share an enthusiasm for the computerization of spiritual texts. Several people interviewed for Jeff Zaleski's (1997) book *The Soul of Cyberspace: how new technology is changing our spiritual lives*, are careful to point out that many aspects of religious practice cannot be distributed via computer. Rabbi Yosef Y. Kazen, the administrator of the Chabad-Lubavitch web site, does not believe that the Bible should be on the Net because "To market it on the Net, to say that 'here is an authentic version of the Bible as provided by the movement' — that's a very, very big responsibility" (p. 17). This stems partially from the belief that making something widely available cheapens it, increases the potential for distortion and misinterpretation, and decreases control over it. While these may be valid claims to some extent, they are the same claims put forth by those who originally opposed the printing of the Bible.

Landow does raise a valid point, however, regarding the dissolution of a central authority: not as a result of hypertext *per se*, but as a result of the structure of the Internet itself. It follows that if people are searching for spiritual answers on the Internet, they may have a difficult time finding them given the lack of maps and guidelines. The Pope's web site is as easily accessed as any other, and a keyword search on "Faith", for example, may not necessarily lead one to the former. In addition, there are no guarantees as to

the credibility of a particular website or who one might be communicating with on-line. This may have important repercussions for spiritual seekers. If one relies solely on the computer for information, frustration and a distorted view of reality may result.

Just because our society is becoming increasingly dependent on computers does not mean that we forfeit textual communication, however. Despite what the critics and theorists might say, the alphabet is here to stay. This does not mean textual communication will not evolve, either. The question remains whether books will eventually be replaced by computers. At this point in computer development, computers are no match for the ease of reading afforded by books. Rapid innovation may soon change this, however. Sweet points out that "there is perhaps no greater evidence that book culture is coming to an end, a vital but vestigial force in a predominantly electronic culture, than the explosion of scholarly interest in the history of the book" (p. 7). Mullins (1996) argues that "modern [biblical] literalism represents some of the fears and nostalgia of late book culture" and that "critical study of the Bible is thus also a second offspring of book culture" (p. 277). Historically it is the case, however, that papyrus replaced stone blocks, and parchment replaced papyrus. Each technology played a vital role in communicating and preserving information, but each technology was eventually replaced by a better one. While the debate still rages on whether computerized text or printed text is superior, history demonstrates that whichever technology proves more useful will prevail.

To understand the "word" one must understand the many forms this symbol can take. Spoken, written and electronic words carry with them different characteristics that affect how the word will be understood. A more drastic theory sees these technical changes as altering how our mind itself works, as altering our consciousness. How the word is understood is especially important in the spiritual lifeworld as interpretation is central to belief. Conversely, belief is also central to interpretation as the power of faith can overlook the inconsistencies of communication. The word, as mediator between deity and mankind, plays a special role in the spiritual experience as it is both affected by technological changes and protected by sacred power. In a sense, the word is a neutral vessel adorned by technology, interpreted by belief, and understood finally through an awareness of the mediating role this symbol plays in communication.

3.2.2 Symbolic Images and the Spiritual

The conclusions reached above regarding the word can be applied as well to the symbol. While both word and image are mediating symbols, the image retains —for lack of a better word — a different image. McLuhan insisted that the printing press instigated a shift from "image culture to word culture." Eisenstein (1983) illustrates that this is an oversimplification of the cultural metamorphosis that took place (p. 35). To claim that electronic media is reversing the process is equally misleading. The issue today is no longer a contest between aural and visual, or even text and image, but —perhaps as always — our culture is a multimedia experience. To continue the investigation of symbolic mediation of the spiritual, this section discusses the

attitudes towards spiritual images. This discussion focuses on religious icons and art. Underlying these positions are attitudes toward reproduction and distortion that have important repercussions for religious belief and practice. First the location of the power of the icon or symbol depends on interpretation and faith. Second the reproduction of spiritual images raises questions of value and authenticity. Finally, the digitization of spiritual images presents a new set of considerations for believers.

An icon is a devotional image or painting. Goethals (1990) demonstrates that, historically, tension has existed between the aniconic and iconic aesthetic in religious practice. This controversy centres around the perceived power ascribed to religious images. The preference for one form of spiritual mediation over the other has caused huge religious rifts in Christianity and other religions. In Christianity, iconoclasm surfaced first in the 8th and 9th century in the Eastern church and again in the 16th and 17th century as a Puritan backlash to the Church. This breaking of images has a long history in Judaism, where Yahweh often instructed his people to destroy their idols. Image-making is a potent religious issue.

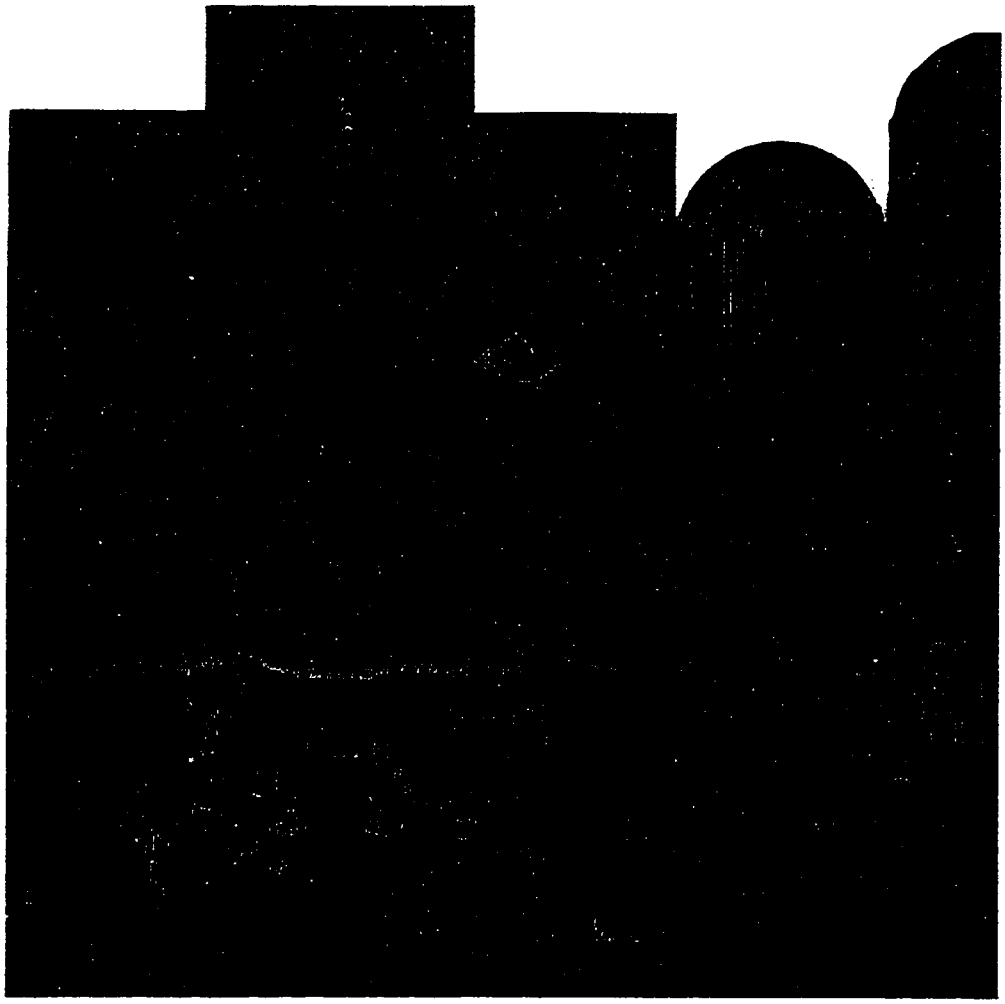
From a spiritual perspective, however, the power or usefulness of the image lies in how it is perceived. Making an image can be considered debasing, as in the case of the Jewish refusal to write God's name, or idolatrous, as an extreme interpretation of the second commandment.[50] On the other hand, images provide teaching tools, meditation objects, and mnemonic devices. Goethals (1990) writes that:

> [t]he essential power of images is their capacity to give material form to invisible faith. If we look back over history, we see an almost endless panorama of symbols human beings have fashioned *to impose order on experience* — from the handprints on a paleolithic wall to the pervasive electronic images which leap across national barriers and boundaries (pp. 209-210, my emphasis).

Goethals (1981) does point out that "[a]s long as no supernatural power is thought to be residing in images, the use of images to call up recollections, ideas, or emotions is acceptable even among some Protestants" (pp. 147-148).

Religious images also served an instructional purpose as the Bible could be illustrated in the windows, doors, walls and ceilings of the church. From the suffering of saints to the suffering of the damned, these images provided a graphic portrait of salvation for the illiterate believer. With the advent of the printing press, the Reformation, and increased literacy, the argument could be made that such objects were superfluous in Protestant northern Europe.[51]

Figure 3.1 The Ghent Altarpiece (Inside center and side panel)



The Ghent altarpiece is a particularly fitting example of the tensions that existed during the sixteenth century around the issue of symbolic sacred representation. Painted a century earlier, although the exact date and artist are not definitively known, it was threatened by Protestant disturbances that broke out in Ghent in 1566. Puyvelde (1947) relates how:

> two days before iconoclasts broke into the church, the picture had been hidden in the tower, and a few days later it was moved to the Town

> Hall. The municipality, which had turned Protestant, thought of offering it to Queen Elizabeth of England who had advanced them large subsidies, but the opposition of Josse Triest, seigneur of Lovendeghem, a descendent of the donors, put a stop to this project. In 1584 the altarpiece was returned by the municipality — now Catholic again — to the church (p. 120).[1]

In modern times, large-scale iconoclasm, such as demonstrated during the Reformation, would be difficult to enforce given the pervasiveness of both religious and secular visual images. Making and reproducing images is easier than ever. Walter Benjamin (1968) in his essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" formulated a theory that explains why we devalue this reproduction. He proposed that:

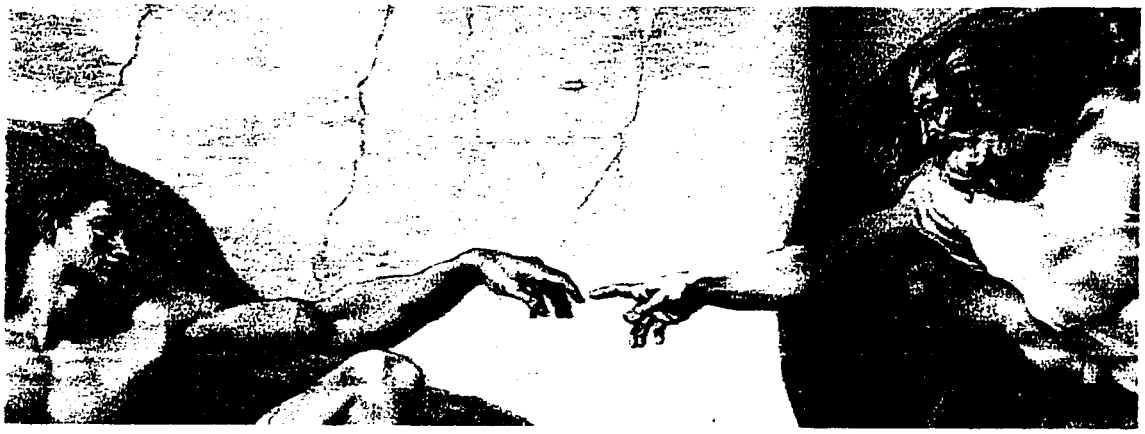
> that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art [...] the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind (p. 221).

The notion of "aura" has its origins in Platonic Idealism that sees in everything a reproduction of the original Form. The aura also has phenomenological implications because the presence or absence of the aura will effect how the object is experienced. Finally, the aura is a challenge to

capitalist production, that highlights the debasing nature of mass production and the fetishization of cultural products.

The aura of the spiritual image, however, is of a different quality than that of the artwork, as Benjamin makes clear. Believers have more than simply an aesthetic relationship to their images. This "spiritual aura" depends on the belief system of the observer, and its efficacy lies in its ability to mediate spiritual experience. For example, the Cistine Chapel has deeper meaning for the believer than for the non-believer simply admiring the artwork.

Figure 3.2 The Creation of Adam (portion)[2]



For this reason, the fetishization of spiritual products seems even more debasing and sacrilegious. Schultze (1991) referring to televangelism, points out that "when Christianity is peddled like any other product, it loses its distinctiveness and authenticity" (p. 123). It seems debasing for spiritual products of any kind to have to conform to the needs of the market. For example, outrage against the peddling of papal dispensations during the

fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was one impetus for the religious reforms of the Protestant Reformation.

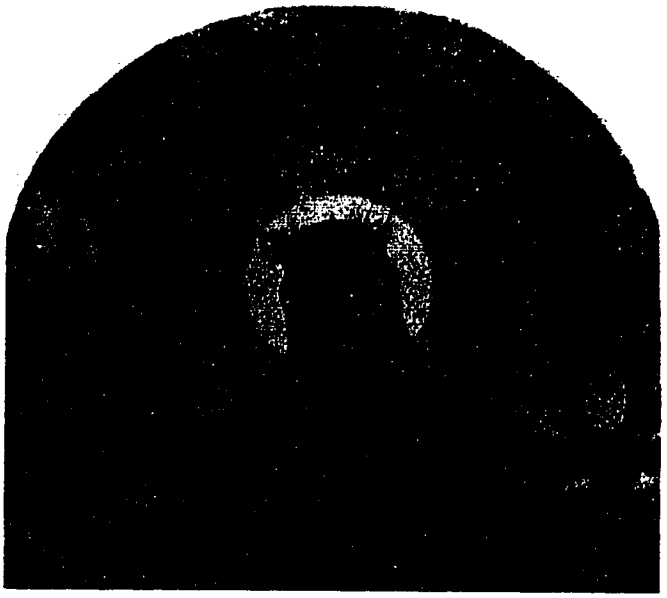
Mass production and fetishization also have a numbing effect. This is particularly serious for spiritual belief. Kinney (1997) believes that "if the imagination is stunted through being spoonfed an endless stream of others' visions, especially images that compete with each other for violent or shocking impact, the spiritual life of the individual will atrophy" (p. 774).[3] Certainly images of "violent and shocking impact" abound today, but it is not proven that this is a causal factor for why many people lack a spiritual life. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to see a relationship between imagistic oversaturation and a carelessness or indifference towards images that were traditionally considered sacred. For example, the Christian symbol of the cross is now an ambiguous fashion statement.

Benjamin's perspective, however, is a negative and reactionary one that views the "massification" of art, and culture in general, as the degradation of society.[4] Postmodern theory, on the other hand, applauds this multiplication and manipulation of symbols and images. One of the major themes of postmodern discourse is that our culture is "recombinant"; "that is, all images or events are simply fodder for further media allusion and manipulation" (Kingwell, 1996, p. 158). Now more than ever "there is nothing new under the sun." One outcome of this belief is the transformation of traditional religious symbols. Thieme (1997), echoing Ong, points out that the major religious figures:

> Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and others, all emerged in human consciousness during that very narrow bandwidth of historical time that coincided with the ubiquity of writing. Their translation from flesh-and-blood human beings into oral constructs and in turn into textual beings enabled them to mediate meaning to the cultures that coalesced around their symbolic presence.[5]

While Thieme is historically incorrect regarding the "ubiquity of writing" — writing was far from ubiquitous during this period which extended from 1200 BC to 600 AD — his point that each of these historical personages have been mediated according to the dominant form of communication is correct. He proposes that each of these spiritual figures will eventually have a symbolic digital presence as well. He questions whether changes in mediation might change the *nature* of these central religious figures. Textual descriptions of Jesus or Mohammed are open to interpretation and individual imagination. Visual images of these figures would impose a form on them that present-day believers might not accept as readily. So while technology might enable the easy digitization and reproduction of images (easier than with print) Thieme disregards the trend towards iconoclasm in our culture that resists the imposition of images on the imagination of believers (Goethals, 1990). Witness the rejection of the bearded white, male God and European-faced Jesus for female God images and more authentic Middle-Eastern visages of Christ.

Figure 3.3 The Light of the World (Upper portion) [6]



The computerization of religious images raises another question. How do we reconcile Benjamin's statement that "[t]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (p. 220), with Haraway's (1990) observation [this is originally Baudrillard's observation[7]] that "[m]icroelectronics is the technical basis of simulacra, that is, of copies without originals" (p. 207). When we consider the "spiritual" image produced on a computer the "original" is often an element of faith. So the authenticity of the computerized visage of Christ for example, is twice removed from the realm of originality.

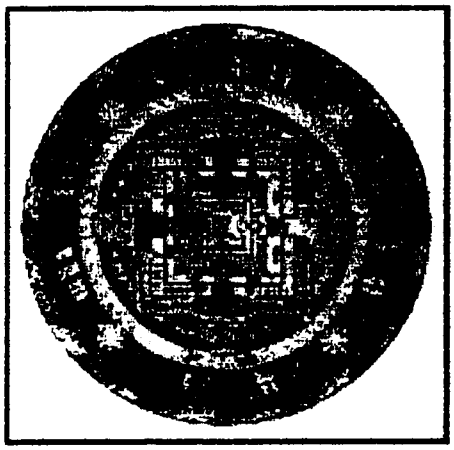
Haraway and Baudrillard failed to realize, however, that the absence of an "original" is not a new phenomenon that emerged with the discovery of microelectronics. Art itself is a "copy without an original" because art is not simply mimetic. Gombrich (1977) in his book *Art and Illusion* demonstrates

that artistic creations — even when they attempt to copy nature — are utterly constructed using stereotypical forms and types. Indeed, the act of representation guarantees that two artists will not paint the same picture and two critics will not "see" the same image on the canvas. Computerized images are affected by the same considerations, only they are created in a different medium than brush, paint and canvas.

Spiritual images, obviously, are not copies of an "original." Zaleski (1997) mentions the use of Buddhist *mandala* for meditation. Several of these holy symbols have been digitized so others may easily obtain copies for their own purposes. Zaleski himself owns a mandala screen saver that appears whenever his computer is idle. He raises the point that:

> employing a sacred symbol as a screen saver seems especially problematic, since screensavers are themselves like habits, running through the same routine over and over again. Familiarity with them breeds not contempt, but invisibility. Stopping the Kalachakra mandala each time I need to return to work on my computer, moreover, strikes me at times as vaguely blasphemous, like cutting off a crucifix at the knees (p. 241).

Figure 3.4 The Kalachakra Symbol[8]



While digitization may have enabled the free distribution of these images, their pervasiveness — being used as a screen-saver — encourages irreverence.

Icons and religious images act as symbolic mediators of spiritual knowledge. A devotional image is meant to remind, instruct and focus one's attention on the spiritual experience rather than the image itself. In this sense, devotional images function on a similar level to words: it is not the physical letters or form of the image that matters but the meaning behind the symbol. When spiritual images are mass produced for sale, they are treated simply as *images* that can be reproduced, altered, or destroyed without a second thought. The meaning behind the symbol is not inherent in the form, as if present only in the original. This means that reproduction should not be an issue for the believer. The only issue is the interpretation and belief about the image itself.

Believers treat their sacred texts *and* symbols with reverence. This reverence stems from the belief that the texts, icons, images and symbols mediate the Divine. For this reason, these communication technologies, while possessing the same characteristics of other media, are in a category by themselves. They are qualitatively different from everyday forms of communications and can

be distinguished as "representational". Their particular categorization depends on the nature of belief — with wide interpretations — and faith in both the technology and the Divinity. A lack of faith in either the Sender, the method of transmission, or the interpretation is a serious spiritual issue as it represents a break with the Divine. The further one is removed from the original message communicated by God, the further one is removed from God. What matters to communicants, therefore, is that the essential message remains true. As forms of communication evolve, the task for the believer becomes one of adaptation rather than a drastic shift in consciousness. If belief does not evolve — or changes very little — then this constant allows for symbolic reinterpretation *ad infinitum.*

3.3 Action, Interaction and Mediation

Before inspirational books, televangelists and instructional videos there were people who guided us on our spiritual quests. Today, the spiritual guide and spiritual community still plays a vital role in the life of the spirit. The modern difference is that technology has impinged on this relationship. Two issues are of paramount importance. First, the notion of spiritually significant rituals needs to be explored. When it comes to spiritual activities, mediation of any kind — whether human or technological— is a contentious issue. Second, community formation and sustenance is brought into question when technology is used to mediate between community members. The nature of the technology partly determines whether communities can form at all. Regretfully, the discussion of community will not be addressed due to the constraints of the project.

3.3.1 Mediated Ritual

While it may be commonplace now to see a religious service on television, hear a sermon on the radio or read the Bible in one's own home, *sacramental* experiences have so far almost completely avoided technological mediation. The sacramental ritual is investigated here to illustrate the barriers to mediation and the effects of mediation on spiritual activity. Several issues that come into play when discussing the idea of the *technological* mediation of spiritual rituals. The first central issue is whether sacraments and religious rituals require physical presence. The answer to this question lies partly in how materiality is interpreted in a given belief system. Second, the role of intersubjectivity in the sacramental experience has implications for technological mediation. The final consideration involves the "desacralization" of the modern lifeworld and the role of communication technology in this process.

The notion of *sacrament* is open to a range of theological interpretations. Religious ritual, according to Goethals (1981), "presupposes a mystical or supernatural dimension. In the ritual play of traditional religion, persons seek communion with transcendent being; the myths that are enacted point to the beginning and beyond. Through faith, the participants perceive dimensions of space, time, and destiny beyond finite experience" (p. 7). Sacraments are a Christian version of religious ritual that provide opportunities for "communion with transcendent being" at specific points in life and for specific reasons. The Concise Oxford Dictionary offers a more

specific definition of sacrament: "a religious ceremony or act of the Christian Churches regarded as an outward and visible sign of inward and spiritual grace: applied by the Eastern, pre-Reformation Western, and Roman Catholic Churches to the seven rites of baptism, confirmation, the Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, ordination, and matrimony, but restricted by most Protestants to baptism and the Eucharist." While sacraments are mediating rituals between (wo)man and God, they are also most often guided, or mediated by a religious practitioner. Sacraments are also rituals that follow a prescribed procedure including place, format, and other elements such as the bread of Eucharist and the water of baptism. It is the ritual aspect of sacraments — and interpretation of the significance of that ritual — that require the physical presence of the participants.

Sacramental events operate on a one-to-one basis: like a telephone call to God.[60] Paradoxically, according to St. Thomas Aquinas "the faith that works in the sacraments is primarily and essentially the faith of the Church, and only secondarily the personal faith of the recipient united to the Church. [...] This faith of [the Church] establishes the necessary continuity between the divine institution and the Passion, on the one hand, and the sacramental action, on the other."[61] This is partially what sets sacramental experiences apart from other religious rituals. The difference between sacrament and other religious rituals lies in the realm of experience. While rituals can be experienced at the level of community, sacraments are individually-experienced religious rituals that take place before the community and help to preserve the continuity of that community.

Sacraments are often thought to be a particularly Catholic form of Christian ritual. The traditional beliefs of the Catholic Church are a facile explanation, however, for why these rituals have escaped technological mediation. The preservation of traditions, and the resistance to technological mediation is located in the degree of materiality found in the respective belief system.

Meyrowitz's (1985) book *No Sense of Place* can provide insight into the problem of materiality and sacraments. He argues that "electronic media have undermined the traditional relationship between physical setting and social situation" (p. 7). It is noteworthy that his theory applies to "social events" specifically (p. vii). Giddens (1990) also addresses the role of electronic media in distancing activities in both time and space. While many religious rituals are also "social events", sacraments are less about social experience and more about the individual's spiritual journey.[62] For this reason, the notion of space, as the location for these events is *complicated by the idea of the sacred.* Eliade (1959) addresses the idea of sacred space. Sacred space is qualitatively different from the space of the everyday and is invested with significance (p. 20). Sacred space is consecrated by the Divine. The fluidity of this space is determined by the belief system. A typical example are Muslims who must face Mecca when praying at predetermined times. The ritual of turning to Mecca is a substitute for actually being there. On the other hand, Christian sacred space is fluid and spontaneous because of Jesus' words that "where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them."[63] Space is sanctified simply by Christian fellowship.

This flexibility, however, has not necessarily persisted in the formation of traditions and doctrine. For example, the sacrament of the Eucharist is approached with more or less formality among Christians: for Catholics it must be a certain bread and a certain wine consecrated by a priest; for some Protestant denominations, crackers and grape juice suffice. In the first case, the material objects of earthly bread and wine take a divine form as the actual body and blood of Christ. In the second example, the crackers and grape juice are a symbolic reminder of the Last Supper. In stark contrast, O'Leary (1996) gives an example of a Technopagan community that simulates a eucharist-type celebration on-line where neither real bread nor real wine are necessary. Each belief system interprets the importance of the actual objects for spiritual activity. The attitude towards material presence predetermines whether technological mediation — or the dislocation of the ritual place — is acceptable.

Material presence is a paramount issue for the *experience* of the ritual (O'Leary & Brasher, 1996). The full experience of ritual requires belief in the power and significance of the event. The experience of the ritual also depends on the level of participation in that ritual. For example, guests at a wedding ceremony feel less involved than the bride and bridegroom receiving the sacrament. Finally, in the spiritual sense, ritual is intended to link both (wo)man to God and (wo)man to (wo)man through the generations. The experience of ritual is a celebration that annihilates time in its cyclical

enactment guiding the believer through the spiritual life and following an ancestral tradition that binds the generations (Eliade, 1959; Campbell, 1988).

If the most important aspect of ritual is situated action, then it would seem that the television viewer cannot be said to be participating fully. Television reduces the ritual experience from a multi-media experience to a two-dimensional picture of sight and sound. (Goethals, 1981, p. 129). This does not mean that viewers do not *feel* somewhat involved. Some religious rituals are better suited to technological mediation than others. Goethals (1981) gives the example of the televised Catholic Mass celebrated by the Pope (p. 129). While television participants cannot receive Communion they may have a better experience of the Mass because they have a better vantage point.[64] Another contemporary example is the funeral of Princess Diana. Countless mourners tuned into her funeral and wept. Requiring only observation, this ritual is on a different level of participation than celebrating the Mass. Nevertheless, television performed an important function by mediating the mourning experience of a funeral for many people.

For the most part, however, technological mediation of a sacramental experience is far from satisfying. For example, Catholic believers on their deathbed might feel very cheated if priests offered Extreme Unction (or Last Rights) only over the phone. Similarly, a couple getting married over the Internet, even with video-conferencing, might really be deprived of the true magic of the moment. Certainly consummation would be a problem. Nevertheless, if these were the only options available due to distance or some

other impediment, then perhaps technological mediation would suffice. There seems to be no denying, however, that the *full* experience of the ritual requires actual physical presence .

Zaleski (1997) probes several key spokespeople regarding the possibility that computer technology can mediate spiritual experience, such as sacraments. While one or two people cannot constitute a representative sample, all of the interviewees including those from Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Christian faiths concede that at some point, actual presence is a necessary aspect of religious teaching and spiritual experience. Computers can certainly mediate intersubjective experience: communication between people. Physical presence, however, cannot be modeled.

The problem lies in the paucity of the experience and the attitude of reverence. Goethals (1981) reminds us that "[r]itual participation can renew a person's faith in a center of values and meaning and can confirm one's place in a larger symbolic order. These experiences of renewal and confirmation occur, however only to the degree that one is totally immersed in the ritual and its myth" (p. 10).[65] From the standpoint of experience, perhaps "immersion" can only be achieved through physical presence. Sacraments, however, are not simply about the experience of the individual. These sacred rituals are believed to be "unions with God." Such an occurrence requires the utmost reverence. Such reverence requires — at the very least — the actual presence of the individual receiving the sacrament!

When technology *replaces human participation*, however, questions of theological importance arise. For example, Garvey (1994) proposes the creation of an automatic confession machine, or ACM. His humorous description of how this machine would work is underscored by the realization that such seemingly inane ideas are a symptom of our technologically blinded society:

> This Automatic Confession Machine should not be misconstrued as a diatribe against religious faith. Rather it is as much a warning - suggesting that the inexorable drive of commercialism and marketing will redefine spiritual needs as yet another commodity to be researched, marketed, and packaged. At the same time the ACM is indicative of how technology has intruded into our lives, mediating what used to be human-to-human transactions now potentially encroaching upon the personal and spiritual (Garvey, 1994).

The central issue is that such a machine would replace the human mediator -- in this case the priest — with a technological substitute. Garvey points out that "[t]he question is not whether or not computers can think, but if someone who confesses at the ACM and believes they are absolved, are they actually absolved? Can the program as an expert system replace the functionality of the priest?" If conversion, prayer, healing and mourning can take place in the virtual space of television, why not also confession? Essential to Catholic belief is the notion of intercession. The priest in the confessional intercedes on behalf of the sinner. Removing the priest is removing the buffer between impure sinner and God. Catholic theology

designates the ministers of sacraments as "Christ's agents for the benefit of the Church and ultimately, of all men".[66] This is one example where religious belief discounts even the possibility that a computer could perform such a function. The role that humans play in ritual is sometimes irreplaceable.

One might ask, however, "if a sacrament is a telephone call to God, why does the operator need to listen in?" Aside from the theological explanation, there is perhaps a deeper psychological explanation: people still *want* to confess to *someone*. Confessions of various sorts often appear in the Christian newsgroups on the Internet. Recently, a newsgroup participant confessed on-line to killing his two daughters. On the Net, confession takes on an interpersonal aspect again. The difference lies in the degree of anonymity. Rather than just the confessional screen between priest and sinner, confession can be completely incognito.[67]

The human mediator, intercessor, or spiritual guide is thought to be superfluous in the modern Western lifeworld. The rejection of this type of mediation has its origins in the modern concept of self-autonomy. Luckmann (1963) points out that "the dominant themes in the modern sacred cosmos bestow something like a sacred status upon the individual by articulating his 'autonomy'" (p. 109). This autonomy is in direct opposition to themes of interdependence, community and even mediation. Each person is challenged to find their own path using their own resources. This is one reason why sacraments such as confession have fallen out of fashion.

Weber (1930) demonstrated that the Reformation saw the devaluation of the notion of sacrament as a consequence of Calvinist doctrine. The notion of predestination made the mediating power of the sacraments superfluous (p. 104). What followed was a spiritual isolation that Weber proposed partially led to the formation of modern individualism (p. 105). Thus, the celebration of sacraments became antithetical to the modern sensibility. Weber (1958) saw the construction of the modern sensibility as a process of disenchantment where attaining salvation through this-worldly asceticism evolved into an impersonal, rational, and objective material existence.

In contrast to Weber's pessimistic view, Durkheim (1963) maintained that despite the secularization of society, modern (wo)man still needs the life-affirming experience of ritual. In the modern Western lifeworld, secular rituals have replaced sacred ones in many instances. (Durkheim, 1963; Eliade, 1959; Goethals 1981, 1990; Luckmann, 1963; Weber, 1963;). Eliade (1959) calls this the substitution of the *profane* for the *sacred*, the "two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of history" (p. 14). Goethals (1981) compares the experience of religious ritual and symbolic expression with the experience of watching television. Her thesis is that "television has begun to perform one of the oldest, most traditional functions of images: to visualize common myths and to integrate the individual into a social whole" (p. 2). She acknowledges, however, that television distorts, trivializes, and secularizes the spiritual aspect of ritual.

In far greater abundance are the *secular* rituals that television supports. Sporting events, news and politics all have their ritual elements where the modern (wo)man can find meaning (Goethals, 1981). The superiority of the face-to-face experience, however, holds true even for many secular ritual experiences. The sporting event is almost always better in person, as is the concert and the play — in the good seats. Granted, the experience of these events are qualitatively different such that the televised game, the live CD recording, and the radio play carry an appreciation and enjoyment separate from their live-and-in-person versions.

Finally, Schultze (1991) points out that some televised religious activities "are often perceived as little more than entertainment. Moreover, they can become outlandish spectacles for unbelievers" (p. 122). The history of televangelism, in many respects, has made a mockery of contemporary Christian belief. On the Internet, many of the Christian newsgroups have become venues for non-Christians to criticize, verbally abuse and denounce Christians.[68] So while televised religious services, radio Bible study programs and other mediated religious events may be edifying for some believers, non-believers may be further alienated — rather than converted — by the spectacle. Indiscriminate communication of sacramental activities, without the requirement for active participation, may simply open the arena further for misunderstanding and criticism.

The technological mediation of events impinges on every aspect of our lives. Spiritual activity is no exception; although among Christian denominations,

the trend has been to resist technology for what is considered to be the most important events, such as sacraments. Whether technological mediation is permissible is partly determined by the theological interpretation of materiality. Whether technological mediation is preferable depends on the nature of the experience. Traditional sacraments are multimedia experiences firmly rooted in sacred place and ritual. While sacraments have a personal aspect to them, they are also dependent on the intersubjective participation of a spiritual guide or a companion. Replacing the human mediator with technology radically changes the ritual experience. Denying the intersubjective experience — replacing sacred ritual with secular individuality — leads to the impoverishment of the spiritual journey. Goethals (1981) maintains that:

> "human beings are sacramental creatures. The word *sacramental* in this context is used in a broad sense to emphasize that images, objects, and human gestures communicate in ways that words cannot. Visual forms of icon and ritual, thus, are not subservient to the word, but are important ways of mediating faith" (pp. 142-43).

In the attempt to communicate what essentially cannot be communicated, sacraments and other religious rituals represent a symbolic language that unites believers to each other and to the Divine.

Summary

There is no question that religious practice and spirituality has changed as a result of the mediation of various communications technologies. Although communications historians overlooked the role of subjectivity and

intersubjectivity in their theory, it is clear from the analysis of these technologies that the role of human agency in shaping spiritual experience supersedes any technological effect. Whether one reads a Bible, listens to a radio gospel program or watches a televangelist in action, each action is situated within a social context that has implications for individual and collective spiritual experience. From a phenomenological standpoint, this conclusion echoes the idea that experience is situated within the lifeworld of intersubjectively shared meaning. Giddens' notion of knowledgeable human agency is important in explaining how much of an effect mediation can actually have on the individual. For example, the ability to preserve belief in a religious belief system despite the inconsistencies of the historical record, of contradictions regarding doctrine and amidst secular pressure from all sides can be seen as an instance of knowledgeable human agency that supersedes the idea that we are pawns in a galactic game of chance. Indeed, Christian believers continue to provide discursive rationalization for their beliefs despite the "desacralization" process. This theme will be further elaborated in Chapter Five.

In the end, however, mediation does matter. The complexity of human relationships is both multiplied and simplified by communications media. Reason tells us that technological mediation does not interfere with the essential experience of the spiritual. Mediation does, however, change the *communication* experience. The sensory reception of the message is modified and often the message is altered to suit the form of mediation. For

this reason, the decision to technologically mediate any element of faith holds great responsibility.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cyberculture: The Building of a Mythological Space

Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.
Max Weber

In the information age, a mystic glow surrounds the term *cyberspace*.
Michael Heim

It may be that our role on this planet is not to worship God, ...but to create him. And then our work will be done. It will be time to play.
Arthur C. Clarke

Turn on a computer and you enter a world constructed by some of the most prolific, imaginative minds of this century. Science fiction writers, scientists, engineers, hippies and even politicians have driven the building of this world based on their particular visions and agendas. [69] Now that the popular press and other opinion shapers are involved in the creation of this world, the average person has a sense of what it is like —or supposed to be like—in cyberspace.

For the novice, however, sitting in front of a computer screen may not produce the sense of being in another 'world' at all. Few critics consider it

odd that a whole culture is being built around what is actually — at this point at any rate — a rather *blasé* machine. Describing this technology as "blasé" refers to the "oversaturation" many people feel as a result of marketing, news coverage and general hype, and the disappointment that comes with encountering what the actual box on your desk can do.

Despite the lackluster of the technology, the mythology surrounding it is rich and fascinating. This mythology has been centuries in the making and forms the basis for cyberculture. An analysis of cyberculture is essential for the purpose of this inquiry, as this culture is spawning a host of ideas with spiritual implications. Benedikt (1992) describes cyberspace as:

> a globally networked, computer-sustained, computer accessed, and computer generated, multidimensional, artificial, or "virtual" reality. In this reality, to which every computer is a window, seen or heard objects are neither physical nor, necessarily, representations of physical objects but are, rather, in form, character and action, made up of data, of pure information. This information derives in part from the operations of the natural, physical world, but for the most part it derives from the immense traffic of information that constitute human enterprise in science, art, business, and culture (pp. 122-123).

Cyberculture presents a number of challenges to traditional religions and religious belief in general. Kinney (1997) believes that "the decentralized contact and conflict among followers of different religions that 'the Net' encourages may represent an end-run around institutionalized religious leadership" (p. 763). Enthusiasts believe that computer technology provides a unique experience in the history of communication, and that computer networks form a new level of consciousness that will reveal the next phase of spiritual evolution. The faith that this culture has in technology, and the

corresponding technologizing of spirituality is linked both to the mythology that has been built up around computers and to the perennial search for spiritual understanding.

In the previous chapter, we investigated the role of the computer in mediating spiritual experience. The conclusion was reached that computers, like any symbol system or technology, are vessels for meaning and for action. They do not contain meaning in and of themselves but are infused with it. In this chapter, an attempt is made to get closer to understanding what is happening in the minds and souls of those who are using these machines. In order to achieve this, we must understand not only the machines, but also what the machine symbolizes for these people, how they experience the reality of these machines, what they do with them and what the computers do back. This leads us to the study of cyberculture. This brief analysis of cyberculture is far from exhaustive. In the first section, the roots of cyberculture are introduced. These roots are located in the history of mind and consciousness. Cyberspace has been hailed as "a new venue for consciousness" owing greatly to the works of Marshall McLuhan and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The second section discusses our relationship with computer technology, and how we envision our creative role. Over this discussion hovers the anthropomorphic spectre of the cyborg: a mythical man-machine that threatens our notions of self yet thrills the "postmodern" sensibility with limitless potential for subversion of traditional thinking.[70] Related to this topic, is the "creative force" that is a key driver for computer technology. In the third section, an analysis of the teleological development

of computer technology and how it relates to spiritual eschatology provides further insight. Central to this analysis is the notion of evolution and how this concept has been used by cybercultural pundits. Finally, the discourse on science and religion will help illuminate the trend towards a purported *rapprochement* between technology and spirituality, a prevalent theme in cybercultural circles.

4.1 The Roots of Cyberculture

The roots of cyberculture can be traced to the debate — since ancient Greece – – about the relationship between mind and consciousness. A central issue within this debate is the notion of dualisms: between mind and matter, body and soul. In this section, the ancient roots of cyberculture are explored, followed by an analysis of the more recent origins: the 1960s. Finally, the dual prophets of cyberspace — Marshall McLuhan and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin complete the inquiry into the formation of cyberculture.

Bolstered by cyberpunk novels and video games like *Myst*, cyberspace remains ninety-five percent imagination partly because much of the discussion in cyberspace is about the immaterial.[71] The separation of body and soul is held up for scrutiny and experienced through virtual reality. A 'place' called cyberspace, does exist where computer users can talk to one another, but it is as yet nothing like what William Gibson imagined in his novel, *Neuromancer*. Benedikt (1992) agrees that "this fully developed cyberspace does not yet exist outside of science fiction and the imagination of a few thousand people" (p. 123); however, he points out an extremely important

issue regarding cyberspace for this inquiry into spirituality. Cyberspace, as a place and as a concept, can be seen as both the *etherealization* of the material world we live and as the *concretization* of the immaterial (or mental) world we think in (p. 124). Yet, neither of these processes, according to Benedikt, "make the real world [...] less real" or the "'mental' world [...] less mental or spiritual" (p. 124). Rather, and this point is essential for our inquiry into cyberculture, "cyberspace becomes another venue for consciousness itself" (p. 124). Heim, too, believes that "[w]ith its virtual environments and simulated worlds, cyberspace is a metaphysical laboratory, a tool for examining our very sense of reality" (Heim, 1995, p. 82).

4.1.1 The Philosophical Heritage: Philosophy and Artificial Intelligence

In order to understand some of the debates regarding cyberspace, one must understand some aspects of Enlightenment thinking that have molded and shaped present-day thinking. Rene Descartes, a key pre-Enlightenment philosopher, is credited with popularizing the notion of dualism. Dualism refers to "a term describing worldviews that explain the facts of the world, or even particular facts encountered in daily life, in light of two different, ultimate and irreducible principles."[72] His philosophy, known as Cartesianism, spawned the idea of rational doubt and gave rise to the modern scientific method. Descartes reasoned that mind or spirit and physical matter have a separate existence and this led to the distinction between the body and the soul. Further, he believed the mind to be the seat of reason; whereas the body is a sort of machine or automaton driven by desire and swayed by the senses. This separation is blamed for a myriad of modern-day ills from

environmental degradation to pornography[73]. The notion of dualism is promoted by computer technology because of the seeming superfluousness of the body in computer mediated communication. Artificial intelligence (AI) research further problematizes this debate by attempting to model the mind in purely physical terms.

From the early 1950s onward, AI researchers have maintained that intelligent human behaviour will eventually be programmable. From the neurophysiological standpoint, the brain receives information and processes it according to previously learned (or hardwired) experience that is recorded on a neuromolecular level. Supposedly, what we call 'intelligence' is merely passive information processing. Consciousness is thought to be "a superfluous by-product of brain activity" (Sperry, 1991, p. 241). This cognitive model proposes that the brain functions similar to the computer.

Howard Gardner (1985) details this early development of AI research in his book *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution.* Gardner details the many players involved in AI and cognitive research since the 1950s. Cognitive science was (and still is) interested in mental processes such as perception, concept formation, language and finally learning. One of the key supporters of what Gardner terms the "strong view" of AI is Marvin Minsky who led the 'cognitive revolution at MIT in the 1970s. His book *The Society of Mind* (1986), offers a metaphor for understanding cognitive function in terms of a series of processing centers, or a "society of minds" where each agent or center has a specific mental function i.e. visual center

responsible for vision. This theory lent credence to the view that the brain works similar to a parallel computer processor. Indeed, artificial intelligence research has followed Minsky's suggestion that parallel processing more closely models the brains functioning.

Gardner's (1985) analysis suggests that the role of philosophy in the development of both cognitive science and by extension, artificial intelligence research, has been absolutely foundational. He proposes that:

> philosophy participates in the disciplinary matrix by virtue of its dialectical role: a dialectic within the discipline and a dialectic between the analysis put forth by philosophers, on the one hand, and the empirical findings and theories put forth by scientists, on the other. This has happened dramatically in recent years. Just at the time when philosophy seemed at low ebb, when the program of logical empiricism had been thoroughly discredited, the invention of the computer and the beginning of cognitive science suddenly underscored the need for sophisticated analysis. It was thinkers acquainted with the long-standing philosophical tradition — with Kant's notions about representations, Descarte's claims about the mind-body problem, Locke's scepticism and innate ideas — who could bring to bear the appropriate conceptual framework and then revise it in the light of new scientific discoveries (Gardner, 1985, p. 87).

It is not surprising, then, that fierce debate over what constitutes consciousness has occupied some of the greatest minds of this century such as John Searle, Karl Popper, Daniel C. Dennet, and Sir Roger Penrose.[74]

More and more, competing paradigms that challenge the determinist-materialist philosophy within science are emerging. These challenges are coming from a range of scientific disciplines. Jeeves (1997) summarizes some of the arguments regarding conscious mind within the fields of mathematics,

psychology and neuropsychology. Jeeves (1997) gives the example of Sir Roger Penrose, a renowned mathematician, who doubts the possibility of artificial intelligence because of the inability of a computer to grasp the meaning of mathematics. Penrose wrote in his book *The Emperor's New Mind* that "Mathematics is *not* something we ascertain merely by use of an algorithm."[75] Penrose maintains that a sense of beauty is necessary to comprehend mathematical truths. Sperry's (1991) challenge addresses further the debate between mind and brain. As a result of his experiments in neurology, he has come to the conclusion that the brain does not function by materialist principles alone. In fact, he proposes that "in cognitive processing [...] neurocellular events are seen to be enveloped within, and thus controlled by, higher-level types of causal phenomena" (p. 243). Thus, conscious experience is acknowledged as a key causal factor in brain functioning. For Sperry, this discovery allows him to reconcile his professional scientific beliefs with his personal, religious-ethical beliefs. This "consciousness revolution" allows for a concomitant "values revolution" (p. 248). Sperry's (1991) theory, however, views consciousness as an emergent phenomenon, an evolutionary landmark in the development of organisms.

Dreyfus (1992) also questions the cognitive explanation of intelligence by asking whether the body is necessary to the functioning of the mind. "In thinking that the body can be dispensed with, these thinkers again follow the tradition which from Plato to Descartes has thought of the body as getting in the way of intelligence and reason" (Dreyfus, 1992, p. 235). Dreyfus puts forth a phenomenological argument against the possibility of modelling human

intelligence. Husserl's concept of the "outer horizon" or background stocks of knowledge, proposes that humans are able to communicate and understand the world around them because of the multitude of shared knowledge. Following Schutz, Dreyfus argues that the brain does not passively receive information from the environment, but interacts —rather than simply reacts — with its environment. The body is central to this process as it "enables human beings to zero in on the relevant facts without definitely excluding others which might become relevant" because man is "at home in his world" (Dreyfus, 1992, p. 260). Thus, the body is necessary for the functioning of intelligence and reason (Dreyfus, 1992; Weizenbaum, 1984). It follows that not only the brain, but the whole body would have to be computer simulated. This, in fact, is one direction that artificial intelligence research is taking.

Weizenbaum (1984) argues that artificial intelligence is a moot endeavour. He believes that "an organism is defined, in large part, by the problems it faces. Man faces problems no machine could possibly be made to face." (p. 203). A machine can never know what it is like to be a human; therefore, a machine cannot act like a human. A computer cannot learn, adapt or act reflexively independent of its programming. The problem of artificial intelligence lies in the mythology that has built up around it. Even if we acknowledge that computers could never mirror human intelligence, or function, the perception that it is possible has already infiltrated popular imagination and discourse naturalizing this theory to the point where we are no longer critical of this agenda. The reality is that for a machine to possess intelligence, it must be able to learn, to be able to exhibit true reflexivity and

adaptation not simply adaptation based on predefined rules specified by the programming itself. In a sense, to possess intelligence the computer must be able to go beyond the limits and boundaries of the algorithms of which it consists.

Speaking from a both a programmer's and an artist's perspective, Jaron Lanier points out other flaws of artificial intelligence and virtual reality research:

> There are consequences to believing that computers are people. This belief has a percolating effect. First of all, you design poor computer products. If you believe that computers are smart, its effectively the same thing as making yourself stupid. Furthermore, it creates this nerdy, weird, bland culture. That is the aspect that concerns me most, because I think beauty is fundamental. Right now, probably the biggest problem in computer culture is that on the whole it has not been beautiful. It's been bland, one of the most bland cultural changes in history. I mean, it's on the level with Bolshevism or something in terms of ugliness (as quoted in Zaleski, 1997, p. 142)

Perhaps as an attempt to break out of this mundane mold, cyberculture discourse has popularized the notions of artificial intelligence, mind and consciousness. For example, Kevin Kelly, executive editor of *Wired* magazine claims that, "A recurring vision swirls in the shared mind of the Net, a vision that nearly every member glimpses, if only momentarily: of wiring human and artificial minds into one planetary soul" (in Kingwell, 1996, p. 138). This is a recurring theme in *Wired*. Zaleski (1997) asks: "[t]he online world is a world of mind alone. How will the human spirit fare in such a realm, sundered from the mystery of the flesh?" (p. 6). Ascott (1996) believes that "the question of consciousness, the technology of consciousness,

the transcendence of consciousness will be the themes of twenty-first century life."[76] Finally, Cobb (1998), referring to Plato's philosophy of ideal forms, proposes that "cyberspace can be interpreted as the Platonic Realm incarnate." (p. 31).

Indeed, the notion of cyberspace, or the Internet, being the culmination of human mental evolution is hailed as a sort of cognitive Nirvana. Not only Plato, but every thinker through the ages that has envisioned the crowning achievement of humanity to be some sort of mental oneness is apparently vindicated by the Net. Hegel's philosophy of Mind is one example where:

> Everything that from eternity has happened in heaven and earth, the life of God and all the deeds of time simply are struggles for Mind to know itself, to make itself objective to itself, to find itself, be for itself, and finally unite itself to itself; it is alienated and divided, but only so as to be able to find itself and return to itself (in Edwards, 1972, p. 83 [77]).

H.G. Wells proposed the creation of a what he called a World Brain, but this entity was less esoteric and more practical than Hegel's vision. Wells believed that a huge database of information on everything known to man was essential to the continued existence of humanity. Zaleski (1997) points out that within cyberculture there is " a pervasive devotional attitude toward the projected global mind of which computers will be a part" (p. 213). Can cyberspace be the incarnation of the Universal Mind?

4.1.2 Influence of 1960s Counterculture

If cyberspace is the incarnation of the Universal Mind, then the Age of Aquarius is truly upon us. Dery (1996) and Kingwell (1996) both trace the roots of cyberculture to the counterculture of the 1960's: "[t]he return of the sixties, and the culture war raging around the memory of that turbulent decade, is at the heart of the cyberdelic wing of fringe computer culture" (Dery, 1996, p. 17). The revival of religious mysticism in the sixties has spilled over into nineties cyberculture. Alexander's (1990) analysis shows that the roots of a computer culture steeped in spiritual significance extend even further back in the century:

> While there were certainly 'routine' assessments of the computer in the period from 1944 - 1975 — assessments that talked about it in rational, scientific, and 'realistic' tones — these paled in comparison to a transcendental and mythical discourse that was filled with the wish-fulfilling rhetoric of salvation and damnation (p. 165).

There is a certain romanticism and nostalgia that comes out of the sixties psychedelic influence on cyberculture. In an interview with John Perry Barlow, Zaleski (1997) concludes that "I agree with Teilhard de Chardin, that mind is bound up in everything, including organic matter, and in fact my personal experience, including long ago with LSD, confirms that" (p. 41). He reminds the reader that he is very much a product of sixties psychedelic culture and that whatever conclusions Barlow, Zaleski, Leary and others of their generation reach, are tainted by that fact. Taking a page from Timothy Leary's philosophy, Rushkoff (1995) compares the psychedelic drug user with

the computer user claiming that "the tripper gains the ability to see things in an unprejudiced manner, like the computer does", as if the computer can actually "see" (p. 28). The pioneers of cyberspace, that is those who have created the myths — not necessarily the technology — are for the most part, "steeped in the Northern California counterculture of the sixties": Timothy Leary, Stewart Brand, Howard Rheingold, John Perry Barlow, Brenda Laurel and Jaron Lanier (Dery, 1996, p. 22).

While the rhetoric of the sixties is often echoed in the nineties, there is a sense of urgency and a lack of innocence in cyberculture, antithetical to the spirit of free love and peace. Dery and Kingwell locate the cause in anxiety about the millennium. The millennial optimism of the sixties has turned to pessimism as the year 2000 approaches. Faith in technology, for many, is steadily being eroded in the wake of the Year 2000 problem, economic uncertainty and other portents of social collapse.

4.1.3 The Prophets of Cyberculture: Teilhard de Chardin and McLuhan

Teilhard de Chardin and McLuhan are revered as prophets in cyberculture because they both seemed to forecast the creation of the Internet in their writings. Both men gained popularity in the sixties and interest in them has been revived in the nineties (Dery, 1996, p. 45). While McLuhan had more to say about technology in general, Teilhard de Chardin's worldview provided fodder for the transcendental vision of cyberspace. Both scholars contributed to the belief that cyberspace and the Internet, are "new venues for consciousness."

Teilhard de Chardin is a fitting prophet for cyberspace because he attempted to reconcile his scientific belief in evolution with his Christian beliefs. As a Catholic priest, he was chastised for crossing this line between religious and scientific dogma. He formulated a sort of theological explanation of the concept of evolution that was highly unorthodox in light of accepted Church teachings.[78]

Teilhard de Chardin (1959) gained notoriety in cyberculture for his prescience regarding the concept of the *noosphere*. He (1959) posited that above the "biosphere" of living organisms, a term coined by Eduard Suess, there existed " new layer, the 'thinking layer,' which since its germination at the end of the Tertiary period, has spread over and above the world of plants and animals" (p. 182). The noosphere, referring to the Greek term "noos" meaning "mind", was a "sphere of reflection, of conscious invention, of conscious souls."[79] This concept prefigures how many perceive the Internet today.

The second idea that is central to Teilhard's philosophy is the idea of consciousness. Consciousness is evidence of the divine in humans. It is what separates us from the rest of creation and allows us to love. The third notion that is often quoted in cybercultural discourse is the "omega point." (Cobb, 1998; Pesce, 1997; Zaleski, 1997). The Omega, the last letter of the Greek alphabet, is the final stage of evolution, and where humanity unites into a sort of superconsciousness (Teilhard de Chardin, 1959). Not so much a place in our evolutionary development, as it is often interpreted, the Omega is

represented by the force of universal and unconditional love exhibited by Christ himself.[80] Finally, Teilhard de Chardin, not surprisingly, argues in favour of cooperation between science and faith because "neither can develop normally without the other. And the reason is simple: the same life animates both" (1959, p. 283).

Teilhard de Chardin's eschatological outlook also corresponds to the same perspective found again and again in cybercultural discourse.[81] Cyberspace is hailed as evidence for technical, as well as spiritual progress, bringing us closer to whatever blissful endpoint one's worldview dictates. John Perry Barlow's analysis represents this attitude: "What Teilhard was saying can be summed up in a few words [...] The point of all evolution to this stage is to create a collective organism of mind. With cyberspace, we are essentially hardwiring the noosphere" (in Cobb, 1998, p. 85). Cobb (1998) elaborates on how cyberspace fits into Teilhard's scheme:

> cyberspace has the potential to help us embrace the basic truth that as we become more fully individuated, we can find the inner resources we need to create strong and healthy communities. If cyberspace can aid in this progression, it will truly be an important way station on our journey toward greater spiritual evolution (p. 97).

Her argument that cyberspace will expand our consciousness and could lead to the ultimate philanthropy is not wholly convincing. Nevertheless, she attempts to create a theology of cyberspace based on the ideas of process theology, into which Teilhard's evolutionary thesis fits perfectly. She is optimistic that "Through cyberspace we can share grief and joy, ecstasy and

pain. If we can learn to harness the subjective moments carried in this medium, then it is possible that cyberspace can serve as a crucible for a new extension of our spiritual lives" (p. 153).

Like, Teilhard de Chardin, McLuhan also forecast a "psychic communal integration" that will arise from electronic communication (in Dery, 1996, p. 45). Many of McLuhan's ideas have had a profound influence on cyberculture.[82] The "global village" may perhaps be the most frequently cited idea of McLuhan's. Electronic culture has contributed to the formation of this village, but it does not possess the traditional characteristics of village life where work, kinship and community are interconnected and supported. In addition, McLuhan's various dictums such as "the medium is the message", the "retribalizing effect" of technology, and all media as "extensions of man" have had a lasting effect on communication theory and postmodern cyborg mythology. Some of his more outrageous propositions are equally memorable, but perhaps not as well known. We are certainly more than "the sex organs of the material world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever newer forms" as McLuhan (1964) has proposed. (p. 56).

Similarities can easily be drawn between McLuhan's and Teilhard de Chardin's perspectives (Dery, 1996, p. 45). Both were devout Roman Catholics—Teilhard de Chardin a Jesuit priest—and both could be said to have explored outside the boundaries of Catholic doctrine, without being explicitly critical of it. Both subscribe to a teleological outlook of time and an evolutionary approach to human development. Both believed that through

the harmonization of man's consciousness with technology humanity would achieve social harmony. McLuhan was aware of Teilhard de Chardin's work and cited him several times in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.[83]

Perhaps, the most unusual connection is their shared belief in the vital force that guides all things. Teilhard de Chardin believed that spirit infused all matter, whether living or non-living, and that all matter was implicated in the evolutionary march towards heavenly perfection. He was influenced by Henri Bergson in this regard, who proposed that an *elan vital*, or life force was responsible for the evolutionary process (Cobb, 1998, p. 80). Teilhard de Chardin differentiated between the spirit found in non-living matter, calling it "pre-life", the spirit in living matter calling it "life" and in living beings, calling it "consciousness" (Ibid, p. 82). McLuhan uses the term "entelechy" to describe the "the new actuation of power brought about by any arrangement of components whether in the atom or the plant or the intellect" (McLuhan, 1987, p. 429). He points out in a letter to Claude Bissell (Mar. 23, 1971) that

> "The Greeks and their followers to the present time have never seen fit to study the entelechies generated by human arts. It is quite otherwise in the Orient, as you know. In the electric age when the actuation of human energies has gone all the way into the organic structure of life and society, we have no choice but to recognize the entelechies of technology" (McLuhan, 1987, p. 429). [84]

With such an attitude towards non-living matter, it is not difficult to conceive that computer technology itself has a certain life-force within and plays an important role in the evolution of mankind. It may be that

McLuhan's version of vitalism is owing partly to Eastern mythology; however, both McLuhan and Teilhard de Chardin's notions of vitalism are not inconsistent with Christian doctrine that sees the hand of God in all things, and the Holy Spirit as the guide and comforter of creation.

It is easier to believe in the global consciousness of cyberspace if one also subscribes to the notion that computers exhibit a sort of vitalism. The danger that may arise from this viewpoint, believing that technology has animate qualities, is technology worship. This is technological determinism at its worst. Such a perspective regarding technology willingly relinquishes control over the technology in acknowledging that it is superior to us in some way, or has its own agency. Our culture has a high degree of faith in technology that borders on worship. How this attitude influences spirituality is discussed in the next section.

4.2 Computers and/or/are Us: The Mythology of Relationship

Since the first tool was constructed, the relationship between ourselves and our technology has become increasingly complex. In this section, we look briefly at the various types of relationships between technology and humanity, focusing on computer technology in particular. These relationships have repercussions for spirituality, technological development, and our culture as a whole. When technology is perceived as something more than simply a tool, technological determinism threatens to displace power from the hands of the creator to the creation. The role of creativity in computer technology research results in a relationship that goes beyond

simple craftsmanship. This creative force fires the search for the connection between mind and machine. Finally, some explanations are offered for how a metaphorical attitude towards computer technology is implicated in the struggle for immortality.

4.2.1 Technology and Humanity: From Inanimate to Intimate

Our relationship to computer technology begins with North American culture's love of technology in general. Postman (1993) claims our culture is a "technopoly" which "consists in the deification of technology, finds its satisfaction in technology, and takes its orders from technology" (p. 71). Schultze (1991) comments that "The national [U.S.] imagination has always linked technological development to human progress" (p. 52). He identifies a relationship between faith in technology and faith in God where:

> technological optimism is intimately connected with the Christian worldview, especially as formulated by modern Protestantism. [...] In the United States, then, popular sentiment frequently saw technology as a means of ushering in an idyllic world of peace and harmony. Communications technologies, in particular, took on a kind of religious significance as the vehicles for undoing the curse on humankind and creating a new and more godly society (pp. 52 - 53).

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, communications technologies from the telegraph to the computer "seem to connect the spiritual and the material" (in Rowland, 1997, p. 59). In North America, technology is welcomed into even traditional religious faiths, such as Catholicism and

Pentecostalism.[85] In the absence of a strong religious faith, technology steps in as a force in which to place our hopes. Kingwell (1996) also points out that

> The fetishizing and worship of technology [...], is something apparently peculiar to recent times, in particular the centuries since the 'new science' of empirical observation and control swept the West, beginning around 1580. We have not always believed that we could bring the world to the mat using the tools we had invented, or that we would usher in new forms of consciousness by virtue of the communications media we developed. Now our tools seem tools no longer. We do not use technology; it uses us. Rather, it *is* us — and we it (p. 167).

How we perceive technology is related to how we perceive our role in creating it, what we want to accomplish, and who will benefit. It would be reductionist to claim that everyone loves technology in present-day culture. As Postman (1993) points out, there are winners and losers in the technological game. The knowledge of the pollution, environmental degradation, and human displacement resulting from our technologies now counterbalances this exuberant love affair resulting in a more ambivalent relationship. Nevertheless, many still claim that the answer to our modern-day technological problems is more technology. Using computer technology as our example, the following table illustrates the range of possible relationships we might have with this technology.

Table 4.1 Relationships with Technology

computers are:	origin	relationship	example	level of control
basic tools	craftsman	utilitarian	data processor	complete
extensions 1. simple	inventor	extend our agency	telephone	cooperation
2. us/reflection	parent	anthropomorphic/ offspring	cyborg i.e. $6M Man	guidance
better than us	'hands-off' creator	awe-inspiring, worship	Tom Ray's Program/Big Blue	out of our control/autonomous

The origin of the word 'technology' can be found in the Greek word, *techne*, meaning art or "craft". From the beginning, technology is defined as more than the study of tools, but of artifacts. Artifacts form the material basis of our culture. The simplest relationship — complete control over our tools — does not preclude continued progress, but it does preclude a metaphysical aspect to this relationship. Our tools are separate from ourselves. We use them to accomplish a particular task. On the surface it would seem that we have complete control over such a relationship. We control the wrench as we control the telephone. The more complex the tool, however, the more complex the relationship. With the telephone as with the wrench, tools are extensions of ourselves. They help us to do things we could not do alone.

McLuhan (1964) pointed out that communications media are "extensions of man" in his work *Understanding media: the extensions of man.* Looked at from this perspective, these tools extend our agency, and increase our ability to accomplish previously difficult or impossible tasks. If technology is seen as extensions of ourselves, then they become part of ourselves. The tool is no longer simply hand-held, and physically separate; it becomes our hand, eye, brain. In this sense, the relationship becomes more intimate, more akin to cooperation versus the complete control of the basic tool perspective.

Once we acknowledge that media are extensions of ourselves, it is merely a short stretch to imagine them to be like ourselves. Thus is born the cyborg. The technological augmentation of human abilities is seen as changing the nature of what it is to be human (Benedikt, 1992). We are no longer humans; we are cyborgs. This anthropomorphization of technology creates a complex relationship with possibly dangerous consequences. Haraway (1996) wrote that "At the center of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg." While this statement may be meant as facetious or simply sensational, her essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs", is often quoted in cybercultural discourse. Haraway sees the cyborg as a potential mascot for the postmodern resistance against _____ (fill in the blank). She defines the cyborg in order to reclaim feminist power from the misogynist tendencies of technology:

> A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generates antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends); it takes irony for granted. [...] The

> machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; they do not dominate or threaten us (p. 222).

The cyborg is one instance of how technology has been given human features (and vice versa).

Anthropomorphism is rampant in cyberculture. Attaching human features to inhuman objects is perhaps one way of dealing with the unknown and unfamiliar. Modern science has raised a host of ethical and social problems that further problematize our relationship with technology. Cyborg discourse, then, can be seen as an attempt to deal with these dilemmas. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* may be the historical ancestor of the cyborg. Born of the discarded pieces of dissected cadavres, Frankenstein's monster demonstrates the danger of science trespassing on the territory of creation. Cyborg discourse plays on the themes of creation, control and what it means to be human.

Nevertheless, buying into the cyborg mythology elevates technology on level with ourselves. This results in a further relinquishing of control over such a technology. In her article regarding the anthropomorphism of computers in the workplace, Prasad (1995) acknowledges that "the ongoing societal discourse of anthropomorphism represents computers as mentally superior, extraordinarily intelligent and even occasionally as a superior form, at the pinnacle of both technological and biological evolution" (p. 256). She points out that there is an ideological aspect to anthropomorphism that works to

define reality for computer users and "tells individuals who they are, where they fit in, how they should relate to authority, and what sort of power and dignity they possess."[86] For this reason, the power of an anthropomorphising discourse must be acknowledged if we are to understand cyberculture. Do we bestow more authority on our computers, than we allow for ourselves? If we believe in the superiority of computers, then we believe that the pre-programmed decisions formulated by computers are superior to our own.

The fourth level of association defines computer technology as superior to ourselves. Unlike the previous level, however, technology is believed to be autonomous. The superior computational abilities of computers is widely acknowledged; however, mathematical ability cannot be equated with intelligence. Or can it. Promoters of artificial intelligence are fond of quoting the example of Big Blue, the super-computer that outwitted the master chess player, Gary Kasparov (Cobb, 1998; Zaleski, 1997). Observers described Deep Blue in anthropomorphic terms saying that "Deep Blue played with 'style'"; after the second game Kasparov himself said that "Something truly unbelievable happened, and it showed a sign of intelligence. I don't know how it happened. But the most amazing thing is that the computer made a blunder on the last move." (in Cobb, 1998, pp. 3-4). After that moment, Kasparov was running scared. He failed to play in his usual imperturbable style and lost to the computer. This is one example of how faith in the technology, displacing faith in ourselves, can result in defeat. When we are in awe of technology, we relinquish our power to it. This theme returns us to

the realm of artificial intelligence research and the implications for spirituality.

4.2.2 Cyberculture and the creative impulse

How we structure our relationship with computer technology is largely based on how we envision ourselves in the creation process. Like the Renaissance magus trying to create the mythical homunculus, the artificial intelligentsia (to borrow Weizenbaum's term) dream of creating a machine that can match (or exceed) man's abilities. Pesce (1997), the creator of virtual reality mark-up language (VRML), summons the metaphor of the magus to compare what he does with computer technology to what the magus did in the pre-modern era with magic.[87] This creative impulse, this dream to copy ourselves, lends insight into who we are in cyberculture.

Paul Davies (1992) proposes in his book *The Mind of God* that the whole universe could be computer simulated, the ultimate in hubris (Zaleski, p. 33). Frank Tipler (1994), in *The Physics of Immortality: Modern Cosmology, God and the Resurrection of the Dead*, believes that if we could record all the information that exists, that in the last moment before the end of the world – – borrowing the term Omega Point from Teilhard de Chardin — the universe will implode, activating this program and resurrecting everything to eternal virtual life (Dery, 1996, p. 9; Zaleski, 1997, p. 91). Tom Ray has achieved cyber-worship status by creating a computer program which he claims exhibits digital life [88] (Cobb, 1988; Zaleski, 1997). Originally constructed as a system to simulate evolution," Tierra", for Earth, contains digital entities that

reproduce, mutate, evolve and die. What is interesting about Ray's approach is that he maintains creative distance from the program, not interfering with the processes taking place. He also professes respect for his 'creations', as Cobb (1998) relates that "central to his philosophy in creating Tierra is the desire to understand what evolution might feel like from the organism's perspective" (p. 164).[89]

What is it that drives these experiments in artificial intelligence and cybernetics?[90] Perhaps the perennial quest for knowledge is explanation enough for the motivating force behind computer technology. This agenda, however, raises a host of ethical and existential questions. To duplicate creation is to disprove that we are unique living beings, to destroy the understanding of consciousness as a mystical and even miraculous phenomenon, to defy death, and to deny the almighty omnipotence of the creator. In essence, it is a desire to become that creator. Grosso (1995) confirms this thesis stating that "the eschatological thrust of technology is toward remaking the human body" (p. 262). Further, we are not content to simply remake the body, but "behind technology is the drive to restructure nature, a drive toward a second genesis" (p. 263).[91]

Can it be that we are not content with the original genesis, because we had no hand in it? Speaking with the voice of reason, Lanier (in Zaleski, 1997) points out that "as soon as a computer program becomes your tool for creation, you can create only what was conceived of in the ideas imbedded in the program. That's the nature of the program. Programs are not the same thing as nature"

(p. 191). He proposes that we are fascinated by computer technology because it is essentially "a little miniature model of the world, a simulated universe that's built entirely of human idea" (Ibid, 193). We worship the technology because we made it to simulate ourselves. Lewis (1997) calls this aspect of cyberculture the "cult of computers."[92] It also demonstrates the narcissistic drive of artificial intelligence research.

Cobb (1998) looks to the nature of creativity for an explanation of our relationship with computers. She relies on the theories of Alfred North Whitehead and John B. Cobb, creators of process philosophy and process theology, respectively, for her argument that "[t]he divine is woven throughout all of reality in the form of creative, responsive love and evolutionary becoming" (p. 12). Her thesis is that in cyberspace, the primary mode of reality is *process*. The second aspect of cyberspace central to her argument is that it enables human agency. The notion of process, or one might say, becoming, is equated with the idea of the divine. Cobb writes that "Divinity is that which enables all of creation to become more than it once was, to evolve and expand, to experience greater richness, depth and diversity. The quality within the process that enables these new levels of becoming is creativity itself" (p. 12). Thus, she argues, that "as computers become more powerful and complex, we are beginning to see numerous examples of creativity in cyberspace" (p. 13). The central notion important for the understanding of our relationship to computers is this:

> If we can accept the fundamental notion that divinity can inhabit the fruits of our labor, our *techne*, the gulf between the organic and the

> technological has the potential for being bridged. When the creative potential of computation becomes a part of our spiritual awareness, we may find that cyberspace begins to participate in our lives in a deep and meaningful way. On the other hand, if we choose to consign cyberspace to the realm of dead matter, reducing it to the aspect of raw calculation, its deeper potential and meaning may remain forever blocked from view (Cobb, 1998, p. 13).

Her well-reasoned argument promotes the view that our approach to cyberspace should not be as an omnipotent creator but as "Gods of persuasion, consciously participating in the evolutionary process" (Cobb, 1998, p. 176). Cobb uses Tom Ray's Tierra experiment as an example of divine creativity in cyberspace. Kelly (1994) also adopts the relinquishing control attitude stating that:

> To succeed at all in creating a creative creature, the creators have to turn over control to the created, just has [sic] Yahweh relinquished control to them. To be a god, at least to be a creative one, one must relinquish control and embrace uncertainty. Absolute control is absolutely boring. To birth the new, the unexpected, the truly novel — that is, to be genuinely surprised — one must surrender the seat of power to the mob below. The great irony of god games is that letting go is the only way to win (p. 257).[93]

Certainly, the Christian version of God is as a creator who bestowed free will upon his creation. The prospect of relinquishing control to what is still a process in its infancy, however, is ludicrous. To compare ourselves to the

creator of this universe — if one exists — is equally inane because we are a part of that creation ourselves.

Our relationship to computer technology is important as we develop the parameters of cyberspace. If the machine is indeed *us*, "we can be responsible for our machines; they do not dominate or threaten us" (Haraway, 1990, p. 222). Believing that computers are our offspring, as Haraway suggests, may be one way of dealing with this technology. On the other hand, promoting the mythology that computers are divine, or better than us, may place too much power in something we need to control at this point. If we believe that computers are our tools, rather than anthropomorphizing them, humans will be further empowered to solve problems, rather than relying on computers to do the job.

4.3 The Eschatological Aspects of Cyberculture

Whether praised as an evolutionary achievement or believed to be a fulfillment of prophecy, cybercultural discourse infuses the development of computer technology with a teleological purpose. Computer technology is seen as having both an eschatological history—which assumes there is an ultimate end in sight such as utopia or apocalypse— and a teleological history — where there is a "method to the madness", or a purpose that guides the historical development, such as Marxism or evolutionary theory. First, cybercultural discourse promotes this type of thinking via rhetorical devices. The rhetoric of apocalypse and utopia resounds throughout cyberspace. Second, this rhetorical 'agenda' — if it can be characterized in such a

conspiratory manner — promises salvation from a number of evils: isolation, prejudice, even death. Third, the theory of evolution plays an important role in these eschatological prophecies. Cyberculture seems to have adopted an evolutionary view of spirituality which has a history in religious studies. Finally, the implication that computers have a central role to play in the story of humanity is counterbalanced by the ideological repercussions of placing our faith in a technology that cannot possibly deliver spiritual salvation.

4.3.1 The Rhetoric of Apocalypse and Utopia: The Technology of Immorality

The rhetoric of apocalypse and utopia is loudest where the technological and spiritual collide. Alexander (1990) has demonstrated that the "deadly combat" between these two perspectives has been raging almost since the dawn of the computer age. Indeed, this rhetoric surfaces whenever a society has been faced with changes instigated by new technology. This is no surprise considering that computer technology follows the rhetorical trajectory that has accompanied technological development since the industrial revolution. On-line religious discussion is permeated with emotional debates regarding apocalypse and utopia. Computer technology plays a part in both contemporary Christian and New Age eschatological narratives. Kingwell's (1996) thesis lends further eschatological significance to cyberculture as "the dream of a transcendent technological moment seems focused and intensified by the advent of the millennium, with its long cultural history of spiritual transformation now mixed indiscriminately with the newer baggage of science-fiction imagery in which bodies fuse with machines" (p. 138).

The Christian reaction to how computer technology will play a part in the Millennium varies from fearful to enthusiastic. Some Christians believe that electronic technologies are the tools of Satan and the antichrist. For example, an electronic message has spread throughout the Internet that Bill Gates' full name adds up to the number of the Beast of the Apocalypse in Revelations: 666 (see Appendix B)[94]. Amidst the paranoia, reasonable voices remind the faithful that it is not the technology that is good or evil; what is important is that Christians seize the opportunity to use this technology advantageously (Baker, 1996). Baker (1996) draws the analogy that "In Matthew 5:13, Jesus calls his followers the salt of the earth. We are the preserving element in a culture that will naturally tend toward decay. If there is any hope of making the Internet a family-friendly medium, it will be found in believers becoming active online" (p. 23). Referring to the early days of print technology in colonial America, Moorhead (1996) has demonstrated that this reaction is nothing new: "despite lingering fears of the evil potential of popular print, Protestants frequently placed their forays in the medium within a millennial perspective" (p. 220). Schultze (1991) reiterates this fact by demonstrating that "again and again, from the telegraph to satellite communication, evangelicals have seen in each new medium the final scene in the biblical drama before the return of Christ" (p. 60).

This attitude towards the saving grace of cyberspace, is not limited to Christians, however. In cyberculture there is also the dual realization that the technology can be both saving and damning. Zaleski (1997) observes that

"[t]here's an idea that is achieving common coinage on the Net: that the Net is somehow going to free us from the tyranny of the body, and of the material world in general — that we are souls trapped in physical reality and that by going digital we can break free of the prison of the flesh" (p. 35). Heim (1993) locates the danger of seeking to escape the material body for the heightened pleasure of the immaterial in the omniscient perspective offered by technology. "Set up a synthetic reality, place yourself in a computer-simulated environment, and you undermine the human craving to penetrate what eludes you, what is novel and unpredictable. The computer God's-eye view robs you of your freedom to be fully human" (p. 78). He concludes with the warning that "Cyberspace can cast a spell of passivity on our lives. We talk to the system, telling it what to do, but the system's language and processors come to govern our psychology. We begin as voyeurs and end by abandoning our identity to the fascinating systems we tend" (p. 79). Various critics agree with this viewpoint that escaping to the virtual world of cyberspace causes us to neglect more important issues on both an individual and a societal level (Dery, 1996; Kingwell, 1996; Postman, 1991).

Douglas Rushkoff's (1995) book, *Life in the Trenches of Hyperspace*, provides a good example of how popular cyberculture discourse promotes the eschatological promise of computer technology. Among Rushkoff's "cyberians" — the makers and leaders of cyberculture — "a common belief emerges that the evolution of humanity has been a willful progression toward the construction of the next dimensional home for consciousness" (p.

5). Grosso (1997) confirms this belief by stating that "we are entitled to speculate that the entire long range thrust of technology is toward the recreation or second genesis of humanity. What this comes to is the creation of a new body and a new relationship to nature."[95] Lanier (in Zaleski, 1997) characterizes the attempt to model consciousness as an instance of "death denial". He states that "a lot of this culture is really a new form of death-denial fantasy. The notion is that if computers can become conscious, then it presents an opportunity to transfer consciousness from the brain to them and avoid death" (p. 195). For example, a computer chip is being designed that will record an entire lifetime of experiences, a sort of digital memory chip that will be implanted at birth. This technology is hailed as a sort of immortality. These are attempts at solving the most difficult problems facing humanity: death and the end of the world. This eschatological fear justifies such projects, making the development of computer technology an imperative. Weisenbaum (1984) points out, however, that computer technology was not a technological imperative from the start, that we could have found other ways to solve our problems (pp. 28-31). In a similar vein, Kroker says that "the doctrine of inevitability is a false bill of goods that's sold by the technological class because it serves its own interests... It wants people to feel impotent because when you feel impotent, you forget the central fact about any technology: that it involves social choice." (In Kingwell, p. 163). Now our society looks to computers as if *they* alone can solve our problems. If we fear destruction by environmental or political forces, the key is not to ignore the causes by finding a way to circumvent the result. If we fear destruction by heavenly forces, then all the technology in the world is not going to save us.

4.3.2 Evolution: a theory for Cyberspace

The technological determinist viewpoint, that sees computers as the force behind the dawn of a new age, is only one aspect of the teleological mythology of computer technology. Among cybercultural discourse, computers are thought of as the newest phase of evolutionary development. This intellectual evolution advances beyond the powers of the human mind, enabling better memory capabilities, faster processing, and more complex problem solving. In some measure, communications history theory, ideas McLuhan and Ong espouse, supports this view of electronic communications technology as the latest phase in communication evolution. While print engaged only our visual sense, computers are promoted as more synaesthetic. This is an improvement, or evolution, in communication technology.

Computers are being promoted as an evolutionary improvement in communication on one level; on a second level they are considered evidence of intellectual improvement; on a third level, they are being hailed as instruments of the evolution of spirituality as well. Within cybercultural discourse, Teilhard de Chardin can be credited with promoting the idea that we are on an evolutionary tangent both biologically and spiritually. This evolutionary approach, however, has its antecedents in religious studies and anthropology. Walter H. Capps (1995) traces this approach in his book *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline.* Herbert Spencer and E.B. Tylor are credited with developing the theory of evolution before Darwin's biological analysis gave the theory further credence. Similar to Teilhard de

Chardin, Spencer's theory "came to apply simultaneously to the universe, Earth, the development of biological forms, the human mind, and [...] even to society" (Capps, 1995, p. 75). Bearing similarities to Ong's thesis, both Spencer and Tylor proposed that human development can be categorized according to successive evolutionary characteristics.[96] Their anthropological investigations seemed to indicate to them that the "primitive" mind formed certain associations regarding the unexplained. Sir James Frazer, influenced by Tylor, proposed an evolutionary relationship between magic, religion and science in his book *The Golden Bough* (Capps, 1995). Natural and mysterious phenomenon are explained, in Frazer's historiography, first in terms of 'magic'. As mankind's ability to comprehend increases, these phenomenon are given religious explanations. Finally, with the rise of science, the previous two are displaced by empirical reasoning. Compare Frazer's contention that "the dreams of magic may one day be the waking realities of science" with Arthur C. Clarke's "Law" that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magick."[97] This perceived relationship (or trajectory) between science and magic is supported by cyberculture. For example, Clarke's Law has become a sort of motto for technopagans.[98] Timothy Leary put it another way: "Religion, read with polycognitive eyes, anticipates the future of science" (Grosso, 1995, p. 269).[99]

Within religious studies, however, the evolutionary viewpoint has been largely discredited (Capps, 1995). Geo Windregen challenged the idea that religion always develops from simple to more complex and "also raised serious questions concerning the equating of 'chronologically first' with

'phenomenologically primitive'" (Capps, 1995, p. 94). A. R. Radcliffe-Brown managed to salvage some aspects of an evolutionary perspective in anthropology by adopting a process approach to the analysis of societies. He excludes religion, however, from this perspective. To him religion is part of the general make-up of societies and is examined in terms of social utility. E.E. Evans-Pritchard pointed out that evolutionist theories of religion cannot be supported because the origin of religion can never be determined (Capps, 1995, p. 99). Finally, Capps (1995) concludes that all evolutionist or "origin and development" approaches to religion presuppose that "the tracing of religious development is coordinate with the tracing of development of human intelligence" (p. 102). This progressivist model presumes that spiritual development is on a teleological trajectory. Capps cites the demise of Marxism and the increase in religious fundamentalism throughout the world as two examples of how this trajectory is by no means linear.

4.3.3 Ideological and Ethical Implications of Spiritual Evolution

It is impossible to determine whether our society has "progressed" in terms of spiritual belief. This is mostly due to the inability to judge whether one form of belief is superior to another whether in terms of utility, complexity, or morality. Habermas (1979) is a proponent of the moral/ethical evolution of mankind. First, he points out that "[c]ognitive developmental psychology has shown that in ontogenesis [development of the ego] there are different stages of moral consciousness, stages that can be described in particular as preconventional, and postconventional patterns of problem solving. The same patterns turn up again in the social evolution of moral and legal

presentations" (p. 99). He is basically making the assertion that the same patterns of cognitive development in the modern individual can be compared to the development of "individuals" in different levels of social development through history. For example, Habermas (1979) asserts that:

> Apparently the magical-animistic representational world of paleolithic societies was very particularistic and not very coherent. The ordering representations of mythology first made possible the construction of a complex of analogies in which all natural and social phenomena were interwoven and could be transformed into one another. In the egocentric world conception of the child at the preoperational level of thought, these phenomena are made relative to the center of the child's ego; similarly, in sociomorphic world views they are made relative to the center of the tribal group" (p. 104).

Despite his sophisticated analysis, he is essentially claiming that individuals in pre-modern societies developed the moral competencies equivalent to those of children.[100]

The term "evolution" is admittedly loaded with ideological implications. The real meaning is whether we, as a society, have "learned" as a result of past experience and have changed accordingly. Many promoters of computer culture maintain that computers can contribute to improved moral behaviour, increased understanding, a fairer society, and the creation of supportive communities. One could argue that these effects could actually result in the "spiritual" or "moral" progress of a society aided by computer technology. Cobb (1998) does in fact use this argument. Further, she believes that "[m]etaphors have an enormously important role to play in our ethical evolution with cyberspace. Metaphors are the primary currency we use to access the digital world. In this context, the moral content of the metaphors

we use in cyberspace carry additional weight" (p. 231). Certainly how we represent computer technology is paramount to how we allow this technology to affect us. The power of metaphor is central to the construction of cybermythology. Alexander (1990) concurs that:

> it is because technology is lodged in the unreal fantasies of salvation and apocalypse that the dangers are real. [...] Only by understanding the omnipresent shaping of technological consciousness by discourse can we hope to gain control over technology in its material form. In order to do so, we must gain some distance from the visions of salvation and apocalypse in which technology is so deeply embedded (p. 170).

The "danger" is that we will become consumed by our fascination with computer technology and neglect the dire problems of our society. Critics of the imperative of computer technology question why so many billions of dollars are spent on improving this technology when so many billions of people go hungry, are lonely, suffer from disease, or are killed in war. These critics point out that computer access is still limited by wealth for the most part and that computer technology represents simply one more example of material excess in a world that is crying out for both environmental and spiritual salvation. It is disheartening to realize that those characteristics of computer culture that may be supportive of spiritual enlightenment are being promoted for marketing purposes. Finally, it is vital to admit that amidst the eschatological rhetoric and utopian or apocalyptic fervour of cyberculture, that the world that exists outside of cyberspace demands our attention.

4.4 A Culture of Convergence: Science and Religion

The final aspect of cyberculture to be discussed in this chapter refers to the characteristic of convergence, both technological and philosophical. While communication technologies are designed to cooperate in new configurations; spheres of thought are also cooperating in the quest to explain life's mysteries. The realms of science and religion, and the perspectives of the rational and the intuitive, are no longer seen as mutually exclusive among cybercultural discourse. This convergence reflects, ultimately, a more general trend in the Western world that acknowledges the necessity of both science and religion to understanding existence. Instances of this convergence are demonstrated in the New Age movement which has strongly influenced cyberculture. This intellectual convergence, however, is often reduced to "scientism" when not properly understood. Indeed, the convergence of science and religion can be seen as central to the cyber-project of expanding into new levels of consciousness. Without a proper understanding, therefore, of both the history and the philosophy behind these two spheres of thought, the mythology of cyberspace is merely fictitious wishful thinking. A crisis of boundaries then emerges from the converging disciplines of science and religion.

A whole intellectual discipline is devoted to the study of science and religion. The complexity of the debates found within this interdisciplinary venture cannot be fairly treated in this paper. Debates concerning science and religion, however, take place all around us. What is important to emphasize for this paper is that when people meet on-line to discuss religious matters, these

intellectual issues are foregrounded. The next chapter provides specific details about these discussions. Clearly, the debates between scientific materialism and interpretivism; between fact and feeling; and between observation and participation require some investigation as the outcome of these debates may have major repercussions on spirituality. The outcome is not known even among experts. The reality, whether based on rationality or feeling, is no longer as clear-cut as it may once have seemed. There is a spectrum of overlapping opinions that now inform the modern-day psyche.

In some respects, the discourse of science and religion acknowledges the usefulness of religious ways of thinking and analysis while it downplays the hegemony of scientific thought. Examples such as the analysis of the shroud of Turin, the Jesus seminars, and scientific rationalization of creationism all attempt to provide conclusive truth as to the verity (or error) of Christianity. Science has made an institution of criticizing religion; now, science is being placed under the microscope. Rolston (1997) believes that science needs religion to play this critical role, along with the other humanities, in order to balance our notions of reality. Albert Einstein was also of this mind, but he saw the two as needing to cooperate: "religion without science is lame; science without religion is blind." Similarly, Cobb (1998) believes that "a sacred understanding of cyberspace requires a reconciliation between scientific and religious worldviews, perspectives that in the wake of modernism have inhabited diametrically opposed corners of our reality" (pp. 34-35).

There is a difference, however, between the intellectual analysis that seeks to understand the relationship between religion and science and the appropriation of scientific terms and theories to justify or explain philosophical, religious or metaphysical beliefs. One of the defining characteristics of the New Age movement is the blurring of spiritual and scientific boundaries, often using the latter to justify the former.[101] Gray (1991) in his book *Thinking Critically About New Age Ideas* addresses the issue of "pseudoscience" that pervades New Age epistemology. He characterizes pseudoscience as follows:

1. It has a negative attitude toward skepticism.
2. It equates an open mind with an uncritical one.
3. It does not require repeatability.
4. It is often not testable.
5. It is often incompatible with existing knowledge.
6. It explains away or ignores falsifying data.
7. It uses vague language.
8. It is not empirical.
9. It relies on anecdotal evidence.
10. It is vulnerable to experimenter effects.
11. It is not self-correcting.
12. It produces belief or faith but not knowledge.

In contrast to the above, Hess (1993) sees the New Age movement "not as a new irrationalism but instead as a new expression of skepticism within a framework of religious or spiritual assumptions: a spiritual self-help movement or even a kind of religioscientific consumerism" (p. 14). Hess believes that the New Age movement is skeptical of both traditional religion and science. If this is an instance of scientific skepticism, then New Age believers must adhere to the rules of empiricism where proof exists in

repeatable, observable experiments (Gray, 1991, p. 119). Classical skepticism, on the other hand, is the belief that truth is unattainable.[102] In practical terms, skeptics refrain from making judgments of any kind (Marias, 1967, p. 96). This attitude is prevalent in postmodern perspectives as well.

The New Age movement is important to the investigation of computer technology and spirituality because the two seem to be mutually reinforcing. Like cyberculture, New Age culture is also a product of the sixties, with roots tracing back "to the Enlightenment's scientific critique of official religion in the eighteenth century and to the Spiritualist movement of the nineteenth century" (in Hess, 1993, p. 4)[103]. At this point, cyberculture does not support any one religion in particular, although it is one of the main sites where the cooperation between spiritual and scientific epistemologies is being explored. According to Hess (1993), New Age discourse also does not subscribe to or support any one religious viewpoint (p. 39). The open, dialogical and pluralistic attitude fostered by computer networks make computers a perfect New Age "medium" (Brasher, 1996). Computer networks also enable easier browsing in the religious marketplace.

Partially as a result of the ability to network, and partially as a result of the New Age *Zeitgeist*, new religions are being formed with the help of the Internet (Kinney, 1995; O'Leary, 1996). Cybercultural discourse reflects a spiritual scientism that on the one hand acknowledges the existence of the "paranormal"; and on the other hand places excessive faith in technology.

This perspective takes its most extreme form in the practice of *Technopaganism.*

Dery defines Technopaganism as "the convergence of neopaganism (the umbrella term for a host of contemporary polytheistic nature religions) and the New Age with digital technology and fringe computer culture" (p. 50). Certainly with technopaganism, the technology is organic to the belief system. Just as fundamentalist Christianity would be nowhere without the Bible; so technopaganism requires computer technology to pursue this spiritual path. Brasher (1997) believes that "on the Net it is new religious movements untethered from ancient texts that appear most at home" (p. 819). This small but interesting group is highlighted in the July 1995 issue of *Wired* along with spokesperson Mark Pesce. Pesce himself is the creator of VRML and a self-proclaimed witch. The *Wired* article reveals that most technopagans work in technical fields as computer programmers and engineers, and that "technopagans suspect that the Old Ways can provide some handy tools and tactics in our dizzying digital environmental of intelligent agents, visual databases, and online MUDs and MOOs" (p. 128). The article's author states that "besides whatever technical inspiration they can draw from magical lore, technopagans are driven by an even more basic desire: to honor technology as part of the circle of human life, a life that for Pagans is already divine" (p. 128). In an interview with Zaleski (1997), Pesce's perspective is thoroughly informed by what Habermas has called "scientism" or popular (and often erroneous) belief in science. Bolstered by quasi-scientific theories such as the Gaian hypothesis and morphic resonance Pesce attempts to 'prove' that the

world as we know it will end on December 21, 2012 (in Zaleski, 1997, pp. 263-278). This, coincidentally, corresponds with the end of the Mayan calendar.

While technopagan views may seem extreme and their numbers too small to be concerned about, much of computer culture is guided by those who share beliefs in common with spokespeople such as Pesce. What emerges is not necessarily a cooperative view between scientific and religious views, but rather a continuation of the project to control and dominate the known and unknown. The preponderance of occult-type video games such as *Myst*, *Diabolo*, and *Doom* are evidence of this desire to become wizards of cyberspace. On a more positive note, the technopagan interest in myth, magic and Pagan folklore does provide inspiration or fuel for the technical imagination.

Contrary to Hess (1993) who sees New Age thinking as critical of both science and religion; Dery (1996) is critical of New Age and technopagan scientism because it "reaffirms the cultural superiority of empirical science and inductive reasoning as the arbiters of what is admitted into the mainstream and what is banished to the fringes" (p. 59). The pronouncements of empirical science still dominate our understanding of what is true and real. In a similar vein, Weizenbaum (1984), in a diatribe against the hegemony of science, states "that the attribution of certainty to scientific knowledge by the common wisdom, an attribution now made so nearly universally that it has become a commonsense dogma, has virtually delegitimized all other ways of understanding" (p. 16). Although the New Age movement claims to be

acknowledging the importance of "other ways of understanding" the scientism and pseudo-science that permeates New Age belief systems are problematic and confusing. The realm of scientific inquiry is no longer confined to denying spiritual and metaphysical beliefs, it permeates and infiltrates those very beliefs.

While science has certainly come under scrutiny in the last few decades, the issue of power is important to any discussion that purports a coming together of spiritual and scientific viewpoints. Grosso (1997) points out that "[t]he psychic and the technological represent two forms of the human attempt to abolish the constraints of time and space."[104] The problem is that "the psychic and technical models of transformation are mainly about power; they fail, in important ways, to reach the level of spirit."[105] D. A. Therrien, a "cyber" performance artist, agrees that we view technology as a form of religion, which is all the more dangerous because of its power: it unifies us, and at the same time, enables the few to dominate the many (in Dery, 1996, p. 169). Rolston (1997) points out that "the underlying premise of all scientific knowledge is mastery; and with that insight, the claims to detachment, objectivity, and independence take on a different color" (p. 77).

What emerges from all this is that the once competing paradigms of science and religion, are no longer so clearly defined a dualism.[106] People may be more open to acknowledging the validity of both perspectives on the surface; however, the competition for "mastery" continues. The shortcomings of both ways of knowing are now more widely known, but misconceptions

persist as to what applies to which realm. The concept of consciousness, for example, stands in defiance of scientific understanding while providing support for the religious viewpoint because consciousness cannot be explained by science alone. The blurring of these boundaries has also resulted in new and what-now-appear-to-be-bizarre "religions" where technology is considered animate and divine. Finally, no matter what cyber-spokespeople might claim, computer technology cannot save your soul.

Summary

Marvin (1988), referring to technologies of the past, points out that "[t]he devices that social imagination constructed and then reacted to sometimes actually existed, but just as often were entirely imaginary" (p. 193). So far, cyberspace, as it has been represented by science fiction and promoted by the media, is imaginary. Despite this, a great deal of discussion has taken place regarding how to build, how to regulate, and how to survive in such a place. What emerges from this conglomeration of wishful thinking, rhetoric, propaganda, doomsdaying, soul-searching and enthusiastic belief is the realization that the human capability of myth and cultural construction remains paramount. Recalling Benedikt's (1992) assessment that "cyberspace becomes another venue for consciousness itself" shows how much of the excitement and worry regarding computer technology is that it is a *new* venue for exploration (p. 124). Given that many people have lost faith in anything beyond our five senses — and perhaps are suffering accordingly — this new space seems to offer insight into what might be missing. These

seekers form the backbone of cyberculture. They are asking the difficult questions and seeking the ultimate answers.

This culture also forms the backdrop for spiritual seekers who are on the fringe of cyberculture; who are looking for answers but are not necessarily a member of the elect of cyberspace. For these seekers, who may or may not be involved in a mainstream religious organization already, cyberculture represents a challenge to traditional views within a fascinating world of cutting-edge technology. The next chapter follows the path of a such a pilgrim, lending credibility for the assessment of cyberculture presented here and getting to the basis of the issues regarding spirituality and religion in cyberspace.

CHAPTER FIVE
Case Study and Analysis

When Lifeworlds Collide: Intersubjectivity and Spiritual Experience

> If you don't believe in the Bible or God, knock yourselves out! But it seems awful fishy to me that anyone would spend much time consciously denying the existence of God or the doctrines of the Bible. If I did not believe, I would just shrug my shoulders and keep on moving. I wouldn't waste my time discussing those poor deluded saps living in a fantasy world with their Bibles and their God. I certainly would not dedicate a newsgroup or a bulletin board to refuting the religious beliefs of people with odd beliefs. I'd spend my time doing something I did believe in. I'd become a psychiatrist or a physicist. A poet or an artist. (Not to say a believer cannot also enter one of those fields). My reaction to religious belief would be much like the reaction of Mr. Spock to a given oddity: I would raise an eyebrow and say, "fascinating." (Participant A)

Following the reaction of the fictional Mr. Spock, this research project has proved supremely fascinating for this researcher. In Chapter Two, the theoretical perspectives of communications history and phenomenology were outlined. Chapter Three saw the analysis of mediation and how communications media have been implicated in spirituality and religious change. The fourth chapter served as an introduction to the world of cyberculture and how it intersects with individual spirituality. This chapter presents the results of the case study followed by an analysis of these results.

The case study entails the observation of a Christian newsgroup on the Internet. Informed by a phenomenological perspective, the purpose of the research was to understand the nature of *a spiritual experience* by immersing

oneself in the experiential medium. An awareness of communications history discourse meant that the research focus was broadened to include medium theory and informed by the knowledge of how communications media might be implicated in this experience.

The above quote from a newsgroup participant was also used to introduce this chapter because it is a good illustration of the shared spiritual experience found on the Internet: lifeworlds colliding. The author of the posting was responding to some non-Christian participants who had breached the rules of netiquette by sending his original message (without his permission) regarding the Bible to another newsgroup that discusses biblical errancy so it could be discussed — and refuted — by that newsgroup. This posting also questions why non-Christians (atheists in particular) bother to participate in a Christian newsgroup when the two worldviews are so diametrically opposed. It is one example among many where newsgroup participants attempt to explain, discuss, defend and dissect their own opinions and the opinions of others.

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, details about the newsgroup are presented in order to understand the communication processes that are taking place. The second part comprises the theoretical analysis of the case study.

In Part One, the reasons for choosing this group in particular will be addressed along with the need for anonymity in the attempt to preserve healthy group dynamics. This is followed by a brief analysis of the structure and dynamics of the group. The third section is a sampling and summary of the issues that make up the core concerns of the group discussion.

Part Two begins with an analysis of the mediation effects on the communication process. Next, the focus shifts from mediation to interaction. The central theme of this analysis is that participants in this discussion group are challenged to examine their own lifeworld concepts but in a dialogical and interactive environment. This experience of "lifeworlds colliding" is partially an attempt to negotiate meaning in a group setting characterized by pluralism. It is also a form of communication that is enabled by the particular communications media allowing this experience.

5.1 Part One: Presentation of the Case Study

Part one of this chapter provides details regarding my observation of a Christian newsgroup on the Internet (*Xtalk* - a pseudonym). The first section provides the reasons for selecting this group and some discussion about maintaining anonymity for the sake of the group members. The second section is a brief analysis of the structure and dynamics of the group. The

third section provides a summary of the topics discussed on *Xtalk*. Finally, the last section addresses aspects of the technology that mediates *Xtalk* communication.

My decision whether or not to actually participate in *Xtalk* — via posting messages to the ongoing discussion — was based on several factors. I chose to "lurk" — simply read the discussion — rather than contribute to it because I wanted to maintain a certain distance from the group in order to control researcher bias and to avoid asking leading questions (or to be accused of it later). I also concluded that if I had come to the newsgroup independent of the research project, I probably would not have participated either. For the most part, in reading the postings I did not feel qualified to participate or that my opinion would add to the discussion. Finally, I wanted my presence to have the most minimal impact on the community as possible. I could not have, in good conscience, participated in the group without informing them of my intentions. At the same time, once my intentions were known, group relations could have been damaged by this knowledge. This is one aspect of ensuring ethical research practices while conducting this case study. Other measures that were taken are discussed below.

It is vital to note that all that can be surmised about this discussion group comes from the discussion itself. Regarding the individuals involved in the discussion, an observer knows only what participants choose to reveal about themselves. No surveys or statistical data are readily available to participants. Participants can visit a web site maintained by the moderator that contains the charter for the group, frequently asked questions (FAQs), and other related materials. In addition, the ratio of male to female participants is equally difficult to determine given that not all participants use their first names (which might not always indicate gender). Based on a very loose estimate, approximately half of the messages are written by male participants as revealed by their first names. The remaining half is [107] roughly half female and half gender neutral.[108] Finally, it is impossible to determine the number of "lurkers" who might be following the discussion but not participating in it, like myself. Paccagnella (1998) indicates that "only a few persons [...] come to appreciate the conference as a social environment, where they acquire friends and enemies and build their own unique on-line identities".[109]

5.1.1 Selection of the Group

The selection of the newsgroup for this project is mostly based on the actual structure of the group itself. Newsgroups are one form of computer mediated communication that can be accessed via the Internet. This form of communication is asynchronous and text-based communication enabling

meditated, or at times, researched replies (although this does not always occur). A newsgroup was chosen for observation over a chat environment because newsgroup communication allows for reflection — which is essential when religious and spiritual issues are being discussed. The asynchronicity is also an important aspect of what might entail a "new venue for consciousness" or a new spiritual experience as will be discussed in Part Two of this chapter.

I selected *Xtalk* for study after following five different discussion groups with Christian themes for several months, both moderated and unmoderated. The unmoderated newsgroups in the alt. category were far too confrontational and participants lacked the most basic etiquette. Although they provide a good foil for *Xtalk*, and share many of the same qualities of discussion when communication does occur, I cannot imagine anyone wanting to participate for too long. As there are no external controls on these discussion groups, anyone can post anything to them. As a result, I found that weeding out the many spam messages with pornographic or unrelated content was frustrating and depressing.[110] Several participants were there simply to antagonize and insult Christians, and the other participants rarely exhibited brotherly love to these antagonists. The unmoderated Christian newsgroups seem to promote extreme beliefs (or attract extreme believers). Whether atheists or fundamentalists, there is little middle ground, a lot of

frustration, and almost no agreement. Everyone seems to be banging their heads against the metaphysical wall that separates faith and fact. The only consolation is the occasional question that is answered intelligently, and received graciously. One hopes that amidst the sometimes very offensive discourse enlightenment will shine through somewhere. On the whole, the unmoderated groups in the alt. category were briefly entertaining but not the experience I was expecting. The existence of these newsgroups, however, is important because an individual seeking Christian discussion, happening upon one of these groups, may very well be discouraged or disgusted and give up computer mediated communication altogether.

The most important reason for choosing *Xtalk* over other groups was the individual characteristics of the group itself. It is a non-denominational group with no restrictions to participation (such as charging a fee for membership, or requiring certain credentials). The moderator does a superb job of mediating discussions, clarifying facts and regulating behaviour when necessary. Finally, the participants are diverse, and discussion is always interesting.

Anonymity and Preserving Group Dynamics

There is some debate whether newsgroup mediated conversation is in the public domain or private. Given this uncertainty, the door has been open for researchers to study on-line communities without the usual ethical constraints associated with academic research guidelines. This, however, has had a detrimental effect on some discussion groups that discuss sensitive and personal topics. King (1996) cites an example where a researcher studied a self-help electronic newsgroup of sexual abuse survivors. The researcher neglected to take even the most basic ethical steps to preserve anonymity. One participant learned of the study only after it had been published. This person then informed the rest of the group about the research. This resulted in the destruction of group dynamics and feelings of trust on-line. While this is an extreme case, the sensitivities of community members should be respected. Nevertheless, this is also not a case for the prohibition of all on-line research of virtual communities. What is important is that research projects are first chosen carefully, that ethical guidelines of informed consent are followed, and that research institutions become informed of the issues involved in studying publicly accessible virtual communities.[111]

5.1.2 Structure of the Group

Following is a brief summary of the participation characteristics, the diversity of opinions belonging to participants, the motivation of participants and the deterrents to participation. This information will assist in understanding the group dynamics and parameters for intersubjectivity.

The Core Group

While individual participation may shift and evolve, a core group of participants produce the majority of postings. These regular posters fall into several categories. They are either:

1) well educated and their postings exhibit a knowledge of Christian doctrine, biblical scholarship and Church and cultural history;
2) "charged with faith" and their postings urge others to turn to Christ using biblical quotations to support their beliefs;
3) antagonists/skeptics who are critical of naive faith and quick to point out the errors or misconceptions of other participants; or
4) a combination of the previous three categories.

Core group participants devote a significant amount of time to the newsgroup as *Xtalk* generates an average of about 900 messages per month.[112] While a great deal can be learned from the core group about their individual beliefs and personalities just by following their postings; less frequent participants are not as easy to "get to know." Core group participants are also familiar

with the personalities and characteristics of fellow core group members as the discussion and debate reveals individual philosophical and doctrinal "positions."

Diversity of Opinions

Participants come from a variety of faiths: Judaism, Hinduism, Wicca, Islam, Jehovah Witnesses and evangelical Christians have posted messages there. The range of opinions expressed by the various participants of *Xtalk* provide a clue to their respective backgrounds.

Part of the newsgroup experience is getting "to know" the fellow participants. When a newcomer subscribes to a newsgroup, the unfamiliarity of the other participants does not prevent communication but it does hinder understanding. Gradually, as she is able to "label" the participants according to their gender, faith, and position on specific issues, she is able to understand why a participant might respond the way they do. For example, in a heated discussion on *Xtalk* about birth control and the Bible, the fact that a man was discussing women's reproductive issues in close detail angered one participant. In this case, the gender of the person was significant because it raised the issue of whether men — who do not have to bear children — should be able to prescribe birth control methods for women. From the perspective of the participants in the newsgroup, deciphering meaning is

often easier when some knowledge of the Other is available. Small clues enable the actor to determine details about other participants on *Xtalk*. Some participants have "signatures" attached to their e-mail messages that might reveal something about themselves. For example, one *Xtalk* participant includes a link to the Jehovah Witness' website and publication *The Watchtower*. Other participants, as mentioned, might leave biographical clues to their background in the messages they post. In addition, many confessional postings appear on *Xtalk* that contain a great deal of personal information about the individual. It must be emphasized that these are the clues that group members use to assist in their communication efforts as a natural process of understanding rather than empirical facts that can be used to draw conclusions about the group. More will be said on this subject in Part Two.

Most often, language is the only clue to who you might be talking with in *Xtalk*. In this way, communication in *Xtalk* is very much an hermeneutically mediated process of reaching intersubjective understanding. For example, some "born-again" participants can be identified by their rhetoric made popular by televangelists. Stock phrases such as "turn away from sin", "give yourself to Jesus, your personal friend and saviour" and "have fellowship only with those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ" etc. provide clues that this participant is coming from a "born-again" background. Likewise, well-

written replies with proper grammar, clarity and advanced vocabulary point to a well-educated participant. Postings with numerous mistakes may indicate that the poster was:

a) in a rush,

b) too overcome with emotion to check spelling,

c) not a native English speaker,

d) young,

e) not well educated, or

f) any combination or all of the above.

At times, responses to poorly written postings, depending on the nature of the original message, might criticize the poor spelling or grammar. In general, however, one is forced to attend to the manner of expression because it is the best clue to who is "speaking." The only messages that seem to get ignored consistently are those that are blatantly fanatical.

Reasons for Participating

Proselytizing (e.g. soul winning), curiosity, education and community formation are a few examples of what motivates agents to put communication technology to religious use.[113] While a small number of newsgroup participants might declare why they subscribed to the newsgroup, i.e. they need some advice on a particular subject, motivation for

participation is mostly inferred. Reasons for (original) participation in *Xtalk* can be divided into four broad categories (at least):

1) **Antagonize/play the devil's advocate:** This category of participants might be hostile to Christianity and Christians and want to "prove" to the newsgroup that Christianity (or aspects of it) is a sham. These participants post taunting messages that are meant to cause a stir. In a milder form, these participants play the devil's advocate by identifying flaws in other's arguments or raising issues that are not relevant to the subject at hand. Despite their confrontational character, their alternative point of view often has the effect of arousing discussion and providing food for thought.

2) **Convert others to one's own point of view:** A second motivating factor for participation in *Xtalk* is to "preach salvation." These participants are on a quest to convert as many people to Christ as possible. These participants often assume a 'preachy' tone in their messages and urge others to become "born again." Not surprisingly, they use the tired rhetoric of the born-again Christian and often consider the Bible to be literally true. A different approach is taken by some participants, however, who talk of "setting a Christian example" or exhibiting brotherly love to participants in the newsgroup as a means to converting others.

3) **Observe out of interest, whether academic or general:** These participants are obviously well-educated in religious matters and are willing to argue theological and philosophical points. It is difficult to determine whether their motivation is purely out of academic interest or for the thrill of a good argument, or because at the base of their knowledge is a strong faith. They are clearly advantaged over the majority of participants given their breadth of knowledge and ability to express themselves cogently.

4) **Want to know more about Christianity, looking for guidance, answers:** The last category of participants fall into the category of "curious seeker." They participate in order to learn and understand more about Christianity. Some may be skeptical or are seeking explanations for the "difficult questions." For example, the seeming contradiction that "if God is loving, why is there so much suffering in the world" surfaces again and again in *Xtalk* discussion. It is difficult to determine at times whether these messages are "trolls" — i.e. meant to cause dissension – – or authentic.

Deterrents to Participation

A number of deterrents to participation exist that are common to newsgroup communication in general or are particular characteristics of *Xtalk*. The most serious deterrent is the time it takes to follow the group's discussion. A

second deterrent common to newsgroup discussion is the repetition that occurs in the subject matter. A third deterrent common to newsgroup discussion is flaming. A characteristic of *Xtalk* that may prove a deterrent for some is the highly critical and knowledgeable level of discussion. Finally, related to the previous deterrent, is the comment made at times by participants that this newsgroup is "not loving enough." These deterrents are elaborated below:

1) **Time invested in participating:** The ease of newsgroup communication and the large number of people who now have Internet access means that popular discussion groups receive numerous postings on a daily basis. Given the sheer number of postings to this newsgroup, one has to pick and choose what one will read 'in full' carefully. In addition, if one lags behind in reading postings, one risks missing the beginning of an important thread of discussion as most systems "retire" old postings after a certain length of time or if too many messages are being archived.

2) **Repetitious subject matter:** Given that each newsgroup has a specified topic, there are usually a finite number of issues that can be discussed. Topics recur in *Xtalk* on a fairly frequent basis especially if they are introduced by someone who is new to the group. For example, during my six month observation of the group some of the recurring topics

were: the culpability of Adam and Eve, biblical inerrancy/errancy, homosexuality, and the Second Coming of Christ. The moderator keeps a list of frequently asked questions that is based on the group's discussion over the years. The moderator has chosen "objective summaries" of each issue that has been addressed time and again.

3) **Flaming and spams:** Flaming is another term for an on-line fight. While arguing and disagreeing are perfectly acceptable, it is when an argument becomes hostile that it is considered a "flame". Flames contain personal criticisms, or are messages that are intended to start a "flame war." It is not difficult to compose an offensive message that would get a Christian newsgroup going. Luckily, one of the functions of a moderator is to weed out obvious baits and reign in discussions that become too heated. Spams are when someone posts a message to a number of newsgroups for the sole purpose of "stirring things up". In the case of *Xtalk,* someone might post a message with "flame" content to several groups i.e. Christian newsgroups with no intention of participating in the discussion that follows or supporting their claims.

4) **Highly critical and knowledgeable level of discussion:** One really needs to be careful about their claims, because an erroneous claim will be pointed out by somebody. In addition, not everyone is interested in

knowing the exegetical details about The Sermon on the Mount, for example. Some may also find these threads difficult to follow if they have no previous knowledge of Biblical hermeneutics. For example: "The Hebrew text I'm using is the Biblia Hebraica, based mostly on the Masoretic texts. It is my understanding that the Qumran community scrolls that are copies of Hebrew Scripture are surprisingly similar to the Masoretic text. [...]" might seem "all Greek" to the average reader (JMD).[114]

5) **Lack of loving behaviour:** Participants might be discouraged by the lack of "encouragement" found on a Christian newsgroup. Despite this criticism, participants often do come to the aid of one another, if someone is being unjustly or harshly attacked by another participant. When a new participant shared a story of what she thought to be an encounter with her guardian angel, she received a reply to the effect that if guardian angels exist then why are they doing such a poor job protecting children in Africa, women etc. Immediately, several participants went to the aid of the first poster defending her because, as one participant put it "[this person] was sharing with us about an encounter with God's love that increased her faith. I have little doubt that she wrote to us in order that our faith might be built up too. I

> think we should encourage posts that edify, rather than the quarreling and idle speculation that is so common here" (Participant B).

As a result, participation on *Xtalk* evolves for a host of reasons. As seasoned participants become overly familiar with the discussion matter, as individual circumstances change (e.g. less time for participation), or as individuals become discouraged by the discussion they may decide to drop out of the group, or to take a less active role.

5.1.3 Topics for Discussion

The following overview of the issues discussed on *Xtalk* does not claim to be exhaustive, but it does exemplify the general nature of discussions taking place. It is important to note that the moderator does control the issues that are being discussed to a certain extent, ensuring that they relate to the overall topic of Christianity. For example, at the present time the moderator does not permit messages about the Y2K problem "unless there is a clear connection with Christianity." The topics being discussed fall into the following four categories: The Bible, Moral Issues, Christian Belief, and Current Events. A fifth category takes into account the postings that do not necessarily produce discussion but are there for the use of participants. For example, prayer requests, syndicated sermons, and news items appear on a regular basis.

The Bible

The Bible is probably the single most discussed and controversial element on *Xtalk*. Biblical passages are frequently appealed to for confirmation of an opinion or belief in *Xtalk* discussion, as the Bible is obviously the central text of Christianity. Not everyone agrees, however, on how the Bible should be interpreted or understood. Some participants believe that the Bible can be taken literally, word-for-word and that it forms the basis of all truths. One participant — responding to the statement that perhaps some elements of the Bible must be rejected, in this case, evidence in the Old Testament that God is capable of hate (i.e. sinners), because this is inconsistent with the rest of Christian belief — declared that:

> The entire Bible has to be the Spirit Breathed, Inspired Word of God in it's entirety or none of it is true. We cannot pick and choose. the Bible cannot be in conflict with itself. It may seem like it is, but it is merely that our understanding is limited. As we grow in maturity and in perfection it will all come together. That is where our faith comes in to play. If one part of the Bible lies than (sic) it is all lies. I believe that it is all Truth and in time the Holy Spirit will reveal it all (Participant C).

In contrast to the above are those who see the Bible as an extremely flawed, contradictory and outdated book that is the source of prejudice, misogyny, confusion and small-mindedness.

Taking the middle ground are those that acknowledge the difficulties inherent in communication given the fallibility of all humanity, the difficulties of translation, the unreliability of communications technology and the gap between information and understanding. One participant points out that while there are difficulties in interpreting the Bible, understanding is attainable:

> The meaning of NO text is set in stone, expect (sic) perhaps in the mind of the author at the time of writing. This is the epistemological problem inherent in reading any text and trying to understand it. With most texts, it's not big deal. With religious, philosophical or inspirational texts, especially after many years, this is an important issue. Asserting it prevents us from reaching any understanding is impractical. Claiming that it presents a plain, straightforward understanding is unrealistic.
>
> Truth is somewhere in the middle (JMD)

It is interesting to note that the same difficulty applies to interpreting the texts of the newsgroup itself. While the message does not make this explicit, the

reality is, even the messages posted to the newsgroup are plagued with obstacles to understanding.

While there are numerous discussions about what the Bible should be to believers, there is also a great deal of detailed biblical exegesis. The scientific study of biblical text is appealed to in the constant attempts to clarify meaning and "come to an understanding." Many discussions follow a similar pattern. For example, in a discussion that began with a simple query about divorce and marriage, participants offered examples from the Bible where Jesus condemns divorce. Then, two or three participants argued over what exactly Jesus meant, returning to the original Hebrew and Greek versions to get the exact meaning. Finally, acknowledging an impasse, one participant wrote:

> It is clear that you and I approach God and the Bible from completely different angles. You seem to be looking for rules to apply. I am looking to better understand God to love Him more fully (Participant D).

What is interesting about this particular discussion is that amidst the exegetical excitement, someone posted a message about his own personal divorce experience and brought the whole discussion back down to earth. What became clear is not what the Bible says definitively, but that this is a difficult and heart-breaking issue for those experiencing it and that sometimes divorce cannot be helped.

Moral Issues

The range of moral issues addressed is completely open. One advantage of having a site like this is that people can ask the questions they have always wondered about but "were afraid to ask." In addition to the helpfulness of providing an open forum for sensitive issues (or lack of it), *Xtalk* sometimes provides a venue for confession. While the topics for discussion are generally open, at times the moderator must control discussion of very controversial or sensitive issues. Homosexuality is one example of a moral issue that is presently off the discussion roster.

1) **Freedom to discuss any moral issue:** This freedom to discuss any moral issue is a liberating feature for many Christians who might have been raised in a morally mute or sexually repressive environment where certain topics were not discussed beyond whether they were right or wrong. In addition, the anonymity afforded by the medium makes asking the question far less intimidating than in a face to face situation. During my survey of *Xtalk*, questions regarding masturbation, hermaphroditism, birth control and pornography became topics for discussion. In general, moral topics generate a great range of opinions. Oftentimes, however, a person receives both information and reassurance regarding a moral problem they might be having. One participant wanted to know more about what the Bible says about hermaphrodites as his relative had several

problems arising from this birth defect. He received information and support for his relative, and the newsgroup was educated regarding the difficulties that this condition can cause. One of the excellent attributes of *Xtalk* is that there is almost always someone who can speak as an "expert" on an issue either because of their own personal experience or because of their educational background. The group is not always helpful, however, in solving moral problems. A person who confessed to being addicted to pornography asked for help from the newsgroup. After a great deal of discussion, one participant pointed out that:

> I haven't read a response to this thread that would have helped me one iota while I was still deep in my addiction [...] The rest of you should do some reading about addictions before you attempt to counsel people who have them (Participant E).

2) Venue for confession: Confessional postings are quite frequent; but again, responses can be both helpful and controversial. A self-confessed Atheist, but former Christian, wanted to know "what do you do in your normal everyday life that you would call sinful" because he believed he was a good person and followed what would he considered Christian morality. While it is difficult to determine whether this was an honest post or a "troll" (when someone posts a message that is intended to start a flame war or other vacuous discussion), three out of four responses to this

message all confessed to sinning and sympathized with the original message poster. The fourth was more condemnatory and preachy. At any rate, this person received loving and sympathetic responses to what he claimed to be an "honest" query.

3) Highly controversial issues: Homosexuality is presently off the discussion roster of *Xtalk* because of the controversy this issue causes. There is a great deal of hostility from both sides of the issue: homosexuals who resent what they perceive to be the rejection by Christians of something they cannot help; and hard-line Christians who believe that homosexuality is completely wrong and that the Bible supports this view. Some messages seem to be confessional in tone with the underlying hope that perhaps their homosexuality will not be an issue and they will be accepted all the same. Many participants on *Xtalk* concede that the only way they can deal with the issue of homosexuality is to "love the sinner, hate the sin" as Jesus did. One participant pointed out the problem with this line of thinking:

> Love the sinner, hate the sin" is excellent theory. I'm sure that Jesus is capable of carrying it off well. I don't think the rest of us are in his class. In a recent sermon on how Christians should deal with homosexuality, the pastor at my church made a very good point about the subject. We, as fallible people, are so very good at hating the sin and

> so very bad at loving the sinner that we spend all our time on the first and never seem to get around to the second. Consider well what "loving the sinner" actually entails. Consider how Jesus would do it. If we ever get that done, then we can consider moving on to "hate the sin" (Participant F).

Christian Belief: Diversity of Belief Systems

The third category of discussion can be labeled as "Christian Belief." This category encompasses doctrine, tradition, values and concepts that comprise the Christian faith. Predictably, given the diversity of participants from diverse backgrounds, elements of belief vary sometimes drastically between Christians of different denominations. In addition to the interdenominational disagreement, there are also many non-Christians participating in *Xtalk*. This means that different belief systems such as Hindu, Islamic etc. are also compared and contrasted with Christian belief. Some examples of topics in this category are "Love", "God", "Christmas" and "heaven." Rather than present a selection of posts on these topics, one recent discussion exemplifies discussion regarding Christian belief.

When someone posted a message relating that he was planning to convert to Christianity and said that he was "wondering which denominations actually preach *true* Christianity" he received a variety of replies from participants

[my emphasis]. Some unabashedly made the case for their own denomination or Church. Some gave more general advice such as "One thing you should look at is a church that is likely to help you learn about Christianity and get involved with it" (Participant G). One participant made an interesting observation that:

> This [original question "which denominations actually preach true Christianity"] reminded me of the story from Greek mythology in which Eris (Discord) was angry about not being invited to a party of the gods. In revenge she gave them a golden apple inscribed "to the fairest." Athena, Aphrodite and Hera all then claimed the apple. This began the chain of events which led to the Trojan War. Of course, if Mt. Olympus had had a moderator, it never would have happened :–) (Participant B).[115]

When the discussion became heated, one participant pointed out that :

> We must learn to get along with those who disagree with us in details of theology. When there are disagreements we must search the Scriptures together to understand each other's points of view and grow closer to God. What we must not do, and what we usually do to the disgrace of God's Church, is cast stones at one another and walk off in a huff (Participant D).

After all of the advice, criticism and well-intentions had been voiced, the original poster wrote that:

> I have to point out here that the discussions have raised more questions than they have answers. [...] For the time being I'll continue on with my comparative religion question. There should be one true path to God, and there are many religions/denominations that are worth listening to at least (Participant H).

This thread of discussion highlights one of the most important issues concerning the growing pluralism of our society. How does a person choose amongst so many choices and so many voices? The original poster of the message needed guidance but instead he received a cacophony of opinions. A message that appeared six months earlier on *Xtalk* read "Can America Survive the religious diversity of the 90s?". This message prompted a long discussion about religious pluralism. *Xtalk* presents an interesting study for religious pluralism. Unfortunately, a detailed analysis of this aspect of *Xtalk* is not possible here; however, *Xtalk* does continue to thrive despite the myriad of opinions that each participant holds.

Social/Cultural Issues

Anywhere that people gather, discussion of current events and social or cultural issues is a given. Not surprisingly, the Clinton-Lewinsky affair surfaces often in discussion as do issues such as the Y2K problem,

homophobia, even movies. The only stipulation is that the issue must have a connection to Christianity in some way. *Xtalk* provides a valuable service in the sense that it enables people to discuss aspects of their world that may be troubling or maddening, and to work out their feelings on these issues, beyond the moment of emotion that watching the news on television allows. In addition, voicing one's concern to a group increases the satisfaction a person might get from "getting it off your chest."

The level of interest that certain topics promote can also give some clues to the cultural interests of participants. When one participant argued that the game "Magic the Gathering" (and other similar games with occult content) were diabolical and harmful to the souls of those who play them, immediately a host of supporters responded to this accusation. This might indicate a correlation between those who participate in newsgroup discussion and those who enjoy playing such games.

Other: Prayers, requests for information, news services etc.

A number of messages that appear on *Xtalk* do not require a textual response. These messages often require some type of other activity. Some messages are requesting that participants pray for a friend or relative for some reason or another. There are also regular postings of "teachings" or "sermons" that are meant to instruct participants or provide a topic for Bible study. Other

postings are simply there to provide information. Some of the "news" messages are articles that most likely do not appear in the mainstream media. Sometimes, however, participants do respond to these messages. For example, after reading about persecution of Christians in India, one participant expressed skepticism regarding the nature of this story that originated from a " 'secret document' which somehow has come into the hands of 'Last Days Harvest Ministries,' which is to be taken of 'proof' of a Hindu conspiracy to persecute Christians" (Participant I). It is also easy to skip over these messages altogether, (in the first menu level, one receives information regarding only the title, author and date of the message - see next section) as one begins to recognize who posts these messages on a regular basis.

It is important to realize that, given the dialogical nature of newsgroup discussions, no discussion can ever really be "categorized". Conversations meander, backtrack and evolve often starting with one subject and ending up as another. This is one of the fascinating aspects of communication on *Xtalk* (and most other newsgroups). Despite that it is asynchronous and textual, *Xtalk* discussion is also remarkably like face-to-face dialogue in the way that many voices contribute to the topic, there are exchanges between individuals or groups of individuals, and participants become familiar with one another through the conversations. At the same time, it is a unique form of

communication in that it enables many people to participate in the conversation at once, in a non-linear fashion, and allows for reasoned or researched replies. These factors enable the conversation to reach new levels of complexity.

5.2 Part Two

Analysis of *Xtalk* Experience: The Reflexive Nature of Interaction

Part One presented the findings of the case study of *Xtalk* as an example of a computer mediated spiritual experience. In Part Two, the experience of participating in this newsgroup is analyzed within the frameworks of phenomenology following Alfred Schutz, Anthony Giddens and Jurgen Habermas. As a preface to this analysis, the role of mediation in the *Xtalk* experience must be addressed. Computer mediation is absolutely foundational to what is taking place at the discursive level among *Xtalk* participants. My observations of *Xtalk* and the experience of computer mediated communication in a spiritual setting has identified a number of experiential elements that are common to dedicated participants in this newsgroup. Recall that phenomenology:

> seeks to discover the essential characteristics of experience and the experiential process which are essential for the experience of objects regardless of who the experiencer may be. This means that

> phenomenology's aim is to get away from subjective skepticism and relativism and to discover universal and necessary structures that would be valid for all experiencing subjects at all times and everywhere (Pilotta and Mickunas, 1990, p. 14)

While the aim of defining the universal is central to phenomenology, my claims are not so grand. I hope that the characteristics of experience identified here do indeed exist; however, I have learned too much from this newsgroup to claim that *any* experience is universal.

Given that disclaimer, one can suggest that the *Xtalk* experience seems to be a reflexive, intersubjective mode of experience. The central feature of this reflexivity — discussed in section two — is that personal views are challenged in the dialogue that takes place. Habermas (1990) points out that "agreement in the communicative practice of everyday life rests simultaneously on intersubjectively shared propositional knowledge, on normative accord, and on mutual trust" (p. 136). All three levels must be negotiated in *Xtalk*. On a simple level, differing opinions are the source of the conflict; in more complex cases, the very lifeworlds of participants are dramatically at odds. The third section addresses how a community that is characterized by conflict can possibly hold together. The key lies in the subjective and intersubjective experience of "knowing the other." This process of getting to know who one is conversing with is important for both

building trust and understanding difference. The fourth section steps back from the level of micro analysis to look briefly at what is taking place in our society at the macro level. A key institutional process affecting *Xtalk* is the "desacralization of the lifeworld." This process presents a challenge to spiritual belief that is apparent in *Xtalk* discourse. The last section attempts to address how *Xtalk* presents an example of a computer mediated spiritual experience. The seeming paradox of locating the numinous in an environment of discord is an experience that depends both on the intersubjectivity of the medium: allowing contact between people; and the subjective experience that requires inward reflection.

5.2.1 Aspects of Computer Mediated Communication

In *Xtalk,* both the *content* of discussion and the *experience* of participating in that discussion are shaped by mediation considerations. As mentioned earlier, the Bible is the most discussed issue in *Xtalk.* Debates range over everything from the oral nature of communication during Jesus' time to the value of unauthorized texts. Mediation is constantly held up to scrutiny: even direct commands from God are questioned (because they are mediated through an unreliable someone). Mediation also becomes an important element of experience because of the way both language and technology impinge on the communication processes taking place in *Xtalk.* On occasion, however, the mediated experience sometimes becomes transparent: that is,

participants become caught up in communicating and it seems neither language nor the computer interface is part of this consciousness. This occurrence is an indication of how communication technologies become naturalized in the communication process. To demonstrate the role of mediation in *Xtalk* the structure of the interface will be discussed first, followed by the central role of text-based communication in the *Xtalk* context.

Structure of Interface

The interface used to access the newsgroup discussions varies according to the software being used. Originally I used the software provided by the University that worked on UNIX principals called TIN. This interface was command driven (no menus or icons) and not as easy to access as the Netscape browser. Later, I switched to the Netscape browser which simplified the process of logging on, keeping track of, and reading messages. From a personal perspective, this made following the newsgroup much more enjoyable.

Regardless of the type of interface used, however, certain features remain constant:

- Discussion is completely initiated by participants - there are no predetermined discussion topics within which participants must conform.

The only stipulation is that discussion must pertain somehow to Christianity.

- Messages to the group mirror a standard e-mail message with the title of the message, time sent, sender's e-mail address and optional features such as a signature file or spam firewall.
- Organization of messages follow a columnar or nesting pattern. For example, one may respond to a message posted to the group using the "reply" option in your software. In this case the response will appear "below" and to the right of the original message that is posted. A "new" message receives its own heading at the left-hand side of the screen. In Netscape, an arrow indicates whether there are any responses to a "header" or not. Once the arrow is selected, the responses to the first post will appear below and to the right of the first header. This allows for easier browsing given that one can browse the header titles to decide whether to read the whole discussion or not. (see Appendix C)
- The index shows only the titles of the message (sometime partial titles if too many characters), the name of the person who sent the message (if this information is indicated by the participant in their "user preferences"), and the date the message was posted.
- Discussions can carry-on for months as long as one "replies" to a message posted previously. For example, "Do only Christians believe in God"

lasted several months. Often the original message that started the conversation gets "retired" by the system. This makes it difficult sometimes to understand the thread of the discussion if one joins it midway.

The central feature, however, that affects interaction is the ability to browse the titles without having to read each message. I found myself reading only those messages that had responses and would often skip to read what particular core participants had to say on a subject if the string was too long.

Textual Effects

Nowhere is the failure of language to convey experience more evident than in spiritual matters. First, anything to do with religion or spirituality is highly personal and potentially controversial. After all, these views are absolutely foundational to our world view given their ontological significance whether we are fundamentalist Christians, atheists or Buddhists. Second, language, and the methods we have to convey and preserve it are in themselves not perfect. Because Christian belief is perpetuated through language (all religions for that matter are), specifically through the Bible, then a knowledge of hermeneutics is essential. A hermeneutic interpretation, however, is not enough to deliver salvation. For example, was Jesus trying to avoid the conundrum of language by replacing it with himself: flesh made into word? Did he become the Truth, the Way and Light because other

symbol systems were inadequate? If so, then our instructions for living are perhaps not meant to be transmitted via language: rules, writings and dialogue; but by human experience, the lived experience of Christ on earth whose example we are challenged to follow. The only problem is that this experience is also preserved in language.

Computer networks provide the technology that enables a certain type of religious questioning or spiritual seeking. These networks actually promote critical discussion because of the central features of the medium. Those who possess the best command of the language have the best advantage, and those who possess more than one language (Hebrew, Greek) definitely have the upper hand.

The asynchronous and textual nature of newsgroup discussion allows for conscious and deliberate construction of messages. Asynchronicity allows participants to contemplate and revise their ideas. Textuality strips the rhetoric of its oratorical qualities while maintaining a persuasive effect. Obviously, this conscious attitude to written text has been around since Plato bemoaned the demise of culture due to text in the 4th century BC. What is new is the rhetorical interactivity made possible by computer mediated communication that allows for textual banter, witnessed by an unknown audience, and open to anyone. This point is important because the selective

methods of commerce previously dictated who was allowed to participate in public "textual banter".[116] The screening process ensured that only those who could write well or had something important or interesting to say would be published. In newsgroup discussion not everyone is a talented writer or scholar. Because written language is the only medium for meaning in this method of communication, it assumes the central role in the communication process. Not all participants, however, are aware of how powerful the written word is in this context.

While the role that language plays in *Xtalk* is clearly central to this form of communication; not everyone takes advantage of this. Usually, as long as a message is understandable, it becomes part of the discussion. Obviously erroneous, off-topic or unclear messages might not get a response, however. In addition, the large number of postings encourage "skimming". If either the topic or the way it is expressed does not entice, it will also be ignored. On the other hand, skimming also prevents one from paying very close attention to the grammar, diction, etc. unless one is planning on challenging the content of the message. In which case, being unclear and poorly written is an obvious disadvantage and reflects badly on the writer. When an *Xtalk* participant joined in a discussion regarding birth control, and failed to check her message for spelling, admitting she was in a rush and had to get to class, the tone of the other participants toward her became somewhat

condescending. Her message was a confirmation that she was a young person who was uninformed of the issues. On the other hand, her concerns were addressed very clearly and in detail by the other participants who urged her to become better informed. Those who are aware of the power of language use it to their advantage. One participant seems to deliberately make spelling mistakes either to bait others or to offend Christians reading his messages. For example, whether consciously or unconsciously, this person continually misspells the word "Christian". This type of flaming or baiting was common on the unmoderated newsgroups. One frequent anti-Christian participant, completely lacking in subtlety, would use terms such as "xtianutty" and called herself "JeeZus."

Despite that mediation is central to communication in *Xtalk*, at times, it is secondary to the participants' purpose to convey meaning. For this reason, it is possible for the effects and awareness that accompanies the mediation to become "backgrounded". This seems to occur between participants when discussions become emotional, or when participants are rushed. This is one explanation for why the text is more like dialogue — colloquial, abbreviated — than written communication. In dialogue, one does not have to attend to things like punctuation and spelling and many *Xtalk* participants do not either. When reading postings, it is easy to become immersed in the discussion: aware only of the flow of the conversation. This transparency

comes with familiarity with the technology as well as the "suspense" that accompanies threads of an argument i.e. the curiosity that drives one to read the next message in the thread.

The communication process enabled by computer technology has certain characteristics that make it unique. At the same time, this form of communication shares attributes with face-to-face dialogue and letter writing that make it familiar and attractive. Part One on this chapter illustrated what Giddens' would call the "routine", "everyday, or "practical" aspects of communication in *Xtalk* (1994). At the same time, however, *Xtalk*'s subject matter also makes it a unique experience as nowhere else in history has conversation about religious matters taken place to the depth and detail shown here, and been completely open to the public. The resulting experience is analyzed in the following sections.

5.2.2 Lifeworlds Colliding

When we enter the realm of *Xtalk,* one constant in this domain is the challenging of assumptions. The dialogical nature of newsgroup discourse ensures that a participant will be taken to task for her beliefs. Participants' reactions to being challenged may vary. The nature of disagreement ranges from mild differences in biblical interpretation and tradition, to major ontological differences. It is the latter form of interaction that is implicated in

"the clash of lifeworlds." This occurs when previously subconscious horizons of the lifeworld are brought into sharp focus and foundational beliefs are put into question. When lifeworlds clash, the probability of consensus is small. Yet, it is the diversity found in *Xtalk* that makes participation so compelling and challenging.

Discursivity

Participating in *Xtalk* is an example of what Giddens (1984) calls interaction on the place of "discursive consciousness." This means that:

> the agent has to 'think' about what he or she is doing for that activity [in this case believing in something] for that activity to be carried out 'consciously.' 'Consciousness' in this sense presumes being able to give a coherent account of one's activities and the reasons for them (Giddens, 1984, p. 45).

Xtalk communication is also "intersubjective" because it is a dialogue between many people. The communication that results affects both the group experience as well as the individual experience. Even in the case of lurkers – – who follow the discussion but do not provide input into it — "intersubjectivity" remains an element of collective experience. While Heim (1993) believes the practice of "lurking" is a negative aspect of computer mediated communication because it enables people to avoid participating;

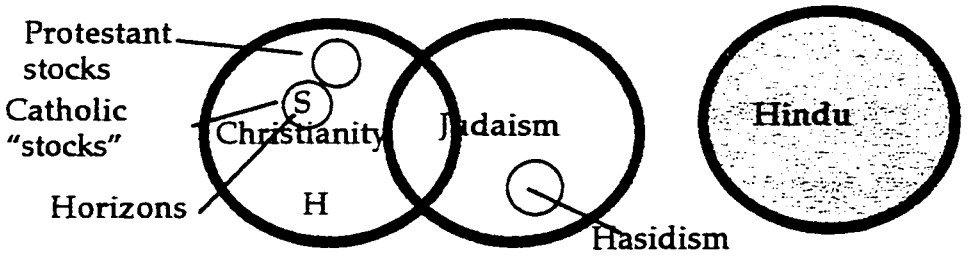
Sachs (1995) maintains that "users need not actively contribute to the discussion to derive benefits; simply following the exchanges of others may be satisfying" (p. 82). For example, a lurker may share messages they read in *Xtalk* with others outside of the group. In another way, the information they receive from the newsgroup may change their way of thinking or acting which in turn may affect other intersubjective experiences they may actually participate in.

The discursive nature of newsgroup discussion ensures that communication in *Xtalk* is often dominated by argument because of the inherent difficulty of expressing one's spiritual beliefs. First, spiritual belief is a very personal matter that we, as a culture, feel uncomfortable discussing. This is partially a result of the fear of opposition to one's beliefs. Given the pluralism in today's society, the odds are against agreement. We are also unaccustomed to discussing spiritual issues because of fear of being judged, ridiculed or rejected for those beliefs. Second, the subject matter, given its nonempirical basis, is difficult to put into words, or defend using logical argument. For this reason, many participants in *Xtalk* resort to close biblical interpretation in order to find some basis or factual ground for their beliefs. If the Bible can be counted on as truth, or fact, then spiritual beliefs based on this book have a solid foundation. Finally, it is difficult to discuss spiritual belief because so few are sure of what they believe.

Levels of Disagreement

The frequently argumentative nature of discussion does not mean that agreement is absent among participants on *Xtalk*, but that interaction poses significant challenges to the complacent believer. The degree of opposition depends on who engages in the conversation. Two Catholic participants might happily discuss the miracle of the Virgin Birth, for example, with little opposition between them. When a third participant joins the discussion, who might be Christian but is critical of the idea of the Virgin Birth, the discussion may escalate into disagreement but at least there is some commonality between those engaged in conversation. If a non-Christian joins the discussion, the belief in the Virgin Birth becomes a ludicrous claim because this person does not share in the opinion that such miracles are even possible. This illustrates the different levels at which meaning must be negotiated: what Schutz has differentiated as stocks of knowledge, horizons, and lifeworlds. These levels are illustrated below.

Fig. 5.1: Illustration of Religious Lifeworlds



Stocks of knowledge form the first level of meaning making. These are the everyday facts about our world. They are the building blocks of meaning. Turner (1978) summarizes Schutz's concept as follows:

> All humans, Schutz asserts, carry in their minds rules, social recipes, conceptions of appropriate conduct, and other information, that allows them to act in their social world. Extending Husserl's concept of "life world," Schutz views the sum total of these rules, recipes, conceptions, and information as the individual's "stock knowledge at hand." Such "stock knowledge" gives people a frame of reference or orientation with which they can interpret events as they pragmatically act on the world around them (p. 401).

In some ways, they may also be thought of as the defining characteristics between Christian denominations. For example, a stock of knowledge shared by Protestants would be the concept of a personal relationship with Christ.

Horizons, as the next level of meaning making, encompass stocks of knowledge. Horizons, again, are an intersubjectively shared "background" for making meaning but on a more general level than stocks of knowledge. Horizons can be thought of in practical terms as a set of stocks such as "Roman Law" or even "Sociology". While stocks of knowledge are taken for granted, they are surrounded by "horizons" that are indeterminate and can be questioned (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 9).

Lifeworlds are constituted from "stocks of knowledge", or "horizons": the building blocks necessary to construct meaning. At the most complex level, it is these elements of the lifeworld that might be at odds. A personal anecdote reveals how this might occur. When teaching English in the Czech Republic one of the lessons was on religion. Since the course was "practical language", class time was spent using the language in as many ways as possible. For this lesson, however, it was not enough to simply supply vocabulary and definitions in order for them to begin discussing the topic. Students had little or no concept of what the terms "soul" or "prayer" might mean, despite my attempts to explain them. I realized that the lifeworld shared by my students under Communism was very different from my lifeworld. In *Xtalk*, the majority of participants are from a Western, English-speaking background.[117] Those sharing the same culture are subjected to very similar processes of lifeworld formation. How then, one might ask, could their lifeworlds differ enough so as to be in opposition?

When lifeworlds clash, foundational concepts interfere with attempts at consensus. It is vital to note that *Xtalk* participants not only have different religious views, they also have different metaphysical views of space, time and being. For the most part, these differences do not surface in everyday interaction. The discussion of spiritual matters, however, is hampered by

these differences because matters such as the nature of existence, the meaning of "rational", the matter of free will and the assigning of authority are central for spirituality. The clash of lifeworlds is apparent when those from different religions discuss religion. Note that consensus is possible between people of different religious backgrounds in other subjects, but reconciling religious viewpoints is far more difficult.

One might argue that religious affiliation is a horizon, rather than on the level of lifeworld itself. This would make sense considering that religious concepts are "transcendable"; that is, they can be examined, rationalized and analyzed readily, unlike the lifeworld itself, which, according to Schutz, is non-transcendable. There is a difference, however, between religious belief and affiliation, and a lifeworld that is ordered by one religious belief system over another. The lifeworlds ordered by Christianity and Hinduism are significantly different. One may argue that the Christian lifeworld has been significantly destabilized, as we will see in the next section, however, the historical precedents and vestiges still remain fairly strong. Further proof lies in the fact that one can only truly *experience* Hinduism or Christianity from within these respective lifeworlds. It is possible to study these religions and know every detail of doctrine but this will not compare with being immersed in a Hindu community.

When it becomes apparent through interaction, that someone's lifeworld does not match our own, understanding is hampered by the "machinery" that enables us to make meaning. For the most part, Christian "believers" — of any sort — have little knowledge of how the "unbeliever" thinks and understands the world and vice versa. Schutz (1964) identified this problem:

> when we consider actions designed to influence other people, we find that the conditions for rational action are only met when we know how our own actions may be interpreted and misinterpreted, the other's reactions and their motivations, his or her plans, means, alternatives, etc. and the range of the other's stock of knowledge (p. 80).

In this way, the clash of lifeworlds is a serious hindrance to conversion if that is the intent of one of the agents.

Possible reactions to having one's views challenged are:

- the challenge can be ignored;
- the challenge can be faced and existing views defended; and
- the challenge may be internalized as the one being challenged may feel inadequate to defending their position for lack of information or self-confidence.

The third response may either result in the person revising their beliefs as a result of the challenge, rejecting the argument after reasonable consideration, or adopting an attitude that "suspends disbelief." This suspension of disbelief may stem from a realization that when it comes to spiritual matters, in the end, no proof is necessary or sufficient. Faith may prevail regardless of empirical evidence to the contrary. Suspension of disbelief is more than simply "ignoring" the inconsistency that has been presented. It involves consideration of the argument without rejection of either viewpoint. The Romantic poet John Keats described this as "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."[118]

Discussion on *Xtalk* is centered around defining what is faith and what is fact. The two concepts stand on the same ontological ground but appeal to different epistemological positions. On one hand, an article of faith, for the believer, has the existential rigour of fact. On the other hand, an article of faith does not require the same empirical legitimizing aspects as does a statement of empirical fact. The story of "Doubting Thomas" in the New Testament illustrates the difficult of "believing without seeing".[119] Since the Reformation, however, "believing without seeing" has been under increasing strain. This is a result of developments in philosophy and the popularity of

the empirical method in legitimizing only those things that are quantifiably identified by the senses.

Many discussions on *Xtalk* end in a state of "negative capability", where interest in the topic fades because all interested parties have had their say and no final answer is possible. Other times, discussions end because participants themselves are diametrically opposed and understanding cannot arise when there is no shared meaning. This is where lifeworlds can be said to be in conflict. Recall in Chapter Two Schutz's concept of the lifeworld as "the universe (ocean) of intersubjectively shared and assumed meaning which mediates all subjective, social and objective ways of comprehending the world."[120] In Schutz's formulation of the lifeworld concept, the lifeworld is considered non-transcendable, meaning that it lies beneath or prior to all forms of knowledge, and functions "in the background" of experience. In this sense, we do not have direct access to our lifeworld and are not conscious of its formation or role in negotiating meaning.

This thesis contests the idea that the lifeworld is "non-trascendable" in every respect. As Schutz's model of the lifeworld did not address the possibility of cross-cultural communication at all, his theory cannot provide guidance in this situation. The confrontational and discursive nature of *Xtalk* requires that participants examine their lifeworld concepts. Habermas (1990) provides

a better description of the processes taking place when subjects disagree. This is defined as a process whereby the "subconscious", or unquestioned aspect of a lifeworld moves into the realm of the "world" where it can be discursively attended to:

> A *decentered understanding of the world* presupposes that relations to the world, claims to validity, and basic attitudes have become differentiated. This process springs from something else in turn, the *differentiation between lifeworld and world.* Every consciously enacted process of communication recapitulates, as it were, this differentiation, which has been laboriously acquired in the ontogenesis of the capacity for speech and action. The spheres of things about which we can reach a fallible agreement at a given point become detached from the diffuse background of the lifeworld with its absolute certainties and intuitive presence. As this differentiation progresses, the demarcation becomes ever sharper. On one side we have the horizon of unquestioned, intersubjectively shared, nonthematized certitudes that participants in communication have "at their backs." On the other side, participants in communication face the communicative contents constituted within a world: objects that they perceive and manipulate, norms which they observe or violate, and lived experiences to which they have privileged access and which they can express (p. 138).

Thus, while some aspects of the lifeworld become foregrounded so that they might be discussed, other aspects that enable the continued process of discussion — such as language, the medium of communication etc. — remain in the background of experience.

Despite the confrontational nature of much of the discussion, participants are willing to continue the conversation in the attempt to achieve some sort of 'understanding.' Though lifeworlds are colliding, insults flinging and

metaphysical positions crumbling, discussion continues. This does not mean that participants are necessarily seeking consensus, although that is the ideal. Some participants do admit that they are seeking *conversion* of someone who opposes them. Other participants only wish to argue for the sake of arguing. On the whole, however, participants seem to be hoping for personal enlightenment on the subject. This might include defending one's position adequately, and thus coming to a deeper understanding of one's own spiritual beliefs, or qualifying a problematic issue that might be standing in the way of faith. For example, one new participant wrote that "I have many doubts and questions that you may be able to help me with [...] I ask this not to offend or to be-little you're (sic) beliefs but to try to find answers" (Participant J).

As mentioned, Schutz did not investigate far enough into the situation that occurs when lifeworlds do clash, or when an effort must be made to achieve understanding. Poststructuralists such as Ricoeur and Foucault did focus on the idea of "misinterpretation." Both Giddens and Habermas also elaborated Schutz's theories further. The next section looks more closely at what is taking place at the subjective and intersubjective levels. Using Giddens' theory of structuration, an analysis of both motivation of participants and the process of "getting to know the other" needs to be examined.

5.2.3 Knowing the Other

The conscious discursivity of *Xtalk* means that participants are challenged "to give a coherent account of one's activities and the reasons for them" (Giddens, 1984, p. 45). In order to do this, participants must reveal something of what they believe. There are two aspects to this act of sharing. First, one is exposing oneself by revealing one's viewpoints to the group. This is the subjective conscious experience of *Xtalk* and it requires at least some feelings of trust. Second, one is privy to the beliefs and feelings of others in the group who are operating on the discursive level. This is an objective experience of discursivity.

It is easier to share one's views, to open up discursively, in this medium than it is in face-to-face communication. There is really nothing to lose by participating in this group: no one to look you in the eye, to see you "lose face" or to hurt you physically if the level of disagreement were to come to that. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this distancing of communication allows for confessional experiences as well as for asking questions that one might be too embarrassed to ask in person.

Opening up to anyone, however, always involves an element of risk: especially if you are exposing your feelings to strangers. In a virtual community, where visual clues are lacking, any information one can glean

from the conversation about *who* one is talking to is illuminating. A person seeking spiritual advice might feel more inclined to accept the advice of an expert — minister, priest, professor of religious studies — rather than a lay person. These titles are not advertised on *Xtalk* unless such details come up in conversation. For this reason, the only basis for determining authority is the conversation itself. Until a participant has formed their own conclusions about who other participants are, *Xtalk* is a level playing field.

This is another reason why the method of communicating — computer-mediated, asynchronous text — becomes so important. In order to achieve understanding, the text is the only link to interpretation. One participant, in responding to a woman's question about why God will not allow her to become pregnant offered some advice but pointed out that his advice "sounds cold, I know, but everything sounds cold when typed" (Participant D). When participants share intimate details about their lives, when they ask questions that are burdening their very souls, intimacy, empathy and understanding all need to be indicated somehow. In *Xtalk*, participants are sometimes forced to consider the characteristics of the medium they are working with, because it is their only method of conveying deep meaning. Without the reassurance of touch, smiles or tears, these emotions are very difficult to communicate in the "cold" textual realm. In some ways, opening up oneself to strangers is made more difficult by this lack of non-verbal signs. For this reason personal

pieces of information gleaned through reflexive monitoring of interaction become like bridges that build trust between participants.

The phenomenological theory of Giddens and Schutz, as well as the ethnomethodology that has grown out of this theory has a bias towards the importance of physical presence in social situations. Giddens (1984), following Schutz, Merleau-Ponty and Goffman, has pointed out that "In human beings the face is not simply the proximate physical origin of speech but the dominant area of the body across which the intricacies of experience, feeling and intention are written." (p. 67). How, then, do participants in *Xtalk* put faces to the words of those they encounter on-line? Text stands in for the body. Language is the only key to experiencing the dialogical world of the newsgroup. There are no facial expressions, aural inflections, or pregnant pauses that are a significant part of communication according to theories of conversation analysis.

This lack of visual clues makes trust a key issue in computer mediated communication. The asynchronous nature of *Xtalk* is language removed from its context: ultimately, we have no idea 'who' we are speaking with because the possibility always exists that the computer mediated Other is a fraud. Granted, given the inability of any outside observer to determine intentions and motivations of a subject, and the possibility for the subject to

lie if she is asked, this danger always exists in human relations. Without the often "telling" aspect of bodily presence, however, lying is made even easier. This has serious repercussions for building trust among participants and assigning authority. Statements made with authority appear credible whether they are or not. So much is dependent on style, the ability to express oneself and to defend one's opinion.

The reflexivity of conversation holds the key to getting to know the Other and consequently being able to trust the other. Giddens (1984) has established that "The rationalization of action, within the diversity of circumstances of interaction, is the principal basis upon which the generalized 'competence' of actors is evaluated by others" (p. 4). It is not unusual for participants to "recall" messages that an individual may have posted previously. This indicates that there is a process taking place whereby participants save (either mentally or physically) information about the Other that helps them to understand who that "Other" is. This is also a process whereby the sincerity of the Other can be tested. Putting someone on the spot by asking "I thought you said that you believed ..." is one means of identifying fraudulent or insincere participation. In addition, certain people become increasingly valued by the group or an individual because of their consistently wise or well-informed responses or their benevolent attitude. While visual and auditory clues such as facial expressions, sighs etc. may be lacking, details

provided by the participants themselves become central to the meaning making process.[121] [122]

The second aspect of "knowing the other" is the experience of being exposed to another person's viewpoints. This experience is inevitable given the diversity found in *Xtalk*. One simply cannot screen out all opposing viewpoints without partially or completely reading what someone else has written who may have beliefs that are in opposition to one's own. The process of getting to know on-line participants very closely mirrors Schutz's theory of "typification" or "type constructs". To recapitulate from Chapter Two, in the communication process, actors hold a number of assumptions about the world that allow them to communicate with an unfamiliar person. First, "(a) others with whom an actor must deal are considered to share an actor's stock knowledge at hand"; and second, "(b) others may have unique components in their stock knowledge because of their particular biographies, but these can be ignored by an actor dealing with others" (Turner, 1978, p. 398).

In some cases, this process of "typification" may stop at the level of "stereotype". Many of the stereotypes that surround Christians, non-Christians and atheists are supported by the behaviour of some on-line participants. Christians, as often portrayed by the Western media are

judgmental, closed-minded and hypocritical. Certainly these personalities can be encountered in *Xtalk*. Other encounters, however, explode these typical notions of the Other when non-type constructs interact i.e. hypocritical atheists or open-minded Christians. Very often, the intersubjectivity taking place in *Xtalk* requires that actors move beyond typification in order to clarify who the other person is and what they believe.

Encountering someone, or someone's ideas that conflict with one's previously held type constructs, one must be prepared to acknowledge that the original type constructs might have been incorrect. For example, when one encounters a "real" person — i.e. the "loving" Muslim, the "spiritual" atheist — on-line stereotypes are bound to break down. This process became apparent when someone posted a message to the group about how Muslims were far more loving than Christians. Many participants denied the examples given in the original message citing instead instances of non-loving Muslim behaviour. The idea of a loving Muslim simply did not fit their original concept of who Muslims were. What became clear is that members of both religions had exhibited hateful behaviour through the ages, that certain sects were more loving (or less) than others, and that the person posting the original message seemed to have as many misconceptions about Christianity as the Christians in the newsgroup had about Islamic belief (Participant K).

The central issue here is that while one is free to reject the beliefs of the Other, one must at least acknowledge the existence of these beliefs. It is spiritually taxing to be constantly confronted with beliefs that are different from one's own. Knowing that there are a diversity of spiritual positions might put the validity of one's own beliefs into question. On the other hand, several participants in *Xtalk* seem to have learned that "I don't believe what the Other believes but I understand that what the other believes is as important to them as my beliefs are to me." *Xtalk* is partially fueled by the situation in America, where "many religious people believe simultaneously in two mutually exclusive things: (1) my religious belief system is right and (2) everyone is entitled to his or her own religious beliefs" (Thieme, 1997). Without this paradox, discussions such as those taking place in *Xtalk* would be impossible.[123] How this paradox is possible is discussed in the next section.

5.2.4 Why Communication Continues

While this thesis has concentrated on the intersubjective level of interaction, a brief reference to Habermas' theory of "communicative action" is helpful for understanding how and why lifeworlds can be at odds in this environment. Habermas' theory is important to understanding the *Xtalk* experience because it is the "desacralization of the lifeworld", one element of the process of "uncoupling of system from lifeworld", that gives a clue as to

why lifeworlds are in opposition in *Xtalk*. Finally, *Xtalk* discussion is evidence of the "discursive rationalization of lifeworld concepts" that occurs when systems become unmoored from lifeworlds.

Recall Habermas' (1984) assertion that lifeworld formation in our present day has been separated from the ideological forces of system. With institutional boundaries gone — or at least in question — religious enculturation lacks the authority it once had. One result is a religious pluralism that lacks any organization around a central institution. Rather, religion becomes almost completely individualized and subjective. Nowhere are the difficulties of religious pluralism more evident than in *Xtalk* discussion. On the other hand, the lack of consensus does not escalate to violent levels as once may have been the case. As religious difference no longer threatens sovereignty or freedom, the sphere becomes at least negotiable. In addition, religion -- in the West -- no longer comprises *the whole* of our lifeworld. This is perhaps one reason why people of different faiths can live and work together. At least some aspects of the lifeworld are shared while religious belief is bracketed by the dictates of practical consciousness.

Habermas' (1984) description of how the desacralization of the lifeworld corresponds with a "linguistification of the sacred" is especially important for understanding the possible systemic or macro effects of computer mediated

communication of spiritual experience. Recall Habermas' (1984) point that the dangers of dissensus can be diffused by communication media:

> the growing pressure for rationality that a problematic lifeworld exerts upon the mechanism of mutual understanding increases the need for achieved consensus, and this increases the expenditure of interpretive energies and the risk of dissensus. It is these demands and dangers that can be headed off by media of communication. The way these media function differs according to whether they focus consensus formation in language specializing in certain aspects of validity and hierarchizing processes of agreement, or whether they uncouple action coordination from consensus formation in language altogether, and neutralize it with respect to alternatives of agreement or failed agreement" (p. 182 - 183).

This indicates that the *Xtalk* experience might have the potential to "focus consensus formation in language specializing in certain aspects of validity and hierarchizing processes of agreement" if consensus can be achieved in at least some respects.

Giddens (1984) also provides an important point in understanding why communication continues in an environment of dissensus. Continued participation can be seen as an attempt to despair or dislocation that arises when spiritual stability is at stake. *Xtalk* participants are often in a state of spiritual angst, or might be put in such a state by participating in this newsgroup. Imagine a naive faith that is challenged by convincing arguments that destabilize this faith: this might be an earth-shattering experience. Although Giddens' examples of "critical" situations are more

concrete, the previous example might very well qualify. Trust, therefore, becomes key to intersubjective understanding. Giddens (1984) describes how:

> [t]he 'swamping' of habitual modes of activity by anxiety that cannot be adequately contained by the basic security system is specifically a feature of critical situations. In ordinary social life actors have a motivated interest in sustaining the forms of tact and 'repair' which Goffman analyses so acutely. However, this is not because social life is a kind of mutually protective contract into which individuals voluntarily enter, as Goffman on occasion suggests. Tact is a mechanism whereby agents are able to reproduce the conditions of 'trust' or ontological security within which more primal tensions can be canalized and managed. This is why one can say that many of the specific features of day-to-day encounter are not directly motivated. *Rather, there is a generalized motivational commitment to the integration of habitual practices across space and time* (p. 84).

This is a clue to why participants continue to participate in *Xtalk* even though their lifeworlds might be destabilized as a result: the "motivated interest in sustaining forms of tact and 'repair'".

5.2.5 Locating the Numinous in Computer Mediated Communication

The above discussion would seem to indicate that the *Xtalk* experience is essentially a stressful, highly confrontational and existentially taxing experience. This is not, per se, the computer-mediated spiritual experience that I originally envisioned. Where is the ecstasy, the love, the repentance, the enlightenment and the salvation that characterizes what is thought of as the "spiritual"?

The experience of participants in this discussion group may present a challenge to spiritual belief but it is not without redeeming qualities. First, *Xtalk* is discourse about spiritual experience. Every participant experiences this discursivity no matter what their motivation. Second, participation in *Xtalk* enables certain aspects of communal experience. Finally, *Xtalk* is a potential spiritual experience in itself because it opens the door to introspection and soul searching.

At the least dedicated level of participation, *Xtalk* requires some sort of engagement — whether reading or responding — with the subject material. Thus, even lurkers are involved in the discursive aspect of *Xtalk*. This discursive experience is valuable in a number of ways. It provides a venue for people to question aspects of spiritual belief that trouble, anger or mystify them. It enables people of different faiths to communicate in a relatively non-threatening (at least physically) environment. On a more general level, this discursivity may have "unintended consequences" that feedback into the process itself. These consequences might affect the subjective level i.e. may result in an individual changing their views; or the systemic level i.e. may contribute to the evolution of spiritual belief.

If we enter the realm of spiritual discussion, the one constant in this domain is the challenging of assumptions. This is a shared experience among participants: if you are willing to voice your opinions, be prepared to defend them. In this sense, despite widely differing viewpoints, these people are *sharing* an experience. They are learning to examine their own beliefs and perhaps to come closer to understanding the beliefs of others.

In Chapter Four, Cobb's (1998) book *Cybergrace* was discussed. She proposed that the numinous was located in some aspect of the computer technology itself, that this technology was evidence of the evolution of human spirituality. My analysis concludes that spiritual experience in *Xtalk* is mediated through the Other. Recall Barbour's (1990) dual requirements for religious experience: "authentic religious belief must always be seen in the context of the life of the religious community and in relation to the goal of personal transformation" (p. 23). The intersubjective aspects of *Xtalk* — supporting others, praying, sharing information — mirrors what is taking place in real time, face-to-face religious communities.

Although the community aspect of computer mediated communication has not been addressed thus far, some mention of this aspect of the experience is warranted here. It is clear from following the discussion that *Xtalk* does exhibit aspects of a functioning, supportive and diverse community. While

the "core" group build and partake in community aspects more so than the lurkers on the fringe, even the lurkers can benefit vicariously from the positive aspects of the *Xtalk* community. First, participants offer support to one another in the form of providing requested information, sympathizing/empathizing with others, and coming to the aid of one another if they are unjustly treated in the course of the conversation. Second, the participants express frustration at the lack of love and support shown by the group and make a conscious effort to create a more loving and supportive atmosphere. Third, the participants come to know one another on a more personal basis through the revelation of personal stories and the sharing of deep personal beliefs. This act of sharing reflexively reinforces the community by enabling better communication once details of another are known.

While it is easy enough to observe aspects of community-forming behaviour that form the collective spiritual experience, it is more difficult if not impossible to confirm the introspective, individual spiritual experience. Only that which is visible can be studied through observation. Certainly, turning points in a participant's opinion can be identified in the conversation. In addition, the discursive relationship may affect ethical reflexivity. There is no reassurance, judging from the conversation alone, that there will be a corresponding change in belief or behaviour. While there

may be seeming ontological commitment, determining whether the individual instance of exposure is existentially reflexive or simply play-acting is almost impossible.

The discursive processes of being exposed to someone's viewpoint, of acknowledging difference, and of defending one's own opinion *could promote* a further process of looking inward at one's own beliefs and attitudes in order to define what is real and what is truth. This would then be a quintessential spiritual experience because the goal is both personal transformation and enlightenment.

The intersubjectivity — whether in the form of conflict or correspondence — would seem *to promote* the spiritual experience of going inward. It follows that one would want to search for answers when one's belief system is challenged. This is a particularly subjective experience requiring introspection, analysis and even prayer. Introspection is a prerequisite of nearly every religious belief system. Given the sometimes highly intellectual and very convincing nature of the debates taking place in *Xtalk*, it is probable that participants are often internally — as well as externally — challenged to defend their faith.

In addition, it can be argued that the experience of having one's views challenged is, in itself, *a spiritual* experience. What participants experience may not be as harsh as persecution, but, being opposed or exposed to contrary viewpoints and standing firm in one's faith is a sort of spiritual test. If anything, my research leads me to believe that interaction between people of different or opposing viewpoints is a spiritual experience that is not often experienced off-line. Although one's spiritual beliefs are often challenged in a non-interactive way, for example, by what we read in the newspaper or see on television, this does not compare to discussing one's views with another person. This type of interaction involves the nuances of interpersonal communication that is qualitatively different from face-to-face communication.

Thus the *Xtalk* experience is inseparable from the characteristics of mediation. As has been mentioned, computer mediation enables a contemplative, discursive environment, that feels like real time conversation on the one hand while allowing for reflection and space on the other. The characteristics of the media that enable the discussion of religious issues without escalating into all-out war and in fact promoting the achievement of consensus seem to indicate that this is indeed a *new spiritual experience.* This investigation cannot conclude that the computer mediated communication of spiritual issues presents an example of "a new venue for consciousness" but it

certainly can conclude that it presents "a new spiritual experience" never experienced before in history in exactly the same way. What effects this might have on a grander scale is yet to be seen.

Summary

This newsgroup exists by virtue of the participants' will to understand spiritual matters. In a sense, the project of *Xtalk* is the construction of shared meanings. While there may be little consensus in *Xtalk* discussion, the experience of being challenged is a "shared" experience. In this sense, despite the widely differing viewpoints, participants are sharing an experience which becomes another mode of "spiritual experience." In a society where — arguably — many Christians have little knowledge of the history, doctrine and philosophy behind their religious beliefs, *Xtalk* discourse demands that participants become better informed of their own beliefs. Many participants are learning to examine their own ideas and perhaps are coming closer to understanding the ideas of others.

One cannot guess at what might be taking place on the subjective level among participants, however. Whether participants are making radical changes to their belief systems is not a question for this thesis, but perhaps a valid inquiry for further study. An outsider cannot know whether a reflexive

experience leads to inner reflection. This is a conversation between God and the believer.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

> [...] when we speak of 'several' consciousnesses, this is not to be taken as a simple arithmetical plurality; the otherness of consciousnesses is relative to a primordial identity and unity that makes possible the understanding of language, the communication of culture, and the communion of persons. [...] the unity of humanity is realized nowhere else than in the movement of communication.
> Paul Ricoeur[124]

This thesis began with the question: what is the nature of the experience of spirituality in a computer mediated context? The question was aimed at illuminating the relationship between computer mediated communication and spirituality. In particular, it strove to contextualize and analyze one example of spiritual experience mediated by the Internet. The focus was both on the historical mediation of spiritual experience as well as the contemporary context for computer based culture. By tracing the historical mediation of spirituality, investigating the context within which computer mediation occurs, and focusing on a case study of a computer mediated discussion group, the intersection of computer mediated and spirituality was shown to be linked by social interaction.

In the second chapter, the two frameworks used to guide the investigation into CMC and spirituality were summarized and rationalization provided for how these two approaches could compliment one another. While

communications history scholars provided insight into mediation and the historical relationship between communication technologies and spirituality; phenomenology helped to understand the nature of both the communicative and spiritual experience under investigation. It is important to emphasize that communication and spiritual experience in this situation were co-dependent. In addition, these frameworks allowed for a qualitative, open-minded analysis of the territory. Finally, the interdisciplinary nature of the subject required input from several knowledge disciplines: communication studies, religious studies, cultural studies, history, sociology and philosophy all contributed to the investigation.

In Chapter Three, the historical analysis of the role of mediation in spiritual experience demonstrated that the form of mediation does have an effect on the spiritual experience. Each form of mediation — technological, symbolic, and intersubjective — had its own set of concerns. In addition, the mediation of "sacred" material is distinct from secular mediation. Mediating technologies allow, most importantly, an event to be experienced irrespective of space or time. Symbolic mediation raises the question of representation, authenticity and notions of the sacred. The necessity or efficacy of guides or intercessors is a controversy that stems from the rise of the modern individual. The central debate regarding mediation and spirituality is whether the displacement of direct experience alters — or destroys —the

essential quality of the experience. The conclusion was that while mediation did affect the experience, the "efficacy" or "sacredness" of the spiritual experience is a judgment made within the respective belief system.

The intersection of spirituality and cyberculture was the theme of Chapter Four. An investigation into cyberculture was called for because it enabled a broader analysis of CMC and spirituality and provided some context for the case study. In this chapter, we saw how spirituality is a central concern of cybercultural discourse. Artificial intelligence, eschatological concerns, and an evolutionary worldview all work to build a mythology of computer culture that has implications for both spirituality and the future of this technology. Whether we are to take the claims of cybercultural discourse seriously, that computer technology might open the door to a new level of consciousness depends on how the technology develops and how we continue to mythologize the place this technology takes in our lives. The analysis of *Xtalk*, however, did not support this claim. It did demonstrate that the *Xtalk* experience could be defined as a new form of spiritual experience. *Xtalk* intersubjectivity remains grounded in textuality, a realm of experience that remains firmly rooted in our lifeworld. Virtual reality, on the other hand, may potentially provide the link to a new level of consciousness once it has achieved a more sophisticated level of development than is presently available.

The conclusion regarding the case study of *Xtalk* was that mediation enabled a certain style of communication that was textual while possessing characteristics of conversation. While at times the effects of mediation were consciously acknowledged in *Xtalk* conversation, at other times the technology enabled seamless communication for participants. The lack of non-verbal cues in a non face-to-face setting was shown to be both positive and negative. On the one hand, this form of communication was less threatening especially when discussing sensitive issues. On the other, achieving meaning was more difficult because of the lack of trust. Participants demonstrated an ingenuity and ability to overcome these barriers in various ways; however, achieving consensus — owing to the subject matter or the barriers of mediation —was a rare occurrence.

Phenomenological theories of communication according to Schutz, Giddens and Habermas helped to analyze the communication processes that were taking place in *Xtalk*. Communication in *Xtalk* was shown to be predominantly "discursive" as participants were constantly being challenged to defend or explain their religious views. This situation meant that background aspects of the lifeworld were necessarily *thematized* into the "world" in order for them to be analyzed and understood. This level of experience was not necessarily characterized as a "spiritual" experience

because participation did not necessitate introspection or even commitment. The potential exists, however, for the discursive experience to lead to a quintessential spiritual experience if participation leads to introspective soul-searching, helping participants to define and understand their spiritual beliefs as well as the beliefs of others.

From Intersubjectivity to System

Following Eisenstein's (1983) lead, it must be emphasized that computer technology is "*an* agent, not *the* agent, let alone *the only* agent of change" in contemporary spirituality (p. xiii). The example of *Xtalk* is even less significant in terms of effects this group might have on a larger scale. At the present time, the number of people participating in this newsgroup and others with similar themes is negligible.

If, however, the Internet is perceived as a *microcosm* of society then the types of changes taking place might well be significant. From this perspective, it could be surmised that traditional religious beliefs are under considerable scrutiny but at the same time, the potential for a wide-reaching renewal of faith exists.

Extending the assumption that the Internet is a microcosm, certain predominant themes emerge. First, the example of the Internet shows that while information regarding religion and spirituality is increasingly available, there is a dramatic decrease in the availability of guidance. This is not for lack of "guides", but more a result of the proliferation of guides and the resultant inability to know who to choose. Second, the pluralistic nature of the Internet encourages a pluralism in the spiritual sphere as well. This technology enables "fringe" groups to grow because of the ability to link small populations around the globe. In addition, it helps to advertise fringe beliefs as well which might not have a voice through other forms of communication. In this way, the Internet might promote a proliferation of "new" religions (Brasher, 1996; Kellner, 1996; O'Leary, 1996). Third, the Internet provides a venue whereby individuals can access information which often leads to a questioning of authority. In some respects this could be seen as a healthy trend for a society that seems to have neglected the basic tenet of Christianity: love thy neighbour. On the other hand, the questioning of authority further undermines the role and credibility of spiritual guides. Finally, in a positive sense, the interest in discussing spiritual issues on the Internet, and the desire to "find one's own way" could be seen as a trend towards individuals taking responsibility for their own beliefs.

Future Research Projects

Giddens (1984) suggests that once the intersubjective aspects of a phenomenon are established, the research focus can be widened to analyze the connections between the local and the regional, the "embeddedness of their activities in time, and the "modes of time-space distanciation" that link the local level to the systemic level (p. 298). This broadening of the focus would help to establish the postulations presented in the previous section. A more thorough application of Habermas' (1984, 1990) theories would also be helpful in understanding the links between intersubjective interaction and how what is happening at the level of the "individual" becomes codified in systemic relations. Habermas' (1990) notion of moral consciousness might also be helpful in terms of understanding the ethical implications of computer mediated spirituality.

Before broadening the level of analysis, however, a deepening of the focus on the intersubjective could also be undertaken. The next step would be the application of empirical methods such as more rigorous conversation analysis, as well as engagement with the research population using alternate research methods i.e. interviews. In addition, I regret not being able to look deeper into two aspects of this thesis: community formation and the relationship between cyberculture and the "culture" of *Xtalk*. Both of these areas need to be addressed.

Finally, I would have liked to provide a better description of the experience of spirituality along the lines of various "theologians and philosophers" of phenomenology such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Paul Tillich and Martin Buber. The opening epigram to this conclusion is an indication of how the wisdom of these scholars could have clarified the phenomenon under study beyond the simply conclusions I formulated for such a complex territory. Alas, I too, am fallible!

ENDNOTES

[1] Barbour, Ian (1997). *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*. p. 265.

[2] In Stone, Allucquere Rosanne (1994). Will the real body please stand up?: Boundary stories about virtual cultures. In M. Benedikt (Ed.), *Cyberspace: first steps* (pp. 81-118). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

[3] A "daemon" is a program that automatically searches the Internet for prespecified keywords on a constant basis providing instant updates for the owner on topics of interest. An avatar is a digital persona or character that is used for virtual "play" in multi-user dungeons, dimensions or domains (MUDs). Something like on-line "Dungeons and Dragons."

[4] From David Mitchell's class notes, COMS 613, Winter 1996. No page number.

[5] The ethnomethodological approach was an attempt to ground the phenomenological theory of Schutz and Giddens in an empirical method that both privileged interaction while focusing on the elements of conversation. This theory which had roots in critical hermeneutics as well was pioneered by Harold Garfinkel (1967), Howard Goffman (1981) Harvey Sacks, E. A. Schegloff, and Gail Jefferson. The central tenet of this theoretical approach is that "analysis can be generated out of matters observable in the data of interaction" (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984, p. 1). This approach led to the concept of "grounded theory": meaning that the researcher should begin observation with no preconceived notions of what is taking place. While this approach did partially solve the problem of phenomenology's lack of empirical method or engagement with the acting subject, it proved too empirically focused for the purposes of my investigation.

[6] The writer of the Gospel of John recognized the power that the "Word" represented. He used this metaphor to describe the Saviour himself. For many religious groups, the books that contain the words of prophets, sages, saints and saviours are also in themselves powerful and true. Christian, Jewish and Islamic holy texts are believed to contain the very words of God. Believers find no inconsistency or incredulity in the sacredness of their texts. These holy books are the link between the Almighty and humanity.

[7]Although Eisenstein's contribution may not be considered to be on par with the other three scholars, for the purposes of this thesis, her contribution has considerable importance.

[8]"Chaytor argues that print significantly changed the oral and scribal worlds by altering literary style, creating a new sense of 'authorship' and intellectual property, fostering the growth of nationalistic feelings, and *modifying the psychological interaction of words and thought*" (Meyrowitz, 1994, p. 53)

[9]For a more in depth study of Mumford and Childe, see Heyer (1988).

[10]See Goody, Jack (1975) *Literacy in Traditional Societies.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and (1978)*Domestication of the Savage Mind.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[11]See *Technics and Civilization* and *Myth of the Machine.*

[12]Heyer (1988) points out that, according to Innis, "communications technology never determines the character of an epoch. To use his words it 'hasten', 'facilitates' or 'helps to define' that character" (p. 115).

[13]Monopolies of knowledge: "The properties of the dominant medium, along with the pre-existing institutional structure, facilitate knowledge, and therefore power, being localized in such a way that it preserves particular interests and is always beyond access for a large segment of the population" (Introduction to *The bias of communication;* Heyer, 1951, p. xix).

[14]For example, the guilds that copied manuscripts before the printing press was invented. See *Empire and Communications*, (1972) p. 141.

[15]This is a bit confusing, for how else can one study history but through secondary sources? I am presuming Czitrom means that secondary sources are written by other historians and scholars rather than a written record from the time period under investigation.

[16]As with many of these scholars, their ideas are not exclusively defined as one category or another. For example, Bolter and Landow can also be labeled as postmodernists, deconstructionists or semioticians. Their theories, however, fall under the communications history canopy because they focus on communications media and how shifts in this media affect individuals and society. They, too, are transformation theorists, in that both believe that changes in our relationship to text will produce corresponding cognitive and epistemological changes in consciousness.

[17] Neither of these scholars, however, fit Meyrowitz's categorization of "second generation." For example, Zelman (1997) views Ong as a bridge between first and second generation theory. The distinction between first and second generation is somewhat problematic because the term "generation" implies historical separation as well as "theoretical" separation. Not every scholar who has followed in the footsteps of Innis and McLuhan naturally takes the "second generation" approach.

[18]Those criticisms include his structural and linguistic determinism that discounts the role of everyday communication; his lack of historical grounding and empirical proof for such cognitive shifts imposed by literacy; and finally, his enthnocentrism.

[19] This could be a criticism of many communication history studies: they take for their evidence, intellectual history rather than cultural history, particularly popular culture.

[20] Other agents of change were for example the various political revolutions of the time, the changing notions and awareness of time due to the invention of a reliable timepiece.

[21] While it was not discussed in the section on Innis, some scholars believe that Innis shared this concern for how spirituality was affected by modes of communication. Keast (1995) asserts that "the works of Innis [...] clearly suggest that God is manifest in human interaction" (p. 23). After all, Innis preferred oral communication to "mechanical" because it "involves personal contact and a consideration of the feelings of others" (1951, p. 191)

[22] For example, the nuances of Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, while they form the basis for philophical phenomenology, do not have a large bearing on the phenomenology of religion approach. Walter H. Capps (1995) writes that 'Philosophical phenomenology is the product of a concerted attempt to give philosophy — and sometimes, metaphysics — a more effective point of departure. Its strategy is to focus on the structure of *phenomena*, as distinct from earlier preoccupations with *noumena*. Phenomenology of religion, in its most common form, is ordinarily less ambitious epistemologically and ontologically. Being a particular development within religious studies, it simply regards concentration on religion's manifest features — the visible, empirical, and self-evident factors — as the most effective way of coming to terms with the subject." (p. 110).

[23] *Playboy Interview*, p. 105.

[24] Note that *Structures of the Lifeworld* will refer to Schutz and Luckmann, as Luckmann compiled Schutz's work but was not responsible for the ideas per se.

[25] David Mitchell Class Notes, COMS 613, 1996, no page number.

[26] David Mitchell is responsible for the revised version of Giddens (1984) model found on p. 5.

[27] Perhaps this is an attempt to bring the reader up to par with the researcher's knowledge of context: note Mitchell's comment that "an observer's accounting of what is going on often is precluded by much taken-for-granted implicit assumptions which could not be generated from the empirical evidence itself say by another observer not so culturally fluent (i.e. the account itself rests on practical consciousness)." From Class Notes, COMS 613, 1996.

[28] Complete text can be found at www.west.net/~jrprod/tmt/manhat.html.

[29] Note that more forms of spiritual mediation are possible — such as spirit or energy — but are beyond the boundaries of this thesis.

[30] While other sacred texts such as the Qur'an have also played important roles in spiritual mediation, the Bible has arguably been the most influential text for Western civilization.

[31] Luckmann(1963) points out that both Durkheim and Weber "sought the key to an understanding of the individual in the study of religion" (p. 12). Further, the individual in modern society is profoundly affected by the secularization of this society. He also compares the theories of Mead and Durkheim as being complimentary with regard to the formation of the Self (p. 19).

[32] Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

[33] Although the telegraph played an important role in the Union Prayer Meeting Revival of the late 1850s in the United States, and telephones used to transmit church services, these were not consistent (Sweet, 1986, p. 54,, and Marvin, 1991, p. 145; Kern, 1983, p. 69). Sweet also laments the lack of scholarly attention regarding these two communication media and their historical religious usage (p. 54)

[34]The first commercially licensed station to begin regular broadcasts was in fact XWA in Montreal. It is unknown whether programming was religious in nature. See David B. Mitchell and Edward Renouf Slopek, book review of *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* by John B. Thompson, Stanford UP, 1990. Reviewed in *Communication Theory* p. 84 - 87. Date?

[35]For a detailed account see Marc Raboy, *Missed Opportunities:the Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990, pp.22-29.

[36]The Bible was actually the first communications "technology" that brought religion into people's homes. The radio was the first electronic technology.

[37]Opinions regarding this phenomenon fall into two camps: those who abhore it, and those who are apologetic and hopeful that it might improve. The former group: Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media;* Jacques Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); and the latter group: Ben Armstrong, *The Electric Church,*Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979; Virginia Stem Owens, *The Total Image, Or Selling Jesus inthe Modern Age,* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980. For a more thorough bibliography see Sweet.

[38]In Sweet, pp. 65-66 and Rowland p. 185-86.

[39]In Kingwell (1996), p. 177.

[40]Jim and Tammy Bakker were accused of tax evasion, and Jim admitted to sexual misconduct with his secretary. Oral Roberts made headlines over his claim that God was going to "call him home" unless he raised $8 million. Jimmy Swaggart also admitted to sexual misconduct.

[41]There are many other explanations for the comparison of Jesus as the "Word". This is just one interpretation.

[42]While Ong uses the words writing and print almost interchangeably, it

seems to be the printed word that he defines as the dominant transforming factor.

[43]Chartier (1989), Illich (1989) and Saenger, Paul [(1982) "Silent reading: It's impact on late medieval script and society", *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 13, pp. 367-414.] have demonstrated this.

[44]Summarized in Flim, p, 30 - 35. Many of Illich's works refered to by Flim are unpublished. See especially *In the Vineyard: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon*, 1990.

[45]Keast argues that Charles Norris Cochrane, author of *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New York: Oxford, 1957)and Innis influenced each other's thinking.

[46]"Illich seems less concerned with the sensory experience of electronic reading per se, than with the general failure of modern people to experience reading as an intimate encounter with God" (Flim, 1991, p. 51).

[47]Heim (1993) p. 9: Preface to *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt: Klosternam, 1967) p. ii, author's translation.

[48]Some might argue that "thinking" is *not* a necessary aspect of "believing"; indeed, that the two — when it comes to religious belief — are mutually incompatible. Take for example the attitude towards Pharisees during Jesus' time and the parallel denouncing of academia in pentecostal communities that see intellectualism as detrimental to salvation. I myself do not ascribe to this perspective.

[49]The drive for computerization, in some instances, can be interpreted as a lapse in critical thinking if computers replace people in areas of key expertise.

[50]In the case of Judaism, writing the name of God is akin to depicting God in any way. There is no difference between symbolizing God in letters or in pictures.

[51] The distinction must be made between how religious images declined in the North due to the Protestant preference for unadorned places of worship versus in middle and southern Europe where the production of religious images actually increased in the counter-Reformation.

[52] The story of the Ghent Altarpiece does not end there. Puyvelde (1947) relates further how the altarpiece was dismantled because Emperor Joseph II was offended by the nudity of Adam and Eve. Other panels were subsequently removed for one reason or another. In the 20th century, the altarpiece was finally of a piece again only to have a panel stolen in 1934. It came into the possession of Hitler during WWII but was returned to Ghent at last by the allied armies (pp. 120-121).

[53] Michelangelo, from Cistine Chapel.

[54]Note that here "images" becomes more than simply pictures: images can refer to "outlooks" or "visions" with ontological and epistemological significance.

[55]Benjamin came from the Frankfurt School - critical of modern mass culture. For an alternative perspective see Fiske's - *Understanding Popular Culture*.

[56] Electronic document, no page number.

[57] Holman Hunt, William, *The Light of the World.*

[58]Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (trans Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston), New York, *Semiotexte*, 1983.

[59] Copied from www.bremen.de/info/nepal/S-Mandal/S-Mdla-0.htm.

[60]Meditation is perhaps one of the only examples that operates on a completely personal, unmediated basis. To learn how to meditate, however, often involves a spiritual guide of some sort i.e. guru, monk.

[61]New Catholic Encyclopedia, McGraw Hill, 1967, p. 815.

[62]Note that baptism is an exception to this statement. Baptism has the dual function of a) welcoming the person into the religious community and b)

signifying the beginning of the baptised person's spiritual journey. Note also the doctrinal differences of opinion between different Churches and sects regarding baptism.

[63]Matthew 18: 19-20. New Jerusalem version. Other versions read "where two or three *gather* " which connotes physical presence moreso than the verb "meet."

[64]From a Catholic theological perspective, however, receiving communion is the central focus of the Mass.

[65] In Zaleski's (1997) book, the only exception to the opinion that physical presence is a necessary aspect for some forms of spiritual experience is Mark Pesce, the co-creator of VRML and a practising technopagan witch, who regularly conducts technopagan rituals on-line. He came up with the idea to "create a place for sacred being in cyberspace" by conducting a traditional Samhain ritual on-line (p. 262).

65 Kinney (1995) proposes that these virtual rituals have the potential for changing religious practice in a significant way (p. 773).

[66]New Catholic Encyclopedia, McGraw Hill, 1967, p. 812.

[67]Note that Ong (1981) believed that print actually promoted the examination of conscience resulting in more frequent confessions (p. 153).

[68]This will be addressed in Chapter Five.

[A69]Witness Al Gore's "Information Highway" speech regarding proposed changes to the Communications Act — NII — , on Dec. 21, 1993. Gore's speech introduced the metaphor of the 'information highway': "Today, commerce rolls not just on asphalt highways but along information highways."

[70] Note that each of these subtopics deserves a chapter of its own, but for lack of time and space, will be addressed only briefly here to point out their importance to the central theme of this thesis.

[71] *Myst* is a popular computer game containing a great deal of mythological and religious symbolism.

[72]Hexham, Irving (1993). *Concise Dictionary of Religion.* Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press.

[73]A great deal of feminist discourse takes this position. Haraway, however, argues that computer technology and science actually hold promise for feminism because these disciplines are beginning to confuse the categories and raise questions about the role of the body and mind.

[74] Searle, John (1983). *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Popper, K and J.C. Eccles (1990) *The Self and Its Brain.* Berlin: Springer-Verlag; Dennet, Daniel C. Consciousness Explained: Penrose, Sir Roger (1989) *The Emperor's New Mind.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[75] In Jeeves, p. 183. Original citation Penrose, Roger (1989) *The Emperor's New Mind.* Oxford: Oxford UP, p. 540.

[76]Roy Ascott. "From Appearance to Apparition: Communications and Consciousness inthe Cybersphere." Article obtained directly from author through e-mail. 100143.100@compuserve.com.

[77]From Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy,* Vol. 1 (New York, Humanities Press, 1955), p. 23).

[78] Not only is Telihard de Chardin's philosophy antithetical to Catholic teaching, given its reliance on evolutionary theory, it is unusual in general.

[79]In Cunningham, www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/mar/cunning.html original citation from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Hominization", *The Vision of the Past,* New York: Harper and Row. 1966, p. 63).

[80] In Lukas and Lukas (1977), p. 174 (footnote): "In other essays, Teilhard makes clear that his "Point Omega" is the cosmic aspect of Christ, much referred to in the epistles of Saint Paul."

[81] See *CMC Magazine's* Special Issue "Spirituality Online", April 1997, for examples of how Teilhard de Chardin's philosophy has been suited to cyberdiscourse.

[82]McLuhan was discussed extensively in Chapter 2.

[83] Teilhard de Chardin's *Phenomenon of Man* is quoted at pages 46, 174, 179.

[84]See Onufrijchuk, R. (1997). *Object as vortex: Marshall McLuhan and material culture as media of communication.* Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Simon Fraser University.

[85]Of course, there remain some religious groups who reject modern technology partially or completely such as the Quakers, Doukhobors, Hutterites etc.

[86]Prasad p. 259 citing Warren, Mark, "Ideology and the self", *Theory and Society*, 19, 599-634.

[87]Grosso (1995) also uses this metaphor comparing the desire to create to: Egyptian magicians [who] thought they could (or pretended they could) animate images by proper incantations. The Renaissance magi thought humans could control the forces of nature by manipulating icons and verbal formulas; in late twentieth century, we manipulate the icons of Apple Computers or of Microsoft Windows. (p. 270)

[88] See www.hip.atr.co.jp/~ray/tierra/tierra.html

[89]One wonders why Ray has to look to digital organisms for this insight, when we, ourselves, are organisms that are subject to evolutionary processes.

[90]Note that there is a whole other explanation for this technological trajectory that is ignored in this thesis, namely the economic arguments that sees the development of computer technology as an industry pushed on the Western world in order to preserve the status quo of Western society and those who own and control it; or as an inevitable outcome of the evolution of market economies [...]. See: Bell, Tehranian, Perrole, Tofler, Weinberg...

[91] If it were not outside the realm of this inquiry, the notion that this age-old quest to create not only human beings, but all of nature, anew, is a particularly male quest, given their auxiliary role in the procreative process might be interesting to pursue.

[92]www.stealth.net/~deolog/Lewis.html.

[93]I originally located this quotation in Cobb, 1998, p. 177.

[94]I received this posting myself, but read about it first in Kingwell, 1996. I've come across similar accusations of Reagan and Gorbachev.

[95]Web article, no page number. See Appendix B.

[96] Note that Heyer (1989) in the CJC special issue on McLuhan identifies Tylor as a "worthy precursor of McLuhan" whose work, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* "came as close to being a history of communications as anything written prior to Innis and McLuhan" (pp. 33-34).

[97] Frazer quoted in Capps (1995), p. 73.

[98] In Dery (1996), p. 50. Arthur C. Clarke, quoted in Joe Haldeman,*Star Trek: world without end* (New York: Bantam, 1979), epigraph on opening page.

[99] This interest in magic and occult, fantasy or science fiction writing also surfaces frequently as a characteristic of cyberculture.

[100] I cannot agree with this simplistic and even ethnocentric explanation of moral development.

[101]Hess (1993) prefers the term "movement" to "religion" because it does not fit "conventional analytical categories such as religion." He points out further that "an interest in modern science is oneof the key "elements" of New Age discourse and practice, along with an interest in Eastern philosophies and the psychology of human potential." (p. 4).

[102]Skepticism as a philosophy, is contradictory because there can be no proposition that is true; therefore the skeptics central thesis cannot be true. (Marias, 1967, p. 96).

[103] Original source: Melton, J. G. (1988). *The encyclopedia of American religions, religious creeds: a compilation of more than 450 creeds, confessions, statements of faith, and summaries of doctrine of religious and spiritual groups in the United States and Canada.* Detroit, MI: Gale Research Co., p. 36-41;

[104]http://www.december.com/cmc/mag/1997/apr/grosso.html

[105]Ibid.

[106] That is, if they were *ever* clearly defined is debatable. In the popular imagination, however, it is safe to assume that science and religion have occupied two distinct and opposite realms of thought for several centuries. See Richardson and Wildman (1997) for a more thorough discussion regarding the relationship between religion and science through the ages.

[107] This estimate was made by counting the postings over a one month period, recording which posters were obviously male or obviously female and dividing by the total.

[108] Note that this very rough estimate does not take into account participants who might be masquerading as the opposite sex. In addition, the estimates do not take into account the number of actual participants based on gender, but rather, the number of messages written by male or female participants. In any given day, a "core" group member may send a number of messages so duplication is not taken into account.

[109] Electronic document, http://jcmc.huji.ac.il/vol3/issue1/paccagnella.html

[110] Spam - when the same message is posted to numerous newsgroups, many of which have no relation to the subject of note. Baker, 1997, p. 132.

[111] An excellent summary of the issues is found in a special issue of *The Information Society The Ethics of Fair Practices for Collecting Social Science Data in Cyberspace*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1996.

[112] This is a loose estimate based on observations of over four months. It is not an historical average or an actual average.

[113] It is important to note that individual motivation and organizational motivation i.e. at the level of Church or even corporation, might be very different. When discussing motivation at the organizational level, one must be aware of the *ideological* intentions that organizations might have in using technologies to "advertize" their messages.

[114] This person requested specifically to have their initials cited.

[115] Note: the :-) is supposed to be a "smiley face."

[116] Obviously, letter writing was one form of communication where ongoing discussions took place but these were not public but private. In addition, pamphleteering, which became common in the 19th century, was another form of communication where an unauthorized individual could express their beliefs publicly. This form of communication, however, did not structurally support discussion and "banter" in the same manner as computer-mediated communication can.

[117] Note that no formal research was done to confirm this claim, however, it was something I looked for whenever I read a message. It is sometimes possible to determine where a person is from based on their e-mail address. I deduced from observation of this sort that *Xtalk* includes Canadian, American, and on occasion British participants.

[118] Letter to George and Tom Keats, December 21 - 27, 1817. In *English Romantic Writers*, Ed David Perkins; San Diego, New York, Chicago etc. : Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, p. 1209

[119] John 20: 19-29. The New Jerusalem Bible.

[120] David Mitchell, Class Notes, COMS 613, 1996.

[121] Note that these type of clues have been textualized in many cases. For examples ROTFL indicates that the person is "rolling on the floor laughing."

Smiling faces :-) and winking faces ;-) are also another way of communicating expression and feeling.

[122] There is a difference, however, between using personal information to communicate with group members, and using this information to come to research conclusions. From a research perspective, Pacagnella (1998) states that:

> even when the design of research does expect some data referring to the *real world*, it is never correct to accept these data without keeping in mind that obtaining information about someone's off-line life through on-line means of communication — although seemingly easy and convenient — is always a hazardous, uncertain procedure, not simply because of the risk of being deliberately deceived but also because in such cases the medium itself increases the lack of *ethnographic* context discussed above and it may also produce misunderstandings due to different communication codes. (e-document, no page number).

This means that the *researcher* cannot necessarily make assumptions about who the participants in the newsgroup are "off-line." It also cautions the participant about how much can be surmised about the Other given only the computer-mediated context.

[123] It must be kept in mind that while participants may be exposed to the ideas and views of people whose religious beliefs may differ from one's own, participants are not able to share in the experience of those beliefs through *Xtalk*. *Xtalk* is *discourse* about a particular experience.

[124] Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1986. Revised translation Charles A. Kelbley, p. 141.

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APPENDIX A

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

2500 University Drive N.W., Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4

Faculty of GENERAL STUDIES
ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES

Telephone (403) 220-6343
Effective Writing: (403) 220-7255

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY

This is to certify that the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of General Studies at The University of Calgary has examined and approved the research proposal:

Applicant: Andrea Marie Matishak

Department/ Faculty: Communications Studies - Graduate Program
General Studies

Course: Thesis 112 Session: Winter

Instructor: Dr. David Mitchell

Project Title: The Experience of Spirituality and Computer Mediated Communica

(the above information to be completed by the applicant)

Chair, Ethics Committee of the Faculty of General Studies

26 Nov 1998
Date

Original: Student
Copy: Instructor (for submission to the Academic Programmes Office)

GENERAL\ETHICS

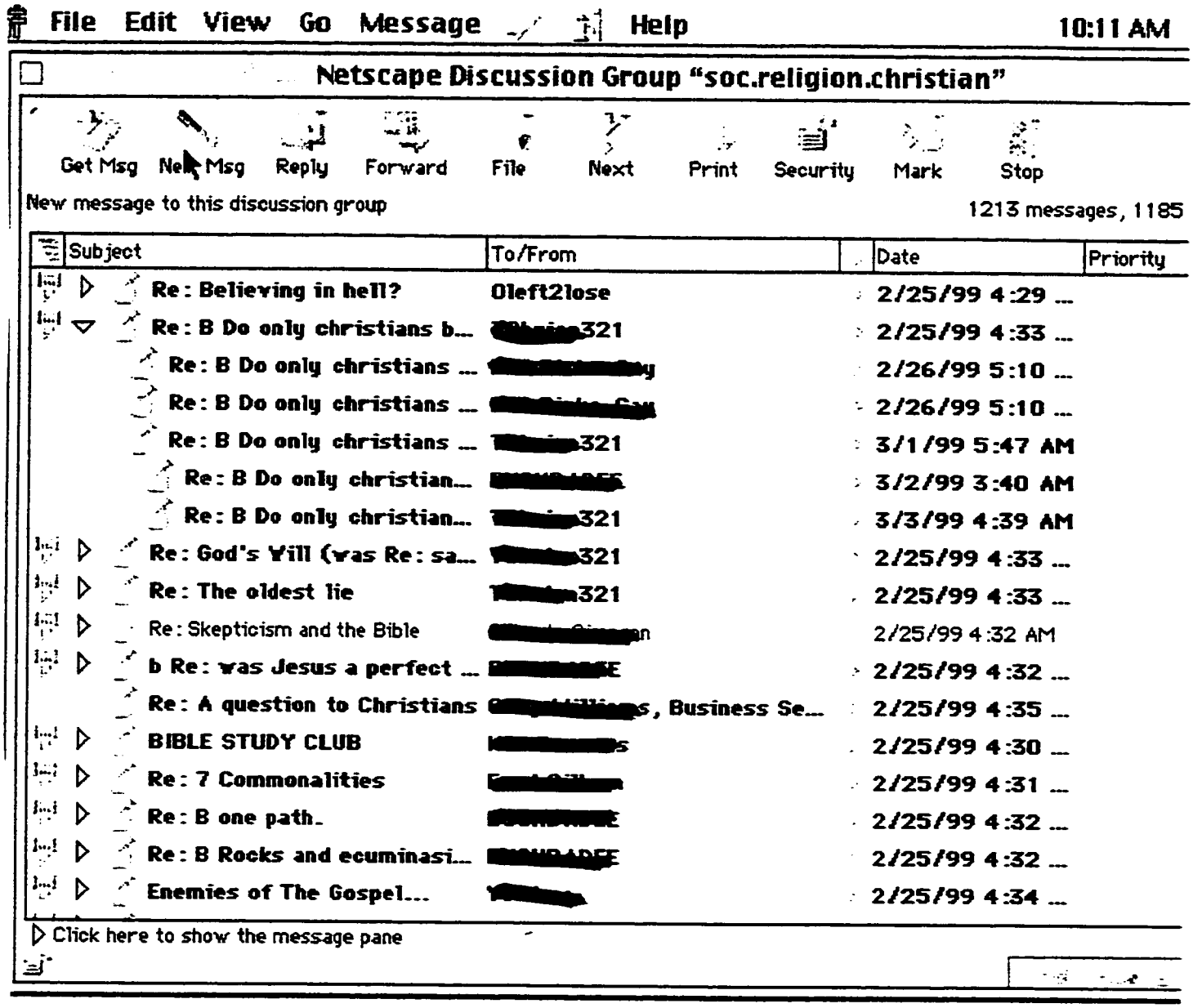
APPENDIX B

> > > Subject: Is the Internet Satan's tool to destroy mankind?-???
> > >
> > > I received this eerie e-mail and u've got to forward this to everyone
> > > u
> > > know, it really makes us wonder, will the world end by 2000??`
> > > Is the internet Satan's tool to destroy mankind?
> > > Is Bill Gates Satan's reincarnation?-
> > > read on.....
> > >
> > > since we're all using MICROSOFT products here, I thought I'd just let
> > > you know these facts...
> > >
> > > Do you know that Bill gates' REAL name is William Henry Gates III?
> > > His official REAL name NOW, is BILL GATES III. So, what's so eerie
> > > about
> > > this name? OK, if you take all the letters in Bill Gates III and then
> > > convert it in ASCII code (american standard code for information
> > > interchange) and then ADD up all the numbers...you will get 666, is
> > > the
> > > number of the beast!!! SICK!! Coincidence? Nope. Take WINDOWS 95 and
> > > do
> > > the SAME procedure and you will get 666 too!!! and the same goes for
> > > MS-DOS 6.31!!! Sicko rite?
> > >
> > > Okay, that's the first part, now for the second part, for those of you
> > >
> > > fellas who still have the OLD excel 95 (not office97) then try this
> > > out:
> > > 1.open a new file
> > > 2.scroll down until you see row 95
> > > 3.click on the row 95 button, this highlights the whole row
> > > 4.press tab, to move to the second column
> > > 5.now, move your mouse and click on help THEN about microsoft excel
> > > 6.press ctrl-alt-shift and click on the tech support button
> > > simultaneously
> > > 7.A WINDOW WILL APPEAR, TITLE : THE HALL OF TORTURED SOULS
> > > this is really eerie okay...it has a doom style format and you can
> > > walk
> > > all around the hall...and on the sides of the walls are the names of
> > > the
> > > tortured souls...
> > > 8.NOW WALK UP THE STAIRS AND THEN COME BACK DOWN, FACE THE BLANK WALK
> > > AND THEN TYPE IN EXCELKFA
> > > this will open the blank wall to reveal another secret passage, walk
> > > through the passage and DO NOT fall off, when you get to the end, you
> > > will see something really really eerie...

> > >
> > > At this point of time, countless witnesses all over the world have
> > > verified this point...
> > > it's really an eye opener. It could be a joke by MS programmers or is
> > > it?
> > > Wouldn't be surprise if Bill Gates was "The Antichrist", afterall it
> > > was
> > > already foretold in the Bible that someone powerful would rise up and
> > > lead the world to destruction.
> > > And Bill Gates definitely have that kind of power in his hands. More
> > > than 80% of the world's computers run on Windows and DOS(including
> > > those
> > > at Pentagon!)
> > > If all his products have some kind of small program embedded(like this
> > >
> > > Hall of Tortured Souls) that can give him control, setting off nuclear
> > >
> > > arsenals, creating havoc in security systems, financial systems all
> > > over
> > > the world,etc.....all from his headquarters isn't a far off reality!
> > > Just using Internet Explorer may just allow him to
> > > map out what you have on your computer bit by bit each time you log
> > > on.
> > > Perhaps the endtimes are near and this is just a tip of the iceberg!?
> > >
> > > "He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and
> > > slave,
> > > to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one
> > >
> > > could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the
> > > beast
> > > or the number of his name. This calls for wisdom. If anyone has
> > > insight,
> > > let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is
> > > man's number. His number is 666.".....Revelation 13:16-18
> > >
> > > Something for you to think about.
> > >
> > > An eerie E-mail for everybody to think about...
> > > The Bible, in the Book of Revelation says that without the sign of the
> > >
> > > beast one would not be able to buy, sell, do business transactions,
> > > etc.....
> > > and .....
> > > My question to you know is this..... Is Internet now a necessity in
> > > doing business? The Internet also bears the sign....
> > > Note that the Internet is also commonly known as the World Wide Web or
> > >
> > > WWW.....
> > > One other way we write W is V/ (VI), so .....
> > > W W W
> > > VI VI VI
> > > 6 6 6
> > > This gives me something to ponder upon ...
> > >
> > > Isn't everything going towards the Internet? (i.e., buying / selling
> > > goods, business transactions)
> > > Isn't Microsoft always on the move to have a monopoly when it comes to
> > >
> > > software technology? And now the Internet?
> > >
> > > Revelation also says that the mark of the beast will be carried on

> > > one's
> > > Hand and one's forehead.....
> > > If the Internet would indeed be the sign of the beast aren't we all
> > > starting to carry it on our hands and foreheads???
> > > Screens (forehead) and make use of the mouse (hand) ???
> > > Are things finally falling into place or are we just letting our
> > > imagination run???
> > > Remember, the devil came to cheat, steal, and to destroy..... so
> > > be
> > > VIGILANT !!!!
> > >
> > > About Bill Gates and Microsoft.
> > > PROOF that Bill Gates is the Devil:
> > > The real name of "the" Bill Gates is William Henry Gates III.
> > > Nowadays, he is known as Bill Gates (III), where III means the order
> > > of
> > > third (3rd)
> > > By converting the letters of his current name to the ASCII-values
> > > and adding his (III), you get the following:
> > > B 66
> > > I 73
> > > L 76
> > > L 76
> > > G 71
> > > A 65
> > > T 84
> > > E 69
> > > S 83
> > > I 1
> > > I 1
> > > I 1
> > > ----------
> > > 666 !!!! THE NUMBER OF THE DEVIL.....
> > >
> > > Some might think ask, "How did Bill Gates get so powerful?"
> > > Coincidence? Or just the beginning of mankind's ultimate and total
> > > enslavement????
> > > Before you decide, consider the following:
> > > MS-DOS 6.21
> > > 77+83+45+68+79+83+32+54+46+50+49 = 666
> > > WINDOWS95
> > > 87+73+78+68+79+87+83+57+53+1= 666
> > > Coincidence? You decide....
> > >
> > > "To agree or to not agree with the WWW or the Beast", is not the
> > > question. What if the WWW is the 666? Or Bill Gates be the Beast?
> > > what will you do?? Cancel subscriptions to the Internet? Resign from
> > > Microsoft? Set out a campaign against Bill Gates in the Internet?
> > > Shut
> > > down all Windows95 forever? It will not do you any good.....
> > >
> > > think about all this and pray, pray really hard, or else.....
> > >
> > > Never Stop Believing....
> > >

APPENDIX C


File Edit View Go Message Help 10:11 AM
Netscape Discussion Group "soc.religion.christian"
Get Msg
New Msg
Reply
Forward
File
Next
Print
Security
Mark
Stop
New message to this discussion group
1213 messages, 1185
Subject
To/From
Date
Priority
Re: Believing in hell? Oleft2lose 2/25/99 4:29 ...
Re: B Do only christians b... 321 2/25/99 4:33 ...
Re: B Do only christians ... 2/26/99 5:10 ...
Re: B Do only christians ... 2/26/99 5:10 ...
Re: B Do only christians ... 321 3/1/99 5:47 AM
Re: B Do only christian... 3/2/99 3:40 AM
Re: B Do only christian... 321 3/3/99 4:39 AM
Re: God's Will (was Re: sa... 321 2/25/99 4:33 ...
Re: The oldest lie 321 2/25/99 4:33 ...
Re: Skepticism and the Bible 2/25/99 4:32 AM
b Re: was Jesus a perfect ... 2/25/99 4:32 ...
Re: A question to Christians , Business Se... 2/25/99 4:35 ...
BIBLE STUDY CLUB 2/25/99 4:30 ...
Re: 7 Commonalities 2/25/99 4:31 ...
Re: B one path. 2/25/99 4:32 ...
Re: B Rocks and ecuminasi... 2/25/99 4:32 ...
Enemies of The Gospel... 2/25/99 4:34 ...
Click here to show the message pane