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TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN ORTHODOX LIFE AND PRACTICE

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Digital technology has come to play a vital role in contemporary religious life, both in the real world and in virtual worlds. Regardless of their comfort with it, whether for facilitating worship or for communicating religious values, all religious traditions have had to face the ubiquity of digital technology and find a place for it in their worldview. While some traditions lean more toward a positive or negative outlook on the use of digital technology, the vast majority find themselves somewhere in the middle. This may mean that they are dedicated to a neutral view on the subject, but in most cases, it simply means that they have not adequately wrestled with the issues involved.

In the case of Orthodoxy, there seems to be a disconnect between private and public use of digital technology. While individuals in the Orthodox community use it in the same way that their non-Orthodox neighbors do, institutional use of digital technology is fraught with contradiction and ambivalence. On the one hand, digital technology is embraced as a way to make Orthodoxy more visible, viable, and more accessible, particularly to its adherents. On the other hand, it is regarded with some suspicion, having limited use for mediating core beliefs, practices, and aesthetics of the Orthodox faith, and potentially serving to disconnect Orthodox faithful from their true community. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the uncertainty that the Orthodox feel about the appropriateness of digital technology for mediating religious life has become particularly acute, and many issues have arisen which call out for resolution.

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THE PRINCIPLE OF MEDIATION

In his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, media theorist Marshall McLuhan argues forcefully that technology does more than communicate some neutral message, but, through the characteristics of the medium, fundamentally changes how people understand the nature of reality, leaving them forever changed. His oft-quoted statement puts his ideas in a nutshell: “the medium is the message.”¹ A similar sentiment is echoed by Birgit Meyer in her book *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*: “As content cannot exist without form, a message is always mediated.”²

While McLuhan and others following his point of view would locate agency in the medium itself, seeing human beings as essentially victims of their own creations, other scholars would argue that human beings still possess significant agency where technology is concerned. Mark Katz argues:

Although we often respond to technology within a context of limited options not of our own making, we must remember that, in the end, [its] influence manifests itself in *human* actions. Put another way, it is not the technology but the *relationship* between the technology and its users that determines [its] impact.³

Nicholas Cook argues similarly:

One important point to make at the outset is that technology does not simply determine what happens in culture...technology may facilitate certain cultural developments while standing in the way of others. The best way to think about this is in terms of the cultural developments that particular technologies afford: this puts the emphasis on the choices that societies make in their use of technology.⁴

Following the ideas of Katz and Cook, then, the use of certain technologies, while not absolutely determinative, is likely to have a marked effect upon their users, so they should not be regarded as neutral carriers of informational content.

Traditionally, religion and media have been regarded as antagonistic to one another; this antagonism is closely related to the supposed divide between religion and science. Within Western Christianity, this divide has been seen most clearly in the opposition of fundamentalist groups to the theory of evolution and scientific systems flowing therefrom; in Eastern Christianity, it has been witnessed most by the hesitance of Orthodox clergy to accept new technologies, being representative of Western cultural hegemony. However resistant the Church—whether in the East or West—may be to digital technology and new media, Birgit Meyer reminds us that all religious systems involve mediation in one form or another, and that new forms of

1 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Critical ed. (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2003).

2 Birgit Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 12.

3 Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, Revised edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 3.

4 Nicholas Cook, Monique Marie Ingalls, and David Trippett, *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture* (Cambridge: University Press, 2019), 7.

media should be analysed in terms of their conflict with older forms, rather than rejected out of hand as modernistic intrusions into ancient traditions. In fact, she would argue that it is precisely the willingness of religious bodies to use new forms of media to their advantage that undergirds their vitality and popular appeal.⁵

AN INTRODUCTION TO MEDIA AND THE ORTHODOX FAITH

Orthodox Christianity has always been mediated through a wide variety of sensory—or as Birgit Meyer would designate them, “sensational”—forms; indeed, the Orthodox faith puts a great deal of stock in materiality as a means of accessing the divine. Seen in early Christological debates, the iconoclast controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries, the official declaration of Mary as the Theotokos (“God-Bearer”), the belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and many other similar cases, Orthodox Christians place much emphasis upon the fact that God has come in the flesh through the person of Jesus Christ and is able to work through material—as well as spiritual—means to accomplish the salvation of the world. Whatever Orthodox Christians may believe about the importance of materiality, however, it is clear that not all forms of materiality, or indeed of mediation, are of equal value or efficacy in the Orthodox mind. The pinnacle of God’s working through material things is to be found in the sacraments of the Church—particularly the sacrament of the Eucharist. Beyond the sacraments, though, material items come to have more or less value as they are useful in directing Orthodox faithful toward their life in Christ.

In his study of digital mediation in the life of Orthodox believers in Thessaloniki, Greece, Jeffers Engelhardt makes a distinction between what he terms “unmarked” and “marked” media. Unmarked media are those forms of mediation which are traditionally associated with the Orthodox Church—e.g., books, icons, bells, and incense. The Eucharist also falls into this category. These types of media have been accepted as essential elements of the Orthodox faith, without which Orthodoxy would be indistinguishable from other forms of Christianity and would lose its spiritual efficacy.

Marked media in the service of Orthodoxy include modern forms of mediation such as digital recordings of sermons and chants; religious broadcasts via television, radio, and the Internet; Internet resources and mobile applications delivering religious content and designed to assist various aspects of Orthodox liturgy; and social networking sites designed to foster Orthodox community online. Put simply, marked media can encompass any form of technology that has potential to assist in the propagation and maintenance of the Orthodox faith but is not an essential part of Orthodox identity. Because of the potential for marked media to be used for both good and evil, much discernment is needed on the part

5 Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations*, 1.

of Orthodox clergy and laity where their use is concerned. Any form of marked media has the potential to be used for edification of the body of Christ, but not all uses of marked media have the official sanction of the Orthodox Church.⁶

Closely following this distinction between unmarked and marked media, Engelhardt also distinguishes between the sacramental life of the Orthodox Church and what he calls “the Christocentric everyday.” The sacramental life refers particularly to Orthodox believers’ participation in liturgy and highlights the importance of the gathered Orthodox community. “The Christocentric everyday,” on the other hand, closely parallels the life of the saints, as Orthodox believers in the world (unlike the saints, many of whom left the world to follow the monastic life) strive to keep their thoughts and affections directed toward God, maintaining their connection with the sacramental life while in the midst of their secular lives.⁷

Among the Orthodox Christians in Thessaloniki, the most attested way to maintain Orthodox identity throughout the week was to watch YouTube videos featuring Orthodox religious content. Another common practice among parishioners with families was to listen to professionally produced recordings of chant and prayer services. Among the younger generation, who frequently used mobile technology, it was common to find a curated and ever-growing collection of digital files containing Orthodox music and religious instruction. In general, the attitude of Orthodox Christians in Thessaloniki toward marked media was ambivalent: “A knife can cut bread or cut a throat, depending on who holds it.”⁸

Engelhardt recalls a conversation with a young Greek Orthodox man, in which three stages of Orthodox life were delineated, and the relation of media to each was explained. The first stage, *catharsis*, is the period during which faithful Orthodox laity are purged from their desires for this world and develop their appetite for spiritual things. Paradoxically, it is this stage during which mediation by physical means is most needed, as lay people, unlike the saints, have less intimate knowledge of God and so need more sensory reinforcement to learn to desire him. It is at this stage that the “Christocentric everyday” is most crucial, for Orthodox faithful must learn how to redeem the time not spent at Liturgy.⁹

The second stage, *illumination*, is the stage to which the church fathers attained as they wrote great works of theology. Even in this stage, the use of media is helpful, but it becomes unnecessary as one approaches *deification*, the final stage of the Orthodox life. *Deification*, or *theosis*, as it is known in the Greek language, is the state to which saints have arrived. It involves *hesychasm*, or ‘inner stillness,’¹⁰ during which the senses are abandoned, and

6 Jeffers Engelhardt, “Listening and the Sacramental Life: Degrees of Mediation in Greek Orthodox Christianity,” in *Praying with the Senses: Contemporary Orthodox Christian Spirituality in Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 58-63.

7 Ibid., 58-66.

8 Ibid., 65-6.

9 Ibid., 59.

10 “Hesychasm - OrthodoxWiki,” accessed 2 May 2020, <https://orthodoxwiki.org/Hesychasm>.

a life of constant prayer is in view. While media can be used throughout all three stages, and prayers and hymnody provide certain benefits, during the period of deification, the saints seek to lay aside the use of worldly media and focus exclusively on participation in the sacraments.¹¹

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN ORTHODOX PRACTICE WORLDWIDE

Throughout history, Orthodox Christians living in traditionally Orthodox lands have faced persecution by foreign invaders and hostile political forces—by Catholics, by the Ottoman Turks, by Communist governments, and in the case of present-day Christians living in the Middle East, by their Islamic neighbours. Because of their inability to participate fully in the societies in which they have lived, Orthodox believers have remained largely unaffected by the major cultural changes that have accompanied the rise of modernity in the West. It is not surprising, then, that Orthodoxy has been slow to adopt modern technologies. However, it would be false to say it avoids them. In fact, throughout the “Orthodox world,” digital technology has been put to good use both by ecclesiastical bodies and by scores of the Orthodox faithful.

After the fall of Communism in the 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church in particular began to rebuild its tarnished image and establish itself as a familiar and trusted presence within Russian society. It accomplished this in part by a sophisticated and calculated use of digital media placed in the hands of sympathetic lay media managers. Understanding the importance of taking control of its media presence, rather than allowing its image to be molded by outside independent and secular media networks, the Russian Orthodox Church stepped boldly into the world of digital media and staked out its territory.¹²

In 2000, an official proclamation proceeding from the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church outlined how the church intended to relate to its secular surroundings and provided guidelines for responsible use of digital media by its adherents. Today, the Russian Orthodox Church hosts its own website and YouTube channel, and it even manages two private television stations, which broadcast religious content. Its individual parishes also manage websites of their own, which are used to disseminate information about and on behalf of religious authorities and can provide a space for interaction between official church leaders and private individuals. In its proactive approach to the use of digital media, the example of the Russian Orthodox Church is being followed by other post-Soviet countries.¹³

The situation in Greece and Cyprus was quite different from that of Eastern Bloc nations during the twentieth century. Unlike those countries, Orthodoxy in Greece enjoyed a certain prestige, owing to its long-time status

11 Engelhardt, “Listening and the Sacramental Life: Degrees of Mediation in Greek Orthodox Christianity,” 59.

12 Jack Turner, “Orthodox Christianity in the Digital Age,” in *Religion Online: How Digital Technology Is Changing the Way We Worship and Pray*, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2019), 114.

13 Ibid.

as the official religion of the Greek state, and even though its authority was undermined at times by secular rulers, it never experienced the same degree of subjugation. Consequently, whereas the Orthodox Church in post-Soviet nations took hold of the advantages of digital media at the first opportunity and established a secure place for itself within the surrounding secular society, the Greek Church has not been motivated to employ digital media to the same degree and has consequently not enjoyed the same type of media presence.¹⁴

In the United States, there are seven recognized branches of the Orthodox Church, over which three bodies—the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese, and the Orthodox Church in America—exercise authority.¹⁵ Each these branches of the Orthodox Church has its own website and each maintains an active presence online. In addition to these official diocesan websites, there are other Orthodox websites emanating from the United States, among which two deserve special mention. Ancient Faith Ministries, sponsored by the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese, provides twenty-four hour streaming radio, live call-in sessions, blogs, and podcasts on a wide variety of topics relating to Orthodox teaching and practice.¹⁶ OrthodoxWiki, essentially designed to be the Orthodox counterpart to Wikipedia, features articles written from a distinctly Orthodox point of view.¹⁷

Some of the other uses of digital technology in Orthodox life include virtual candle lighting apps, digital icons (which although not revered as religious objects, can signal Orthodox identity), and virtual pilgrimages to important religious sites in the Orthodox world. In the case of virtual pilgrimages (especially to monasteries), these websites sometimes allow access to certain segments of the Orthodox population—e.g. women—who would not be allowed to make the pilgrimage in real life. In other cases, these websites allow the observer access to materials which would normally only be handled by experts.¹⁸

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE ORTHODOX USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Up until the present time, the use of digital technology in propagating the Orthodox faith and enriching the lives of the faithful has largely been a voluntary decision. In a few cases, though, the use of digital media has become more expedient. For example, in some of the larger parishes in the United States, worship services have been streamed over the past few years as a way to provide worship opportunities for shut-ins.¹⁹ However, in the wake of the outbreak of COVID-19 in the early months of 2020 and the accompanying directives by government officials prohibiting regular

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 112.

16 "Welcome | Ancient Faith Ministries," accessed 2 May 2020, <https://www.ancientfaith.com/>.

17 Turner, 119.

18 Ibid., 116-18.

19 Father John Finley, telephone conversation, 28 April 2020.

church services, Orthodox clergy and laity have had to come to grips with any negative feelings about the appropriateness of digital technology for mediating worship and overcome any discomfort they might have with its use.

Father John Finley is the chairman of the Department of Missions and Evangelism for the Antiochian Archdiocese. His work takes him across North America—particularly the West Coast of the United States—so he is in regular contact with many Orthodox churches and knows how they have managed worship in the midst of the pandemic. Concerning the inability of Orthodox laity to participate in live worship services, he describes that state of affairs in terms of a trial which must be endured by the Orthodox faithful, and he points to other moments in Orthodox history in which meeting for worship was impractical, dangerous, or forbidden: “This is in our history. We’ve lived through lots of persecution and lots of hard times over the centuries. We’ve learned how to survive in these kinds of situations, and we’ll survive this.”²⁰

Beyond the obvious challenge posed to laity by their being barred from physical participation in worship, the most significant part of that being no access to the sacrament of the Eucharist, the greatest obstacle to Orthodox worship has been the disbanding of choirs. Initially, the provisions of the quarantine order specified that no more than ten persons could assemble, so it was possible to cover all parts adequately. However, when the order was later revised to allow no more than five people to meet, choirs became an impracticality, and most services were conducted by a priest, an assistant or two, a single chanter, and a videographer.²¹

The use of streaming technology has provided unprecedented opportunities for Orthodox visibility and Evangelism, while at the same time presenting significant challenges to authentic Orthodox worship. Some of these challenges arise from the essential nature of the media being used. Like other Orthodox clergy, Father John understands the expediency of broadcasting church services online given the prohibition against live services, but he is concerned that these broadcasts will contribute to a spectator mentality on the part of Orthodox laity.

This is what I encourage people to do—If you’re going to watch the Divine Liturgy livestream, try to translate yourself in your heart and your mind into the nave of the church. Get dressed. Hold your book. Stand when you’re supposed to stand. Cross when you’re supposed to cross yourself. Bow when you’re supposed to bow. And be there...rather than watching it like a TV show.²²

Notwithstanding his uneasiness about how viewing livestreamed services could encourage apathy on the part of the Orthodox laity, Father John sees the current situation as a temporary setback and is doubtful that worship services will continue to be broadcast once the quarantine is officially over:

20 Finley.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

“[Y]ou can’t receive the Holy Communion through a TV screen...You’ve got to go to church to receive [it], and that will bring our people back to church.”²³

Father David Barr is the archpriest of St Elias parish in Austin, Texas. Unlike priests in many Orthodox churches in the United States, he oversaw the use of digital technology in his parish even before the outbreak of COVID-19. Since July 2015, he has been using GoToMeeting to facilitate parish council meetings and to lead evening religion classes. As he sees it, the use of internet technology has been particularly instrumental in encouraging participation in religious life for his parishioners; he reports seeing the number of participants double and even triple once classes were brought online. From his perspective, then, it was much easier for St Elias to navigate the move toward online streaming of worship services, because the parish was already well-versed in the implementation of internet technology.²⁴

While Father David does not feel antipathy toward the use of digital media, and in fact feels that it is playing an important role in negotiating communication between him and his parishioners, he does have some concerns with the role that digital media is playing in mediating worship services. In the first place, he questions the wisdom of recording and archiving a sermon intended for a certain time and place; from his perspective, sermons play a role in the moment that is not easily repeatable. He is also concerned that Orthodox believers will approach worship from the standpoint of consumerism, electing to watch broadcasts that meet their individual needs, rather than maintaining loyalty to their parish. He feels that this trend is even more likely to be seen if churches continue to broadcast their services once the threat of COVID-19 has subsided.²⁵

Father David is much more concerned than Father John about the long-term ramifications of using digital technology to mediate worship. He worries that the convenience of observing worship services at home might ultimately dissuade some parishioners from coming to church.

People have to make a sacrifice. That’s part of our worship—showing up! It’s getting out of bed and such things, and that’s a part of the sacrifice of praise. If we don’t have that...[we’ll] just turn the TV on and watch church, and that’s not much sacrifice. Right now, it may be what we can do...It’s later [on] that I’m concerned about.²⁶

There are other helpful perspectives on the relationship between digital technology and Orthodox life that Father David provides. For one thing, he worries about the role that digital media is playing by providing religious information outside of a communal context. He stresses that Christianity is a lifestyle, not merely a gathering of religious information. As he sees it, Orthodoxy mediated by digital technology has the same capacity to become an industry as other branches of Christianity. For these reasons, he is skeptical of the essential value of many Orthodox resources found online, and emphasizes the importance of following Christ within a local community:

23 Ibid.

24 Father David Barr, telephone conversation, 30 April 2020.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

It's the human touch that we have forgotten. We need each other. Christianity is a community. You cannot have community online. You can have a little bit as a supplement, but it can't take the place of what you have to have. Online [worship] is not ideal, and ultimately it is probably not healthy, because you can't be part of the church community. The church is the people....²⁷

One final point that Father David makes is that the encroachment of technology has removed some of the essential mystery involved in the Orthodox faith. A primitive example that he provides is the use of electric lighting in churches in the West, as opposed to the use of candlelight in the East. A more current example is the placing of video cameras over the altar space, so that worshipers can view what is taking place in the area of the church normally reserved for the priest and his ministers. As Father David sees it, technology can be intrusive and present a sense of immediacy which is not always in keeping with Orthodox aesthetics:

In the Scriptures, there is concealment and revelation. Worship has to have both of these. So we have the curtains that are sometimes shut...so that there can be revelation. There's a drama that goes on in worship. When we take all that away, [we] lose a lot.²⁸

CONCLUSION

Considering the conflicting role that digital technology has played and continues to play in mediating religious life, it is no surprise that it has both its admirers and detractors. In her book *@ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, Teresa Berger examines the wide variety of digital media resources available for Catholic worship and concludes that digital technology has a legitimate—even irretractable place—in religious life.²⁹ At the opposite end of the spectrum, other media scholars like Paul McClure argue that digital technology, especially Internet technology, poses hidden dangers to established religious traditions, encouraging individuality, moral subjectivity, and even atheism.³⁰ Both of these authors have compelling arguments, but the extreme views on the influence of digital technology that they present do not seem to be representative of the vast majority of religious traditions, and certainly do not represent the viewpoint of the Orthodox Church, broadly construed.

I say “broadly construed” because there is much research to be done on the use of digital technology in the Orthodox Church, and the subject has become even more fraught in the environment created by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, while digital technology is enjoyed freely by Orthodox Christians in their private lives, Orthodox institutional life seems to call for a different set of values. Returning to Engelhardt’s idea of “marked” and “unmarked” media, it seems unlikely that the use of digital media will ever

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Teresa Berger, *@ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2017), x-xiii.

30 Paul Knowlton McClure, “Modding My Religion: Exploring the Effects of Digital Technology on Religion and Spirituality.” (PhD diss., Waco, TX, Baylor University, 2018), 1-2.

become a core component of Orthodox practice. When asked to summarize how the Orthodox view digital technology in terms of its rightness or wrongness to mediate religious life, Father John Finley said: “Just to put it in a nutshell? For education, yes. For church services, no.”³¹ It should be interesting, though, to see if this statement aligns with Orthodox practice as we move into a post-COVID-19 world.

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31 Finley, interview.