Digital Religion – Blessed are the heretics!

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The best thing about religion is that it spawns heretics. Ernst Bloch[1] (2009: 122)

The consideration of religion, especially when entwined with technology, has as Bloch suggests, spawned much heresy, and this paper considers the constructive heresies of Jean Baudrillard, as well as Ernst Bloch, Byung-Chul Han, and Peter Sloterdijk. Whether it be it be oral, notches on bone, clay engraving, handwritten scrolls, codices, illuminated manuscripts, print books, audio recordings, or more recently, software and mobile applications, religion has been continually mediated by technologies to various degrees. The recent coupling of the terms digital and religion, brought about by the merging of the digital, internet, and forms of religiosity, attests to this. Indeed, religion itself might often be regarded as mediation between god(s) and man, the heaven and earth, the sacred and the profane, and so forth. This paper discusses the notion of digital religion and attendant theoretical approaches. It indicates how Baudrillard's work might contribute to this configuration and methodology with a consideration of the academic field of 'digital religion' and ideas from Marshall McLuhan. Against a somewhat utopian vision and drive, the poverty of a networked digital religion is advanced. The possibility that a form of religion somewhat influenced the advancement of the internet is outlined with focus on Unitarianism and Tim Berners-Lee. Attention turns to Baudrillardian motifs and notions of potlatch, defiance, and challenge as they might inform the developments of certain elements of religion. There is focus is on the Heaven's Gate 'cult' and Sloterdijk's approach to religion. Finally, consideration given to how the digital itself is emerging as a religion. This leads to the possibility of a new religious movement of 'dataism' on the horizon usurping other forms. With this notion of an emergent inhuman digital religion the position of the heretic is underscored: *blessed are the heretics![2]*

Digital Religion

In his philosophy of technology, following Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, Bernard Stiegler (1998) proposes an 'originary prostheticity' to the human, which challenges the idea that technology is extrinsic or 'unnatural' to being human[3] . Likewise, it can be suggested that religion is always already technological in some regard. In the past technology has both consolidated and disrupted established religious power and practice and the digital age may be no different. To take two broad and, of course, simplified examples from the development of Christianity. First, one can consider the technology of the codex closing the canon and consolidating the authority of the Church at the end of the fourth century. Second, the development of the printing press disrupting power and facilitating the Protestant reformation. The Council of Nicaea was aided in its consensus on Christianity and establishment, more or less, of the Biblical canon by the "development of the media technology of the big codex, or bound book, capable of holding all the texts in the canon together in a single volume." (Beal 2018: 51) Roman Christianity, established as the religion of the empire, led to an increasing drive to consolidate and control ecclesiastical power: "The new medium of the big codex and the new status of Christendom as imperial religion worked hand in hand to close the canon." (Beal 2018: 117) Later, the development in the fifteenth

century of the printing press and fixed type made it possible to produce and disseminate multiple copies of the Bible and other such material, and therefore the control of the Church was disrupted and no longer held by wealthy and powerful patrons: "it was a nightmare of democratisation that the Roman Church of the fourth century could never have imagined." (Beal 2018: 119) Indeed, "the Protestant Reformation was as much a media revolution as it was a theological revolution." (Beal 2018: 119)

Consolidation, disruption, and unanticipated possibilities might be said to be the norm afforded by new technologies. Consider some episodes in the age of digital religion. As an example of digital 'folk religion' practice[4] – or even digital folklore – a *Facebook* post, on January 9th 2018, carried a meme which stated "You will get a miracle in next 1 hour if you type amen in Jesus name". This is written over a 'found-image' of what purportedly resembles Christ's face on a chunk of rusted iron. The post comes from the Facebook page of 'Jesus Christ' (1.5 million followers) and has been 'liked' nearly five thousand times, and there are four thousand comments, most consisting of some elaboration upon 'amen.' 'God' (@TheTweetOfGod) regularly tweets and has 4.41 million followers. The account however follows just one twitter account – that of Justin Bieber (105 million followers). Two decades earlier, on the 8th February 1997, as if anticipating the trouble to come, the Dalai Lama's monastery in New York offered their first 'Blessing of Cyberspace' and performed a ritual to sanctify cyberspace, offering prayers that the benefits of using the Internet become more positive. More recently a 'digital caliphate' was said to have emerged: "Without digital technology it is highly unlikely that Islamic State would ever have come into existence, let alone been able to survive and expand." (Atwan 2015: i) Battles over translation and meaning of religious texts, which are nothing new, are mirrored and magnified online: "Some people or groups were translating the Qur'an to suit their own interests and posting them on the Net" (Lawrence 2017: 82). YouVersion's Bible App provides access to 1,839 Bible versions in 1,275 languages, even if religious digital millennials still prefer paper over screen[5] . Everyone, apparently, is now an expert. As blogger Tim Bednar puts it, "We are not convinced that pastors know more about following Christ than we do. We tire of having their vision delegated to us and instead are looking for the church to embrace our vision and dreams." (in Campbell and Garner 2016: 86) Traditional leadership[6] is disrupted: "No longer do you have to be an ordained minister to lead worship online." (Campbell and Garner 2016: 71) There exists the possibility of a 'smart church' where every member can 'Love', 'Comment', and 'Post' on the Church App similar to *Facebook*.[7] There exist online varieties of the confessional, digital graveyards, and versions of a digital Lent to solemnly observe an abstention from digital media. Social media trolling might be likened to the inscriptions on Greco-Roman curse tablets.

The fundamentalists of the U.S. religious right[8] peddle fake 'good' news via twitter and other platforms. Billionaire televangelists announce that they now accept Bitcoin and Paypal. Others tout 'spirituality' as part of the spiritual-industrial-complex, in similar vein to the marketing of the 'Mystic East' (Mehta 1979), to corporate bodies and management consultants to promote efficiency and the maintenance of a leading edge in the digital economy. Less dubious pastors are nonetheless encouraged to become 'network ecologists,' viewing the church as a network of people and resources (Campbell and Garner 2016: 85). Prayers can be emailed to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, "Sending Prayers has never been easier…"[9] . Worshipers of many persuasions can download a variety of religious mobile phone apps (collecting data and carrying adverts) that, for instance, facilitate praying toward Mecca or connecting with the Pope. Guided mediation apps, with a business model based on subscription, are said to gamify the practice of meditation, and can turn monks into

millionaires[10] . Meanwhile, atheists can choose to hook up with likeminded ideologues via an online atheist dating site, of which the opening page reads "I would find the idea of dating a devout religious person (certainly anything more meaningful than a one-night stand) to be as abhorrent as a Guardian reader dating a Daily Mail reader."[11]

Digital culture also provides new resources with which to discover and create new syncretisms and ways of 'being religious' in a fully mediated age[12] . *Star Wars* (Jediism), *The Matrix* (Matrixism), *World of Warcraft*, Harry Potter, and so forth, seemingly offer resources for new forms of hyper-real religiosity and spirituality[13] . It is claimed that the internet might enable religious change comparable with the way the printing press facilitated the Protestant reformation, it might threaten the notion of the Durkheimian separation of the sacred and the profane, and might challenge the secularisation thesis. The threat to the authority of the educated, imbued, and elite purveyors of religion is up for grabs: "the Internet challenged established religious authorities (…), empowered new religious leaders (…), and provided new opportunities for traditional leaders to re-assert influence online" (Campbell 2013: 9). From consolidation to disruption, the incongruent to the innovative, for better or worse, this is religion in the digital age.

Approaches to digital religion
Such examples can be assembled, but how to begin to approach and study them? Digital religion is defined as "the technological and cultural space that is evoked when we talk about how online and offline religious spheres have become blended or integrated." (Campbell 2013: 4) Here, digital religion is conceived of "as a bridge that connects and extends online religious practices and spaces into offline religious contexts, and vice versa." (Campbell 2013: 4) A broad recognition in this field of study is that forms of mediation "should actually be regarded as an integral part of the definition of religion" (Lundby 2013: 226) and that religions, to varying degrees, are shaped by their dominant means of communication, be they oral, codified in writing, printed, or digital. Rather than simply building neutral bridges however, the technological and digital mediation of religion can become an agent of religious change.

With the acknowledgement that such categories are generalisations and necessarily leave out important nuances, Lundby (2013) proposes the emergence of five dominant theoretical approaches to the mediation involved in digital religion. In this configuration he suggests a specific 'approach to the study of media and religion,' a 'selected author,' a 'definition of religion' associated with a specific thinker, and a leading 'methodology.' Hence the five approaches are deemed to be:

Technological determinism, M. McLuhan, G.K. Chesterton, Philosophy;

Mediatisation of religion, S. Hjarvard, P. Boyer, Survey;

Mediation of meaning, S.M. Hoover, C. Geertz, Ethnography;

Mediation of sacred forms, G. Lynch, E. Durkheim, Cultural sociology;

and *social shaping of technology*, H. Campbell, C. Geertz, Case studies.

Technological determinism, under the aegis of McLuhan's 'medium theory,' "observes influences of communication technologies in addition to, and also separately from, the content they deliver." (Lundby 2013: 227). Hjarvard's mediatisation of religion perspective proposes that "religion is increasingly being subsumed under the logic of the media" (Hjarvard in Lundby 2013: 229) and, as such, the media becomes the primary source of religious ideas. With Hoover, the "ongoing mediation of meaning catches the attention rather than the specific media," and he looks for the "meaning people make out of the media in various contexts of use." (Lundby 2013: 230) Lynch's approach analyses the interplay of the mediation of sacred forms, "[t]he interaction of symbol, thought, feeling and action that characterises sacred forms is only possible through media which give sacred forms material expression." (Lynch in Lundby 2013: 231) Campbell, the leading scholar in the field of digital religion, is characterised as focussing on "processes by which religious traditions help shape technology, instead of asking how the media shape religion." (Lundby 2013: 232)

This latter perspective from Campbell is deemed significant as it "contrasts with technological determinism and linear thinking about innovation." (Lundby 2013: 232) Therefore "McLuhan will emphasise how the various media determine religious practices. Campbell, as the other end of the scale, stresses the agency of religious collectives, how they contribute to shaping the technology." (Lundby 2013: 235) For Campbell, "Technological activity might in fact be seen as a response to God's call." (Campbell and Garner 2016: 22) She proposes 'a definition of technology'[14] : "Technology is, first and foremost, *a human activity that is carried out within the context provided by God for human beings to exercise their creativity and agency*." (Campbell and Garner 2016: 23) This approach, then, might be seen to distance itself from the technological determinism ascribed to McLuhan, but ultimately can be read as a form of McLuhanesque technological optimism: God is calling and technology facilitates answering, technology is in some sense provided by God, and technology unproblematically ('first and foremost') mediates God's gift of creativity and agency.

In his book on Baudrillard and the media, William Merrin explores McLuhan's technological optimism of the apparent ability of electronic media to facilitate the sacred. This is the celebration of man's electronic extension as an almost spiritual unification of consciousness: "modern man, since the electromagnetic discoveries of more than a century ago, is investing himself with all the dimensions of archaic man *plus*" (McLuhan in Merrin 2005: 49) This is, in part, informed by McLuhan's conversion to Catholicism and Teilhard De Chardin's technological mysticism. In sum, "electronic media produce not merely a rediscovery of the Durkheimian sacred, but its electronic amplification into the sacred *plus*." (Merrin 2005: 49) To this possibility however, Merrin's Baudrillard is dubious: rather than modern technology being an extension of man, it is, he argues, an expulsion of man. Baudrillard draws on a Durkheimian tradition[15] that proposed "a contemporary waning of the sacred" (Merrin 2005: 51) in which mediated technologies are the primary mode of its destruction and replacement. This "represents a process of semiotic distantiation" (Merrin 2005: 50) from the symbolic[16] . Therefore, this rejects McLuhan: "the media do not communicate, but rather abolish real, symbolic 'communication' in their very form." (Merrin 2005: 50) Ultimately, for Baudrillard, "electronic man is not 'archaic man *plus*,' but archaic man *minus*." (Merrin 2005: 52) Technologies militate against collective effervescence and bring "not a 'retribalization' but a systematic *detribalization*" (Merrin 2005: 58) Baudrillard reverses McLuhan, "today we become the extension of the media." (Merrin 2005: 57) In this tradition of thought, at least, digital religion obscures and deforms the relation to the sacred.

Digital Dystopia
"The story of social media is, in many respects, the story of the rise and fall of hope."
(Patrikarakos 2018: 32) Likewise the story of digital religion. "In the case of many spiritual
consumers, life on the internet has indeed become more real than reality itself. Their
attachment to virtual reality has created a quasi-religious form of spiritual fetishism where
spirituality is sold as a commodity." (Geoffroy 2012: 29) The idea of technological change as
progressive, quasi-autonomous, driven by some process of autopoiesis or self-organisation,
"allows many aspects of contemporary social reality to be accepted as necessary, unalterable
circumstances, akin to facts of nature." (Crary 2014: 36) The frequent appeal to religious
actors to become networked uncritically accepts this. Digital discourse considers network
technology as being a natural law and inevitable. Digital discourse thereby "neglects negative
aspects of technology and society and provides a profoundly undialectical picture of the
Internet and society." (Fisher 2010: 209) The consequence, for Fisher, is that digital discourse
depoliticises and neutralises the relation of technology and society.

If, as Smith (1998) has it, a sacred space is not so much a radically different kind of domain
but rather simply a kind of 'focusing lens,' then there is no reason why the digital screen
could not function as such a lens. However, it would imbue religious actors further into the
digital realm. At worse, digital religion activity adds to the essentially compulsory notion that
the contemporary individual be online, organising, disseminating, consuming, gambling,
gaming, working, blogging, downloading, or texting 24/7: "since no moment, place, or
situation now exists in which one can not shop, consume, or exploit networked resources,
there is a relentless incursion of the non-time of 24/7 into every aspect of social or personal
life." (Crary 2014: 30) The accelerated tempo of the digital is ultimately anti-social, being
"shaped around individual goals of competitiveness, advancement, acquisitiveness, personal
security, and comfort at the expense of others." (Crary 2014: 41) In this way the post-human
is produced, not simply through biotechnology or the hybrid of the human and the
technological, "but through a deeply ingrained and ultimately quotidian belief that it is in
human nature to connect and circulate flows of information and capital." (Bolimer 2016: 5)

As Baudrillard had anticipated, everyday life and culture is increasingly reliant upon
networks of communication and information, and the human is immersed within digital
circuits of information technologies allowing for little critical distance from cyberspace. This
is a network society of immersion, immanence, and immediacy (Baudrillard 2005, 31). It is
distinct from the notion of the spectacle, which still left room for a possible critical
consciousness and demystification (Baudrillard 1996, 27). There is then, a "disappearance of
the dual, personal, agonistic domination for the sake of integral reality – the reality of
networks, of the virtual and total exchange where there are no longer dominators or
dominated." (Baudrillard 2010: 33) The Orwellian oppression, and society of surveillance
that Foucault once warned about, today appears to have become self-surveillance, voluntary,
indeed a necessity, desire, and demand of the self(ie) in the digital age. Martin Buber's notion
of the I-Thou relationship being usurped by the objectifying I-It relation undergoes a further
objectification with the digital promotion of the self: this is an I-I relationship, where the I
has finally succeeded in objectifying itself. The Levinasian ethical face of the other is now
the face of the very same. The digital subject suffers glitches rather than alienation. The
network is complicit with hyper-reality, the space of the screen, mental space, and so on.
Humans become nodes and fit, or are capable of being absorbed, into a networked totality.
They become exchangeable rather than singular. For Baudrillard, the 'neo-individual' is "an
interactive, communicational particle, plugged into the network, getting continuous
feedback" (Baudrillard 2001, 106). In network-technology relations, the human has become a

prosthesis to technology and information systems, "terminals of multiple networks" (Baudrillard 1998, 16) or nodes in the network.

The digital cultural imaginary both fosters and requires 'nodal citizenship' and 'nodal consumption'. For Bolimer, 'nodal citizenship' is Deleuzian control, and Foucauldian governmentality of the self. Nodes are commodified, surveyed and tracked by companies, governments, other entities, and the self. Digital culture is not simply just a set of neutral technological platforms or devices, but normalises certain behaviours, and carries specifications for "the proper conduct one should internalise in a world defined by network technologies…in which the maintenance of connections and perpetuation of flows is the task of a good 'citizen.'" (Bolimer 2016: 6) To this we could add the digital religion notion of a 'nodal congregation' that is in the embrace of technology[17] , and the ebb and flow of networking. And a nodalism[18] that often wilfully ignores its materialism and the outsourcing and exploitation of the 'third-world.' In considering practises such as cobalt mining in Congo and the Foxconn / Apple sweatshops in China, Qiu (2016) persuasively introduces the notion of the iSlave and proposes parallels between the digital economy and Atlantic slavery.

Of course, not every aspect of human existence may be subject to, nor indeed fitting for, a digital instantiation. "A hug, a meal or the wind cannot be completely digitalised, for instance," writes Lagerkvist (2019: 8), although 'completely' might be the key word here, and this could be read as a Silicon Valley 'To-Do' list. Schwartz (2019) highlights the potential radical role of touch and argues that it exemplifies an 'other' of digital mediation. However, as Berardi indicates, there may be a powerful factor against this. Considerable investment of time and mental energy in online activity is likely to lead to an "unravelling of de-socialisation, and an increasing misperception of the common space of physical and affective interaction." (Berardi, 2015: 16) Hence the rise of online, and perhaps offline, misanthropy.

In *The Burnout Society*, a critique of the modern subject's 'depressive narcissism,' exhaustion, and individualism, Byung-Chul Han[19] , cites Nietzsche on "the '*first* preliminary schooling for spirituality." (Nietzsche in Han 2015: 21) One must learn "*not* to react immediately to a stimulus, but instead to take control of the inhibiting, excluding instincts." (Nietzsche in Han 2015: 21) Therefore, "every characteristic absence of spirituality [Ungeistigkeit], every piece of common vulgarity, is due to an inability to resist a stimulus." (Nietzsche in Han 2015: 21) Needless to say, digital culture, with its over-stimulation – "a medium of *compulsive searching* for the new." (Han 2017b: 47) – instantaneous nature[20] , 'depressive hedonia,'[21] and muddled web of mendacity, conflict, and anger of the mob, does not enhance the serenity and silence that can contribute to contemplation. Elsewhere Han writes that "The medium of thinking is quiet. Clearly, digital communication is destroying quiet and calm." (Han 2017b: 19) The digital, "conveys impulsive reactions more than analog communication does." (Han 2017b: 3) – "Its temporality is the immediate present." (Han 2017b: 15) – and therefore, "it lacks *bearing* – reserve and posture." (Han 2017b: 7) One fingers a smartphone rather than the rosary or mala beads. This represents 'digital devotion' and the smartphone replaces and functions as "the rosary serving the purpose of self-monitoring and control." (Han 2017a: 12) In this digital devotion, "*Like* is the digital Amen…Facebook is the church – the global synagogue of the Digital." (Han 2017a: 12) All this then, is to say that there should be caution and criticism around the conjoining of the digital and religion. Much skill is needed to navigate the intensification of digital principles and the situation militates against cultivation of such skill. As it is presently configured, the digital promotes values and an ethos that is incompatible with much of what passes for

perennial religious practice: the concern for the concrete other, togetherness, quiet contemplation, sublime imaginings / intimations of transcendence (such as *agape*[22]), and the possibility of an wholly other. The time and space of certain religious practice is being colonised and compromised by the digital.

In light of this, we can reconsider the academic field of digital religion. Campbell has suggested three waves of approaches to digital religion: "the descriptive, the categorical, and the theoretical." (Campbell 2013: 9) The possibility of expanding Baudrillard's work and reading of McLuhan would place him on the margin of the scale discussed by Lundby and instigate a fourth wave of approach to digital religion: the critical[23] . Hence to Lundby's typology a sixth theoretical approach to digital religion in his configuration might be proposed:

Critique of technology and media, J. Baudrillard, E. Durkheim, Radical Thought.

The necessity of this critical approach and Baudrillard's heresy towards technological optimism, will become further apparent when the nascent religious form of dataism is explored.

The Internet and Unitarianism

Whilst much deliberation has been given to how technology and digital culture has impacted on religion, less as Campbell contends, has been in the other direction, namely how religion might have influenced technology and the internet. Here consideration will be given to Tim Berners-Lee, Unitarianism, and the internet. Berners-Lee is celebrated and regarded as a core figure in the invention of the world wide web. In 1989, he made a proposal for an information management system and implemented the first successful communication between a Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) client and server via the fledgling internet. Towards the end of an autobiographical account and portrait of his invention, *Weaving the Web – The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web By Its Inventor* (1999), Berners-Lee reflects upon his religious outlook, Unitarian Universalism, and considers how this might have influenced the architecture of the web.

One of the things I like about Unitarianism is its lack of religious trappings, miracles, and

pomp and circumstance. It is minimalist, in a way. Unitarians accepted the useful parts of

philosophy from all religions, including Christianity and Judaism, but also Hinduism,

Buddhism, and any good philosophies, and wrapped them not into one consistent religion,

but into an environment in which people think and discuss, argue, and always try to be

accepting of differences of opinion and ideas. (Berners-Lee 1999: 208)

Berners-Lee accepts some connection of design principles between Unitarianism and the web:

Some of the [Unitarian Universalism] association's basic philosophies very much match

what I had been brought up to believe, and the objective I had in creating the Web. People

now sometimes even ask whether I designed the Web based on these principles. Clearly,

Unitarian Universalism had no influence on the Web. But I can see how it could have,

because I did indeed design the Web around universalist (with a lowercase u) principles.

(Berners-Lee 1999: 208)

In Unitarianism[24] , Jesus Christ is considered to have been inspired by God in his moral teachings but is a human being rather than a deity. There are further distances taken from doctrines such as the notion of original sin, hell, predestination, and Biblical infallibility. It is considered a liberal theology which rejects the importance of dogma, liturgy, and largely anything other than an ethics and gospel of love. Several tenets of Unitarianism overlap with the predominant Muslim view of Jesus and Islamic understanding of monotheism, but in his account Berners-Lee feels no apparent need to include Islam as one of the 'useful parts of philosophy from all religions' that Unitarianism draws upon. It is perhaps also a mark of the confidence in the challenge of liberal Christian Protestantism that it can deem itself to tolerate other faiths, as exemplified in Unitarianism[25] , whilst subsuming them and maintaining some sense of superiority.

Berners-Lee affirms the commonality between his religion and his invention:

For me, who enjoyed the acceptance and the diverse community of the Internet, the Unitarian

church was a great fit. Peer-to-peer relationships are encouraged wherever they are

appropriate, very much as the World Wide Web encourages a hypertext link to be made

wherever it is appropriate. Both are philosophies that allow decentralized systems to develop,

whether they are systems of computers, knowledge, or people. (Berners-Lee 1999: 208)

Indicative here might be the interchangeability of computers, data, and people as flows or terminals in a network. The core celebrated attribute is the notion of peer-to-peer linking nodes in a decentralised network. Network religions eschew the notion of a central node functioning as a God(head) in favour of a decentralised, dispersed deity – the network rather than central node is sacred. This, then, is a non-hierarchical network with no centralised control. In an idealised form both Unitarianism and the internet(work) flatten and challenge the power and authority of hierarchies. Elsewhere (Baldwin 2018) I have drawn attention to this 'network fetishism.'[26] This is the utopian vision of the internet promoted with the hyperbole of the Californian Ideology and where the likes of the *Wired* magazine milieu told us and sold us the coming of a networked society, in which old hierarchical models of business and culture would be superseded by the wisdom of crowds, user-generated content, and an ethos of transparency and collaboration. This prospect looks extremely remote just

half a decade later. It is increasingly coming under internal crisis and external critique. The purported dynamism of the digital, the speed and flows of information technology and data has met the real of capital and power and has, so to speak, a wheel in the ditch and a wheel on the track.

The Fall of the Internet

Finally, Berners-Lee, considering the future of the internet, suggests that,

> *We certainly need a structure that will avoid those two catastrophes: the global uniform McDonald's monoculture, and the isolated Heaven's Gate cults that understand only themselves. By each of us spreading our attention evenly between groups of different size, from personal to global, we help avoid these extremes. (Berners-Lee 1999: 203)*

Unfortunately, and uncomfortably clearer day by day, Berners-Lee ambition has not been met. The fear and anticipation of banal and vacuous sameness with channelling of isolated frustration seems prescient. There is corporate colonisation of the internet, data harvesting, surveillance, steering of behaviour, and the inevitable end of 'net neutrality' on the one hand. Political interference, the amplification of bitterness, trauma, and self-hatred, dissemination of the 'alt-right' and 'fake news' on the other. Both of Berners-Lee catastrophes can be argued to have occurred. The decentred nature of the Internet has meant no centralised or organised resistance, such as the State, to the corporation and no centralised pedagogic or moral resistance to the 'alt right' or duplicitous content. This is reason for a heretical approach to the digital. Also significant in Berners-Lee vision of the catastrophes that befall the internet is the mention of the Heaven's Gate 'cult' as exemplar of what could possibly go wrong. Here we can turn attention to the construction of religion and the role of potlatch, challenge, and heresy in religious processes.

Knocking on Heaven's Gate

It is interesting that Heaven's Gate would be singled out here, but Berners-Lee brief caricature is somewhat unfair. Opposed to the sensationalist understanding of the millenarian 'cult' and its activities – seeking salvation in the literal heavens on board a UFO**,** belief in evil space aliens, and mass suicide – Zeller in a scholarly study, suggests instead that Heaven's Gate was "quite ordinary – even representative! – of American religious culture." (Zeller 2014: 220) This is qualified by indicating four elements of Heaven's Gate: "its highly Protestant biblical grounding; its appeal to seekers of new and alternative religions; the place of science and techno-religious thinking; and their interest in the end-times and apocalyptic thought." (Zeller 2014: 220) Usually science and religion are deemed to be rivals but the Heaven's Gate focus on the scientific possibility of UFOs is not atypical. Recent scientific and technological developments are often attempted to be utilised to support existing theological positions or are redirected and controlled. This might be seen with recent Buddhist appeals to neuroscience to support aspects of meditation or the attempt to reconcile contemporary physics with certain religious cosmology.

The founders of Heaven's Gate, Bonnie Nettles and Marshall Applewhite, merged ufology subculture, space aliens in popular culture, a reading of 'Asian' religions, theosophy, and Christianity with the social dynamics of the counterculture of the late 1960 and 1970s in the construction of their worldview. This was a heady brew of Helena Blavatsky, R.D. Laing, Richard Bach, Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke and the Christology, asceticism, and eschatology of the King James Bible. But religious bricolage and possible pastiche, as a process, is not particularly new in religion, indeed, "[p]astiche seems a basic fact of religious operation rather than something unique to postmodern American culture." (Zeller 2014: 67) One can point to the early Church leaders who stitched together various strands of the doctrines of Jewish, Roman, Greek, Pagan, Persian and Egyptian religion in the construction of Christianity.

It must be said, against Berners-Lee, that much of Heaven's Gate activity predated the Internet and the 'dark areas' of the Web were not a causal factor in its action nor a major recruiting tool (there were never more than a hundred members of the 'crew', of whom 39 took part in the mass suicide). Heaven's Gate was somewhat of a proto-hyper-real religion: "members of Heaven's Gate certainly reflected – and pre-dated – the recent turn toward various forms of popular culture and individual spiritual quests as sources of religious truths." (Zeller 2014: 5) Heaven's Gate had an unusual – ultimately tragic – but coherent set of the usual hallmarks of a religious theology, much the same as Berners-Lee's Unitarianism: a soteriology (beliefs around salvation), cosmology (order of the Universe), Christology (the nature of Jesus Christ), demonology (forces acting upon them), and eschatology (the last things / end times). Zeller confirms that "there is no clinical reason to assume that a person who believes in UFO and extra-terrestrial communication is any more insane than a person who believes in angels and prayer." (Zeller 2014: 23)

Religious Potlatch

Importantly, founder Applewhite, in drawing attention to the corruption of all other existing religions and sects in the branding and construction of Heaven's Gate, "merely follows a trope of other founders of new religious groups." (Zeller 2014: 200) This structure is familiar in religious history, for instance, the Prophet Muhammad announced that the earlier monotheisms had become corrupted and ossified, and that his revelations corrected these corruptions. Later, in turn, the Bahá'í prophets made similar claims about Islam. Joseph Smith Jr. claimed the tainting of Christianity in the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The golden plates announcing the manifestation of Christ visiting America was a challenge to established authority and proclaimed that "Judea no longer possessed a monopoly on divinely inspired biblical content." (Gutjahr 2012: 35) There is, then, a structure of challenge and one-upmanship in certain religious culture, a form of potlatch, a return gift with a sense that this new religion or sect usurps the previous one, and therefore 'I – and my people – are chosen and shall be, or are, holier than thou!'

There is an originary potlatch or challenge, that prefigures the schisms and squabbles to come in Christianity, among the twelve apostles outlined in *Luke*. Jesus and the disciples enter into Capernaum, "Then there arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be greatest." (Luke 9: 46 KJV) With 'reasoning', the Greek word used here is *dialogismos*, "doubt, dispute, argument" and for 'greatest' the Greek word is *meizon*, the comparative form of *megas*, "large, great." This attests that the apostles not only misunderstood the nature of Christ's kingdom, but also disputed their greatness of rank, importance and status, and that there was a competition among them. The attempt by Jesus to teach humility seemingly soon

fades as the dispute arises again at the last supper: "And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest." (Luke 22: 24 KJV)

Such competition might also account for developments in the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. Recent scholarship has emphasised that religious and political developments in classical India provided a powerful impetus for the transformation of old stories of ancient Kshatriya battles into a vast new epic narrative. This was in response to the rise of Buddhism and Jainism, which were "renunciatory movements that explicitly denied Vedic and brahmanic authority [and] posed a powerful ideological challenge for proponents of orthodox traditions." (Davis 2015: 37) In response to this fundamental challenge to the Vedic and brahmanic authority, the authors of the Mahabharata produced a counter-gift and "sought to articulate a new vision of proper royal rule grounded on a modified Vedic tradition." (Davis 2015: 37) This sense of religious potlatch is also apparent in the "proliferation of competitive gitas." (Davis 2015: 45) In each case, for instance the Ganesha Gita, the divine speaker attempts to persuade the listener of his or her pre-eminence as the Supreme Deity, typically culminating in a visionary transformation in which the audience gains a glimpse of the deity in supernatural form, and in so doing subsumes or subordinates all other deities. The Bhagavad Gita served as the formal model for these divine songs and "it was the genre's progenitor – Krishna's initial Gita – that would enjoy the longest and most diverse life." (Davis 2015: 45-6)

A demonic terrain

With this notion of potlatch and contest we can consider Peter Sloterdijk's observations on religion: "A substantial part of the religious people's life takes the form of quarrels at the fence." (Sloterdijk 2016: 46) Sloterdijk, who wants to focus on forms of religious practice[27], writes that "theology is a demonic terrain" (Sloterdijk 2016: 1) and the term 'religion' is considered a pseudo-term, "a false abstraction with a high potential to mislead." (Sloterdijk 2016: 5). Nonetheless, the preferred activity of early religions, Sloterdijk contends, was the concern with competition and the sacralization of leadership. Regarding the early polyethnic and multicultic competitive situation, leading actors respond, "with a resolute hardening and aggrandizement of their own cult traditions." (Sloterdijk 2016: 21) Potlatch is apparent: "this strategy for self-preservation amid intercultic competition to a people must also offer the prospect of a great contest: because our god is like no other, our people too will be like no other." (Sloterdijk 2016: 21) In this regard the often-discussed ban on images, which rules out cultic depictions of a God, initially testifies not so much to the theological depth of a new concept of God "as to the ingenious realization that the most reliable way to stay free of the confusing cult competition is the consistent non-depiction of one's own god." (Sloterdijk 2016: 22) Here power is maintained by snubbing the challenge of others. Actors in early Judaism, Sloterdijk suggests, gain their strength by "singularizing their identity amid the competing cults of the polyethnic situation in the Middle East." (Sloterdijk 2016: 32) There is an originary violence here: the account of the breach of covenant by the people of Israel during the absence of Moses on the mountain of God, as described in chapter 32 of the *Book of Exodus*, "provides the unsurpassable paradigm of an act of violence motivated by the singularization contract." (Sloterdijk 2016: 28) Such notions have led one commentator to call Sloterdijk's work, "the most fundamental attack on religion since Feuerbach." (Sloterdijk 2016: 5)

Sloterdijk does not necessarily mourn the subsequent death of God, rise of modernity, and the secularisation thesis. Nationalism, totalitarianism, fascism, communism, fundamentalism and so forth, are, in essence, nothing other than varying "desperate attempts to re-enact earlier

forms of collective synthesis offered by omnicompetent religion with new, semi-arbitrary themes such as national culture, socialization of the means of production, Fuehrer cult, radical difference or literalism." (Sloterdijk 2016: 56) Indeed this new situation, after the death of God, can free religion to concentrate on its 'main business': "the interpretation of being-in-the-world as such – which it pursues in irresolvable rivalry with art and philosophy – coming to terms with fate and attending to the last things." (Sloterdijk 2016: 54) Once relived from their ethnogenic function – "to the advantage of all, in my opinion" (Sloterdijk 2016: 66) – their doctrine and dogma, structures of power, metaphysical pretences, entwinement with capital, and so forth, and by appreciating them as mental and ritual practising systems, certain remnants of religions can be seen as "important manifestations of poetic human habitation on the earth." (Sloterdijk 2016: 66) Crucial to this possibility is heresy in the 'Scholem mode'[28] : "Scholem discovered heresy, especially in Judaism, as the innermost driving force of religious evolution and understood it as a constant, inevitable and creative struggle between heretical and orthodox forces." (Sloterdijk 2016: 64) This is a constructive view of the dynamic of heresy and challenge in this configuration of religion, and Sloterdijk suggests might "prove to have a great civilizing effect." (Sloterdijk 2016: 64) Recognition of these processes, rather than repression, could prove fruitful. Heresy and reform should also be extended to secularism[29] and atheism[30] . Of course, one must also at times, as Derrida said of Patočka's heresy, be "heretical with respect to that very heresy." (Derrida 1996: 27) It is the matter of the discernment and inheritance of a tradition as in, for instance, Bloch's reconsideration of aspects of the Bible. Heresy, competition, potlatch and change might perhaps be considered the religious norm, with temporary stasis as the actual unorthodoxy. As Karl Barth once attributed to St. Augustine: *ecclesia semper reformanda* – 'the Church must always be reformed.' Or as the Buddhists might say, *Anicca*.

In the beginning was the data

Such heresy should be arguably aimed at the vogue and emergent norm of dataism. Yuval Noah Harari's (2017) popular sweeping history and futurology, *Homo Deus – A Brief History of Tomorrow*, conflates certain anxieties around the digital and envisages the emergence of a technologically enabled *homo deus* (human god), and crucially a new form of religion: *Dataism*. Despite all the talk of radical Islam and Christian Fundamentalism, he writes, "the most interesting place in the world from a religious perspective is not the Islamic State or the Bible belt, but Silicon Valley." (Harari 2017: 409) What is created or evolving here is dataism, "which venerates neither gods nor man – it worships data." (Harari 2017: 427) Dataism declares that the universe consists of data flows, and that the value of any phenomenon or entity is determined by its contribution to data processing, and that "exactly the same mathematical laws apply to both biochemical and electronic algorithms." (Harari 2017: 428) In Silicon Valley, the dataist prophets consciously use traditional messianic language. Raymond Kurzweil's notion of the Singularity – 'The Singularity is Near' – is proffered with much evangelical zeal and is loosely comparable to the Christian notion of the holy city, the *eschaton* found in Revelation. Likewise, there are practical commandments. First and foremost a dataist "ought to maximise dataflow by connecting to more and more media, and producing and consuming more and more information." (Harari 2017: 445) Like other successful religions, dataism is missionary: "Its second commandment is to link everything to the system, including heretics who don't want to be plugged in." (Harari 2017: 445) In this conception, "Humans are merely tools for creating the Internet-of-All-Things" (Harari 2017: 444) Han suggests that, "Although it announces that it is taking leave of all ideology, dataism itself is an ideology. It is leading to digital totalitarianism." (Han 2017: 58) Dataism can be said to have gained its first martyr in 2013, with the suicide of 'hacker' Aaron

Swartz. Dataism might be seen to correspond, as Baudrillard has it, to the "equivalent of the Kingdom of God – that is to say, the immanence of an entirely positive world…brought about by technical means." (Baudrillard 2001: 13) And, as Baudrillard continues, "to create such an equivalence is, from the theological viewpoint, a total heresy." (Baudrillard 2001: 13)

This vision is similar to the anxiety, expressed in a more academic register, that homo sapiens will mutate into homo cyberneticus or techno sapiens (Jackelen 2002). Or the notion that "our species should be known as *Homo dictyous* ('network man')" (Ferguson 2017: 17). This is the broad argument that transhumanism can be seen as a faith and new religious movement with attendant charismatic management, equivalents of sacred texts, practices, and a digitally delineated eschatology of human perfectibility (Tirosh-Samuelson 2012). Take, for example, the *Way of the Future*, described as the first church of artificial intelligence with worship of a Godhead based on AI. Its documents (or 'gospel' called 'The Manual') state that activities will focus on "the realization, acceptance, and worship of a Godhead based on Artificial Intelligence (AI) developed through computer hardware and software." (Harris 2017) Founder, Anthony Levandowski, formerly – but of course! – of Google and Uber, claims that, "What is going to be created will effectively be a god. It's not a god in the sense that it makes lightning or causes hurricanes. But if there is something a billion times smarter than the smartest human, what else are you going to call it?" (in Harris 2017) He continues that, "There are many ways people think of God, and thousands of flavours of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, but they're always looking at something that's not measurable or you can't really see or control. This time it's different. This time you will be able to talk to God, literally, and know that it's listening." (in Harris 2017) All praise Amazon's *Alexa*, amen.

What do dataist's believe? Harari suggests they "believe in the invisible hand of the dataflow." (Harari 2017: 449) Data religion is omnipotent and proposes that "your every word and action is part of the great dataflow, that algorithms are constantly watching you and that they care about everything you do and feel." (Harari 2017: 450) This is a strictly instrumental approach to humanity, "appraising the value of human experiences according to their function in data-processing mechanisms." (Harari 2017: 452) In this way, by equating the human experience with data patterns, dataism undermines our primary source of authority and meaning, Harari argues, "and heralds a tremendous religious revolution, the like of which has not been seen since the eighteenth century." (Harari 2017: 453) Dataism is said to give humanists a taste of their own medicine, by explaining that: "Yes, God is a product of the human imagination, but human imagination in turn is just the product of biochemical algorithms." (Harari 2017: 454) In this way, dataism thereby threatens "to do to Homo sapiens what Homo sapiens has done to all other animals." (Harari 2017: 460) The human is getting a taste of its own medicine, especially in terms of its treatment of others (other people, animals, environment, ideas, and so forth).

Harari's basic charge is open to the exponential growth fallacy and other issues, but this is a bleak vision of the impact of the digital revolution to be a colonisation of both the religion(s) of the human and the human itself. If dataism commands everyone and everything to become part of the network – "including heretics who don't want to be plugged in" (Harari 2017: 445) – then heresy might become like the, easier said than done, polite but firm Bartleby-like refusal of the digital: "I would prefer not to."[31] Or what Han calls the 'negativity of not-to' which is an essential trait of contemplation[32] . In Zen meditation, for example, "one attempts to achieve the pure negativity of not-to – that is, the void – by freeing oneself from the rushing, intrusive Something." (Han 2015: 24) One should maintain and create "spaces for guarding silence, quiet, and solitude," (Han 2017a: 84) rising "above the horizontal plane –

above *merely being informed and networked*" (Han 2017a: 84) and not "defined by individuality or subjectivity, but by singularity." (Han 2017a: 86) Essentially, for Han, "[t]oday, in light of increasingly coercive conformism, it is more urgent than ever to heighten heretical consciousness." (Han 2017a: 83)

Conclusion: Four Horsemen of Heresy

Indeed, it may be necessary to foster forms of critical heresy considering the possible dataist developments and on-going colonisation and compromising of religion by the digital. Bloch's affirmative heresy seeks to explore and redeem aspects of a tradition and make appeal to 'transcend without transcendence'; Sloterdijk's invitation to heresy relieves religion from fundamentalism, and its ethnogenic function, whilst exploring poetic human habitation on the earth; Han's heresy is against the rampant ego and attempts to reinvigorate an ossified approach to and from the Other; and Baudrillard's irruptive singularity can be redemptive[33] : "From the perspective of global power (as fundamentalist in its beliefs as any religious orthodoxy), any mode of difference and singularity is heresy." (Jean Baudrillard 2003) Here then, are 'Four Horsemen of Heresy', making demands on a world not yet ready to meet them, that counter the tendency for reductionism, militant neo-positivism, pedantry, and populist self-righteous outburst of the so-called 'Four Horsemen of Atheism' – Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris. An elegant situation deserves a more elegant response. Blessed are the heretics!

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Endnotes

1 – For Bloch, "the *first real trickle* of life-force comes from that principle within us which makes us *stand up straight*, whether this is understood in an organic or a political or a moral way." (Bloch 2009: 251) Whatever prevents or stunts this uprightness (see William Blake's crouched over Isaac Newton), be it myriad ideologies, organised religions or certain conceptions of God, must be suspect. In this regard, Bloch suggests that the Bible "has always been the Church's bad conscience." (Bloch 2009: 21) It contains two parallel tensions – an apologia for the comfortable, the Papacy with God as Lord and despot, to which many must bow, and another strain based around the afflicted with dissent, heresy and argument, rooted in the lower classes, and suggesting that they rise up: "there are in fact two Scriptures: a Scripture for the people and a Scripture against the people." (Bloch 2009: 83) Biblical criticism in this messianic Marxist view, with a variant of vitalism, would therefore be "the investigation of those remnants that have been *purposely veiled over by the priests, with their counter-revolutionary religious outlook.*" (Bloch 2009: 79) For this enterprise, "The door is open. Heretical pressure has always helped see to that." (Bloch 2009: 80) In terms of a serious atheism within Christianity, "the banner should cry not 'Demythologize!' – …- but 'De-theocratize!' Only that can do justice to the Bible's still saveable text. The Bible only has a future inasmuch as it can, with this future, transcend without transcendence." (Bloch 2009: 82)

2 – A recent biography of Saint Francis of Assisi recounts that the monastic chronicler Guilbert of Nogent mocked the peasants of Picardy. This was because they had translated the

phrase *Beati eritis* ("Blessed will you be …" or "You will be blessed…"), proclaimed by Jesus Christ at the beginning of each of the Beatitudes, as "Blessed are the heretics!" Heresy, ordinarily, would not of course be blessed. The Bishop Lisiard of Soissons also notes occasions of the misappropriation of *Beati eritis* into the phrase blessed be the heretics. (Ames 2015: 148)

3 – But this deconstruction of the notion of a pure state that is subsequently mediated by technology, need not lead to an uncritical acceptance of technology. As Heidegger in the early 1950s has it: "No one can see the radical changes to come. But technological advance will move faster and faster and can never be stopped. In all areas of existence (Dasein) man will be encircled ever more tightly by the forces of technical apparatuses and automatic devices. These forces, which everywhere and every minute claim, enchain, drag along, press and impose upon man under the Gestalt of technological installations and arrangements – these forces, since man has not made them, have moved along since beyond his will and have outgrown his capacity for decision." (Heidegger in Lagerkvist 2019: 12)

4 – Yoder suggests that folk religion represents the "folk interpretation and expression of religion," and as existing "in a complex society in relation to and in tension with the organized religion(s) of that society. Its relatively unorganized character differentiates it from organized religion." (Yoder 1974: 11)

5 – Religious objects have not fully lost their aura. "Traditional Bible formats (e.g. reading from a paper Bible) were more popular that digital Bible formats (e.g. reading the Bible on a smartphone)." (Ford et al, 2019: 10)

6 – Likewise, in the context of certain (de)forms of Islam, "In the past, the leadership would produce and release material; now, every jihadist is his or her own media outlet, reporting live from the frontline in tweets, offering enticing visions of domestic bliss via short films and images posted to Just-Paste.it and Instagram, entering into friendly conversations via Skype, messaging on anonymous Android platforms, and posting links to the group's propaganda material and its infamous catalogue of videos." (Atwan 2015: 3)

7 – http://smartchurch.com/

8 – One might catch a glimpse of the anti-union, anti-tax, anti-abortion, anti-gay-rights, anti-immigration, pro-gun, pro-capital punishment, pro-military intervention, climate crisis-denying, creationist religious right of the USA by looking at the Republican Party's field of candidates before the 2016 nomination of Donald Trump. Eliot Weinberger produced a series of portraits with some accompanying religious outlook. Rick Santorum, runner-up to Mitt Romney in the 2012 primaries, has said that "a child conceived by rape is a 'gift from God'" (Weinberger 2016: 7), claims that the "American left hates Christendom" (Weinberger 2016: 7), and the separation of church and state "is a communist idea" (Weinberger 2016: 7). Bobby Jindal, former governor of Louisiana, instituted a law allowing the teaching of Creationism in science classes. His view is that "America is mired in a 'silent war' between Christians and the left" (Weinberger 2016: 7). Scott Walker, governor of Wisconsin, claimed to be the son of a preacher man, and said that he would be "tough with Isis because he had stood up to the local teachers' union when he slashed the education budget in his state" (Weinberger 2016: 7). Jeb Bush, the brother, the son, and the presumptive nominee as heir apparent, stated that evolution should not "be part of the curriculum" (Weinberger 2016: 7) and opened the nation's first Christian prison. Mike Huckabee, governor of Arkansas and

radio preacher claimed "I didn't major in math. I majored in miracles, and I still believe in them, too." (Weinberger 2016: 7) He feels that "Christian convictions are under attack as never before…We are moving rapidly towards the criminalisation of Christianity." (Weinberger 2016: 7) Dr Ben Carson, a neurosurgeon, explained that the 'Adversary', Satan himself, entered the heart and mind of Charles Darwin and "persuaded him to come up with the theory of evolution to undermine God's word." (Weinberger 2016: 7) Marco Rubio, senator from Florida, ran a television ad, in which he declared: "Our goal is eternity – the ability to live alongside our Creator for all time." (Weinberger 2016: 7) Ted Cruz, senator from Texas, believes that "any president who doesn't begin every day on his knees isn't fit to be commander-in-chief of this country." (Weinberger 2016: 7) Weinberger suggests that Cruz suffers from messianic delusions. He has said repeatedly that "we have to awaken and energise the body of Christ," and that "if we awaken and energise the body of Christ – if Christians and people of faith come out and vote our values – we will win and we will turn the country around." (Weinberger 2016: 7) These, then, are some of the candidates that could have been picked, and absurd as it may seem, from a certain perspective, in Trump the U.S. might have got the lesser of several evils.

9 – https://english.thekotel.org/kotel/tehillim/

10 – https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/the-filter/11154773/Man-behind-meditation-app-goes-from-monk-to-millionaire.html

11 – www.atheistmatch.co.uk

12 – *The Handbook of Hyper-real Religions* (Possamai ed., 2012) defines a hyper-real religion as a simulation of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture. This can provide inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life. Music, dance, psycho-active substances (e.g. the experience of a Grateful Dead concert), and variants of popular culture offer resources for new forms of religiosity and spirituality. Jediism, informed by the Stars Wars franchise, under the aegis of the 'Temple of the Jedi Order' in Texas, was afforded religious tax exemption status in 2015. It can be argued that Jediism, like other such culture, reiterates elements of Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Quest' monomyth in offering a legitimate moral and spiritual code, and it has been regularly cited in censuses (often in parody), by participants as their appropriate religion classification. The internet and digital culture is identified as a key factor in the transformation and growth of hyper-real religions. Geoffroy, whilst critical of all market-based theories concerning religion, and in particular new forms of spiritualities, agrees with Possamai "that these alternative networks have potential in creating a form of spiritual emancipation that could reside outside the market and in the human power of imagination. This theory remains to be clearly demonstrated and I'm quite sure Baudrillard would disagree with us, because he denies the very existence of imagination in his integral reality theory." (Geoffroy 2012: 34) Here however, I would suggest that singularity can take the form of such imagination that irrupts integral reality.

13 – Here we could follow Baudrillard's notion that a new form of iconoclasm functions, one which does not destroy images but instead its radicality is in the manufacture and distribution of a profusion of them. Religion then, has not disappeared as Karl Marx predicted, but has lost its metaphysical and transcendental form to become an immanent force and fragment into countless ideological and practical variants. Here, God is considered in terms of an imaginary referent. There is no 'God,' no transcendental signified, and religion becomes (and in a sense

has always been) hyperreal. That is, signs of the religious – texts, rituals, conventions, authorities, and so forth – circulate, reciprocate, and stand in for, and replace, the status of the referent. If this is the case, then exegetical theology becomes unlimited semiosis. Western religion, the most anthropocentric of all religions, sees the Church born of the failure of the second coming, hiding the death of god, and living in deferred eschaton. It has defended the morality of labour and merit, imposed the political economy of individual salvation, and has as its sole condition of possibility the incessant elimination of symbolic demand. Therefore, the bourgeois instrumental interpretation of Christian faith so comfortably serves the powers-that-be rather than the powerless.

14 – This is a definition that largely asserts that contemporary technological arrangements are essentially a neutral set of tools that can be used in many different ways, including in the service of religion or an emancipatory politics. However, Crary utilises Giorgio Agamben to refute such claims: "today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modelled, contaminated or controlled by some apparatus…[Therefore] it is impossible for the subject of an apparatus to use it in the right way. Those who continue to promote similar arguments are, for their part, the product of the media apparatus in which they are captured" (Agamben in Crary 2014: 46). The discussion of digital religion is largely Weberian rather than Marxist in approach insofar as interest is in the possible transformative force of religious ideas rather than the unmasking of religion as ideology concealing power, economic interests, and so forth.

15 – See, for instance, Jon Baldwin (2008), 'Lessons from Witchetty Grubs and Eskimos: The French Anthropological Context of Jean Baudrillard' *French Cultural Studies* 19 (3)

16 – For Baudrillard, the semiotic thwarting of the reciprocity in symbolic exchange, in the context of the death of God, sadly impacts: "Another explanation for our fall from grace is that the world is given to us. Now, what is given we have to be able to give back. In the past we could give thanks for the gift, or respond to it by sacrifice. Now we have no one to give thanks to. And if we can no longer give anything in exchange for the world, it is unacceptable." (Baudrillard 2001: 13-14)

17 – In one case, media technology was initially viewed as suspicious and debilitating, "The Taliban smashed televisions in the 1990s." (Atwan 2015: 2) The clash between advanced twenty-first century technology and the Salafist-jihadist interpretation of Islam, which espouses the values of life in the seventh century, however, "ceased to be a topic for heated debate among extremist ideologues and clerics when the potential of the internet was fully realised." (Atwan 2015: 2) Al-Qa'ida embraced online networking, with email lists and encrypted communications used to orchestrate major attacks. Osama bin Laden's organisation had its first website up and running by 2000. By 2003, 'cyber jihad' "was cited as one of al-Qa'ida's wildely circulated 'Thirty-nine Principles of Jihad'." (Atwan 2015: 2)

18 – Here we might make a distinction between the network and the node in the way that Bruno Latour, in philosophical discussion with Peter Sloterdijk, makes a distinction between the network and the sphere. Unlike networks, "spheres are not anemic, not just points and links, but complex ecosystems." (Latour 2015: 41) Likewise, nodes must be considered as complex ecosystems behind the apparent simplicity of points, links, and lines of diagrammatic representation. Latour notes that the word 'network' has become a ubiquitous designation for technical infrastructures, social relations, geopolitics, mafias, our new life online, and possibly our new religions: "while networks are good at describing long-distance

and unexpected connections starting from local points, [Sloterdijk's] spheres are useful for describing local, fragile, and complex 'atmospheric conditions'… Networks are good at stressing edges and movements; spheres at highlighting envelopes and wombs." (Latour 2015: 41) Instead of having to choose between Latour's actor-network theory and Sloterdijk's spherology, Latour announces the notion of what he calls 'composition' as an ambition to "regroup in one term those many bubbles, spheres, [and] networks" (Latour 2015: 52).

19 – Digital, as a word, is derived from the Latin *digitalis*, from *digitus* 'finger, toe', which once pertained to the numbers ten and below. Around the 1930 and 40s, the work of mathematicians and engineers saw the development of a new type of computing machine. Opposed to earlier analogue devices, which used a continuous quantity (such as voltage) to compute the desired quantity by analogy, these new machines operated upon data that was represented as a series of discrete numbers / digits. The word now pertains to an individual digit and marks a comparison with the notion of the analogue and analogy, by transforming phenomena into a series of discrete digits. It now resonates with the harsh either/or logic of the single digit of 1 in conjunction with the 0 of binary code. Han proposes that, for these reasons of complete unambiguity – it is or it is not, there is no grey area – the digital "has no capacity to bring forth the wholly other – the singular." (Han 2017b: 18) This is also Baudrillard: "And is there really any possibility of discovering something in cyberspace? The Internet merely simulates a free mental space, a space of freedom and discovery. In fact, it merely offers a multiple, but conventional, space, in which the operator interacts with known elements, pre-existent sites, established codes. Nothing exists beyond these search parameters. Every question has its anticipated response. You are the automatic questioner and, at the same time, the automatic answering device of the machine. Both coder and decoder — in fact your own terminal, your own correspondent. That is the ecstasy of communication. There is no 'Other' out there and no final destination. And so the system goes on, without end and without purpose." (Baudrillard 2002: 179)

20 – Networks are famously said to eradicate notions of time and space, but in so doing they impoverish these conceptions. They "abolish history and shift our focus to the event, the happening or the now." (Berry 2008: 366) They distort a reading of reality that highlights synchronic dispersal over diachronic unfolding. The problem is that "the existence of networks invites us to think in a manner that is appropriate to networks." (Berry 2008: 366) Networks also privilege the connected, as the unconnected – by definition – are not within the network. What place here then, for digital equivalents of the unconnected, the out-of-time, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the poor?

21 – Depressive hedonia (from Mark Fisher) – is not "an inability to get pleasure, so much as an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure…[to counter] a sense that 'something is missing'". (Patrikarakos 2018: 32) The attention economy of the internet offers the consumer a series of perpetual Pyrrhic victories.

22 – Love, *agape*, distinguished from *eros* due to its unconditional nature, is claimed to be at the centre of the teaching of Jesus Christ. But, for Bloch, there is an enduring moral paradox. *Agape*, "[a]n all-embracing human love…implying the so far unheard-of reversal of all aggression, only has a place in Jesus' message (and in the social set-up still prevailing at his time) in the light of an imminent Exodus and Advent." (Bloch 2009: 135) That is the case, certainly, unless one subscribes to a more metaphorical *immanent* eschaton, than *imminent* eschaton. To Han's notion of the agony or *eros*, one can place the sublimity of *agape*.

23 – This perspective could be informed by Critical Internet Theory/Studies. Elmer (2002) proposed three characteristics of Critical Internet Studies: the refutation and questioning of ideologies that claim the Internet is revolutionary, the analysis of the process of Internet corporatisation, and the focus on radical possibilities of the critical Internet community especially in the cracks, fissures, and holes in the forms of domination that characterise the Internet. Following on from this, Fuchs defines Critical Internet Theory/Studies and the Critique of the Political Economy of the Internet as an approach that engages in "identifying and analysing antagonisms in the relationship of the Internet and society; it shows how the Internet is shaped and shapes the colliding forces of competition and cooperation; it is oriented towards showing how domination and exploitation are structured and structuring the Internet and on how class formation and potential class struggles are technologically mediated; it identifies Internet-supported, not yet realized potentials of societal development and radically questions structures that restrain human and societal potentials for cooperation, self-determination, participation, happiness and self-management" (Fuchs, 2009: 75).

24 – At its most basic, and as the name implies, Unitarianism belief is that God is one entity rather than the classic Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In *On the Errors of the Trinity* (1531), Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician and theologian considered to be the first (modern) Unitarian martyr, argued that the concept of the Trinity, as traditionally conceived, was not biblical, but arose from the influence of Greek philosophy. He advocated a return to the simplicity of the Gospels and the teachings of the early Church Fathers that he believed pre-dated the development of Nicene trinitarianism. "Servetus asserted that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were dispositions of God, and not separate and distinct beings." (Goldstone 2002: 72) For this, Servetus was arrested, convicted of heresy, and burned at the stake in 1553, under the order of John Calvin.

25 – *The Simpsons* (Season 12, episode 19), *I'm Goin' to Praiseland* (2001), opens at an Ice Cream Social at Church – 'A Sundae Service You Can Swallow' – Lisa and Bart gaze over the ice cream offerings.

Bart: *Ice cream at Church, I'm intrigued, yet suspicious.*

Lisa: *Wow, look at all these flavours. Blessed Virgin Berry, Command-mint, Bible gum.*
Rev. Lovejoy: *Or, if you prefer, we also have Unitarian ice cream.*
Rev. Lovejoy hands Lisa an empty bowl.
Lisa: *There's nothing here.*
Rev. Lovejoy: *Eeeexactly.*

The Simpsons creator, Matt Groening, is rumoured to be Unitarian Universalist, so this is self-deprecating humour but it also reveals a certain truth to Unitarianism and indeed much religion – when stripped away of belief, dogma, ritual, liturgy and so forth, there is nothing. Or, in a different register, behind the signs of a religion there is no real.

26 – Decentralised networks in this discourse, are deemed a natural progression over centralised networks. Such claims often ignore the historical architecture of the internet. Paul Baran is cited by Berners-Lee as one of three individuals responsible for the development of the "general communications infrastructure that links computers together, on top of which the Web rides." (Berners-Lee 1999: 6) Baran's 1962 'On Distributed Communication Networks' contributed to the "early research [that] would eventually develop into the internet." (Bolimer 2016: 99) Baran discusses three types of network: centralised, decentralised, and distributed.

Communication in a centralised network is vulnerable, Baran suggests, because "[d]estruction of the central node destroys intercommunication between the end stations." (Baran 1962: 3) Preferable then, would be a decentralised network, "because complete reliance upon a single point is not always required." (Baran 1962: 3) Baran was writing, as he puts it, in the "thermonuclear era…that must anticipate a worst-case destruction." (Baran 1962: 18) The discussion of networks, informing the Internet, is founded on geopolitical antagonism and the paranoia of nuclear war: "The network must be built with the expectation of heavy damage." (Baran 1962: 19) A decentralised network, with no central node that can be destroyed, will allow military communication to be maintained. This will allow the US to return nuclear fire and lead to mutually assured destruction. This confirms the often overlooked or unacknowledged, "relationship the internet's development has with fears of nuclear war." (Bolimer 2016: 99) Also factored into the development of the Internet by Baran is the cost-analysis of the capitalist middle-manager: "In choosing the communication links of the future, digital links appear increasingly attractive by permitting low cost switching and low cost links." (Baran 1962: 18) Baran's model negotiated the numerous contradictory historical attributes of networks to "invent a structure that was all-encompassing, restrictive, and potentially totalizing while simultaneously weak, fluid and flexible." (Bolimer 2016: 100) In summation, the creation of a cheap, weak network designed to maintain US military communication in the case of nuclear war has been adapted and adopted to influence the architecture of what we now know as the Internet.

Whilst decentralisation, in its response to a perceived threat, has facilitated certain elements of electronic communication it also opens a new problem: the computer virus. The possible threat to a centralised node may have been alleviated but this does not create security, instead the threat changes location. The decentralised multiple and weak nodes are now made vulnerable to viruses, worms, hacking, cyberterrorism, anomalies, accidents, assemblages, contagions, and so forth. The 'solution' of decentralisation creates its own new problems and threats. The very nature of a decentralised network with multiple weak nodes and packet-switching produces the perfect environment for a virus to spread and hacking to occur. Packet-switching is a mode of data transmission in which a message is broken into a number of parts which are sent independently, over whatever route is optimum for each packet, and reassembled at the destination. This is championed in Baran's network, and introduces local intelligence to communications. Instead of being controlled from above, from a centralised, hierarchical position, network communications decentralised control into small packets which find their own way from sender to recipient. The basic architecture of the Internet has been based on data that is intelligent in the sense that it contains its own instructions for moving, using networks to accomplish its operations: "In this sense, we can justifiably claim that the origins of worm-like – and partly virus-like – programs lie in the schematics of network computing in general." (Parikka 2005) Viruses, hacking, and so forth, cannot be eliminated so long as the ontology of network culture is viral-like. The computer virus "thrives on the openness of info-space…thrives on the infinite potential of algorithmic computing; the open, flexible and undecidable grammar of the algorithm allows the virus to spread, infect and evolve." (Sampson 2004) Decentralisation has given birth to "the anarchic virus [which] is without a central agency; it is a profound rejection of all Generals and power centres." (Sampson 2004) What was once proposed as a solution – of sorts – to the supposed centralisation of networks has thrown up its own problems in terms of the virus and hacking and has analogies in the network society.

27 – "If practice analysis initially unsettles theologians, this is probably because it deals less with questions of truth than with states of being-in-shape." (Sloterdijk 2016: 6) Sloterdijk

became a disciple of Osho (a.k.a. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) in the late 1970s, attending his Poona ashram. Couture writes of "Bhagwan's formative influence on the younger Sloterdijk" (Couture 2016: 3) and that "the lessons learned in Poona are never far removed from the theoretical stances adopted in his later thought." (Couture 2016: 3) Osho can been seen to be Potlatch-like provocative: "I have been calling myself bhagwan [the 'divine'] just as a challenge – to the Christians, to the Mohammedans, to the Hindus." (Osho in Urban 2015: 43) His teachings are a "remarkable postmodern bricolage" (Urban 2015: 14) drawn from an array of sources, including yoga, Tantra, Taoism, and Sufism to Nietzsche, Freud, and Reich; "and yet his teachings were always delivered with a keen sense of humour, playfulness, and self-mocking irony." (Urban 2015: 14) Infamous for his fleet of Rolls Royce cars and embracing of materialism, Osho's was "the only religion which has synthesized capitalism and religion." (Urban 2015: 202) A car bumper sticker in the 1980s proclaimed: "Jesus Saves, Moses Invests, Bhagwan Spends!" (Urban 2015: 114) However, the experiment in collective living in Oregon, U.S.A. in the early 1980s soon turned sour, "gone from a free love utopia to paranoid police state in just a few short years," (Urban 2015: 128) mutating from "a meditation camp into a concentration camp." (Urban 2015: 132) It is suggested that it would be difficult to think of a more extreme example of neoliberal logic than Rajneesh's famous declaration 'I *sell* contentment. I *sell* enlightenment.' "While Rajneesh rejected all other forms of blind faith and dogmatism, he did seem to accept the neoliberal blind faith in the market as the best means of conducting all human affairs." (Urban 2015: 134) The alleged right-wing tendencies of elements of Sloterdijk's recent thought might be traced back to Osho's marketism.

28 – In *God, Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination Between the World Wars*, Lazier (2009), utilising Gershom Scholem, attempts to resuscitate the lost art of heresy, with all its potential and peril. The prototypical heretic was the figure of the Gnostic and the Pantheist. The former sought to distinguish god and world, the latter sought to equate the two. These notions were revisited in Europe in the interwar period, with Scholem embracing and working through heresy, responding broadly to Walter Benjamin's problematic of the irreparable loss of authority for tradition.

29 – For Terry Eagleton, in many regards, we have never been secular. Instead, 'secular' substitutes have replaced the missing referent God: "The history of the modern age is among other things the search for a viceroy for God. Reason, Nature, Geist, culture, art, the sublime, the nation, the state, science, humanity, Being, Society, the Other, desire, the life force and personal relations: all of these have acted from time to time as forms of displaced divinity." (Eagleton 2014: 44)

30 – David Bently Hart argues that the current fashion in belligerent atheism usually involves flinging condemnations around "with little interest in precise aim." (Hart 2013: 2) This kind of atheism might be said to lack "the very experience of existence itself." (Hart 2013: 15) In a return gift, Hart polemically mirrors atheist discourse: "true philosophical atheism must be regarded as a superstition, often nurtured by an infantile wish to live in a world proportionate to one's own hopes or conceptual limitations." (Hart 2013: 16)

31 – Žižek's Bartleby is beyond direct resistance to domination. Bartleby does not say that he doesn't want to do it; "he says that he prefers not to do it. This is how we pass from the politics of 'resistance' or 'protestation,' which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation." (Žižek 2006: 382)

32 – In 'The Scent of Time,' Han wants to rethink the dispute between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita active*. For instance, Aquinas, 'Vita contemplative simpliciter melior est quam activa' [the contemplative life is simply more excellent than the active] (in Han 2017c: 88). Whereas for Han's Marx, "it is not thinking but work that distinguishes man from the animal. The human being is not *animal rationale*, but *animal laborans*." (Han 2017c: 97) Here, the active life, without contemplation, "finds expression in accelerated production and destruction." (Han 2017c: 113) Attempting to bring these two together, Han writes that "A *vita contemplativa* without acting is blind, a *vita activa* without contemplation is empty." (Han 2017: 112) A retreat to the not-to of, for instance, (Zen) meditation, is not a retreat to quietist contemplation but a necessary precondition for action. And then subsequent meditation on the skilfulness and efficacy of this action. And then action on this, and so on.

33 – James Walters (2012) has utilised Baudrillard's idea as a form of radical alterity in the immanent semiotic world, which might reawaken possibilities for transcendence within a hyperreality lost in nihilism and egoism.

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