

# New technology and old religion

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The Oracle has spoken. His vision will soon become your personal gadget. In the latest F8 annual global developer conference last month, the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, announced his vision of new technologies. He wants to change our lives by changing the way we perceive, engage and experience the real world around us. He wants to create augmented reality to spice up the mundane reality of our everyday world such as using an app to fill a cereal bowl with images of tiny swimming sharks.

Augmented reality is like this. It begins with dissatisfaction with the way the world appears before us. It panders to the worst of our human desires when it creates a world which is special to each one of us as if the world should be amenable to our desires rather than the other way around.

## A familiar lure

However, Mr. Zuckerberg's vision is not really new. This vision is presented as if it is something new and radical but there is much in this new technological imagination that should remind us of old religious imaginations.

Mr. Zuckerberg wants us to "think about how many of the things around us don't actually need to be physical". His vision of a world suspicious of materiality points to technology's attempt to always go beyond the real which is present in front of us. This view of technology is closely related to the old religious imaginations, suggesting that the more digital, technological we get, the more religious we will become. Is it only an accident that religiosity and new-age gurus have increased in the digital age?

If this suggestion sounds absurd, consider the following. Like religion, this new technology begins with a suspicion of the real physical world, always searching for something more than the world outside us. Both technology and religion do so by choosing the physical body as the fulcrum of all problems of the physical. They use selective ideas of liberation and freedom as an escape from the physical.

Both these domains raise fundamental questions about the autonomy of human action: do we lose our autonomy to God in the same way that we lose it to the digital gadgets? Both use magic and spectacle as a way to attract us towards them. Both of them create a sense of protection and comfort, and create forms of dependencies towards them. Finally, not to forget another common strategy to promote both these domains: the question of cost.

Religion is cheap for all that it promises us. Zuckerberg has learnt this lesson well: he sells his vision by claiming that a \$500 TV can be a \$1 app in the future with the use of his technology. But what really is the problem with the physical? Why is the idea of the physical a problem for the digital technologists as also for the religious imagination?

## Human and divine

There is a marked difference between the human world and the world of the divine. A crucial aspect of this difference is defined by the physicality of human beings. We are all embodied creatures, occupy space and consume physical produce. Our body is the first model of the physical, and this body is also the problem for many notions of liberation.

The body is a problem because the physical, by definition, is always an entity that is constrained and bound by laws. The body is a physical body in that it cannot do certain things because of its physicality. Liberation is firstly a liberation from the physical world. Heaven is not constrained by any of the factors that characterises the physical world. Gods and angels fly when we cannot. They are not restrained by the constraints of space and time. Gods are

not like us. They are immaterial, omnipresent, eternal, a spirit, a consciousness. God is the first example of a digital world where there is no constraint due to physicality. That is also the reason why the notion of God was deeply correlated with mathematics in the Western tradition. Geometry was thought to embody the omnipresence, and arithmetic the eternity, of God. Isaac Newton was among those who subscribed to this fundamental relation between these two non-physical domains.

Augmented reality takes this one step further and is actually the logical end to the imagination of science and technology. Science describes the world in its own way, but the aim of science does not lie in a mere description.

The fundamental aim of science is to use this description and do something to the world which it describes. Science is as much about using the knowledge of nature in order to control and harness it. However, there is a more important aim of science: to ultimately create nature.

For science, it is not enough to merely know how things are or why they act the way they do, but it is more essential to know how to recreate not just this world but 'better' ones. The ultimate aim of science is to be God; cloning, Bt foods, artificial intelligence and augmented reality are just the first faltering steps on this journey.

Religion and Mr. Zuckerberg have one more thing in common. They depend on the fact that human individuals are perpetually unhappy with themselves and their world. Religion offers solace through another world, a world of the divine. Mr. Zuckerberg wants to create this world of the divine in his digital toys. He wants to change the world rather than ask us to change our individual selves.

The domain of Gods was different from that of the humans, and so liberation meant leaving this place and going to the beyond. However, augmented reality is not about this form of liberation. It wants to create a heaven outside each of our doors, or at least outside each of our smartphones.

## **Not socially shared**

Augmented reality is narcissistic and self-centred unlike religion in general. Religions are always social. They are practised socially and are composed of social rituals. But this new technological make-believe world which each one of us can create according to our desires and fantasies is not socially shared. It insulates and creates an individual who can only end up being socially delusional.

It is the digital world, ephemeral, unlocated, seemingly free and floating, that beckons as the way out of the constraints of the human world. This new technology mimics all that the old religion had to give in order to create a delusion of a new religion. Like all religions, it too forgets that the digital and the ephemeral are always based on a foundation of the material, just like human life is always based on a foundation of loss and death.

What Mr. Zuckerberg is showing us is only the glitz, and not the wires and the black boxes that are behind it which make all this possible. But eventually he is not responsible for what he creates. It is we, the suffering, burdened physical humans who go to him for the satiation of our desires. We are puppets in the hands of the digital masters and we have gone beyond the point of even asking whether we know what we are doing or what we are getting into. We are already in the land of the new religion.

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