AOSIS

Commodification and transfiguration: Socially mediated identity in technology and theology

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Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter allow users to create an online identity with preferences, photos including 'selfies' and links to other users. These platforms allow users to present and edit their identities or profiles in accordance with their subjective desires and aspirations as well as in response to feedback from others. Defining individual identity online presents new challenges for many individuals. This article explores those challenges and engages the culture and the practices of online identity formation critically. Identity formation online raises profound theological questions, which are explored in relation to Christian theology and its understanding of personhood as defined in relationship. This view originates in the earliest Christian theology as an attempt to understand the Christian God as three identities that are mutually defined by their relationship to each other. The article asks how the experience of identity formation online in social media can challenge and inform a Christian view of the human relationship with the divine.

Keywords: Social media; Facebook; Person; Social relationship; Self-branding; Identity; Trinity; Icons.

Introduction

'Writing parodies live presence; it is inhuman, lacks interiority, destroys authentic dialogue, is impersonal, and cannot acknowledge the individuality of its interlocutors; and it is promiscuous in distribution ...' So writes John Durham Peters, paraphrasing a complaint voiced by Socrates according to Plato's *Phaedrus*. He continues: 'Communication must be soul-to-soul, among embodied live people, in an intimate interaction that is uniquely fit for each participant' (Peters 2012:47).

Hardly anyone today still fears the evils of writing. But what about social media? Surely these platforms are superficial and disembodied, promiscuous and inhuman, pure seductions that destroy true conviviality. Just watch the people using it, eyes focused close and faces aglow, especially the young people. And there are plenty of them to watch. A recent study released in May 2018 found that 95% of US teens aged 13–17 years have a smartphone or access to one; 45% said they are online 'almost constantly', even though the teens themselves are ambivalent about the benefits or harms of social media; 31% said its effect was mostly positive because it connected them to friends and family; and 24% said its effect was mostly negative because it amplified bullying and the spread of rumours. Others commented that social media use makes online friends seem perfect and therefore fake, that it makes face-to-face social contact seem hard by comparison or that it is a constant distraction (Pew Research Center 2018). Nine in 10 users check in several times a day.

The explosion in the use of smartphones and social media comes against a backdrop of growing concerns about privacy, security, bots, fake news, fake accounts and interference in elections. Companies like Facebook, Twitter and Google track all kinds of data, including location, even when we think they are not watching.

Cyberbullying begins for some children in primary school. Rumours and fake news, some of it horrific in content, spread almost instantly through networks of fear and anger, where they fuel resentment, conspiracy theories and real-life reprisals (e.g. in Myanmar). Meanwhile, we see the growth of social science research about the impact of digital technology, even entirely new sub-disciplines such as 'cyberpsychology'.

What special features of social media make these new platforms of human connection vulnerable to political exploitation? What broad, underlying cultural and economic trends bear upon the development and use of social media? Firstly, questions like these are explored in the article. Secondly, it focuses on how social media use changes the dynamics of individual human identity. How does the growing use of social media transform the meaning of personal identity by changing the ways in which people today present and understand themselves? Thirdly, the article turns to the phenomenon of selfies and what they suggest about identity expression online. Finally, the article asks how Christian theology approaches questions of personal identity and social relationship, asking whether our experience with social media can help us understand more fully what it means to live with an awareness of a relationship to God.

The social media context

Social media platforms are free to use. In exchange, users give back vast amounts of personally identifiable data. Social media platforms are built by corporations that offer free access to their services in order to get something far more valuable, which is user information. Users are free to use the platform, but the corporation is free to collect, process and sell user data to third parties or through their targeted advertising services. For companies like Facebook, user information is the product.

Social media companies depend on billions of people (users) freely giving them an almost incomprehensible amount of personally identifiable information. Sometimes information is given knowingly by users, who upload profiles, pictures, comments, 'likes' and 'friend' requests. Other information is gathered without the knowledge of the user, in some cases even when the user thinks the data-gathering function is switched off, or even information about someone who is not a user but is linked to a friend who uses the site.

Smartphone apps add to the power of these devices to gather self-presentation information that is not in the form of pictures or texts but can be described as quantitative. Collecting quantitative information (Rettberg 2017):

> is becoming increasingly common as phones become step-counters and apps give us more and more opportunity to represent our lives through numbers and graphs. Quantified self-representation can mean extensive and deliberate self-tracking … (p. 42)

Perhaps to try to show just how useful quantitative data can be to the user, apps and social media companies now generate 'automated diaries, which are generated by apps you can install on your phone, or the algorithmic self-representations generated as summaries of your activities on various sources'. Consider, for example, Facebook's 'Year in Review'. 'These algorithmically created diaries are usually present to the individual with a question: Would you like to share this?' (Rettberg 2017). 'Yes' means more data for the company.

To protect themselves legally, social media companies rely on the notion of 'informed consent'. In exchange for free use of their services, users must accept company policies that are often not understood but that allow the companies to do pretty much what they want with user data. This is seen as the 'price' users pay for a free service, and for the companies the data generate huge revenues in terms of targeted advertisements or other 'products'. Strictly speaking, users may 'own' their data and may have the right to remove it, at least what they uploaded and at least in part. But the license agreement included in the consent process allows companies like Facebook to use data while 'users have no control over how that information is used by Facebook and third parties in marketing and advertising campaigns' (Adams, Clark & Craven 2018). Nearly everyone agrees that (Jones 2017):

> the terms and conditions of these policies are complex, lengthy and written in language that is often ambiguous, occasionally misleading, and subject to change without notification. Empirical studies have shown that such policies are frequently either misunderstood, passively agreed to, or unread … (p. 919)

What this means in practice is that companies like Facebook acquire the right to commodify user data by selling targeted advertisements or by providing user information to other corporations and third parties, such as Cambridge Analytica, whose use of Facebook user data sparked widespread criticism of the industry in 2018 (Adams et al. 2018):

> According to their mission statement, Cambridge Analytica's primary focus is 'To deliver data-driven behavioural change by understanding what motivates the individual and engaging with target audiences in ways that move them to action' … The research that Cambridge Analytica undertakes is not, in and of itself, illegal or improper.

The political implications of the role of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica are particularly worrisome in light of the firm's declared intent to generate behavioural change. In the end, it is not just information but the user's future behaviour that is being bought and sold.

The commercialisation of user data is made possible technologically in part because of social media bots. The word 'bots' sounds ominous, and so it is important to remember that most bots are helpful or at least benign (Wojcik et al. 2018):

> These accounts can play a valuable part in the social media ecosystem by answering questions about a variety of topics in real time or providing automated updates about news stories or events. (p. 3)

The problem is that bots can be built to disguise themselves. They can create social media accounts that appear to be connected to actual human beings but are really 'fake', linked only to a socialbot that is often part of a network of bots under the control of an unidentified person or group. With these fake accounts, bots can manipulate news trends:

> As social media has attained an increasingly prominent position in the overall news and information environment, bots have

been swept up in the broader debate over Americans' changing news habits, the tenor of online discourse and the prevalence of 'fake news' online. (Wojcik et al. 2018)

A socialbot is 'designed to be stealthy, that is, it is able to pass itself off as a human being'. Stealth allows socialbots to 'spread misinformation and propaganda in order to bias the public opinion'. In addition, socialbots 'can further harvest private users' data such as email addresses, phone numbers and other personal data that have monetary value' (Wojcik et al. 2018).

Hundreds of millions of fake user accounts have been created by socialbots. On platforms like Facebook, fake accounts can become integrated into the social milieu of the online ecosystem. They pass for regular accounts by other Facebook users, who accept or 'friend' fake accounts without realising the deception at play or that they are being friended by bots. Like any new account, bot-created Facebook pages garner friends slowly. But once they attain the status of being friends of friends, widespread acceptance follows quickly, almost as it does for 'normal' accounts (Boshmaf et al. 2011).

Following embarrassing public disclosures about fake accounts, Facebook announced in May 2018 that it disabled 583 million fake or suspicious accounts in the first quarter of the year. Twitter has also deleted millions of 'user' accounts, with some of its most popular accounts losing upwards to a million followers, triggering a short-term loss in market value of about 20% in 1 day. At the same time, regular users began to delete their Facebook accounts, leading to a movement known as '#deletefacebook'. One blogger wrestled publicly with the value of 'liking' the #deletefacebook movement:

> Many people (myself included) simply click the 'Like' button of the call, then carry on using Facebook. The latest #DeleteFacebook campaign could well be another hapless boycott. And the irony of this is that the energy and emotion spent on the #DeleteFacebook campaign could well be harvested and used to target us as consumers in one way or another. (Lin 2018)

The frustrations felt by many social media users may mean that some services, especially Facebook, have reached the peak of their popularity and are facing a decline. Already there is some evidence that younger users have moved on to other platforms. Even so:

> … the terabytes of data we generate in our interactions on these platforms allows companies to 'datafy', quantify, track, monitor, profile us and sell target adverts to haunt us.
>
> This is an economic system that has been dubbed 'surveillance capitalism'. (Lin 2018)

At the macro level, social media use raises profoundly disturbing questions for the future of free governments, public discourse and the meaning of truth itself. At the micro level, social media is raising equally profound questions about free individuals, public presentation and the meaning of the person or the self. Social media are creating a new ontology of human social connection. What does personal identity mean in the new ontology?

Social media and managed identity

The idea that personal identities are shaped by social contexts has been explored in the past, for example, in Erving Goffman's 1959 work: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Even though Goffman's work largely predated today's computer era, his ideas are revisited today as a helpful starting point for thinking about personal identity in the age of social media. How do personal computers and the Internet change the ontology of human sociality and thereby transform the dynamics of personal self-presentation?

Around 2000–2005, some scholars suggested that the Internet both confirmed and complicated what Goffman first suggested about identity construction through self-presentation. Summarising the discussion as it occurred around 2005, Doster (2018) writes:

> So identity construction has arguably become more challenging … whilst the Internet enables individuals to connect globally it also encourages fragmentation. In this environment individuals construct an 'elective identity'. (p. 54)

The idea of 'elective identity' fits nicely with the 'self-branding' movement that became popular in the late 1990s. The movement's core idea was simple. Just as corporations and institutions have valuable brand identities that convey trust and identity in the marketplace, so now individuals should define and promote themselves as a brand, as if each person was a corporation. The classic manifesto of the self-branding movement was Peters' (1997) article in *Fast Company*:

> Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding. We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You. (p. 83)

Self-branding is now widely popular in many circles, and learning how to do it is now seen as an essential part of the curriculum in some educational programmes, not just in business or journalism, but elsewhere. 'Students must understand their skills, abilities, knowledge, talent, personality, strengths and weaknesses and what others see in them' (Johnson 2017). Younger scholars in the humanities, so often discouraged by the lack of conventional employment opportunities, turn to self-branding as a necessary activity by which they promote their abilities in order to secure temporary employment from multiple institutions. Established scholars also engage in personal branding in order to boost their visibility in their field, increase their citations, strengthen their case for tenure or promotion, or persuade would-be publishers that their stodgy manuscripts will become the next big bestseller. Specialised social media platforms, notably academia.edu and researchgate.net, cater especially to scholars, offering users a place to exchange papers as an act of self-benefiting altruism, at once helping other scholars

who then cite shared material and thereby help the one who shares. Here again, as with Facebook and other social media corporations, it is important to keep in mind that platforms for academics are offered by corporations, whose final concern is their own financial success and not the careers of their users:

> The logic of self-branding – of carefully curated self-promotion – is a fact of social media life, for everyday users and cultural workers alike … The academic social-networking sites were launched with the same venture-funding model as their popular counterparts … (Duffy & Pooley 2017:8)

Elective identity and self-branding were part of the cultural landscape that greeted the arrival of smartphones, first from Apple in 2007 and then with Android-based products the next year, powerful devices that include a camera (two, in fact). The Web itself was being transformed from the fixed or static pages of Web 1.0 to the interactive user experience of Web 2.0. Around the world, an ever-growing number of people gained near-constant, mobile Internet access. The confluence of cultural and technological changes set the stage for the social media revolution.

Today we see near-universal social media use by young people in economically privileged societies. For them it is no longer a matter of 'going online'. For some, going face-to-face is the unusual step, the one that makes them feel odd. What happens when a culture of self-as-brand meets the technology of constant connection to social media? What deeper trends are at play? At first glance, self-branding via hand-held social media access seems to offer unprecedented freedom to define and redefine the self. However, in the global economic downturn of the mid-2000s, compounded by the loss of a sense of corporate loyalty as a workplace assumption, it is not hard to see how freedom is encircled by fear. Is 'my' brand still current? Is 'Me Inc' still in demand in the marketplace of personal brands (Khamis, Ang & Welling 2017)?

> Ironically, self-branding can therefore be seen less as a testament to personal control and more as a reflection of unstable and uncertain labour markets, whereby workers are expected to be as adaptive and nuanced as all branded products … (p. 201)

It is not just that the person is 'always on'. The task of self-defining or self-branding is also always on.

Elective identity needs constant updating, not just because we change our minds about how to present ourselves but because we want to change our identities in response to feedback from others (Khamis et al. 2017):

> The branded self, with subjectivity shaped by and for the market, is always working … With the commodification of the self, individuals are locked into a mode of constant Promotion … Self-branding asks the individual to view relationships as transactional and instrumental, and to look to the market to gauge personal accomplishment – each social encounter effectively tests how useful (and hence valuable) the branded self is … self-branding ultimately exacerbates the insecurity it

aims to resolve, since it relies on economic conditions that are notoriously precarious, decentralised and flexible. (p. 201)

The elective, self-branding identity is always in flux. In some respects, it is the old question: 'Who am I?' But now the asking is constant, and the answer is created in the noisy, rebounding dynamics of social media rather than discovered in depths of quiet introspection.

The task of self-branding reflects a contemporary global economic ideology in which individuals are encouraged to take responsibility for their own financial and social success. This ideology, known by various labels including 'neoliberalism', is reflected in the very structure of corporate social media platforms like Facebook, at least according to some critics (Gershon 2011):

> Facebook's interface, more than the other media these students use, is structured to encourage a neoliberal engagement with others because it allows people to present themselves as a compilation of both consumer tastes (preferred movies, books, music) and unweighted alliances (shown through the number of one's Facebook friends, wallpostings, and one's posted photos). The Facebook profile also presented people with a profile 'self' that could be managed through a reflexive distance similar to what a US neoliberal perspective encourages in self-management and business management. (p. 867)

The result is that the self is freely branded and performed, but with constant feedback that triggers the endless burden of rebranding and re-performing (Gershon 2011):

> The neoliberal self is simultaneously manager and managed. The neoliberal self is one in which the reflexive distance lies in the ways one should take oneself to be a project or business to be carefully controlled or enhanced. (p. 878)

The process is self-reflective, but not in anything like the sense that was advocated by traditional philosophies or religious teachings, a process of self-knowledge and self-improvement based on ideals grounded in some transcendent view of human excellence or wholeness. The goal is not to 'know thyself' so much as to know how others are responding to your digital presentation, and to adjust your identity accordingly. Here the reflective process is measured in likes, retweets and friend requests, bits of feedback that rate past successes in self-branding and self-performative.

Part of the problem here, according to one critic, is that (Jones 2017):

> the funnelling of these needs into prescribed templates acts to restrict the diversity of social life into atomised silos, and subsumes the complexity of human expression into narrow commercial interests and categories tuned to advertising. (p. 920)

When that happens, something is inevitably lost. Even when social media platforms allow free self-expression, the messy but meaningful complexities of human lives are too complicated for the technological platforms (Jones 2017):

> Rich qualitative expressions of affection, emotion and friendship are flattened into quantitative values and relationships with

digital objects and fetishised brands. The cultivation of digital *personae* as repositories of social capital, and the imperative to curate and add value to them as personal brands, can be seen as part of a wider ideology of neoliberalism that seeks to bring all human action and expressions of individual worth into the domain of the market. (p. 200)

All these problems are made worse, at least for many individuals, by another dynamic that is at play, especially in the context of social media, even though it was identified decades ago. This dynamic is called 'context collapse', and it originated with Goffman's idea that human beings tailor the 'presentation' of the self in different ways for different contexts, sharing slightly different personal information with friends, partner, family or coworkers. On Facebook or other social media sites, however, a 'friend' can be any of these persons. As a result, the once-discrete contexts of self-presentation tend to collapse, for example, when the parents of teens want to friend their children.

'Context collapse' can be particularly challenging for anyone who needs social support from one context but whose information may lead to harm in other contexts:

> Given these complex relational landscapes, the phenomenon of online context collapse presents particular challenges for LGBTQ young people. To negotiate these disclosure-related challenges, LGBTQ young people engage in a variety of identity management strategies, including monitoring their online self-expression, using privacy and security controls, strategically managing their friendship networks, creating multiple accounts, curating and editing personal photographs, and restricting LGBTQ-related to other, more anonymous online contexts. (McConnell et al. 2018)

Social media may offer a new space for freedom of self-expression, but for many the new space comes with the old risks, all the more so because self-expression can shift from context to context, from close friends to parents to employers, sometimes with disturbing consequences.

The experience of freedom and constraint, if not outright fear, is perhaps nowhere felt more acutely than by girls coming of age with social media. They live with conflicting messages. They are told that they 'can choose their own selves in an open marketplace of images, identities, values, and voices'. An early social media study that interviewed MySpace personal page users, however, raised serious concerns about just how free girls are – especially lesbian and queer girls – to 'choose' the self that they present. The authors compared what these girls told them with the 'often contradictory engagement with postfeminist narratives about personal and social independence, agency, and gender-sexual power'. On the one hand, their embrace of the idea of free expression was evident on their MySpace pages. They claimed 'agency and autonomy' that rests in 'the insidious assumption by many teen girls that they can achieve radically desocialized self-determination' through social media (Brown & Thomas 2014:956). On the other hand, however, these young social media users could see that they were not entirely free to explore or define their identities online. They faced 'deeply

problematic limits on possible lives'. And so the researchers asked (Brown & Thomas 2014):

> How do the powerful social contexts of postfeminism frame unchosen girlhood subjectivities? How do they constrain the possibilities of recognizable existence for girls, that is, both recognizable to themselves and to society? (p. 956)

The authors concluded that it is mere wishful thinking to see social media as nothing but a place for free expression and presentation of the self.

Shallow or not, social media seems to hook its users in the experience of endless iterations of self-expression. Some call these addictive, perhaps even addictive by design. One of the original developers of Facebook, Sean Parker, spoke out in 2017 about his view of the thinking inside the inner circle when the social media platform was first being built. According to Parker, Facebook is intentionally addictive. 'It's a social-validation feedback loop … exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you're exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology'. 'All of us are jacked into this system', he said. 'All of our minds can be hijacked. Our choices are not as free as we think they are' (Parker 2017).

With all these reasons for disliking social media, one might think that people would simply delete their accounts. And yet people choose to participate and sign consent forms and 'End-User License Agreements' or EULA. Are they somehow being coerced into consent? Perhaps it depends on what is meant by coercion.

'That users must agree to Facebook's EULA, and submit to commercial surveillance as a condition of access to the platform, represents a subtle form of coercion …' (Jones 2017). What makes signing feel 'coercive'? Perhaps the greatest motivator is 'fear of missing out' or 'FOMO', as it is now called. FOMO seems to compel us to check for updates or incoming text messages, even while driving or sitting across from a dear friend or a neglected child. FOMO leads us to sign forms that may not be in our best interest but will certainly benefit the social media companies. FOMO makes us feel the need to update our status, add new pictures or tweets and follow intently the stream of messages and postings from friends, even those we have never met.

'Fear of missing out' keeps social media companies in business because it builds on the 'fundamental human needs to be valued, and to connect and communicate with others'. Deep human needs, ancient in their origins and rich in the conviviality they generate, are now being met by social media. For some, the corporate creation of the technology of social ontology is inherently disturbing.

Selves and selfies

Social media use is fraught by conflicting tendencies towards freedom and constraint, self-expression and self-commodification, breadth and shallowness. Nowhere are

these conflicts more vividly expressed than in the 'selfie', a photo taken on smartphones and often shared instantly with a network of friends. Unlike traditional photographs, which are pictures of one person taken by another, selfies merge photographer and subject into one. In addition to being the 'head marketer for the brand called You', selfies make us the head photographer of the image as well as the brand. Selfies can no longer be called 'portraits' because they no longer portray the self as seen by another. Selfies express the self in the moment.

So often today social media's naysayers see selfies as narcissism gone wild. How often in everyday conversation do we hear someone say something like this (Barry et al. 2017):

> selfies are inherently narcissistic, as narcissism involves a grandiose self-presentation, vanity, and strong desire for positive feedback from others or as an indicator of low self-esteem and a desire for confidence-boosting appraisals from others. (p. 2)

Whether selfies are truly an expression of narcissism depends on how the term is defined. It is used loosely today to describe any self-loving, self-promoting attitude. Selfies seem to fit that definition, revealing or perhaps increasing the narcissistic tendencies in today's culture, loosely understood. Then, of course, there are more technically precise definitions of narcissism in psychiatry and psychology. Some suggest that narcissism is best viewed as a continuum and that there is even such a thing as 'healthy narcissism'. Others see it as a discrete personality disorder that does not apply to all those who take selfies. Perhaps the most interesting nuances associated with narcissism go back to Ovid's retelling of the Greek myth of Narcissus, a beautiful young man. Narcissus is pursued by a nymph named Echo. He rejects her, choosing instead to admire himself in the reflective water of a pond until he turns into the flower that bears his name. Or as we might say today, he disappears except for his selfie. Echo searches for him, calling his name until she disappears except for the sound of her voice, becoming nothing more than the endless retweeting of the views or the identities of others.

At least one study casts some doubt on the connection between selfies and narcissism as understood in psychology. At the same time, people clearly tend to see selfies as narcissistic at least in the broad or non-technical sense of the word:

> People in selfies are perceived to be more extroverted, less open, less socially attractive, less trustworthy, and more narcissistic compared to the pictures that are photos taken by another person. (Krämer et al. 2017)

For the person taking the selfie, the question is not so much about narcissism as about authenticity. Does the selfie express the self? Often we think of photos as accurate representations of reality, saying things like 'the camera never lies'. That view, of course, is naïve at best, and all the more so today when photographic images can be manipulated not just in subtle or artistic ways but to distort the truth or to fabricate lies. All this is known, of course, to those who take selfies.

The newest smartphones, in fact, have image processing built into the device. One does not simply select a flattering selfie for sharing. One enhances it first.

But in that case, is it still 'authentic'? Clearly not, if authenticity means visual faithfulness or accuracy. An alternative view of authenticity, however, shifts its meaning from accuracy to expression. Does the selfie authentically express the self? Based on what they hear in interviews, some scholars are now using the term 'expressive authenticity. This term refers to the association between an individual and his or her visual representation …' It is rooted in the individual's belief that the representation is 'an accurate expression of the individual's nature … personality, morals, and beliefs' (Nguyen & Barbour 2017).

The move from accuracy to expression is a shift from objectivity to subjectivity. The shift is perhaps most clearly revealed by how people think about selfies, but it extends to just about everything that people share about themselves through social media:

> Through focus group discussions, we saw a belief that only the person who took the selfie can determine whether it is 'authentic', and authenticity was understood as expressive, rather than fixed. (Nguyen & Barbour 2017)

This shift ties directly to the underlying conflicts in social media noted earlier. One the one hand, social media use creates space for free self-expression. On the other hand, self-expression is always shaped within an environment that affects the meaning of the self that comes to expression. The experience of freedom is clearly felt:

> Several participants noted that online platforms are a great space for users to experiment with their identity and be more expressive. The participants believed experimentation of the self using technology can lead them to reach a more 'authentic' version of themselves. According to one participant's opinion, social media use gives individuals a much broader platform to play out other aspects of their identity that are not easily portrayed in the off-line world. (Nguyen & Barbour 2017)

In fact, freedom for self-expression is not limited by the self as it exists today. Freedom of self-expression leads some to express the self they want to be. If the aspiration is authentic, then the aspirational self is valid or authentic as a presentation of the self:

> Participants in one focus group spent some time discussing young women who attempt to put up an identity performance that may not entirely represent who they are presently but what they aspire to be in the future … (Nguyen & Barbour 2017)

Of course, the interviewees recognised some limits to aspirational freedom. But in the end, they tended to insist that expressions of the selves they want to be are not necessarily inauthentic. Authenticity is in the eyes of the one who creates the self-representation. According to one respondent:

> I think it's inauthentic because according to her it's inauthentic. So whether or not you know deep down that really is you or not

is ultimately up to you. So basically [*it's*] a subjective thing, it's a personal thing. (Nguyen & Barbour 2017)

The sense of subjective authority seems so strong here that it overwhelms any sense of an objective check on the scope of authenticity. The concern, of course, is that subjective aspirations flow through the channels of social media validation, which modify the aspirations themselves. The individual is free to express personal identity, regardless of whether it is tethered to objective reality or to nothing but free-floating subjective expressivity, and then wait to see what happens. How do others (some of whom may be bots) react? How do reactions affect aspirations? According to a respondent in one study:

I think social media is now measured in Likes or [*similar*] interactions and it is the other person responding. [*People*] want to get engagement with their posts. It's like a self-affirmation kind of thing and I think people also want likeable online identities. I think it's like a branding exercise … (Nguyen & Barbour 2017)

Constant feedback is not the only feature of social media that shapes the aspirational aesthetics of selfies. The selfies that are posted are first of all selected, and the act of selection is itself aspirational. But more than that, selfies today are also edited or filtered. Smartphones include apps for photo-editing or filtering that allow users to remove any unwanted imperfections in facial features or blemishes that remain even in their best selfies. In other words, users select their best images, but then they make them even better. This leads to feedback about how good the person looks, feedback so intoxicating that some who post these enhanced selfies turn to cosmetic surgery in order to make their 'real' face look like their enhanced selfie face (Rajanala, Maymone & Vashi 2018):

A new phenomenon, dubbed 'Snapchat dysmorphia,' has patients seeking out cosmetic surgery to look like filtered versions of themselves, with fuller lips, bigger eyes, or a thinner nose. This is an alarming trend because those filtered selfies often present an unattainable look and are blurring the line of reality and fantasy for these patients. (p. 443)

It is worth noting in passing just why cosmetic surgeons find this trend 'alarming'. It is not because social media use triggers so strong a desire for improved looks that surgery is contemplated, but because the surgeons cannot match the 'unattainable look' of the photos. But in a world in which some people commit real atrocities because of what they read on Facebook, there should not be much surprise that others would seek surgery because a 'friend' happens to 'like' their enhancement appearance, or even that 'doctors' are worried about the limits of their art.

Social media and theology

There should not be any surprise that various forms of social media interact with religious institutions and practices in complicated ways. Local Christian churches often have a Facebook page. People who meet in religious settings are likely to connect with each other on social media.

Church leaders, of course, routinely use Twitter and other platforms to promote their message. In the arena of popular spirituality, in 2018, a major American television network launched a weekly show entitled 'God Friended Me'. According to the network, the programme is intended to be a 'humorous, uplifting drama'. Its lead actor receives messages that prompt him to help others, but of course he discovers that helping others provides meaning and personal satisfaction even while the source of the messages remains puzzling.

In contrast with the well-funded television show, a socialbot entitled 'Preacher_Bot' is a small-scale and mischievous exposé of the entangled relationship between religion and social media. Partly for research and partly as a joke, 'Preacher_Bot' was created by Cantwell to run on Twitter. It follows the real Twitter accounts of several prominent US evangelical preachers. It takes the words of their tweets, 'pulls them apart, and then remixes them with other pieces of digital evangelical ephemera to create an entirely new tweet' (Cantwell 2018:276).

After his bot ran for a while, Cantwell (2018) says he:

began to receive notifications that other accounts were following and interacting with the program … soon the accounts of other preachers or self-described 'Christ followers' began to follow, like, retweet, and reply to the program as well. Initially, I was worried that the output of my automated experiment might actually impact the religious life of someone real. But upon closer inspection I discovered that all of these seemingly real religious followers were bots as well. (p. 282)

Not surprisingly, Cantwell's bot reveals how religious leaders and institutions are vulnerable to all the dangers that lurk in social media.

For Christians and for followers of other traditions, the life of faith cannot be isolated any longer from the wide-ranging impacts of social media. While classical philosophers in the tradition of Plato tended to see writing as a form of communication subordinate to speech, early Christianity modified that view by recognising the theological significance and necessity of writing. Christian leaders trained in classical philosophy and rhetoric were fully aware of the argument putting speech above writing. They modified this view, however, by insisting not only on the practical necessity but also on the profound theological significance of the written word. How else, after all, could they lift up the importance of sacred writings? How else could they confess faith in revelation unless written texts played a central role? They believed that the original writers of Christian scriptures viewed writing as a means necessary for the spreading of the 'gospel', a word that in itself refers both to the original proclamation of good news and to its written forms. In their view, writing has the power not only to overcome the human distances of time and space but also to overcome the ontological distance between the human and the divine. Their view of writing was grounded in their view of the

Incarnation itself. In the mystery of the Incarnation, God's eternal Logos takes on the materiality of human flesh. In the mundane practice of writing, words take on the materiality of manuscripts, ink and letters on a page.

Not surprisingly, their view of writing affected the way they interpreted biblical texts. Unlike modern interpreters who debate the literal or historical meaning of the text, Christian interpreters in the 4th century looked for the moral and spiritual meaning that can be found only by rising above the merely literal sense of the text. Is each one of the four gospels an 'authentic' expression of the identity of Jesus Christ? Their answer loosely mirrors the notion of 'expressive authenticity' described earlier in that each gospel authentically reflects God's intent to reveal good news in the person of Jesus Christ.

In their own literary creations, these early Christian authors 'often struck autobiographical poses, bringing their portraits of themselves as artists into conformity with religious ideals'. Their narrations of events served a purpose higher than mere reporting. They wrote about saints in order to build up saintliness in their readers (Krueger 2011):

> The power of writing to shape the Christian author flourished especially in the production of narrative literary forms. Saints' lives, in their combined ability to entertain and edify, contributed broadly to the formation of Christian practice and self-understanding. (p. 2)

They wove their own experiences into the narratives for the same reason, even if it meant going beyond the factual to the aspirational. 'Observing an author performing acts of piety in his text tells more about how a writer wished to be viewed than about what he really thought' (Krueger 2011:9).

The 4th century theologian Gregory of Nyssa 'was strongly influenced by Plato's discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus* …' (Krueger 2011:118). He agreed that writing reflects speech and is subordinate to it at least in time. But precisely because it is temporally subordinate, writing is a gift for the spiritual life because it can bridge what is separate in time or space. For those who are not eye-witnesses of the incarnate Christ, writing is 'made necessary by separation from the addressee by time and space'. (Krueger 2011:118). More than mere accommodation to the fact of separation is at play here. Words spoken and written make past events present. Without that power, the Eucharist itself is impossible and its words are empty (Krueger 2011):

> In contrast to the interlocutors in the *Phaedrus*, who (despite being embedded in a written dialogue) attempt to keep writing both distinct from and subordinate to speech, Gregory's Christianity – his liturgical practice – celebrates the materiality of the Logos, the Word made flesh. Confidence in the incarnation deconstructs the opposition of speech and writing. (pp. 118–119)

Something similar is found in Gregory of Nazianzus. He saw writing as a form of spiritual discipline. He speaks of his chaotic or unmeasured life being made more measured by writing poetry in metered verse. 'The discipline of writing served as a powerful metaphor for the composition of a more Christian self'. (Krueger 2011:1). For Gregory and others at his time, writing is not so much self-expression as self-forming. He asks what it might mean 'to make writing an idiom of Christian self-expression, indeed of Christian self-fashioning through literary composition?' (Krueger 2011:3).

Today, however, the rise of social media poses a new challenge for theologians who struggle to think about the meaning of speech, writing and human communication in our time. New modes of communication change fundamentally the forms of person-to-person contact. Almost like the invention of writing itself, today's technology transforms social connection by changing the underlying ontology of human relationality. It is not the end of the social connection that we are witnessing, but the emergence of a new kind of social connection. If the identity of human persons is shaped by social relationships, how does the technological transformation of social connectedness change human identities? How is each individual human self actively shaped and reshaped by these social media platforms of corporate design, filled with socialbots and other questionable 'friends'?

These questions are forced upon us today by the relentless intrusion of the new technologies of social connection. As difficult as they may be to answer, reflecting on them is surely a part of what it means today to be self-aware. For that reason, part of the pastoral role today is to invite people to take up the perennial burden of self-awareness, but now in a new context and therefore in a new form. A key aspect of social media savvy and self-awareness, of course, is the cultivation of the habits and disciplines that limit and manage the use of these technologies. Some, no doubt, will want to withdraw entirely from the use of social media. Whether or not to use them and which ones to use are matters of choice. However, there really can be no choice about whether or not we live in a social world saturated by their use. Those who abstain from social media cannot avoid being influenced by persons whose identities are defined by living online.

The rise of social media can be seen as an invitation to theology to develop, refine and promote a richly alternative sense of social relationship rooted in a consciousness of a spiritual connection alongside social and technological connection. How might our social media culture be interpreted theologically and critically in terms of its power to reveal to us more fully what it means to be shaped by our social relationships? Those who actively use social media live every moment with an awareness of their social relationships. Even when they are alone, they are rarely if ever out of touch and almost never unmindful of their wider social media network.

When they are physically with one group of friends, they are mentally conscious of their contact with others as their devices buzz or chime almost constantly. Is it possible that this new reality can disclose something to us about the

spiritual life, about what it might mean to 'pray without ceasing' (1 Th 5:17). Can we learn anything from social media about how to be constantly aware of a gracious Presence even while being present to others in a way that allows for the divine co-presence to permeate all other relationships and fill them with unexpected grace?

In recent decades, Christian theology has refocused its attention on the significance of the claim that the God of Christian faith is triune and not simply monotheistic. Contemporary Christian theologians disagree, of course, on how best to restate the doctrine of the Trinity for our time. But nearly everyone agrees that in Western Christian theological circles there has been a recent turn towards what is often called the 'social Trinity', a shift generally associated with the work of Jürgen Moltmann. Critics of this turn to the social Trinity as well as its advocates agree that the so-called 'Persons' of the Trinity are not 'persons' in the modern sense. They are not three individual centres of autonomy and rationality, as the humanism of the modern Western Enlightenment defines human persons. Each Trinitarian 'Person', classically identified as 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit', is equally and fully the one God, defined in three distinctive identities, never as three beings but as a unity in threefold relationship. What distinguishes them from each other is the relationship of each one with the others.

In the long history of the Christian theological development of the idea of a triune God, theology has come to understand the meaning of 'person' or individual 'identity' in ways that are directly applicable to today's conversation about online identity. The idea that individual persons are defined by relationships is central to Trinitarian theology, whether it is expressed by the notion of the three hypostases in the thought of the Cappadocians or the person as 'subsistent relation' in Augustine's theology. In either case, the identity of each divine 'Person' is established and defined relationally.

What unites advocates and critics of the 'social Trinity' is their shared insistence that monotheism, strictly speaking, is not an option for Christian theology. Nearly all agree, too, that Christian theology should take its view of the human person not from Enlightenment humanism but from the Trinitarian understanding of personal identity as relationally defined. Furthermore, nearly all Christian Trinitarian theologians agree that we human beings are created for the kind of salvation that ultimately results in our sharing or living in the communion of the triune God. This claim is now seen as central to mainstream Christianity:

> The triune God has revealed his plan to share the communion of Trinitarian life with persons created in his image. Indeed, it is for the sake of this Trinitarian communion that human persons are created in the divine image. (International Theological Commission 2004, para 25)

This statement grounds its claim in the idea that human beings are created in the image of God.

One thing this means is that individual human personal identities, like the distinctive identities of the three divine Persons, are defined relationally or socially, a view that stands in sharp contrast with the humanism of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on the autonomous self. Human persons are socially defined in their specific identities by their relationship with other human persons. In addition, human persons are also defined by their relationship with God, a relationship that in the end is far more important than any human-to-human bond. In Christian theology, there is a twofold relationality that defines individual human personal identity.

We are defined by relationships with others and by our relationship with God. This is the theological ground on which Christianity engages the theological significance of social media.

Over the centuries and with renewed interest today, many Christians place icons in front of themselves in the home and in their places of worship. Depicting Christ, Mary, angels or saints, these icons keep watch over us, not so much as pictures that we look at but as faces in whose gaze we live. We see them and they see us in mutual and reciprocal watchfulness. Icons are not objects of art but subjects who live with us in order to be portals or openings through time and space to divinity and eternity.

Today, of course, the word 'icon' is most commonly associated with the little images on touch screens, usually buttons we click to open an app, which may of course be watching us even before we open it. More directly comparable to traditional religious icons, however, are today's selfies. These images of ourselves and our friends pop up endlessly on our screens, making others present to us even when they are far away or even when they are not wanted.

When entering an Orthodox church, one is struck immediately by the presence of icons, most notably those on the iconostasis, a screen on which icons are arranged in a hierarchy of theological significance. Viewed one way, the iconostasis is a wall that separates the space where worshipers stand from the holiest space or 'sanctuary'. But understood theologically, the iconostasis unites the people with the holy, linking earth with heaven, creation with Creator. The iconostasis functions more like a window than a wall, translucent in its power to connect the persons who worship with the Persons of the Holy Trinity. If selfies are today's icons, perhaps the Facebook Timeline, formerly called the Facebook 'Wall', is the new social media iconostasis, the screen on which selfies and other images and messages are displayed, offering a window through which to see social connections. If the relationships we have in social media completely replace our sense of relationship with the divine, the loss will be great indeed. Perhaps, however, we can learn from the new world of social media how to experience, understand and value the human relationship with the divine.

In the end, theology's concern about social media is not primarily to criticise it or to add its own weak echo to the growing wave of complaints about companies like Facebook. Of course, everyone should be aware of the corporate structure and ideological context in which social media platforms are created. Being savvy about the misuse of personal information, its manipulation by politically motivated hackers or the ubiquity of stealthy socialbots are all part of what it means to be wide awake to the powers that shape us. We need to understand the new social world in which individuals promote and hone their personal identities.

Theology's main concern, however, is not with these general problems. Its focus is on two things. Firstly, how do the social media of our age affect the way in which people engage each other, thereby contributing to the construction of our personal identities as individuals? Secondly, how does the dynamic of personal identity formation in the context of social media affect our sense of a relationship with God? Does an awareness of a relationship with God simply disappear from the scope of our awareness, leaving only our consciousness of our horizontal relationships so constantly mediated by technology? In an age when social media use tends to make people constantly aware of their human social connections, is it possible to maintain an awareness of a divine social connection, perhaps even using what we learn about social media to assist our understanding of our relationship with God?

The human relationship with God is defined by grace, healing and transformative blessing in Jesus Christ. It is upon Jesus that the divine blessing is pronounced. In the account of the baptism of Jesus in Mark 1, a voice declares: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Mk 1:11). Then at the event usually called the 'transfiguration', Mark 9 says this: 'Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"' (Mk 9:7). While Christ's relationship with the God who speaks here is a unique relationship, it is one into which all are invited to share, incorporated into the communion of the triune life by being made one with Christ and all that he has.

What is it that Jesus says to his 'followers'? In a chapter all about 'abiding' in an organic social connection with God just as branches do in a vine, Jesus says this: 'I have called you friends' (Jn 15:15). The divine blessing that is first spoken uniquely to Jesus Christ at his baptism and transfiguration is spoken to each person in Christ. Each one receives God's gracious affirmation as 'beloved', not just 'friended' as on Facebook but beloved and befriended through God's unmerited grace. God's pronunciation that we are beloved defines our identity and in a very real way completes its creation, as God's first and last and eternal word for each of us.

Being God's beloved transforms or transfigures each individual human person in Christ. One way to think about

this is to contrast God's declaration that we are 'beloved' with the relationships we experience in social media. Contrast for a moment what it is like to hear God's pronunciation, 'You are my Beloved', with this description of online relationships. In a transcript of an interview discussing personal interactions in MySpace, a researcher asks a young volunteer: 'How important are your MySpace friends' opinions of your page, photos, etc.?' The volunteer responds (Brown & Thomas 2014):

> Hmm . . . it depends on who they are. Because if my Girlfriend were to tell me that something on my page was stupid or bad then i'd take it off. But if like some girl that i have only known for a month goes and says 'Hey that's really lame' then i'd just delete her instead of deleting whatever it was off my page. Because my page is like a part of me like a little window into my mind and if someone doesnt like it then that means they dont like what i represent and i am totally not the kind of person who cares what others think. Motto: You dont like me, then you can go away. (p. 966)

There is an obvious contrast between this social media experience and God's declaration that we are 'beloved'. The point, however, is not that there is a difference between the two, but that the contrast reveals a similarity.

Relationships matter because they define us. If we today can learn from our human-to-human experiences in the technological spaces of social media, perhaps we can comprehend at a deeper level the meaning of an identity-defining relationship with God. In social media, many today take up the task of presenting, redefining and narrating the self that they are becoming in and through these technological platforms. If our relationship with God is one that transforms and transfigures, can we take up the task of narrating our own transfiguration with at least as much care as we represent and narrate ourselves on the 'timelines' of social media? More than Google or Facebook or anything else in all creation, God befriends and blesses us not to commodify us but to glorify us.

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Competing interests

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