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How Communication Technologies Remold the Religion/Human Rights Divide
Online Synergies for a Global Democratic Space

Abstract
Human rights, when understood and applied interculturally, offer an interface for translating and mediating values across global diversities. Religions have long done the same, attempting to provide meaning that bridges human-to-human as well as human-to-divine relationships through a universalist ethos. Still, the two are often pitted against each other with religions accused of a particularism that only human rights with its global aspirations can overcome. At the same time, the alleged universality of human rights has also been often criticized for passing off as universal a limited set of values with, paradoxically, Christian European origins. Meanwhile, and also as a result of the Covid-19 global pandemic, technology is mediating our daily experiences around the world now more than ever. Critics argue that this shift is 'dehumanizing' and risks alienating people and exacerbating conflicts among diverse groups. I will argue that neither the contrast between human rights and religion nor the supposed affective limitations and negative effects of technology are accurate. Instead, religions contain universalist resources that could be crucial to investing human rights with the affective power to make them meaningful interfaces. Human rights frameworks drained of their meaning by submersion in abstractness could be revitalized by universalistic attitudes toward space and affect. Online technologies, similarly, do not entirely obstruct our capacities for empathy but instead have the power to bridge otherwise faraway realities in potentially more productive ways than could occur 'face-to-face.' A supporting analysis of empathy and emotions online will undergird this claim. Understanding the potential synergies among human rights, religions, and technologies, viewed anthropologically, could help to pave the way for new avenues of interaction and engagement with real social effects. Indeed, such an approach holds the potential to help move the needle on the overwhelming disparities brought on and exacerbated by capital-driven globalization. Without this effort, there can be no hope for the only kind of democracy left to develop: global democracy.

Keywords: Religions, technology, human rights, democracy, empathy.

1. Human Rights v. Religions

There is a long-standing contrast within academic and political schools of thought between religion and human rights. Religions, it is argued, are particularistic, communal in a tribal sense, judgmental, and dogmatic. They map out just conduct but demand that followers demonstrate exclusive loyalty. Religions draw a line between who is in and who is out, typically declaring dramatic consequences for those on either side. Indeed, these days religions often appear in headlines when the subject matter is related to extremist terrorism. For many, their dogma is associated with a pre-Enlightenment era of darkness in which they were the replacement and consolation for human scientific ignorance. The conflation of institutional religion and lived religion or religious praxis understood broadly, contributes

to misunderstandings of religions' long histories, above and beyond the conduct of churches. Human rights, by contrast, are differentiated by their universalist scope, their unifying aims, and their presumed objectivity insofar as the only criteria for inclusion is being human. The term seeks to rope together values—and the subsequent positions they imply—that address how all humans should be treated. Human rights declarations try to be both compass and map, pointing the way towards just conduct that is considered equitable for all people. Concepts such as human dignity seek to ground the legitimacy of human rights in their 'inherent nature.' Despite these altruistic intentions, the term 'human rights' has become, for a variety of reasons, an abstraction: distant, representational, its meaning hollowed out by political and institutional use. At the same time, the long-predicted evaporation of religion as an automatic consequence of the ongoing rollout of modernity has failed to take place as expected.[1] However sectarian and vexatious to modern secular notions of proper human comportment they may be, religions are, generally speaking, thriving. Why? Where have these understandings of religion and human rights gone wrong?

A common argument in support of the idea of human rights as secular and therefore distinct from religion is that they emerged from the spirit of the French Revolution, viewed as a political expression of the ideas of the French Enlightenment [2]. Even a brief glance at French political history, however, complicates this view. While the spirit of both the Enlightenment and the Revolution may have been self-defined as anti-religious, it is more accurately understood as anticlerical, opposed first and foremost to the political power of the Catholic church and the institutional entwinement of church and state. Ideologically, both the Enlightenment and the Revolution had roots in Christian ideals of individuality, sincerity, and love of neighbor (or compassion).[3] Human rights have famously been called the religion of modernity[4] and yet modernity itself is not nearly the aseptically secular separated state of affairs that its defenders often assume. Any view of the varieties of secularism[5] extant today that fails to acknowledge the profound entanglement of religious and secular strivings and their material consequences for societies and states from past to present is, at best, myopic. We can think of secularization as a spirited but unfinished historical process[6] which was 'originally' motivated by a desire to create new models of societal organization that privileged individual rights and liberties and attempted to redistribute power away from religious institutions toward civil-political ones. Unfortunately for those keen on a 'clean break,' the interwoven cultural threads between religion and state are plainly visible throughout modern secular societies, not least in the legal institutions of states which are sustained almost entirely by concepts of Christian origin (legal categories such as equity,

[1] There is, of course, an enormous literature on this topic. Among the more commented moments in the history of secularization scholarship is sociologist Peter Berger's famous pronouncement of the death of religion as part of a broadly academically supported 'secularization theory.' He argued that religion would fade substantially in importance as an inevitable consequence of modernity (Berger, 1967), and indeed was quoted in the New York Times (and endlessly cited) for stating that by the twenty-first century, religious believers were likely to be found only in small 'enclaves and pockets', 'huddled together' to resist a world-wide secular culture. Subsequently, he retracted this claim and argued instead for the undeniable 'resurgence of religion' and wrote that "literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled 'secularization theory' is essentially mistaken" (Berger, 1996).
[2] Joas (2013), 4.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Wiesel (1999).
[5] In an ever-expanding literature, see Warner et al, (2010).
[6] Many authors have written about the historical process of secularization, but one succinct central point of reference is Casanova (2009). See also Berger (1999).

obligation, good faith, ownership and property rights, guilt and innocence in the commitment of crimes, and endlessly so on)[7]. Historical and cultural ways of worldmaking can never simply step aside for new ones, but instead remain present, even when they are pushed behind curtains. Western human rights have been defined by a conceptual division of public and private in which religion is (and can be) relegated to the private sphere (an idea sustained by Catholicism but fundamental to Protestantism), and humans, a category with its own fluctuations of inclusion and exclusion, rule over all other living beings, an idea with clear origins in the Genesis of the Bible. These ideas are said to be universal and yet their Christian origins are easily traceable.

It is not only the stickiness of religious roots that contaminate historical and current conceptions of human rights, however, but also the philosophical problem of authority. While human rights in the modern age can be said to have gained political dominance, this is not the same as ethical authority.[8] A meaningful ethical authority for a universal application of human rights would demand universal scope and atemporal agreement among all, something that has never yet come into existence and which is fundamentally illogical given the wild diversity of human experience. Even the leaders who propelled human rights to the global stage with the formation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 were aware that any sincere accordance of values could slip out from under international aspirations for global human rights, and that this was perhaps even necessary for their success.[9] Though foundational documents such as the American Declaration of Independence proclaim that the 'inalienable' rights of humans are 'self-evident,' much ink has been spilled debating both these terms and the neat side-stepping of any definition of such terms, particularly given the entire categories of humans (women, children, non-landowners) who have been excluded from these rights.[10] Self-evidence and inalienability would seem to imply an inevitability, a state of affairs in which no person could be denied their rights. History is, however, replete with genocide, abuse, and inequities at every level, making the idea of inviolable rights feel less than genuine. There are political critiques[11], feminist

[7] I have written about this extensively following the oeuvre of Mario Ricca. See, indicatively, Vazquez (2019), Ricca (2008) and references therein.
[8] Dembour (2006), 1.
[9] Philosopher Jacques Maritain has been quoted repeatedly for having said, "Yes, we agree about the rights but on the condition no one asks us why." Cited in Ackerly (2017), 135, but also available at Maritain (1949).
[10] Hunt (2007), 15-25.
[11] In a mighty literature, see Baxi (2002/2008), Sarat and Kearns (2009), Mutua (2002), Perugini & Gordon (2015),

critiques[12], racial critiques[13], cultural critiques[14], 'occidentalist'[15] critiques, and even metaphysical critiques of the extensive limitations of human rights propositions and their inability to arrive at any kind of true universalism.[16] Many of these contrasts are also derived from the conflation of human rights ideals and implementations; the synergy between anthropologically Christian rooted conceptions of human rights and the legal systems charged with supporting them have often yielded ethnocentric unbalanced results.[17] Human rights, then, can be criticized for being neither cleanly distinct from religious understandings of human experience nor universally present or applicable across time and space. These frictions contribute to their perceived hollowness. As Dembour eloquently summarizes:

> The proposition that human rights exist irrespective of social recognition (affecting *all* human beings in *all* human societies across time and space) does not make sense. It suggests that human rights are and have always been somewhere out there – but where? And why?[18]

There is still another aspect that contributes to the hollowing out of the impact of human rights: lack of emotional connection. Human rights, after all, are "not just a doctrine formulated in documents; they rest on a disposition toward other people, a set of convictions about what people are like and how they know right and wrong in the secular world."[19] They depend on people caring about each other enough to consider yielding when priorities clash, enough to share resources, enough to empathize with others. While countless volumes have been written on the subject of empathy and I will analyze the concept in more depth further on, I will begin by positing that empathy is something religions are good at and human rights not so good at. Human rights require people to see each other as alike in order to foster empathy, and yet the internalization of the idea that the other is like me, as important as me, as deserving as me, is not an easy conviction to advance without some kind of values scaffolding that might reassure and contain. Human rights by definition must contend with the vast diversity of *humanity*, and yet find recognition and respect for every Other. The constant presence of difference, morphological, cognitive, affective, and so on, makes this a challenge which formal declarations are

[12] Had the UDHR been universally accepted as addressing the needs of all humans, there may not have been the need for The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly, and described as an international bill of rights for women. For a feminist critique of the universalistic claims of human rights, see Mullally (2006).

[13] There is a prodigious literature in this regard, but one recent compelling addition is offered by Zakiyya Iman Jackson who argues that historically, efforts to protect humans have accommodated racist agendas by 'animalizing' black humans. The entanglement of 'black' and 'animal' makes it impossible to rescue a traditional approach to the concept of human: "Consequently, a new epistemology and transformative approach to being is needed rather than the extension of human recognition under the state's normative conception." Jackson (2020), 83.

[14] Again, there is an enormous literature of critiques of human rights, but for a culturally driven analysis, one could begin with the excellent collection edited by An-na'im (1992). For specific analysis of human rights in Asia, see Bruun and Jacobsen (2000), Bell (2000), and de Bary (1998) and for 'Global South' critiques see the entire oeuvre of de Sousa Santos, but indicatively (2020/2002). For human rights analysis regarding Islam and the Arab world, see Mayer (2018/1999) and Chase (2006), and for a Hinduist perspective see Sharma (2005).

[15] See Note 11.

[16] Dembour (2006), 4.

[17] See Ricca (2016) and references therein. For a compelling recent case study concerning 'human shields,' see Perugini & Gordon (2020).

[18] Dembour (2006), 3.

[19] Hunt (2007), 27.

hard-pressed to secure. Nevertheless, as has been argued from a range of perspectives, human rights frameworks are used to undertake societal work that we may not be able to do without. Is there an alternative way to protect and promote human flourishing without some form of human rights?

Religions[20], for their part, are characteristically secure about the necessity of their existence. While human rights are criticized for promoting a non-universal universalism, religions are instead criticized for their propensity to particularize, creating in-groups and out-groups and making dramatic claims about the futures of said groups. Religions are totalizing, concerned as they are with both life on Earth as well as the afterlife thus raising the stakes for their claims. Partly for these reasons, much was made in the mid to late twentieth century about an impending expiration date for the societal relevance of religion[21]. As the exponential development of science and technology overwhelmed the social fabric of Western societies and the individualistic bent of ever-more-powerful capitalistic practices spread across the globe, it was increasingly thought that there would be no place left for 'tribal' and 'communal' religion with its transcendental (read: superstitious) views. Nevertheless, about the only quantitative statistic that has upheld the idea of a decline in religion is the rate of church attendance among Christians and Jews in the West.[22] Nuanced sociological and theological assessments describe a gradual but pervasive softening of 'religious commitments' that has accompanied a shift towards choosing one's own religion in Western societies,[23] but the predicted disappearance of religion in modern life simply has not come to pass. Evangelical Christianity and Islam have grown in the modern era[24], and perhaps more importantly, or at least with greater global impact, religiously rooted world views and practices have continued to structure legal and political systems in the West, in some cases exporting these views alongside other means of modernization intrinsic to globalization. Explanations for these trends are of course dependent on their differing developments within diverse societies. Some propose that the growth of religions constitutes a 'backlash' stemming from an exaggerated emphasis on individuality that has fractured families and communities and led to growing feelings of alienation and isolation. Others have argued that the human desire for ways to understand and manage the inexplicable aspects of life have always demanded an engagement with the transcendental that simply cannot be

[20] I use the general term so as to engage an anthropological rather than denominational view of religions. Still, for the purposes of this argument I limit the term to include the Abrahamic religions as lived in the modern West.

[21] See Note 1.

[22] This is, of course, a simplification. Sociologist of religion Grace Davie has written extensively on how to assess religion in modern practice with specific regard to Europe and England most recently in Davie (2017). Warner (2010) also provides a useful summary.

[23] In a broad and complex literature, one of the central works to which many scholars of religion and secularism turn is Taylor (2011). The interdisciplinary response to his magnum opus is also illuminating (Warner et al 2010).

[24] Berger's much publicized recantation of secularization theory (see Note 1) in which he said the world was "as furiously religious as it ever was" (later strengthened in his volume dedicated to the subject Berger (1999)),
coincided with a surge of studies by scholars from a range of fields trying to understand what was taking place with religions and modern societies. The French political scientist Gilles Kepel wrote provocatively of the "revenge of God," Keppel (1994), and interdisciplinary volumes addressed in a newly cognizant way the intersections between global political events and their concomitant migrations, the growing visibility to the West of the social realities of the rest of the world, and the narrowness of prior conceptions of religious phenomena. Interesting collections in this vein include Beyer and Beaman (2007) and the recent volume by Körs et al (2020). For a recent journalistic review of the rise of Evangelical Christianity with statistics, see Belkäid and Oualalou (2020). For a statistical perspective on the rise of Islam, see the Pew Research Center analysis available at: https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/06/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group/#:~:text=While%20the%20world's%20population%20is,24.1%25%20of%20the%20global%20population.

extinguished no matter how far science advances. Religion, from this point of view, never left it just changed shape. Still others argue that political forces are responsible for fueling religions' role in some societies, with historical or power-driven motives. Regardless of the argument sustained, the presence of religion, particularly when understood anthropologically rather than merely institutionally, is alive and well.

Whereas human rights have been widely criticized for claiming a universalism they cannot actually support, religions nearly always conceive of themselves as universal. From the idea of Christendom to that of Ummah, religions (when viewed theologically rather than politically) take an expansive view of humankind which is unconcerned with national borders or even biological borders insofar as life on Earth and the afterlife are both central concerns. Indeed, religious views find themselves in contrast with so-called secular views precisely at the moment of incommensurability between a belief in transcendence and a belief in unrelenting human immanence. The meaning of life at its conception and life at its end are radically altered by the view sustained. Those who argue that religious freedom, for example, could be subsumed by a more comprehensive understanding of human freedom[25] are countered by those who instead maintain[26] that the very nub of religious belief is its inability to be contained by other kinds of freedom frameworks. While supporting a more generalized idea of freedom may protect some aspects of equality, it can never leave the space necessary for actual freedom which can never be specified in advance. In this view, freedom is precisely the ability to decide for oneself what freedom is. Human rights frameworks have historically excluded some categories of people (women, children, slaves), but religions tend towards inclusion insofar as all are considered to be 'children of god' or 'brothers and sisters in faith,' etc. This of course does not negate the historical moments in which religious institutions have resisted particular movements (including the very development of modern human rights) when a threat to the church's authority or position was perceived. The Catholic church, for example, famously rejected human rights frameworks in the first instance, condemning them as a form of liberal individualism, a position it went on to abandon.[27] These, however, are cases of institutional religion at work, and do not adequately encompass the historical-philosophical view even of Catholicism which is founded on notions of brotherhood, community and solidarity. Indeed, whereas secular logics relegate religion to the private sphere, as something individual and containable, religious approaches are deeply focused on community, with religious ideas permeating many aspects of daily life (from habits of dress to cuisine and so on). It is perhaps turning to empathy and the affective resources of religion, however, that brings the greatest contrasts with human rights to the surface.

Religions are masterful when it comes to working with the emotions. From the poetry of the language of foundational texts to the storytelling used to communicate moral ethical positions to the rites and rituals that invoke all of the senses, religions know how to move people. This is surely because religions are centered around some of the most fundamental questions of life: why are we here? How should we live? What happens when we die? Religions' concerns are everyone's concerns, and they are of significant emotional importance. Even now in the modern West where disdain for religion is part of the mainstream, most people turn to religious institutions at the key milestone life moments: birth,

[25] Fallers-Sullivan (2005).
[26] Ferrari (2016).
[27] This subject has been treated in a variety of ways over years of scholarship, but a succinct historical account is offered by Joas (2013) 9-36.

marriage and death. Church weddings and cemeteries run by churches are the norm in most Western societies. This circumstance is surely due in part to the fact that religions are rich with concepts like grace, charity, gratitude, fraternity, forgiveness, faith, penance, duty, and so on which are so important to managing human lives that they are tightly woven into even the most secular societies. Religions do not expect us to be rational automatons distributing our attention and care equally. Instead, they recognize us for the flawed, emotive, biased, irrational creatures that we are, and this perspective is deeply compelling to many. Religions do not shy away from mystery. They leave room for the unknown. Secular science positions itself as potentially having the answers to everything (if not today, then tomorrow), but it cannot deliver on this promise. It has no answer for existential questions that ask why. Religions, on the other hand, embrace unknowability and call it divine. Is it any wonder interest in religion persists? The necessity of faith within religions leads inexorably to the most radical concept of freedom: the freedom to determine what freedom is. Following in this vein, religious approaches contain at least the potential to be even more revolutionary and inclusive than secular logics.

The question I pose here as a starting point for a more pointed discussion is whether it serves us to continue to view religion as being diametrically opposed to human rights. Insofar as both human rights and religions are concerned with comprehensive human flourishing, it seems obvious to consider how they might benefit one from the other rather than remaining in competition. What could human rights learn about motivating empathy from religions? How might religious know-how contribute to community building that fosters the care necessary for successful implementations and protections of human rights?[28] How might human rights frameworks help prevent religions from descending into partisan extremist conflicts? These are big questions and have been asked many times before. However, I believe that this particular cultural moment presents an opportunity to consider these issues with the goal of obtaining practical, real world effects. There is a special congruence of events that involve global human health and technology that urge us to consider a rethinking of religion and human rights for the benefit of what is becoming, at last, a truly global community, not only economically but socially.

2. Daily human life during this global moment: a great leveling

March 2021 marked one year since the undeniable moment of international spread of the Covid-19 virus. Before the pandemic, the modern ethos held certain ideas (presented in no particular order) to be self-evident: science is the all-powerful modern deity, humans have fulfilled the Christian prophecy of holding total dominion over the earth and all of its creatures, technology will make us better humans, religion belongs to pre-modernity, nation states control territory and therefore determine the shape of human lives. Then came the Covid-19 virus, and from January 2020 to March 2021, it ended the lives of 2.8 million people across the globe and radically transformed our daily habits of living, including the stimulation of a massive movement to online services. Dying in masses of plague feels as if it is in direct contrast with flocking in masses to the use of technology. And yet this is the paradox of the current historical moment.

If you are reading this, chances are you have experienced life as a digital head, occupying a small square in an online videoconference on one or several platforms. We are contained by boxes, identical

[28] For a non-academic but nevertheless charming and thorough exploration of these questions see de Botton (2012).

in size, backgrounds either neutralized by technology or at least limited to what the tiny camera can capture behind a prominent talking head. When cameras are on, we see each other closely, sometimes more so than in the 'in person' meetings of the past. Faces are front and center, unaffected by where each person is sitting, floating on their checkerboard squares in neat lines and rows. In the online classroom, the professor's 'box' is exactly the same as those of the students. In the online meeting, the managing director's 'box' is distinguishable only by the name, in tiny script at the bottom. We are all at home, we are all encased, we are often silent and out of sight.

Not only workplaces but entertainment channels are affected. How strange to see late-night television talk-show hosts at home, filmed by a spouse, their children climbing on top of them. People placed high on social or political hierarchies are increasingly accessible, dressed in pajamas, unlit and unedited. In every context, pets bark and meow, doorbells ring, wifi connections wobble, microphones accidentally left on capture side phone calls and phrases yelled across living rooms; human disarray is rampant. Differences in visual (economic) backgrounds are less evident when only a few square feet are visible. The divisive tendencies of geography are softened. Classes and meetings around the world straddle thousands of miles unobtrusively. Even time zone distinctions are not preventing people from meeting in evermore international conglomerations. Various equalizations, in limited and admittedly odd ways, are taking place. One box, one head. One person, one vote? At the very least, a softening of comportment is seeping into our daily interactions.

Our relationship with technology is increasingly taking the form of a kind of revolution, in the etymological sense, in which a pyramid is being turned upside down; the majority are using technological instruments and making the technology serve their needs, bottom-up, upending traditional hierarchies. As these behaviors impact and change the technologies in use, people are in turn changed by the technologies. The pandemic has taught us, through necessity, that we can reinvent our social habits by relying on technically supported networks and digital experiences. To take one small example, some have been horrified by the restrictions prohibiting funerals, yes, but still others have been deeply moved by the possibilities for shared grieving online. Just as some bemoaned the terrible isolation of being stuck at home, others invented online cocktail parties, online book clubs and more. Family interactions have in many cases changed dramatically, with far flung families and friends instituting regularly scheduled video conferences, something that simply was not so common before the pandemic. Many report having more contact with family during the lock-downs than before. This experience in intensely digital life is changing the way we relate to one another. Does it give more freedom? What is its ultimate potential for chipping away at our hierarchies? Could it give new voice—alongside new access—to the previously silenced? What are the larger effects on our human experience? On our human desires? On our human rights?

The above-described work landscape may appear limited in scope, seeming to describe only Western white-collar workers. But the dramatic increase in the digitalization of daily life is, in fact, global. Consider these statistics[29]: the total number of internet users around the world grew by 321 million from October 2019 to October 2020 – more than 875,000 new users each day; more than 180

[29] As reported by Datareportal, available here:
datareportal.com/global-digital
overview#:~:text=Roughly%204.66%20billion%20people%20around,twelve%20months%20to%20October%202020

million people started to use social media between July and September 2020, equating to growth of almost 2 million new users every day; there are 4.14 billion social media users in the world today – more than half of the world's total population. In fact, more people around the world now use social media than do not use it. Furthermore, there is evidence that users largely prefer the multinational media platforms (Facebook, Instagram) over smaller more localized competitors. The long-touted claims regarding the shrinking of the world, the globalization of economies, the advent of a 'global village,' would appear to finally be fully taking place. Not only is the growth in the number of users exponential, the time spent online is also striking: the average global internet user spends almost 7 hours online each day. It would seem that Moore's law, touted rather promiscuously in the past, is nevertheless holding true for human behavior as well as technological advancement: rates of change are exponential. Across languages and class lines, national borders and landscapes, *everyone is spending their days online*.

Technology has pushed wide open a dialogue door on a trans-local dimension that has rich communicative capacities and engenders a co-spatialization of experience. But of course, the cause behind this transformation must first and foremost be recognized: an international pandemic. A virus, seemingly sprouted in China and rapidly exported to Italy, has had very little trouble travelling to every corner of the globe within weeks. The Covid-19 virus is itself a great leveler, moving across borders and demographics with ease and forcing everyone to confront the simple truth that what happens *over there* has dramatic and nearly immediate consequences for what happens *here*. New virus variants on one continent mean new social regulations on another. Changes in behavior resulting from regulations here will instantly affect economies and daily lives there. Vaccines are simultaneously developed in different locales and the battle for access to them is immediate and ferociously international. Perhaps obvious and yet important: news updates regarding a global pandemic are necessarily global. Lest we momentarily lose sight of this fact, there are new virus variants to remind us, popping up in one country and provoking new lockdowns thousands of miles away.

Perhaps more than ever before, there is a unification occurring, a sharing of experience, on an international level as well as in our daily lives, a distinction that would appear to be increasingly fragile. Despite great differences in the ways in which nation states address healthcare for their populations, all states are faced with the same virus, which at the time of this writing is responsible for more than 3 million deaths worldwide. Now that we are a faced a with an inescapably global human crisis, what is the impact on our human rights policies and institutions? Could all of this change how we think of human rights? Mustn't it? Periodic weather disasters, mass immigration to Europe, the violence of extremist religious groups in Nigeria, political sovereignty struggles in Hong Kong, the US Black Lives Matter movement, these are just a few examples of events that have turned a global spotlight onto human rights issues. But the Covid-19 pandemic is unique in its nearly immediate and lasting global impact not only on human health and survival, but on human behavior around the world. The mass shift to online work and life as described above is unprecedented. How does this digitalization of our daily lives influence our ways of relating to each other? Apart from the lives lost, have the societal changes prompted by the global pandemic netted progress or setbacks to human flourishing? Are critics correct in their claims, for example, that diminished 'face-to-face' contact leads to a lack of empathy?

And while the historical importance of human rights is undeniable, they are certainly not top of mind for a great number of people, living their frenetic and wildly diverse lives. Human rights are elsewhere, protecting, perhaps, girls in Afghanistan or children in the Congo. Nevertheless, the global pandemic has brought human rights into the spotlight. In April, 2020 the World Health Organization

declared that "human rights frameworks provide a crucial structure that can strengthen the effectiveness of global efforts to address the pandemic," and that "All countries must strike a fine balance between protecting health, minimizing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights." The Council of Europe proclaims on its homepage, "Human rights should guide health choices!" Further in the text, the claim is made that European governance is, "*Embedding human rights* in the development of technologies which have an application in the field of biomedicine" (emphasis mine). That human rights and health technologies are relentlessly and inescapably intertwined is another of the paradoxes of this cultural moment. But perhaps this is to be expected. After all, it has been endlessly argued that human rights have taken the place of religion in serving as a moral compass and map for human behavior. Are human rights, on their own, enough to answer our biomedical conundrums? Are they capable of addressing the new ways humans engage with each other changing, as I have described, with breathtaking speed? How are religions responding to this crisis?

I have written about this very topic in more depth elsewhere[30], but the pattern of behavior I observed continues now in 2021. While voices in the secular press urge people to recognize that in a global pandemic, the events in one country will have dramatic and nearly immediate consequences in others, it is an insistence that is required because it is not shared by the majority. On April 26, 2021, *The Atlantic* published an article titled, "Why the World Should Worry About India,"[31] currently undergoing a dramatic spike in Covid-19 cases as well as an outbreak of new virus strains (already spread to at least 10 other countries) and a shortage of vaccines. As the article points out, not only are these developments problematic for India, but they also impact the rest of the world, since India is responsible for 60% of the world's vaccine supply. The journalist urges Americans not to be complacent, to see the connections between the geographically distant realities.

Meanwhile, on April 27, 2021, 145 religious leaders (including Catholic and Anglican authorities as well as the Dalai Lama) published a statement[32] underscoring the pressing need for global vaccine production to be urgently and massively ramped up, and for countries of the global north to release their excess doses for use in the underserved south. The call comes as part of action from the People's Vaccine Alliance, a coalition of organizations and activists campaigning for a 'people's vaccine' for Covid-19 and advocating shared knowledge freely available to all. Religious voices are seldom characterized as reasonable or rational in mainstream media and are instead characterized as advocating exclusively for 'their own.' Yet in this instance, they are not the ones that need convincing that the global south matters. The religious leaders state:

> The Covid crisis has reminded us all of our interdependence, and of our responsibilities to care for one another. We can each only be well, when all of us are well. If one part of the world is left to suffer the pandemic, all parts of the world will be put at ever-increasing risk. [...]
> The access of people to life-saving Covid-19 vaccines cannot be dependent on people's wealth, status, or nationality. We cannot abdicate our responsibilities to our brothers and sisters by imagining that the market

[30] Vazquez (2020b)

[31] https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/04/india-covid-19-crisis/618691/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=atlantic-daily-newsletter&utm_content=20210426&silverid=%25%25RECIPIENT_ID%25%25&utm_term=The%20Atlantic%20Daily

[32] https://reliefweb.int/report/world/world-religious-leaders-call-massive-increases-production-covid-vaccines-and-end

> can be left to resolve the crisis, or pretend to ourselves that our country has no obligation to people in their country. Every person is precious. We all have a moral obligation to reach everyone. [...]
> As religious leaders, we join our voices to the call for vaccines that are made available to all people as a global common good – a People's Vaccine. This is the only way to end the pandemic.

By contrast, the latest press release from the World Health Organization (April 26, 2021)[33] describes continuing risks to children worldwide as a result of healthcare systems compromised by their Covid-19 response; it highlights "the urgent need for a renewed global commitment to improve vaccination access and uptake" referring not just to Covid-19 but to vaccinations generally. To be sure, they are advocating "fair access for all countries" to vaccines, but there is no direct or specific appeal beyond recommendation phrases directed at all countries such as "increase investments" and "ensure supply." As if echoing Maritain, they advocate fair access to vaccines as long as no one asks why or what that might actually entail.

These are, of course, hand-picked examples to support a point. But the universalistic attitude of religions needs little elaboration. Following a strain of scholarship that takes an anthropological view of religious practice, I support the view that religious attitudes can open up cognitive possibilities with specific synergies with our technology-driven modern lives. From a practical perspective, religions have long been adept at using new technologies to further their purposes from the more benign (e.g., lighting online 'candles' for the dead) to the more sinister (e.g., recruiting members for participation in extremist activities). The Abrahamic religions have all made ample use of technology from at least the late 20th century, using cassette tapes to spread sermons across religious diasporas, television to exponentially grow evangelical communities, websites to facilitate access to scripture, and every kind of media to open channels of communication with religious leaders and generally facilitate as many aspects of religious practice as possible. A study of this phenomenon within Islam, titled appropriately IMuslims[34], offers descriptions of apps that find East on mobile phones to facilitate prayer in the direction of Mecca, apps that assist believers to participate in *hajj* (in some cases referred to as 'armchair pilgrims') providing everything from travel planning to virtual pilgrimages that recreate the experience through multimedia, countless ways of accessing prayer times, holiday information, and more. One central website, IslamiCity, even features interreligious resources including a video of a Jewish rabbi titled, "IslamiCity: My Go-to Resource on Islam & Muslims!" and another entitled, "Reading the Qur'an as a Quaker." The subject headings on this Muslim portal are instructive: 'Faith, Society, Values, Science, World,' followed of course by 'Donate'; these site sections demonstrate the interconnectedness of religious beliefs within the lives of believers. A non-believer could think that the 'Faith' section would be enough to 'contain' a person's religion, but instead it visibly seeps into many if not all facets of life.

Resources for Christians include GodTube which offers Christian video content, Christian Mingle, a dating app, MyPraize, a social media aggregator that combines content from Facebook, Instagram, Pintrest and YouTube, and BibleHub, which is perhaps the most comprehensive of several bible study sites available online, offering more than 24 different fully-fledged tools for bible study including Greek, Hebrew and Apocrypha resources. An important Christian portal is FaithSocial, which refers to itself as "today's digital faith experience," and is divided into: Community, Resources,

[33] https://www.who.int/news/item/26-04-2021-immunization-services-begin-slow-recovery-from-covid-19-disruptions-though-millions-of-children-remain-at-risk-from-deadly-diseases-who-unicef-gavi
[34] Bunt (2009).

Faith Leaders, and Prayer Support. This last is described as an international Christian prayer network, stating, "It's more than social media; it's holy ground where you can request and offer prayers for friends, family, and the world in need of a touch from God. When you request prayer, a worldwide network of people dedicated to prayer is there for you. Relationships, depression, finances, health—you can pray for anything and tap into the power of God for everyday life."[35]

Jewish resources online are also abundant, covering dating apps (e.g., JDate), sites for studying the scriptures (Jewish Virtual Library), and a major Jewish portal site, Aish[36], which boasts spin-off sites in Hebrew, Spanish and French, live chat with Rabbis, a 24-hour live webcam from the Western Wall, and the Aish Academy, an "advanced learning site with courses in Hebrew Ulpan, personal development, Kosher, Jewish philosophy, Jewish history and more,"[37] just to name a few. The existence of Israel provides a unifying national foundation for many Jewish people in the global diaspora and this is reflected by the Israeli national newspaper Haaretz; it describes itself as "an independent daily newspaper with a broadly liberal outlook both on domestic issues and on international affairs,"[38] but beyond the news, its major subject areas include 'Jewish World' and 'Archeology,' the former of which features a large number of opinion pieces on global events with a Jewish connection. 70 Faces Media is a large North American media aggregator that owns several brands with significant online presence including the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA). The JTA is like the Associated Press or the Reuters news organization, but its mission is to gather and distribute news on "issues of Jewish interest and concern."[39] Another 70 Faces Media offering is the 'Jewniverse,' collecting "dispatches from Jewish culture, tradition, and history."[40]

Across the range of these offerings, we can see how religious needs and interests are not limited to the devotional practice of rites and rituals in sacred spaces, though these too are amply accommodated online; 'the religious' permeates every aspect of life for believers. Religions, then, have been very successful in making good use of technology over the last decades. One question worth considering is: why?

3. *Homo religiosus, Homo technologicus and empathy*

Religions, at their core, and even across their vast heterogeneity, redefine paradigms of subjectivity. Whether the belief system involves a concept of soul, reincarnation, afterlife, trinitarian existence, or other spiritual formations, religions have always sought to make meaning of human lives in all of their embodied and spiritual complexity.[41] Furthermore, they are unique in their totalizing impact which directs human lives not only at the macro level, informing core beliefs and values, but also at the micro

[35] https://www.faithsocial.com/#prayer-support
[36] https://www.aish.com/about/About_Aishcom.html?s=nb
[37] Ibid.
[38] https://www.haaretz.com/1.5349621
[39] https://www.jta.org/about-us
[40] https://www.jta.org/about-jewniverse
[41] The meaning of religion for believers has of course been studied and analyzed for centuries. Among the more seminal works of the twentieth century are James (1902), Otto (1958) and van der Leeuw (1963,1933). For a classic global history of religions by a renowned Italian scholar, see Pettazzoni (1967). For a more recent offering on the study of religion see Waardenburg (2017).

level, influencing specific behaviors with regard to dress, food, calendars and scheduling and more. Religions renew experience and cover daily life with different meanings that affect habits and actions both large and small. The term *Homo Religiosus* has been applied by at least one scholar[42] as a means of better distinguishing between the institutional view of 'Religions' and the 'religiosity' experienced and seen in people and their daily actions. *Homo Religiosus* is, "Latin for a religious person or personality, i.e., someone whose behavior and thought is motivated completely by religious ideas,"[43] and has been used by scholars of religion in different ways, emphasizing in every case, however, the connection between religiosity and personal views and ideals.[44] Religiosity, in this sense, is something that permeates and colors a person's way of negotiating their daily life. It is not only a set of doctrines or practices, but a worldview, a way of seeing, thinking, feeling, that cannot be constrained to a single categorical box.[45] The philosopher John Dewey objected to the term religion and was also opposed to the use of 'religious' as an adjective describing a certain quality of human experience precisely because he saw it as too broad to be limited to this term, proclaiming, "…it does not denote anything that can exist by itself or that can be organized into a particular or distinctive form of existence. It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object or every proposed end or ideal."[46] Again, while institutional religion can certainly be accused of exerting massive influence also for political reasons, I believe that the all-encompassing impact of religion on the individual level has more to do with the very nature of religious beliefs, for the domains they influence and in which they reside which are largely emotive and concerned with the inexplicable aspects of life. They take on existential questions and offer guidelines for how to make decisions. They acknowledge the complexities of being both thinking/feeling beings as well as embodied creatures subject to the limits of the flesh. They consider the deep human need for socialization and communities and offer rites and rituals that nurture these needs. They are inventive and expansive, and in their creativity, they acknowledge the practical and the mysterious in ways that are intriguing and ultimately satisfying for huge numbers of people. The political presence of religions can sometimes obscure the anthropological view, a view that takes into consideration the actual praxis of '*homo religiosus*.' As a means of taking such a view, I would like to offer a very brief review of Catholic ideas of personhood to help illustrate how complex religious ideas of subjectivity can be.

Like most religions', the Catholic understanding of personhood is more complex than the Cartesian modern body/mind divide. In the Catholic tradition, the prophet Jesus is both a man and son of God. At the same time, the doctrine of the Trinity states that God is simultaneously God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The mystery of this tripartite subjectivity is perhaps the most important tenet of the Catholic faith. When Christians are baptized, they become part of the Body of Christ, understood in this layered way. Through the rite of the Eucharist, believers are once again united in a bodily way with Christ. Believers then have an obligation to care for their body and soul not only as 'theirs' but as part of the Body of Christ. This complexity also extends to relationships with other people. The act of

[42] Anello (2021).
[43] Ibid, 92.
[44] Cited in Anello (2021), 92.
[45] A more recent approach to an understanding of how religious experience operates is the study of the cognitive science of religions, notably the work of Justin L. Barrett who popularized the field with his general audiences study, *Why would anyone believe in God?* Barrett (2007).
[46] Dewey (1967) 9-10.

marriage in the Catholic tradition does not merely connect two people, but rather 'makes of them one flesh,' a newly formed sacred entity. So, through baptism, the eucharist, and marriage, every person partaking in these transformative rituals undergoes spiritual multiplication and syntheses. Believers are also connected through the taking of Communion, which unites all members of the faith bodily. The importance of the afterlife contributes to the re-ordering of priorities for human lives on Earth, since there is a constant interplay between earthly acts and their spiritual consequences.[47] Though this is only a very broad overview of concepts each of which are backed by entire literatures and centuries of practice, it can help give perspective on how fundamental concepts of bodily and spiritual identity are radically diversified in religious conceptions.

When personhood is conceptualized as having meaning beyond the confines of the morphological body and beyond the limits of time on Earth, new understandings of how life is lived emerge. While the tenets of Catholicism like any religion might appear to be exotic or irrational there are important parallels with how even the most secular of modern people understand personhood and live their lives. I have written about this topic elsewhere[48] in more depth, but the core of the argument that is relevant for this essay is the idea that now more than ever, the ways in which we live our lives and particularly our online 'manifestations' belie concepts of personhood that are not dissimilar to Catholic or other religious conceptions. Today, we allow algorithms to trace our every move online and off and aggregate our data with that of other people, leading to further shepherding of our actions via new algorithms. We submit to the overtaking of our data; we click away our rights many times a day putting our faith in the companies that ask us for it. Social media puts us in a near constant flow of communion with others around the world, which is often, however, asynchronous, taking place in digital spaces where time and geography are secondary. Today, relationships of all kinds are begun and sometimes conducted entirely online. There are multiple services that offer to tend to our online identities after our bodily death, and some give the possibility for online selves to continue to 'live on' through post-mortem Twitter and Facebook posts. Though it has yet to reach substantial numbers, the digital service 'Eter9' markets itself as, "The very first-ever intelligent virtual self of you,"[49] and claims that more than 100,000 registered users are waiting for their chance to have their own artificially intelligent digital avatar created. YouTube hosts hundreds of thousands of interviews and performances of people both long and recently gone, and people continue to interact with them, leaving messages, forwarding, re-posting. There are many online cemeteries[50] which allow visitors to post and interact with the memorials, and the largest social media sites have protocols for converting profiles to be clearly indicated as post-mortem after the death of a user. Nor is social media the only locus for life extension.

Long before the technology explosion, people used testaments, post-dated letters, posthumous book publications and more to extend their expressive capacity beyond death. The law is full of legal instruments that blur the lines of individual personhood such as corporate personhood, in which a

[47] For a brief overview of Catholic rites and rituals from an anthropological perspective, see Bowen (2016), 113-123. Classic texts in this regard are referenced in Note 41.
[48] Vazquez (2020b).
[49] https://www.eter9.com.
[50] The Worldwide Cemetery has been online since 1995, Virtual-Cemetery.com allows users to light a virtual candle for the deceased, and The Virtual Memorial Garden allows for the creation of online memorial pages. The Digital Graveyards Project is a research project that investigates "the different kinds of digital graveyards that exist within the World Wide Web, and to provide researchers and interested individuals with access to academic literature pertaining to this area of research," available at: http://jiwani.concordia.ca/cybermemorial.

company is treated as if it were a person, as well as provisions such as 'dispositions for the soul' (a request that prayers be regularly said in someone's name after they are gone) which plainly acknowledge and support a person's right to manage their lives and after-lives as they see fit. New legal solutions are emerging to address ever-changing needs related to the digital dispersal of our selves, both pre and post-mortem.[51] In short, the way online technologies are being used to mold lives and push the edges of the category of personhood has much in common with religious ways of seeing the world: encompassing body and soul, depending on community, and existing beyond life on earth.

Of particular relevance within an analysis of religious conceptions and technologically supported modern conceptions is the approach towards physical space. In all of the major religious traditions, there is a signical interplay between the place where a believer resides and the holy place which is the central seat of the religion. Whether we consider the Vatican, Jerusalem or Mecca, each sacred place is simultaneously far from each believer and also imminently present. The meaning of sacred places[52] goes beyond their geography or their physical presence to resonate in the lived actions of believers. Enactment of sacred rites through the pronouncement of words is the corollary: with each holy recitation, the believer is crossing time and space to 'intone' with every other believer who has and who will recite the same words. The meaning of sacred spaces and sacred words rests in their enactment and embodiment, in their capacity to make worlds. In religious practices space and time are simultaneously material and signical. What governs the movement within these practices from an individual perspective is emotion. The person who engages sacred places and sacred words can be fruitfully thought of as what has been termed within phenomenology the 'lived body.'[53] It is through this term that I propose to bridge religious ways of world making or 'worlding' and contemporary technology-mediated worlding.

The 'lived body' can be distinguished from the physical body as being responsible for a set of communicative expressions which can be perceived even if two people are not sharing physical space. Empathy is a useful lens through which to analyze this concept, since by definition it requires that the emotion of one is recognized (etymologically, to *know again*) by another, thereby recognizing "the other as a subject and their bodily actions as expressive. Consequently, empathy is presented not simply as a form of other-understanding but *the* fundamental form of other-understanding"[54] (emphasis mine). When a person experiences empathy for another person it is the lived body that engages emotive capacities that exist independent of the physical material presence of another. This is not to say that the lived body is 'disembodied,' quite the contrary. It is precisely embodiment that allows one person to experience the embodiment of the other: if I see someone cry, I don't analyze the mechanics of the tears to deduce that they are sad, instead I *feel* their sadness[55].

This last observation has philosophical as well as neuroscientific support. Neuroscience has developed a great deal of research on the concept of "mirror neurons" which, among other research

[51] For a thorough review of some of the latest legal solutions in the US and Europe, see Fuccillo (2021). I have also previously addressed digital personhood online in Vazquez (2020a).
[52] This semiotic approach which is to be distinguished from other more sociological or theological views is the work of Ricca (2019), and also references therein.
[53] I borrow this term from Osler (2021),
[54] Ibid, 7.
[55] In the words of a neuroscientist, "What makes the behavior of other agents implicitly intelligible is the fact that their body is experienced not as material object ('Körper'), but as something alive ('Leib'), something analogous to our own experienced acting body." Gallese (2003).

areas, provides material evidence for suppositions made from a philosophical perspective in the late 19th and early 20th century. Edith Stein, a former pupil of Husserl, in her seminal treatise on empathy points out that it goes deeper than a mere ability to understand another's emotions. Instead, there is an underlying ability to *experience another as oneself* through the recognition of similarity, and part of this is rooted in action. So, people can recognize a blurry image in the distance to be another person walking even though they have little practice observing themselves walk. Neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese's shared manifold intersubjectivity hypothesis[56] accounts further for this empathic capacity, enabled by a mirror matching mechanism and extends it by unifying in a single account 1) the 'implicit certainties' we share with others such as our emotions, our body schema, or our being subject to somatic sensations, 2) the functional logic we use when we interpret other people's behaviors, allowing us to detect coherence, regularity, and predictability independently, and 3) the activity of mirror matching neural circuits that seems to indicate a supramodal intentional shared space. This shared space "allows people to appreciate, experience, and implicitly and prereflexively understand the emotions and the sensations they take others to experience."[57] The theory provides support for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological observation that comprehension of another's gestures is not strictly mechanical, cerebral, or rational but is rather rooted in reciprocity, "It is as if the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his."[58] Philosophy and science offer explanations for something we can intuit: our ability to understand others is related to our ability to feel their emotions, and this is not only a metaphorical cognitive act, but also a bodily affective act. When discussing what we experience of the communication of others, the Cartesian mind-body divide is not useful; it cannot account for what we experience.

If, instead, we understand empathy as being both embodied and transcendent of physical co-presence, as something that we understand through our multi-sensory observations but also something that we feel in our bodies, we can begin to see how a concept such as 'lived body' is useful towards an analysis of empathy online. Merleau-Ponty famously described the blind man's cane as an extension of his body. A person's gestures and facial expressions can communicate in the absence of voice just as vocal projection from an unseen source can be felt. All of our senses participate in our reception of the communication of others, and we can engage these senses even through technology-mediated interactions. Though some have argued forcibly that we cannot experience empathy online because we do not take our bodies online with us[59], both the shared manifold intersubjectivity theory and the lived body concept challenge such objections. Empathy is not about bodily presence alone, but rather occurs thanks to a range of rich intersubjective relations. These entail pre-understandings of similarities among people and their modes of expression, biological mirroring processes, but also metaphorical transpositions that enable understanding. Empathy is a kind of melding together of these with exchanged emotions. The concept of the 'lived body' explains why we have no trouble having emotional responses when interacting with people via video calls, audio calls, or even email. Visual cues and audio cues can be just as effective when mediated through technology as when they are 'in person.' Some research has shown that when it comes to digital interactions, the richer the media, the greater the sense of presence, understanding, and empathy[60]. But empathy is possible even in the most

[56] Ibid, 176-177.
[57] Ibid, 177.
[58] Cited in Ibid,176.
[59] Fuchs (2014) and Dreyfus (2008) as cited in Osler (2021).
[60] Bujić et al (2020).

sensorially impoverished kinds of communications such as chat. This is due to the potency of any speech act, capable of conveying vast quantities of information as well as the inner experiences of the speaker. As Osler eloquently states summarizing Merleau-Ponty, when I receive the words of another, "I am not directed to your words as objects, as a script, but at what you are expressing. I hear what you are expressing because I am attending to your subjective, lived, expressive body not to a physical body emitting noises."[61] The use of punctuation and emoticons alongside the characteristically spoken-language style and idioms of chat communication contribute to the ability to express and receive emotional messages. I argue, then, that *Homo technologicus* is not deprived, quite the contrary. Technology is adding to our roster of methods of communicating and understanding, and these additions are not coming at the cost of empathy.

If there are continuities between the ways in which *homo religiosus* creates and develops life pathways and habits and the ways in which *homo technologicus* does so, cognitive and affective continuities, so to speak, what possibilities might emerge given the current prominence of online interaction?

4. Semiotic seismology: transforming through the semiosis of intercultural competence

I have argued that there is a continuum between transcending our limitations via technology and sacred ideas of transcendence. One of the connecting links across these forms of transcendence is the human propensity for metaphorical projection. As we saw briefly with the concept of personhood, the everchanging exigencies of human expression propel new conceptualizations or categorizations capable of reflecting new meanings. Corporations can be people, online repositories extend people, and the ways in which we connect with others both living and gone, near and far, push at the boundaries of old categories. As the growing technological capacity for literally storing memories increases (text messages, photos, voice messages, videos), the relationships between what is present here and now and what is present in a 'stored' here and now blur. In parallel, religious activities push at their own categorical boundaries, re-inventing, expanding, exploring. Metaphorization is constant.

To wit: one of the four principal Chinese annual festivals is called the Qinming Festival, or "Tomb Sweeping Day" in which families visit the tombs of their ancestors to clean the gravesites, pray to their ancestors and make ritual offerings to them. Joss sticks are among the most traditional offerings, but over time, paper "goods" of all different kinds have been created to burn at the gravesites as a way of communicating a message or even passing over goods to ancestors in the afterlife. From paper money to paper houses to, recently, a life-sized paper Lamborghini[62], people are always more creative in the offerings to be burned. Paper mobile phones and tablets are 'provided' to the dead in the hopes that they will contact the living. In 2020, shops in Malaysia sold Covid-19 themed paper packages with masks and paper representations of hand sanitizer because "even the dead may need to fight the coronavirus in the afterlife."[63] Protections against the virus for the living were of course considered as well, with cemeteries offering a staff service to clean tombs on the family's behalf and share the process via live video streaming. Other cemeteries have embedded QR codes on tombstones - scanning the code

[61] Osler (2021), 17-18.
[62] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39487437
[63] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZ9Ndxbe1-s.

with your phone allows you to access interactive memorials featuring photos and videos of your loved ones. Still others operate online memorial pages, where families can pay respects by burning virtual candles and buying virtual gifts.[64]

These practices illustrate a fluidity of worldmaking, a desire to extend, connect, make sense of experience using all the tools available, metaphoric and otherwise. Burning a paper phone so your ancestor will be encouraged to contact you is no more or less an act of faith than creating an online avatar to interact with your future kin[65], or, for that matter, writing a last will and testament. In fact, recent virtual reality experiments have found that numinous experiences can be created through VR with participants experiencing significant well-being as a result. As the authors of the study point out, the matter-energy continuum is a scientific reality, "everyday material objects *are actually* constructed from the dynamical choreography of molecular organisms whose essences are fundamentally energetic"[66] (emphasis in the original). Furthermore, comparative control studies in which participants were administered psychedelic stimulants did not produce any meaningfully differing results. Because the results were so similar, the authors state:

> ...it is problematic to assert that one is virtual and the other is not. [...] 'virtual reality' may be a concept best understood from a wider vantage point, where head mounted displays simply represent one kind of 'virtual reality' technology amongst a broader continuum of VR technologies, which include for example IDs, mythologies, rituals mediation practices, lucid dreaming, etc.[67]

The importance and relevance of any given human experience can only be defined through chosen ends. As people determine what they wish to achieve, where they want to end up, in short, their practical and existential ends, their actions shift to make use of the means available. This fluid relationship between ends and means constantly creates opportunities for different ways of engaging. Emotional impulses are a kind of bridge between values and actions which propel people to shift the borders of their own categories, re-semanticizing the metaphors they use to make meaning. The criticality of 'face-to-face' communication has shifted dramatically and taken new forms, and one of the results is an amplification and broadening of everyone's experience of the Other. To take just one example, where once we unthinkingly accepted the products which appeared in our shops without reflecting on where they came from, who produced them and what such processing and transport entails, a globalization that was conceptual more than felt, now we can videoconference with people offering services or making products halfway around the world, and many people are concerned with the carbon footprint of their food as well as the labor sources involved in its cultivation and distribution[68]. In many cases, pandemic lockdowns have led to people spending more time, not less, with distant others, as transport hurdles have become immaterial. Workplaces have been transformed by the blurring of private and public 'selves' and people's attitudes have changed as a result. As one

[64] Though there is of course a large literature on Chinese religious and cultural traditions, one instructive work that also compares Eastern and Western traditions from a philosophical and sociocultural perspective is Roetz (1993) with specific reference to religion at 19-22

[65] The service "Safe Beyond" allows users to create 'digital time capsules' and calls itself "emotional life insurance," see: https://www.safebeyond.com/.

[66] Glowacki et al (2020), 5.

[67] Ibid, 10.

[68] One recent analysis of corporate structuring of and abuses within contemporary food systems is offered by Howard (2021).

businessperson quipped, "…when you see people in their homes, with their noisy children and importunate pets, struggling to stay focussed and upbeat, you have a different kind of empathy for your co-workers."[69] A large international corporation's internal survey revealed that the effect of having all workers at home, including those from their New York headquarters, was unifying: "people who worked in other cities and countries felt much more involved. One worker wrote, 'New York has stopped acting like it's New York and everyone else.'"[70]

All of reality is in some sense virtual, in that what we see as objective is always the result of a dynamic relating of what is inside and outside our categories of meaning-making. People have always been and continue to be skilled in the art of reconfiguring categories to meet new needs, finding similes and continuities that instigate categorical shifts. The current newly energized re-spatialization of our habits of daily life can stimulate new understandings of others' actions and experiences. Close personal contact, even when digitally mediated, is giving people the opportunity to see the way others reach ends they have in common, and this can in turn re-engender experience. The power of seeing heads of state, celebrities, and CEOs in their living rooms, climbed upon by their pets and children, should not be underestimated. Video interactions allow us to see and hear the intimate realities of others, and our empathic sensory systems are more than capable of filling in the missing sensory details. Notions of public and private sphere are turned upside down online: one can hide behind an icon or avatar or invite the world into one's living room. What are the implications of this shift? Are they not seismic?

The mid-century economist Joseph Schumpeter, of the famed "creative destruction economics" theory is often quoted for his observation that, "*Emotional* attachment to the social order is the very thing capitalism is constitutionally unable to produce."[71] This is perhaps along the continuum of obstacles faced by human rights efforts which struggle to induce the emotional engagement necessary to make them effective. Where then, can this affective power be found? As I have tried to show, the ontological dimension of religious experience is overflowing with emotion-based know how, which could be leveraged as a cognitive political tool. Overlapping potentialities in the redefinition of paradigms of subjectivity that can be found in religions and technologies directly engage with emotion, and can move people to re-think behaviors that were previously culturally mandated, even if unawares.

I use the term 'intercultural' to encompass an anthropological perspective on all aspects of human conduct which include the religious as well as the vehemently declared secular. Regardless of the particulars, it is culture that determines the way we see our worlds; it is culture that furnishes our pre-embodied perceptions. When we redefine the global space of experience through online interactions, we redefine our imaginary of space. We *learn* to consider what was far as near, what was opaque and therefore foreign, as visible, audible, and now newly 'domesticated,' internalized, understood. These are intercultural processes, semiotically-charged acts. They are skills that might be applied to human rights frameworks and implementations to revitalize their impact. The gulf between universalist inspirations and 'real life' can be bridged by 1) our capacity to determine and re-determine meaning through our constant redefinitions of paradigms of subjectivity and communication, and 2) the affective impetus to do so. Again, the competence of religions in these domains is clear and can be of instructional use. The more real globalization becomes in our daily experience, the more holistic our approach to reality becomes, and the closer the parallel with ideas that connect our here and now with

[69] Seabrook (2021).
[70] Ibid.
[71] Schumpter (1943/2003), 145.

an elsewhere, an unknown that demands an openness in our categorization schemes. Factorial recategorization can work at a symbolic level as we are increasingly exposed to alternative spaces and ways of being. Put simply: when I begin to *know* the Other, I may begin to *care* about the Other, and this changes, at least potentially, my behavior. The levelling effect of online interactions encourages collaboration and indeed might facilitate it insofar as digital interfacing gives just enough space to provide breathing room, a wedge of time/space between presence and reaction that is not available in face-to-face encounters.

The Covid-19 global pandemic has put into stark relief the impossibility of denying our planetary interdependence. Attempts to define human rights in this new landscape are only just beginning. The fragility of our walls and borders has become evident to all, both to our detriment, as the virus continues to spread and devastate, and to our benefit as unprecedented access and exchange has taken place in our overwhelmingly digital lives. There seems to be a vague consensus that "human rights must be respected." But what does this mean? How will it happen? The meaningful protection of people's rights can only take place when there is an emotional drive to undertake such protection, and that drive requires genuine empathy for the Other. I have tried to show that at the intersection of our technological and religious skillsets lie semiotic creative capacities, new means for understanding that could be developed and nurtured towards precisely this end. The cultural inversions that are taking place every day, rendering the public private and vice versa, shrinking geographical distances, and making hierarchies fall from view, can be buttressed by religious skills in bridging worlds and empowering meaning-making in ways that encompass body, mind, and spirit. If we can understand that Covid-19 is not a 'Chinese virus' might we understand that what happens across an ocean is important, even constitutive of, what happens here? If employees communicate with far greater frequency with their foreign counterparts, literally seeing and hearing parts of their lives, how might ideas, aspirations or, even, *demands* change?

5. The co-implication of people and their destinies and the impact on global democracy

Even if globalization is old news, people's awareness of its real and pervasive effects may not be. The shift to online interactions has been swift, but as with all major social change, it is only after the practical action that the echo of meaning comes back to us. The provincial mindset that comes with the ethos of nation states is losing its grip on many societies. Those who don't travel physically, travel online. Younger generations make little distinction between online and 'IRL' interactions. The public square has at long last become truly international, transnational. The Iron Curtains of the world have largely collapsed and there are small signs of solidarity emerging across global networks through hashtag activism, solidarity networks across cyberspace, and more. All of this is driven by the colonization of our lives by technology. The hacker's rally cry, "information wants to be free" has its parallel in human lives – people want to be free. It is precisely the overlapping of these circumstances that is helping to define this historical moment.

It is one thing to have access (to information, to other people), however, and another to know what to make of it. I have argued that religions contain cognitive attitudes that are emotionally charged, that seek to address the most basic human emotional needs and desires. They are imaginative, and despite accusations to the contrary, they largely aspire in their fundaments towards universalism, the

inclusion and salvation of all souls. They are experts in a semiotically-charged conception of space, uniting near and far through their awareness that all human experience of space is made, not found. Human rights, too, have universal aspirations, try to unite the disparate, but they lack the emotional meaningfulness and connection necessary to move people to put them in action. Nonetheless, it is a mistake to see them as antagonists given the continuities in their aims. Religions simply have more translational tools at their disposition for the goals that both they and human rights frameworks ultimately seek: inspiring empathy and co-involvement, helping people to envision a global community through acts that translate difference and soften frictions – in short, generating a kind of *productive consent* towards shared human purposes. If we look at religion and human rights as two sides of one coin whose value lies in promoting human flourishing and bringing people together, then technology may offer the means to gain real value from that coin. Communicative technologies can deliver on the promises that religions make for global connection and community.

The Achilles' heel of democracy is that it only works if it feels truly legitimate to its constituents. People must believe and feel that they have the freedom to make their lives as they see fit and that they have a say on the rules and regulations imposed upon that freedom. Over the last decades of liberal democracy and globalized capitalism, that legitimacy has been in danger. There has been too much opacity between those who govern and those who are governed. The exponential rise of social media has put information in the hands of the many like never before. But information does not move people. Emotions, empathy, other people who are recognized and felt as kin move people. Now, people are seeing each other, hearing each other, talking to each other, *globally*. Is there not a parallel to be seen between ideas such as Christendom and the communities forming through social networks, the 'communing' that is taking place in a new 'videoverse' of contact? Through hashtags, but more effectively through video-based communications, people can follow threads of discourse as they weave their way around the world. Space barriers of old no longer block communication. Our information about Others in distant lands is no longer only curated, it's streamed live into our living rooms. We choose who to invite in and where/how we will share. The religious insistence that 'the other is us' is, in this sense becoming true, a lived experience. So-called digital natives don't distinguish between online and offline tools and communications; they are all part of a flow of normal experience. This approach to experience means online contact, communication, *Digitallife* is multiplying daily, and it is inherently global.

If there is any potential left in democracy as a political institution, it is going to have to be a global democracy, and it will take place through communicative technologies. If we are smart, we will take the gifts of religion, their ability to convey bodily imagination, to unify people spread across the globe through emotional, spiritual, and semio-spatial connection, and we will present them to, allow them to flow into, human rights frameworks. Human rights alone are unable to slip into the daily subjectivities and life habits of people. If human rights implementations, however, were founded on new intercultural interpretations based on people's exigencies, beliefs, desires, even as they develop and mutate, they might have a better chance of obtaining their aspirational ends. Human rights are in desperate need of a legitimacy that only the connection to the daily, the tangible, and the spiritual (all filtered through the emotional) can achieve. The paradox, perhaps, could be stated as follows: universality requires transcendence, and democracy requires universality. All of it is a house of cards without the legitimacy that can only be granted by people when they feel included.

Online spaces and communications are providing that inclusion, making previously invisible people visible and exposing the power games of the power mongers for what they are. Not long ago, corporations could wield power over workers who asked for better conditions by threatening to hire foreigners who would accept less. Now that 'Others', once impossibly distant, are in our lives, in our phones, in our homes, woven into the fabric of our daily lives, how long can that continue? Western 'superiority' might be revealed for the mirage that in many cases it is. Would-be migrants might consider staying home. At the very least, people are and will continue to be far more aware of what is happening 'over there' and how it connects with my 'here.' When Marx coined the slogan, "Workers of the World Unite!" it was a big ask. The logistical hurdles alone made it ungainly; the difficulty of emotionally uniting diverse groups was at least equally daunting. Today, more and more, people are uniting. Smart phones are ubiquitous, and with the press of a button we can share our experiences, live, in full color and sound. Only by experiencing the Other's experience can we understand it. Only by feeling the continuities do they become 'real.' Once real-ized, however, anything is possible. Terms of inclusion and exclusion can be redefined. The legitimacy sought from governmental authority can at last be found, or rather, *made*. If the human capacity for plastic interpretation is our superpower, it might be time to put it to good use in this our brave digital planetary platform, the best hope for a functioning global democracy.

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