

The threat of “soulful pornography” in cloud computing and metaverse thinking: Toward a panentheistic theology of diachronic thinking in pastoral caregiving

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Abstract

Due to the impact of metaverse thinking, both religious thinking (*homo religiosus*) and the spirituality of transcendence (*homo transcendentalis*) is constantly exposed to the demands of what can be called a digitalized online spirituality (*homo digitalis*). Facebook and Instagram brought about a fundamental paradigm change regarding spiritual experiences. It transformed the spirituality of metaphysical and analytical thinking into diachronic networking: I am digitalised, therefore I am. I start to exist through and via (Greek: dia) the digitalized other. Thus, the following research question in pastoral theology: If the traditional understanding of “God” as an all-controlling and all-powerful deity, is challenged by the multidimensionality of metaverse cosmology and optimized anthropology, how should orthodox and traditional faith be reframed and rephrased to still care to the existential needs of human beings surfing the internet within cyberspatiality? Caregiving is constantly being challenged by the following existential predicament of *homo digitalis*: The lurking danger of digital disillusionments (the dystopia of a “messianism of networking digitalism”, Han 2012:6). The following pastoral question surfaces: What about the soulful needs of the human spirit? Especially, when vulnerable and wounded human beings become exposed to irreparable loss and the unavoidable factuality of fatal mortality? It is argued that metacene thinking should be supplemented by a kind of caring Space-praxis (*cura pro spacio*). The pastoral challenge is to start focussing on the cure and care of disillusioned netizens. In this regard, a “pneumatology of diachronic panentheism” is proposed.

Keywords

Cloud computing, cyberspatiality, diachronic networking, *homo digitalis*, *homo electronicus*, panentheism, pastoral care

1. Introduction and background

The internet has become an indispensable part of our daily lifestyle on planet earth. It has enormous benefits in increasing the quality of people's lives. One could say, it changed the way we formulate our human quest for meaning. It brought about a revolution of paradigms and created new patterns of thinking. It brought about the playfulness of mine crafting (*Minecraft Wikipedia* 2020)¹.

How can this revolution of paradigmatic thinking help theology to find new concepts to reframe our understanding of God's place in the cosmos? Can metaverse thinking revolutionise the realm of God-images and their impact on how frail human beings deal with suffering, loss, and mortality?

On 29 October 2021 Mark Zuckerberg announced that the new trademark of Facebook² will be called "metaverse".

In its current meaning, metaverse generally refers to the concept of a highly immersive virtual world where people gather to socialize, play, and work. Awareness of this term surged on 29 October 2021, when Facebook rebranded itself "Meta" and released a video in which CEO Mark Zuckerberg says, "I believe the metaverse is the next chapter for the internet (Metaverse Merriam-Webster 2021).

The announcement has got tremendous implications for how human beings will orientate themselves in life. To my mind, metaverse introduces a total new approach to cosmology and economy. It is going to influence lifestyles, immensely. "The Metacene has begun" (Ferguson 2022). Metaverse forced

1 In Minecraft, players explore a blocky, procedurally generated, three-dimensional world with virtually infinite terrain and may discover and extract raw materials, craft tools and items, and build structures, earthworks, and machines (*Minecraft Wikipedia* 2020).

2 Facebook can be accessed from devices with Internet connectivity, such as personal computers, tablets and smartphones. After registering, users can create a profile revealing information about themselves. They can post text, photos and multimedia which are shared with any other users who have agreed to be their "friend" or, with different privacy settings, publicly. Users can also communicate directly with each other with Facebook Messenger, join common-interest groups, and receive notifications on the activities of their Facebook friends and the pages they follow. (*Facebook Wikipedia* 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook> [Accessed: 30 March 2022].

human beings into a new direction. The Terra Incognita of our digitalised human existence has begun (Ferguson 2022; Frank 2016).

According to Adam (2016:1), research regarding the habituality of life on the planet, started. This new field of study is called astrobiology.³ The predicament of *homo digitalis* is that, suddenly, human beings must face the challenge to think in terms of artificial intelligence and not anymore merely in terms of natural wisdom (*sapientia*). Ball (2022:39) points to the following paradigmatic revolution: “But think of the metaverse as a fourth era of computing and networking” (Ball 2022:39).

We as pastoral caregivers should, therefore, attend to the following research question: If metaverse imply indeed a total new way of thinking about the meaning of “*meta*” in the conceptualisation of *meta*-physics (the transcendent dimension of beyond), what are the implications for theological reflection in pastoral caregiving? What role can cyberspatiality and cloud computing play in attempts to reframe thinking about God within a cosmology shaped by artificial intelligence? What will be the impact on traditional God-images and how can pastoral caregivers take care to the possible predicament of *homo digitalis* when faced with the disillusionment of dystopia: The avatars are indeed superficial and not “real”? Even netizens will die and become exposed to the existential factuality of undeserved suffering, loss and dying?

3 Astrobiology, and the related field of exobiology, is an interdisciplinary scientific field that studies the origins, early evolution, distribution, and future of life in the universe ... This interdisciplinary field encompasses research on the origin of planetary systems, origins of organic compounds in space, rock-water-carbon interactions, abiogenesis on Earth, planetary habitability, research on biosignatures for life detection, and studies on the potential for life to adapt to challenges on Earth and in outer space (Astrobiology. *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopaedia*. [Online] Available: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Astrobiology> [Accessed: 14 October 2022].



A satellite space station called: Azure Space, Space Born Computer 2. 2022. Rendition of EchoStar 24 satellite, which SSL is building for EchoStar/Hughes. Photo: SSL. Russell, K. 2017. Azur Space to Supply Next-Gen Solar Cells for SSL September 8, 2017. [Online]. Available: <https://www.satellitetoday.com/innovation/2017/09/08/azur-space-supply-next-gen-solar-cells-ssl/>. [Accessed: 7 April 2022].

2. Metaverse as fourth era and habitual challenge: Living as *homo digitalis* in a virtual world (anthropological implications)

The metaverse should not be thought of as an overhaul to the internet, nor as something that will replace all mobile models, devices, or software. It will produce new technologies and behaviours (Ball 2022:39).

The introduction of metaverse as the new trademark of Facebook, underlines the fact that the digitalization of life brought about a total paradigm shift in terms of our understanding of our place and space within a “universe” determined by cyberspace and cloud computing. In fact, it requires a total, existential repositioning of human beings in hypersphere.

Visiting the internet and surfing Google.com, create a mode of online spirituality. Metaverse implies even a rapid technological evolution of humanity. Homo sapiens is not anymore merely *homo ludens* (the playing human being) or *homo religiosus* (the believing human being). Homo sapiens shifted from being shaped by exclusively social, psychic, pedagogic and religious categories, more and more to be determined by digital and electronic categories.

Furthermore, human life is becoming encapsulated by 3D technology, Azur space and online spirituality. “The volume of content we produce online has grown from a few message-board posts, emails, or blog updates a week to a constant stream of multimedia content encapsulating our lives” (Ball 2022:38).

In a nutshell, metaverse presupposes a totally different understanding of place, space, and time.

The metaverse is a concept of a persistent, online, 3D universe that combines multiple different virtual spaces. You can think of it as a future iteration of the internet. The metaverse will allow users to work, meet, game, and socialize together in these 3D spaces (Beginner 2021).

Digitalization as hyper mode of existence in metaverse, transfers human existence from pure organic modes of being, into “... cyberspatial forms of intelligence as opposed to the more conventional humanistic, more or less reflexive, study of pre-modernist, modernist, or postmodernist humankind” (Karaflogka 2002:200). Thus, the link between metaverse and “cyberspatialism”.

According to David Thomas (in Karaflogka 2002:200):

Cyberspace has the potential to not only change the economic structure of human societies but to also overthrow the sensorial and organic architecture of the human body, this by disembodiment and reformatting its sensorium in powerful, computer-generated, digital spaces.

The fact is, metaverse⁴ and the digitalization of life, do not only brought about a revolution in cosmological thinking but also in reflection regarding anthropological categories applied to capture the impact of cyberspace on human behaviour and our quest for meaning. The prefix “meta” challenges anew reflections on the *meta*-physical realm⁵ of life. But the digitalization of “meta” does not imply instant, rational solutions to the human quest for meaning in life. It rather contributes to the complexification of life.

2.1 Digitalization: the complexification of life

Metacene-thinking underlines the fact that truth and the human quest for meaning is not about the positivism of verification but about a heuristic search within the crypto⁶ sphere of life events. Truth is framed by what Rescher (1998:56) calls: Complexifications. Rather than the offering of “cheap solutions”, complexification⁷ describes the richness of experiences as embedded in paradox. It does not want to simplify, but to probe into the density of systemic networking (thick descriptions). Complexification is an attempt to understand the system in terms of its complementary and

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- 4 “This metaverse interoperability or openness will be a challenge for the big tech companies of today who have made their fortunes building and operating proprietary platforms where users are essentially ensconced in “walled gardens and their personal data is monetised”. This is where blockchain technology and cryptocurrencies such as Ethereum and Bitcoin come in. Blockchain – a distributed ledger – is inherently decentralised and, theoretically, can provide users with greater control of their data and allow smaller businesses to flourish online through smart contracts and the like. Cryptocurrencies incentivise users to maintain the blockchain for the common good based on coded laws and governance, in turn creating a tokenised economy that threatens to disrupt everything from banks and law firms through to traditional government structures and organisation” (Sheldon 2021).
 - 5 “Metaphysics” is the combination of two words: Meta, meaning “over and beyond”, and Physics, meaning “the knowledge of nature”. It is the ultimate study of our reality. It explores the essence of objects or the world around us.” (Metaphysics in Philosophy 2021).
 - 6 According to the Dictionary.com, crypto is about the following: “A combining form meaning ‘hidden,’ ‘secret,’ used in the formation of compound words: cryptograph”; (Crypto in Dictionary.com. 2022).
 - 7 In his book *On Complexity*, Edgar Morin (2008:21) pointed out that to deal with human problems, one has to reckon with the notion of hyper-complexity. “But complexity is not only quantities of units and interactions that defy our possible calculation; it also is made up of uncertainty, indetermination, and random phenomena. Complexity is, in a sense, always about chance” (Morin 2008:20).

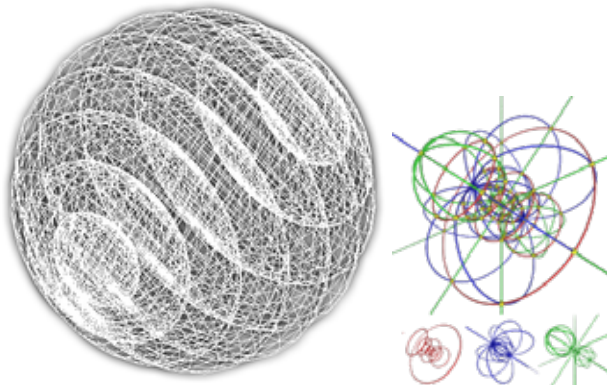
interconnected parts despite obvious levels of contradiction (intriguing paradoxes) (Collen 2003:61).

The fourth era of metaverse thinking points to a radical new way of thinking in theory formation. (Montuori 2008: xxix). “While the multiverse is deterministic, we perceive non-deterministic behaviour governed by probabilities, because we don’t observe the multiverse as a whole, but only one parallel universe at a time” (*Quantum Mechanics* 2022). Thus, the shift from what can be called a “solid universe” (see Gier 1987) towards the seemingly irrational friction brought about by multi-dimensionality and paradoxical reasoning.

Instead of one stable domelike construction, cosmology is currently depicted in terms of the dynamics of expanding dimensions. Space is constituted by height (vertical dimension), extensiveness and width (horizontal dimension), and depth/length (back and forth). (Three-Dimensional Space. Wikipedia 2022).

The notion of 3D-spheres, implies inexhaustible sequences of meaningful connections and variation in terms of interconnectivity.

A 3-sphere is a compact, connected, 3-dimensional manifold without boundary. It is also simply connected. What this means, in the broad sense, is that any loop, or circular path, on the 3-sphere can be continuously shrunk to a point without leaving the 3-sphere (Three-Dimensional Space 2022. *The Free Encyclopaedia*).



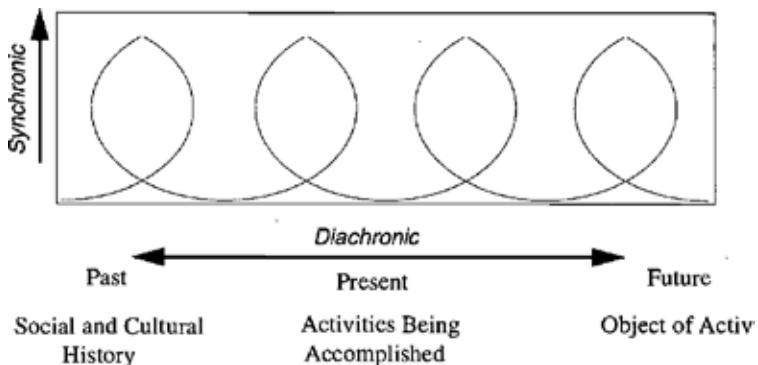
Depiction of multi-dimensionality of 3D Spheres. (3D Spheres 2022. From Wikipedia).

3D spaces are complimented by the multiplicity of many intersections to create what is called the hypersphere of multi-dimensional thinking. This multiplicity of intersections within multidimensionality, creates a new way of thinking, namely diachronic thinking.

2.2 Toward a spirituality of diachronic networking

Through the notions of Facebook and Instagram, a spirituality of diachronic networking and digital immediacy, sets in: I start to exist through and via (Greek: dia) the digitalized other, here, and now irrespective of virtuality and the spiritual power or attractiveness of sublimation and optimization. Even the notion of time, becomes a matter of interrelatedness. “Relating to or dealing with phenomena (as of language or culture) as they occur or change over a period of time” (Diachronic Definition. Merriam Webster 2022).

Synchrony and diachrony are two complementary viewpoints in linguistic analysis. A synchronic approach (from Ancient Greek: *συν*- “together” and *χρόνος* “time”) considers a language at a moment in time without taking its history into account. Synchronic linguistics aims at describing a language at a specific point of time, usually the present. In contrast, a diachronic (from *δια*- “through” and *χρόνος* “time”) approach, as in historical linguistics, considers the development and evolution of a language through history (Diachrony and Synchrony (*Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopaedia*. 2022).



According to research in socialisation (Gutiérrez & Stone 2012), diachronic thinking creates new modes of existence and relating to one another. The other discloses options for perceptual expansion. The latter frees one from short-sightedness and visual exclusiveness. It opens a new horizon and field of semantics. Even to a radical new understanding of our being human; to what can be called the customizing of anthropology by transferring human beings into avatars (see Customizing your Avatar Shape 2022) ⁸ living in what can be called the utopia of slim technology – the multidimensionality of “Second Life”.

2.3 Transhumanism and the utopia of slim technology: The multidimensionality of “super-consciousness” and second life

Second Life is an online multimedia platform that allows people to create an avatar for themselves and have a second life in an online virtual world (*Second Life Wikipedia* 2022).

The utopia of “Second Life” is based on the notion of the superhuman being, thriving by means of “super-consciousness” (Ellis 2022). Metaverse anthropology contributes to what Nietzsche already in 1966 wrote about “Could you create a god? – So be silent about all gods! But you could surely create the Superman (Nietzsche 1966:110). The digitalized superman of virtual reality and Space X could be summarised by the following:

8 Avatar derives from a Sanskrit word meaning “descent”, and when it first appeared in English in the late 18th century, it referred to the descent of a deity to the earth – typically, the incarnation in earthly form of Vishnu or another Hindu deity. The word is usually translated into English as “incarnation”, but better as “appearance” or “manifestation”. According to the Merriam- Webster Dictionary, four levels of meaning regarding the essence of an “avatar,” can be derived. Definition of avatar:

- 1: an electronic image that represents and may be manipulated by a computer user (as in a game)
- 2: the incarnation of a Hindu deity (such as Vishnu)
- 3a: an incarnation in human form
- b: an embodiment (as of a concept or philosophy) often in a person
- 4: a variant phase or version of a continuing basic entity”

Avatar Noun 2022. Online: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/avatar>. Accessed: 7th of April 2022.

To some degree we are already a cyborg – you think of all the digital tools that you have – your phone, your computer ... humans will deepen our ties with technology even further, to the point where we become cyborgs, as a way of upgrading our inherent natural abilities (Dockrill 2017).

In fact, the digitalized optimisation of our being human gives rise to the notion of transhumanism.

Transhumanism is a loosely defined movement that has developed gradually over the past two decades. Transhumanism is a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values. (Max More 1990; In *Transhumanism* 2022).

In terms of Elon Musk’s projection of a mode of “super-consciousness”, *homo digitalis* has become transposed into super-humanity. Thus, the reason why the notion of transhumanism as projected by Elon Musk about life on Mars, has led to the image of a kind of “economic god”: Tesla, SpaceX.



One of the best things to have happened to the world in recent times is the birth of a new age through Tesla and SpaceX--two leading companies that owes credit of its successes to an Economic god in the person of Elon Musk. This is a biography about this great man, turned god whose humble beginning reflects two things: Hard work and consistency! If the little nerd who was bullied as a child can rise up to become the richest man in the world today, then what makes you think you can't achieve your

life goals? (*Biography Elon Musk* by Arthur Anderle. [Online]. Available: https://www.google.com/search?q=Rise+of+An+Economic+God:+Tesla,+SpaceX.+Elon+Musk+Biography.&rlz=1C1JJTC_enZA954ZA954&source=Inms&tbm=isch&s. Accessed: 13th of June 2022. (Photo. Online: <https://www.amazon.com/Rise-economic-god-SpaceX-Biography/dp/B08WSH7T7W>. [Accessed: 10 May 2022].

It has become clear that metaverse spirituality functions within the interplay between digitalised utopia and the possible failure of human wishful thinking (the disillusionment of dystopian texts).⁹

Metaverse spirituality points inter alia to the following features:

- Internet and interviews with internet users, indicate the wish for a kind of utopian condition of enhanced, qualitative livelihood; it even revealed the birth of a new “electronic frontier” (Dawson 2004:8). Nowhere has become everywhere. Beyond geographical terms, the meta of cyberspace cannot be demarcated. The reality of cyberspace is “nowhere” and yet its presence is felt “everywhere” (Benschop in Karaflogka 2002:192).
- New modes of post-organic manifestations of our being human are developing due to the impact of “Post-organic cyberspatialism” on our orientation in the cosmos. “Cyberspatial forms of intelligence develops as opposed to the more conventional humanistic, more, or less reflexive, study of pre modernist, modernist, or postmodernist humankind (Karaflogka 2002:200). Facebook-friends replace conventional friends of the old neighbourhood. (Dawson & Cowan 2004:8).
- Therefore, a new danger lurks, namely the digital objectification of the human soul – the mystery of humanhood. The human “I” is running the danger of becoming a digital exponent of “post-organic manifestations” within the computing range of Avatars created by “Post-organic cyberspatialism” (Karaflogka 2002:200). Facebook-friends replace conventional friends of the old neighbourhood (Dawson & Cowan 2004:8).

9 Dystopian texts: “It indulged an illusion of sociality that was superficial and furthered the real alienation of modern individuals from themselves, their families, their friends and co-workers, and their neighbourhoods” (Dawson & Cowan 2004:8).

Furthermore, the possible threat to *homo religionis* is that transcendence has become so occupied by the utopia of “smart living” and the virtuality of “second life”, that the normative position of religious institutions are gradually replaced by the aspirations of digitalised values and lifestyles. (See Ball 2022:39).

3. Metaverse spirituality and the challenge to *homo religiosus*: “Nowhere” has become digitally “Everywhere”

According to Karafloga (2002:193-194), the “rise of a new conceptual framework and language of meta-thinking, challenges religiosity to”:

1. Develop new spiritual categories and different theological language and religious grammar (paradigmatic conceptualizations) for metacene experiences suited to the changed environmental conditions of postmodern society.
2. To reinterpret *meta* within the notion of a diachronic understanding of divine *transcendence* and its engagement with the trajectories of life.
3. To deal with the artificiality of online spirituality, the possible threat of dystopia and the soullessness of despairing disillusionment.

The artificiality of online spirituality and digitalized utopia create the intoxicating danger of a kind of “soulful pornography” (Han 2013:8-9). Facebook-friendship cannot cover the whole area of personal and psycho-social particularity as well as the spiritual longing for embodies intimacy.¹⁰ “The human soul is not transparent, only a machine is transparent

10 Emmanuel Levinas (1987:31) calls this longing for inter-collectivity and the desires for closeness, intimacy and a during sense of belongingness, *désir métaphysique*: “The inspirational yearning for an uplifting sense of transcendence, i.e. the quest for a metaphysical desire (*désir métaphysique*).” In this sense, meta obtains the meaning of the spiritual quest to be cared for like in a hospice; the longing for a safe space of intimacy and humane co-humanity; the quest for being at home (French: *chez soi*).

“Being at home, creates a sense of belongingness wherein one can become wholly connected to oneself; saved from just “being there” amongst things without being acknowledged as a unique, human being. The interiority of inner enjoyment, and the sense of “I-am-at-home”, become a hospitable space for becoming engaged in the exteriority of the world. It creates a reasonable hermeneutics for self-understanding and helps one to adopt and conform to basic needs” (Van Rhijn en Meulink-Korf 2019: 196).

otherwise we will die from spiritual burnout; total transparency equals death (Han 2013:8-10). Hence, the real threat that internet communication and digitalization could endanger the multi-dimensional dynamics of the human spirit and curb the mysticism of soulful variations within the irreplaceable vitality of our being human (*elan vital*) (Bergson 1946).

As argued, virtual reality operates according to technological manipulation, the fictitiousness of sublimation and imposed forms of superhumanity, optimizations and spatiality by means of cloud computing. The utopia of “Second Life” impressions, Internet-facilitated communication and virtual friendship, are immediately exposed to possible dystopia and disillusionment. The optimization of artificial intelligence creates a shadow side as well: The suppression of the creative mind: “... as young minds became immersed in the glib, irreverent, and rock video-inspired culture of the new hypertexts environment” (Dawson & Cowan 2004:8). “Wikipedia killed the encyclopaedia. Apps killed maps” (Grunwald 2014:14).

Han (2012:6) calls the digital illusions and utopian expectations of internet projections the “messianism of networking digitalism” (“Messianismus der Vernetzung”) (Han 2013:65). The core point in Han’s critical analyses of digitalization, boils to the following: Virtual reality and Facebook friends can replace the soulful needs of the human spirit when it becomes exposed to irreplaceable loss, the mental fear for rejection and the awareness of mortality within processes of dying and death. Grief has its own personal dynamics (“Menschliche Geist als Schmerzgeburt”) (Han 2013:12).

In the light of the possible intoxicating threat of “soulful pornography”, the article proposes the anthropological supplementation of *homo electronicus* by the compassionate notion of *homo sympatheticus*. In the words of Friedrich Nietzsche: “But if you have a suffering friend, be a resting place for his suffering” (Nietzsche 1961:113-114).

However, it should be noted that in the framework of *homo religiosus*, sympathy implies more than merely listening skills and emotional warmth and understanding (the affective component). Sympathy within a Christian and theological context is about a new state of mind and being. It is about a radical ontological reorientation as determined by what can be called the *passio Dei*.

3.1 The *passio Dei*¹¹ of divine infinities: “Nowhere” becomes pneumatologically “Everywhere”

Bouncing back regarding the challenges posed by the *meta*-dimension of Facebook, I want to propose:

- A pastoral theology of the intestines (the polymorphic form and mode of bowel categories) as mode of presencing¹² God in caregiving – the bowel categories of pity emanating from divine *hēsēd*.
- The theological grammar of not definite language (definitions of God) but infinitive language (God as active verb – infinities of God).

Instead of *defining God* in terms of fixed characteristics and omn-categories,¹³ theology should switch over to *verbing God* – pointing to his involvements and engagements as reflected in the narratives of the Biblical verdict regarding God’s journeying with his people through history. The starting point for the design of a pastoral theology is therefore the covenantal bonds of during friendship and caring hospitality (the faithfulness of God) as displayed in his pity and steadfast love. Thus, the emphasis on the notions of *miser cordia*, *ta splanchna* and *compassionate hēsēd* as encompassing

11 Together with *oiktirmos* and the notion of *miser cordia*, the *passio Dei* expresses the being quality of God as connected to human vulnerability and suffering (Esser 1976:598).

12 “Presencing” is a blended word combining human experiences and senses (the dimension of the affective) and the realm of being-there (*Dasein*) (presence as the state of being in the present moment) (Kempen 2015:140).

13 I think one can concur with the following conclusion (Van der Toorn (1995:749-751; 1421). In the LXX *šadday* has been rendered with various words and expressions. In the Old Greek version of Job, the rendition (ὁ) παντοκράτωρ, “(the) Almighty”, is predominant. This translation – to be interpreted against its contemporary Hellenistic religious and philosophical background – together with its Latin cognate, *omnipotens*, opened the way for theological speculations concerning omnipotence as a divine attribute. The phrase “El Shadday” should be designated within the context of the various texts and could never be captured by a substantial or personified or psychic or abstract, metaphysical hermeneutics. It should be borne in mind that the concept is many layered, with different associations in different biblical accounts regarding the intervention of a divine factor in the lives of the people of Jahwē. “El Shadday” represents the uniqueness (sovereignty) and greatness of Yahweh who reveals himself not in abstract metaphysical terminology but by means of the tribal and familial metaphor, as a Father and the living God of the covenant. Therefore, it remains a crucial question whether Hieronymus’ translation (*omnipotens*) and the *pantokratōr* image which so deeply influenced the Western thought was correct.

theological categories for caregiving offered by *homo sympatheticus*. It is in regard that *homo sympatheticus* starts to operate as representant of a sympathetic God and becomes, in terms of Christian spirituality, *homo religiosus*.

Different languages have different words to express the meaning of compassion as co-suffering. Davis (2001:234) points out that among these we can site the Latin word *commiseratio*, the Greek word *sumpatheia* and the German *Mitleid* (Afrikaans *medelye*, *ontfermende barmhartigheid*). Other concepts which are used to express a kind of pathetic mode of care, are: *clementia*, *misericordia*¹⁴, *humanitas* and sometimes *pietas*, the Greek *eleos* and *oiktos*, the English “mercy” and “pity”, and the French *pitié* (Davies 2001:234; see discussion Louw 2016:300-302).

While sympathy as a mode of compassion points more to “fellow suffering” as suffering with, compassion as the exemplification of the *passio Dei* in the biblical narrative of Christ’s substitutionary suffering,¹⁵ illustrates divine mercy and sacrificial love.¹⁶ The latter is captured in a very poignant way by the New Testament notion of *ta splanchna*.

Ta splanchna reveals God as a Presencing Entity, “a Companion, ‘your God’” (Hall 1993:147). Therefore, in praxis-thinking it is not the task of theological reflection to proof and demonstrate that God exists and

14 The Christian poet Lactantius (in Davies 2001:235), who lived from the third to the fourth century, combined the concept of compassion, *misericordia*, to the notion of *humanitas*. He viewed compassion as a corporate strength granted by God (*hunc pietatis adfectum*) in order that humankind can show kindness to others, love them, and cherish them, protecting them from all dangers and coming to their aid (Lactantius in Davies 2001:35). Compassion thus creates a bond of human society and displays human dignity. “Humanitas is to be displayed to those who are ‘suitable’ and ‘unsuitable’ alike, and ‘this is done humanely (humane) when it is done without hope on reward” (Lactantius in Davies 2001:35).

15 *Paschō* is closely connected to soteriology. It is substitutionary in character because Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins (Heb. 13:12). The suffering of Christ as displayed in a theology of the cross, describes the all-sufficiency and completeness of his atoning sacrifice. His vicarious suffering took place *ephapax*, once for all (Heb. 7:27; 9:12; Rom. 6: 10) (Gärtner 1971:723).

16 “As the signifier of a divine quality which can apply also to human relationships, the root *ḥm* has much in common with the noun *hesed*, which denotes the fundamental orientation of God towards his people that grounds his compassion action. As “loving-kindness” which is “active, social and enduring”, *hesed* is Israel’s assurance of God’s unfailing benevolence” (Davies 2001:243).

therefore must be, but to bear diachronically witness to God’s being-there, being-with, and being-for the creature.

The notion of *ta splanchna*¹⁷ indicates the polymorphic multidimensionality of God. God as the verbing God in terms of a divine infiniscence. Therefore, a vivid mode of *splanchnizomai* totally reframes our understanding of who God is and what is meant by God’s power. Instead of threat, power (a Caesar-like display of imperialistic strength – *pantokrator*), divine power is now understood as caring power, passion, and compassion (*oiktirmos*).

3.2 Toward a pneumatology of diachronic panentheism within the interplay *homo religiosus* – *homo digitalis*

Metaverse thinking is about befriending relationality and technical communication. It creates a sense of belongingness to Facebook friends. However, the relations are in the first instance via a network of cloud computing. Soulfulness becomes part of a virtual reality and cannot replace the existential realm of what Heidegger called Dasein, being immediate there within the reality of the threat of death and dying; Dasein as an ingredient of a sense of purposefulness which is not artificial but indeed ontological (Heidegger 1963: 324); direction towards - *Woraufhin* (Heidegger 1963: 324).

In order to address the threat of “soulful pornography”, the notion of panentheism could be viewed as a most needed contribution to the interplay between metaverse thinking and the unfulfilled spiritual needs of *homo religiosus*. Sally McFague (1987:72) calls the whole of the cosmos and universe the “body of God”. Thus, the notion of panentheism (see also McFague.1993). For J. Moltmann (1993:xi-xii), the challenge Christian spirituality is to exchange the traditional notion of “God *and* creation” with the panentheistic notion of “God *in* creation”. “In” then becomes a pneumatological category. This new kind of panentheistic thinking about the presence of God in the whole of the cosmic universe, boils to the

17 Within metaphoric speech, *ta splanchna* expresses pity, compassion, and love. “The oldest form of the verb is *splanchnneuō*, eat the entrails, prophesy from the entrails” (Esser 1976:599). And that is what the humanisation of humankind and the ministerial praxis of Christian spirituality, should and ought to be: Prophesy from the entrails and not merely formulating rationalistic solutions from the human mind (*nous*). See also Louw (2016:316).

following: “The centre of this thinking is no longer the distinction between God and the world. The centre is the recognition of the presence of God in the world and the presence of the world in God.” (Moltmann (1993:13). I want to concur with Moltmann’s version of a pneumatologically infused form of panentheism:

In this network of relationships, “making,” “preserving,” “maintaining” and “perfecting” are certainly the great one-sided relationships; but “indwelling,” “sympathizing,” “participating,” “accompanying,” “enduring,” “delighting” and “glorifying”, relationships are of mutuality which describe a cosmic community of living between God the Spirit and all his created things (Moltmann 1993:14), even the digitalised networking of digitalised relationships and friendships.

Conclusion

Diachronic thinking in pastoral caregiving, leads to the notion of divine presencing as substitution (exchange of place with the suffering other). Due to the *passio Dei*, *homo religiosus* gain a new ontological status: To exemplify divine forms of panentheistic embodiments within the whole of the cosmic universe and the digitalized metaverse. *Homo religiosus* become diachronically redefined. The diachronic moment takes place when compassion is en fleshed in gestures, attitudes and encounters wherein people, the other, become aware of the pity (ῥῆμ) and caring grace (ἡνν, *oiktirmos*) of the *Meta-Other*. In this way, the *Passio Dei* (*splanchnizomai*) could become enacted in different polymorphic God-images and the multidimensionality of different encounters between the Divine Pneuma and the human soul (*nēfēsh*).

Ta splanchna, displays divine compassion as explication of the theological *meta-physics* of divine bowel categories. In this regard, pastoral caregivers, as representatives of *diachronic panentheism*, becomes theological speaking, comforters to the soulful needs of netizens exposed to the threat of soulful pornography.

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