Pandemic, New Media and Religion

H. Gutierrez, "Villa Aurora"
Florence Italy

The more recent data released by one of the most reliable research institutes in the world, the "Coronavirus Resource Center" of the John Hopkins University in Baltimore, speaks of more than 141 million cases of Covid-19 infections and more than 3 million deaths in the world. If we add to this epidemiological dramatic description also the social, financial, economic and political elements of distress and instability this virus has introduced, we easily understand that the true significance and reach of this pandemic still eludes us. The impact is tremendous and devastating on a more organic and not always visible and measurable way. There will be a "before" and an "after" this pandemic, for us all. Our life will not be the same, it can't be the same. The existential, psychological and anthropological effects are profiling a new way of being in the world. A new sense of what we are and who we are is emerging and is creating a different way of being in relationship with others, with nature and also with God. Will we be able to grasp the message behind this pandemic beyond this present moment of crisis? Or unfortunately, as has happened so many times in the past, will distraction, indifference, superficiality and automatisms of various kinds, social and religious, finally take over?

On one hand, to prevent contagion and to limit the risk of spreading the virus, an infinite number of preventive measures and strategies have been proposed: the washing of hands, avoiding close contact, hugs, handshakes, maintaining the due social distance or the use of appropriate medical masks. All this has certainly helped but only "one measure" has been really determinant: the vaccines. Only the countries that have vaccinated the majority of their population, U.S.A, Great Britain, Israel, have passed to a second stage of economic and social opening.

On the other hand of all the strategies proposed to limit, to mitigate and to compensate the devastating effects of this pandemic, the use of the "new media" appears certainly as number one. The introduction of the Smart-work, distance learning, zoom committees and webinars and also internet churches and online worships, have saved us from a real economic and social catastrophe. But what is the real and final impact of the massive use of these new media on our society?

I.   THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA

Marshall McLuhan's pioneering work for describing how "Media" works still helps us today to understand better the enormous implications digital technologies and the new media have in this pandemic. His conception emphasizes three different aspects we should keep in mind:

1. Media are not neutral tools, but they have considerable psychic and social consequences, without regards to their content.
2. Each medium is in constant interplay with other media.
3. The "New Media" fashion and modify our perception of space and time creating a new sense of what reality is and means.

Let us briefly comment each of them.

First, assuming that "the media (medium) is the message" (the classical McLuhan's formula) implies that the media can have considerable effects upon individuals. This position was not generally accepted some decades ago when the effects of mass communications were said to be minimal. But even today the same unawareness is still visible in large sectors of society and in the majority of religious communities as well. To have today the Bible in the smartphone certainly is of enormous help but at the same time it changes the profile of the message itself and also the religious attitude of the reader in a fundamental way. As a consequence, we are advised to look more carefully at the intrinsic effects of new technologies and their accelerating and amplifying effects on human, social and historic processes like this Pandemic, not in order to avoid them (we could not, that's almost impossible) but to better understand and follow the new religious attitude we are fostering and creating. In other words we should have not only "Adventists media enforcers" but also "Adventist media analysts".

The second principle reminds us that media do not act alone, separately, but are part of a large system encompassing all the other media. When a new medium is introduced, the other existing media are affected and, at the same time, existing media affect the new medium that is introduced. This effect is called hybridization by McLuhan and can be seen in action in new media and whose effects are not of summation but of multiplication. This means, that the today massive use of the new media, particularly in this pandemic, has tremendously accelerated, beyond our awareness, a new way of being church for which we are not administratively prepared.

Third, according to McLuhan, the media heavily change our conception of space and time. Suffice it to remember his claim that "the globe is no more than a village". The implication of this position can be fully understood if we accept the idea that social space and time today are defined in terms of information and not of geography. As a consequence, according to this principle, we can explore the implication of new technologies in shaping interpersonal relationships. It means that what new media do now, as old media have done in the past, is to establish new communicational contexts - virtual spaces, virtual communities, etc. – in which individuals can interact and exchange information in new anthropological ways. This means, that the today massive use of the new media, particularly in this pandemic, has already tremendously changed, beyond our awareness, the way of being church for which we still are not theologically prepared and for which we have not theological proposals and theological answers.

II.   THE NEW MEDIA AND THE PANDEMIC

The Covid-19 outbreak on an unprecedented global level has further embedded media – as news institutions, as information providers, as spaces for socialization and as technologies of power – in people's lives in ways never witnessed before. With information vying with misinformation in the virtual "war against the virus", news media corporations have reported a monumental rise in traffic as people concerned about their lives turn to mainstream media, often seen as representing the official viewpoint, for continuous coverage of the virus, updates on quarantine and lockdown support and counter-programming. Digital media platforms and smartphones have also seen increased traffic, becoming, by necessity, the virtual spaces for all types of interactions, from work, to conducting business, to all forms of socialization (including virtual dinner parties) as all forms of interpersonal socialization have been prohibited.

Media have also become more entrenched in the very fabric of government and governmentality, with leaders across the globe using technologies of power to monitor people's interactions and movements and ensuring their compliance through digital surveillance measures put in place to 'combat' the global coronavirus pandemic. China, where the outbreak began, has reportedly used

the most extensive population surveillance capabilities – data analysis, facial recognition, phone tracking, apps and even drones, to monitor the disease through domestic surveillance. South Korea and Singapore, too, have adopted these technologies, provoking comments in the Western world about cultural differences that serve to normalise discourses that what happens in Asia, or the non-West, is always different to what happens in the West. India, the so-called largest democracy in the world, complemented digital surveillance with lockdowns on the ground and Israel, often talked about as the only Middle Eastern country with Western-style democracy, announced it was using "digital means", including geo-locating phones, to monitor the population, neglecting to disclose that these technologies, designed for supposedly counter-terrorist activities, had been in use against the entrapped Palestinian population for decades.

But what to make of ubiquitous media and its entrenchment in everything we do? How can we address it without falling into generalisations and neglecting to continue asking key questions concerning media power? In a post-Covid world, media and communications scholars will no doubt be competing to make sense of the excessive mediation around the virus and its effects, and will no doubt produce studies after studies on different aspects of the coverage of the crisis, whether we like it or not, and technologies will continue to be as ubiquitous as during this moment of global crisis, if not more. As Italian philosopher and analyst, Giorgio Agamben, has put it: the pandemic has introduced and justified an unprecedented "State of Exception" reinforcing the already strong controlling profile of our modern States and Societies.

Or as Evgenij Morozov, author of the "The Net delusion. The Dark Side of Internet", says about the massive use of the new media in this pandemic that he calls the "Solutionist Strategy". The main question, says Morozov, is not how these technologies might threaten our privacy. That is not the greatest danger to our democracies. The real risk is that this crisis will entrench the solutionist toolkit as the default option for addressing all other existential problems – from inequality to climate change. After all, it is much easier to deploy solutionist tech to influence individual behavior than it is to ask difficult political questions about the root causes of these crises.
But the solutionist responses to this disaster will only hasten the diminishment of our public imagination and make it more difficult to imagine a world without the tech giants dominating our social and political infrastructure.

We are all solutionists now, continues Morozov. When our lives are at stake, abstract promises of political emancipation are less reassuring than the promise of an app that tells you when it's safe to leave your house. The real question is whether we will still be solutionists tomorrow.

Solutionism and neoliberalism are so resilient not because their underlying ideas are so good but because those ideas have profoundly reshaped institutions, including governments. The worst is still to come: the pandemic will supercharge the solutionist state, as 9/11 did for the "surveillance State", creating an excuse to fill the political vacuum with anti-democratic practices, this time in the name of innovation rather than just security.

III.   NEW MEDIA, PANDEMIC AND RELIGION

So, the main, and for the moment still, eluded question for religions, is the same. How, the massive use of these new media, is changing faith and the profile of religious experience today? And this is not a nostalgic, conservative or an old-fashioned question. We need to use these new technologies, today it is a must, but at the same time we need to know, through an accurate cultural and theological analysis, what is in play and what is implied by this massive use.

There are three types of churches according to the use they make of the "New Media". Each of these types combines and presupposes a particular understanding of what a "Media" is but also a particular understanding of what a church is.

First, there are churches that make a massive and sophisticated use of new media as a pure means of spreading their own message which, however, remains untouched and invulnerable both to the new media and to the socio-cultural context in which these are born and of which they are an expression. Here we are in front of a solipsist, purist and fideist understanding of religion.

Second, there are churches that use new media massively, without realizing how much these tools and their socio-cultural context of reference, transform them essentially and structurally. Here we are front of a digital cultural determinism that uncritically is accepted by some churches.

Third, there are churches that use new media but that allow these tools and their socio-cultural context of reference to become a space for renewal and reorientation of their faith without losing control of these processes. Here we find the fragile but conscious interaction of a faith that knows that it is influenced by its own culture without been necessarily determined by it.

To make it short, I think that Adventism belongs to the first group. It's a church that makes a massive and a sophisticated use of the new media but without changing neither its own identity nor its message.

IV.   "IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS"

I have tried to do differently in a little book on the pandemic, published last December in California, where I attempted to describe the effects the pandemic should have on our Adventist identity and message. Let's me read, to conclude, the last page of the first chapter where I analyze Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel "Love in the Time of Cholera" putting it in parallel to our "Life in the Time of Coronavirus" written march 7, 2020.

"The sense of vulnerability is not an ethical virtue, an exceptional anthropological trait. It is not given by the power of a shrewd and incisive introspection. It is essentially given by the presence of the other, by the opening to the other. It is the other that awakens in us the sense of our incompleteness and our vulnerability. But today this vulnerability revealed to us by a virus makes us feel uncomfortable and embarrassed because we fear it and we don't know what to do with it. As the German sociologist Harmut Rosa says, we have built societies with "resources" but without real "relationships". And the first thing that real "relationships" produce in us is a very beneficial sense of vulnerability. In both directions, vulnerability in our life that pushes us towards others in trust and vulnerability in the lives of others that pushes them to open up and trust themselves to us. Vulnerability creates reciprocity, affections that reach us from others and emotions that starting from us touch others.

Only the preservation of this sense of fragility of life can guarantee to societies a full flowering which Hartmut Rosa describes as the ability to create social "Resonance". We have lost a healthy and beneficial sense of familiarity with others that would allow us to create social resonance by not anesthetizing our vulnerability but rather by making it become the pilot of our empathy for the other.

What should religions say in this crisis? Anything. The less we say, maybe the better. Our zeal and diligence, the sense of our own mission and our obsession with a synthetic and all-encompassing vision of history and life, which often lead us to compulsively pronounce what we believe to be pearls of wisdom or decisive words, is better to curb, to contain, to suspend momentarily. This could even become a sign of a wisdom recovered in extremis. This virus is teaching us, even us believers, many new and different things about the world, about ourselves and about others that we thought we knew well. For example, the fact that we are like others, neither more nor less. We have no anthropological or medical privileges. We can be affected like others in the same way. Our doctrinal advantage, what does it give us in addition really? And the doctrinal ignorance of those who don't believe, what does it actually take away from them? Isn't the discovery of this unexpected human solidarity, revealed by a virus, like Balaam's donkey, in essence, good news brought by an atypical messenger? It certainly is, because it reminds us once again of the transversality and indelible solidarity of the human condition that cannot be tampered nor deleted by any ideology or denominational belonging. Should not this belief be at the heart of every religious message?

Christians are certainly special in God's eyes. But they are just as special as any other human being who does not attend a church and does not read our holy text, the Bible. How special to the Creator is he who does not manifest the transport and emotion for the religious forms that instead touch and move us Christians. The value of Christianity does not lie in what it manages to say or not say, do or not do but rather in the fact of being able to transmit through the incomplete words and even through the ambivalent actions of our testimony, through our gestures, breath, gaze and through our unconscious and natural way of being in the world, not the sense of a distance that separates us from others but on the contrary a profound sense of closeness and convergence in the common belonging to a humanity freely offered to us all by God.

This is what was difficult for me to understand as a pragmatic Peruvian pastor, son of a pastor equally concrete and certain, in ideas and actions. For us pastors, bureaucrats of the sacred, as for Jonah the prophet, faith has mostly become lately a matter of geometry and precision. But this virus is teaching us that Faith if nourished by love does not schematize either life or people – even less God or the Bible, and that the essence of love is expressed in the incompleteness of one's own experience of Faith which pushes us towards others with confidence. This is the essence of an atypical, vulnerable and empathic religiosity, not muscular, not overbearing, not boasting, which I slowly and painfully learned to know in the version of my dear friend and colleague, Professor Vittorio Fantoni, here in our welcoming campus of "Villa Aurora.", in Florence, where he died just these days.".

(Hanz Gutierrez, *In the Time of Coronavirus. Chronicle of a Pandemic*, Roseville, California, 2020, chapter I, pp. 20,21)