Mission in the Age of Digitalisation: Metaverse, Metamodernism, and Metanarrative [1]

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We are living in a transitional period where the metaverse is expected to shape our future in all aspects of our lives. In particular, the metaverse and other relevant computing technologies have already led us into a new era of Christian mission. There is no doubt that the metaverse is a significant mission field for the next generation. Churches and mission agencies need to recognise the urgency of developing practical strategies and methods for mission in the metaverse. However, it is equally vital for them to realise some of the negative trends manifested in the metaverse, which need attention from cultural, social, and theological perspectives in order to consider missional approaches to deal with the underlying thoughts underpinning the trends.

The first negative trends of the metaverse are digital identities and 'imago meta'. It is not difficult to foresee that humans will identify more closely with the digital identities they have created than with their real identities given to them by God when the metaverse has deeply permeated our lives and creates an irresistible digital lifestyle in the future. There is a reasonable concern that the God-given identity

[1] This is a summary of 'Mission in the Age of Digitisation: Metaverse, Metamodernism, and Metanarrative' which is the 11th chapter in "Together in the Mission of God" published by WCC publications to commemorate the centennial anniversary of IMC (International Missionary Council). This book is available on the website of WCC publications (https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/TogetherInTheMissionOfGod_Web.pdf)

'imago Dei' would be conflated with the self-made identity 'imago meta' crafted in the metaverse.[2]

The second negative metaverse trend is disembodiment which separates the physical body from the virtually expanded consciousness. If one's existence is closely related to self-awareness recognising one's ontological existence in the real world and one's presence is connected to consciousness realising one's experiences in the virtual environment through one's ontic avatar, disembodiment in the metaverse causes depersonalisation by disabling self-awareness of users and increasing the sense of presence through reinforcing the sense of spatial presence, involvement, and reality in their immersive virtual experiences.[3]

Finally, the metaverse would be a virtual platform to realise virtual immortality and digital resurrection to construct the human utopia. There are people who pursue the possibility of immortality by uploading their consciousness into cyberspace.[4] Digital cloning technology in combination with holographic technology makes the "Digital Resurrection" of the deceased already possible at the stage of practical use.

The aforementioned negative trends of the metaverse will bring complex and multifaceted challenges not only to Christian ethics and theology but also to the Christian worldview concerning Christian ontology, epistemology, and anthropology.

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[2] The term 'Imago Meta' was coined by Ian Harber and Patrick Miller in their article 'How to Prepare for the Metaverse' to describe a virtually created being by a human user in opposition to "Imago Dei' describing a human being created by God in His image. Ian Harber & Patrick Miller, "How to Prepare for the Metaverse." The Gospel Coalition, Last modified November 2, 2021, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/prepare-metaverse
[3] Thomas Schubert, "The sense of presence in virtual environments: A three-component scale measuring spatial presence, involvement and realness," *Journal of Media Psychology* 15, no. 2 (2003): 69.
[4] Tim Jordan, *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet* (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, 2002), 28; Jonna Quitney Anderson and Harrison Rainie, *The future of the Internet: Ubiquity, mobility, security* (New York: Cambria Press, 2008), 311.

The biblical understanding of the ontological nature of humanity and the epistemological understanding of reality will be seriously challenged in the era of the metaverse. These negative sociocultural trends of the metaverse are at the stage of producing emergent patterns at present and will become dominant cultural regularities nurtured and underpinned by metamodernism and transhumanism.

In their article 'Notes on Metamodernism', Vermeulen and van den Akker "explain that the prefix 'Meta' was derived from the word 'Metaxy' in Plato's Symposium, which means 'Betweenness'.[5] Vermeulen and van den Akker interpret the term 'betweenness' as an oscillation that engages two opposing philosophical stances, modernism and postmodernism, like a pendulum swinging between the two poles. [6] In this light, the oscillations of human identities and perceptions of reality between the real world and the metaverse are underpinned by the metamodern ontology and epistemology. Metamodern ontology, in particular, emphasises co-existence and hybridity between humans and their avatars in the metaverse. The concept of the human-avatar symbiosis is not only about the co-existence of biological humans and digital humans (avatars) but also about co-evolution by reciprocal interactions and mutual dependence, which seems to be a new type of ontological syncretism amalgamating human and avatar ontologies.[7]

Another underlying philosophy underpinning the phenomena of the metaverse is transhumanism. Humans have been always trying to overcome physical limitations and enhance living conditions for a better life. However, the contemporary version of transhumanism is more than an intellectual movement but a religion that conceives of a superhuman state free of illness, unhappiness, and death through the use of advanced technology.[8] Many transhumanists have professed faith in the eventual uploading of human minds into machine bodies and virtual reality in the pursuit of immortality, which is their religious concept of salvation.[9]

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[5] Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2, no. 1. (2010): 5, DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677
[6] Vermenulen and van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," 5.
[7] Peter Hancock, Mind, *Machine and Morality: Toward a Philosophy of Human-Technology Symbiosis* (London: CRC Press, 2009), 56.
[8] Robert Geraci, *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 287.
[9] Geraci, *Virtually Sacred,* 287.

One of the noticeable aspects of metamodernism is that it engages in the resurgence of metanarratives and universal truths. This positive side of metamodernism can be used as a missional tool to reintroduce the biblical metanarratives, which can bring hope to humanity by overcoming the hopelessness and deconstruction caused by postmodernism's cynical irony and relativistic skepticism toward universal truths.

This paper now lays out the three main narratives that the Christian mission needs to particularly focus on as missional responses toward the phenomena and philosophies of the metaverse.

Firstly, Genesis 1:26-27 exposes that the imago Dei is best understood as human identity since humanity was created in a manner appropriate to the realization of its God-given identity.[10] This God-given identity has a distinctive theological role to play, which is the unique office as a divine representative and divine reflection.[11] In the era of the metaverse, humans may replace their God-given identity with the virtual identities that they create in the metaverse. Humans may also alter God's mandate from actualising God's divine purpose to actualising human ambition. Imago Dei is not only related to who we are but also what we are created for as God's image bearers. After creating the first human in His image, God gave him the mandate to act as His agent to cultivate the real world that He created. This mandate is the original mission of God given to humankind so imago Dei is inseparable from 'Missio Dei' since both are central to human existence as the cultural mandate of God ties both together.[12]

The second narrative is Jesus's incarnation which shows the corporeal embodiment of the divinity and the humanity of Jesus. Different from the concept of avatar in Hinduism which is about manifestations of divine beings (taking forms of humans or animals so that they are not truly embodied in flesh), Jesus's divine nature

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[10] Ryan Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: Penn State University Press, 2016), 120.

[11] Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 184.

[12] Clark Fobes, "Imago Dei in Missio Dei: Biblical Foundations for Work and Mission," The Evangelical Missiological Society Southwest Regional Conference 2018, 2-3. https://www.academia.edu/36262616/IMAGO_DEI_IN_MISSIO_DEI_BIBLICAL_FOUNDATIONS_FOR_WORK_AND_MISSION..

became completely embodied in human flesh, which was seeable, touchable, and even killable to offer Himself as the eternal atonement for our sins. The real theological peril expected in the disembodied age is that the metaverse can play a role to foster a disembodied theology, such as digital Docetism that denies corporeality to be fully embodied human or digital Gnosticism that undermines the significance of physical experiences of humans in the ordinary earthly life.

The final biblical narrative is the eschatological event as the hope for the restoration of God's kingdom against the transhumanist utopia. Transhumanism pursues the evolutionary development of cloning human minds for the very telos of human existence in the metaverse and of cybernetic immortality after death as its soteriological goal.[13] In addition, transhumanism is based on a techno-optimist perspective on the eschatological end of the physical world, which will be accomplished by human efforts alone.[14] This soteriological goal and eschatological hope of transhumanism aim to replace traditional religions by proclaiming that through technology transhumanism can achieve what traditional religions have sought for millennia: immortality and the establishment of a cyberspace utopia.[15] It is significant for Christians to proclaim the biblical version of eschatology to enable humans to live their ordinary lives either in joy or suffering through embracing the suffering of Christ and the hope that He will restore His kingdom.

These three narratives are the essential parts of the Bible containing the core messages for biblical soteriology, Christology, and eschatology. This interesting feature is a strong justification to emphasise the necessity of reintroducing the biblical metanarrative in a fresh way, not only to rescue God's people from the complicating confusion caused by the philosophies of this age but also to expand the Kingdom of God in both this physical world and the virtual world.

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[13] Mikael Leidenhag, "Saved Through Technology: Exploring the Soteriology and Eschatology of Transhumanism," Religion Compass 14, no. 11 (November 2020): 1-9, https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12377.
[14] Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Transhumanism as a Secularist Faith," *Journal of Religion and Science* 47, no. 4 (December 2012): 725.
[15] Tirosh-Samuelson, "Transhumanism as a Secularist Faith," 715.

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