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# Metaverse as challenge to *homo religionis*. Diachronic thinking in theory formation for pastoral caregiving to netizens

## ABSTRACT

*Metaverse brings about the reshaping of the playful human being (homo ludens) into the digitalised human being (homo digitalis). Transcendence (homo transcendentalis) has become digitalised by the power of technologised options (optimalisation of our being human) and fictive forms of sublimations (avatars). Due to, inter alia, Facebook and Instagram, a spirituality of diachronic networking and digital immediacy, set in: I start to exist through and via (Greek: dia) the digitalised other. Thus, the following research question: How could metaverse thinking contribute to a multidimensional reinterpretation of religious spirituality?*

## CONTRIBUTION

The article explores the interplay between metaverse thinking and the reframing of metaphysical thinking in practical theology and pastoral caregiving. In this regard, it provides information on the impact of virtual reality on anthropology and how spatial categories (3D Spheres) and their relatedness to transcendent experiences change our understanding of religion. The article revisits the notion of *homo religionis*. With reference to categories emanating for



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cyberspatiality, the article challenges pastoral theology to exchange abstract categories describing an impassible God, for diachronic categories outlining a panentheistic God infiltrating the hypersphere of cloud computing and the virtual reality of *homo electronicus*, pneumatologically.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a very surprising and unexpected way, after the 20<sup>th</sup> century with its secularised critique on all forms of metaphysical reflection, the meta-notion of “transcendence”<sup>1</sup> in religious spirituality surfaced. Due to the internet and its connection to metaverse thinking,<sup>2</sup> the realm of cyberspatiality and cloud computing reopened the debate on the connection between transcendence and the religious mysticism of meta-physics and slim technology.

On 29 October 2021, Mark Zuckerberg announced that the new trademark of Facebook will be called “metaverse”. He released a video wherein he declared: “I believe the metaverse is the next chapter for the internet” (Haigney 2021:1). In this way, we can argue that the new dimension of the digitalisation of life brings about a new, but vivid curiosity regarding the expansion of the realm of the universe into the realm of metaverse. The notions of cyberspatiality and cloud computing reopen the debate on “meta-physics”.

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1 A core feature of spirituality is, therefore, people’s relationship to transcendence (Puchalski & Ferrell 2010:121).

2 In terms of a spirituality of metaverse, a kind of utopian condition of enhanced, qualitative livelihood is created virtually; it even revealed the birth of a new “electronic frontier” (Dawson & Cowan 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).



**Figure 1:** 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 (2017). Public domain. For academic purposes only.

According to Han (2013:20), human imagination will, in future, be shaped fundamentally by images originating from social media, the internet and Artificial Intelligence.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the reshaping of the playful human being (*homo ludens*) into the digitalised human being (*homo digitalis*). Transcendence (*homo transcendentalis*) is now becoming digitalised by the power of technologised options (optimisation of our being human) and fictive forms of sublimations.

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3 "This reference architecture articulates how to apply artificial intelligence over satellite imagery at scale, using Azure resources including Azure Synapse Analytics, Azure Data Lake Storage Gen2, Apache Spark pools, Azure Data Share, Azure Batch, and Azure Container Registry" (Azure Space 2022).

What will be the impact of cloud computing on:

- The quality of our being human (existential disposition) and self-understanding (the anthropological question)?
- The dynamics of religious thinking and the conceptualisation of transcendence within our human quest for meaning (religious spirituality)?
- The theological categories in pastoral caregiving that are applied to emphasise the presence of God within the trajectories of painful life events? The theological language in theory formation and the content of faith as related to God-images within the interplay between virtual reality and the divine realm of religious thinking in pastoral caregiving?

The challenge in a praxis approach to anthropology and the notion of spirituality is to revisit the paradigms used to describe the connection between the human spirit (*spiritus*) and the realm of religious thinking in pastoral theology.

What is meant by *homo religionis* in praxis thinking?

## 2. THE COMPLEXITY OF RELIGIOSITY WITHIN THE HUMAN QUEST FOR SIGNIFICANCE IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

From a phenomenological point of view, we can say that religion arises when a vision of a celestial order is used to bind together a fragile group of human beings (Mann 2011:57). According to Eliade (1959), life evolves within the realm of myth. Human beings are thus driven by what Eliade calls, an “ontological nostalgia”: a desire to live in the presence of the gods who are the pre-eminently real and the source of all being; a religious curiosity driven by a kind of numinous awareness (Otto 1923); the religious feeling and need for being dependent from a transcendent source for trusting (Schleiermacher 1810; 1980).

Doty (1996:290) traces the meaning of religion back to linguistic roots indicating *ligature* or (to draw on a Sanskrit root) *yoga*, namely a tying-together of significances. Religion should thus contribute to the human quest for a sense of belongingness and meaningful interconnections (see also Drehsen 2005).

Levinas (1987:31) calls this longing for intersubjectivity and the desire for closeness, intimacy, and a during sense of belongingness within the countenance with the stranger and weak other (*visage*): *désir métaphysique*. The metaphysical desire is, from the start, an existential longing for the other – being-for-others (*l’être pour autrui*).

Weima (1988:21) describes the main task and function of a psychology of religion as the study of the relation between the religious person and the transcendental object, as made known through perception and expressed in symbols and rituals.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the quest for a transcendental source that constitutes an existential mode of trust.

## 2.1 Religious experiences as expressions of life forces (*spiritus*) and human well-being (wholeness)

In “African spirituality”, religious spirituality points to the notion of *spiritus*, a force that determines human destiny and is concerned with day-to-day human activities. According to Mtetwa (1996:24), religious spirituality is a life force that operates within the sphere of communal events:

One of the most remarkable and tangible dimensions of African Spirituality relates to the unique notion of communality and collective solidarity that the African society exhibits in all spheres of life. There is a profound sense of interdependence, from the extended family to the entire community. In a very real sense, everybody is interrelated; including relations between the living and those who have departed.

Skhakhane (1995:106) argues that religious spirituality not merely refers to a pious behaviour but rather describes a commitment and involvement in a manner that gives meaning to life. Spirituality then means that which influences a person to live in a mode that is truly fulfilling. Within a communal understanding of life, religious spiritualities point to general human well-being. Therefore, life in itself must be healed, in order to establish a sense of “wholeness”. African spirituality is structured, not along the lines of a pyramid, but of a circle – community and communality as the centre of religious life (Bosch 1974:40).

## 2.2 Religious experiences as exponents of *pneuma* (the pneumatological dimension)

To my mind, Waaijman (2004:314-332) has done the most extensive research on spirituality. He explains the complexity of the concept in its relationship to *nous* and *pneuma*, as well as to the biblical concepts of devotion (*eusebeia*), holiness, mercy/charity, and perfection (see also Endres 2002:143-155). According to Waaijman (2004:359), spirituality is an exponent of the French *spiritualité* (Latin: *spiritualitas*) with roots in the biblical field of meaning: *ruach*

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4 In order to get a better understanding of what is meant by “religious experiences”, literature distinguishes between extrinsic religiosity (religiousness as traditional involvement in structures and rites; strongly dependent on the group or community) and intrinsic religiosity (the primary focus is on religious values and the experience of transcendence).

*pneuma*. Spirituality represents both the divine perspective and the human spirit. It includes ascetic and mystical experiences as related to both the biblical tradition (*ruach*) and Hellenistic intuition and knowledge (*nous*).

To conclude, at stake in religiosity is the relationship between the divine Spirit/*pneuma* and the human spirit/soul within the reality of life. The notion of Spirit/spirit could, therefore, be viewed as a key concept in the spiritual yearning for transcendence and human attempts to search for meaning. The existential dynamics of religious experiences takes place within the existential interplay between our desire for fortune/wealth/luck/happiness and the acute and painful awareness of mortality, human frailty, and woundedness.

### 3. *HOMO RELIGIONIS* WITHIN THE GAP BETWEEN FORTUNE/WEALTH/LUCK AND MORTALITY/DEATH/HUMAN FRAILTY

In antiquity, *religiosus* denoted persons who were scrupulously but not excessively attentive to observances due to gods and human beings. In this sense, Cicero could speak of *homines religiosi* (Alles 1987).

In Greek mythology, two bipolar tensions contribute to the fuelling of what can be called the human quest for religion. *Homo religionis* is encompassed by two existential bipolarities. On the one hand, there is the constant yearning for luck/fortune, success, and happiness (*Eros*). On the other hand, life is daily being threatened by *Thanatos*: The painful awareness of death and the struggle to cope with the notion of mortality and human vulnerability.



**Figure 2:** Eros with stretched arms and wings awaiting fortune. “Ἔροσ (Eros; Gr. Ἔρως) is central to our religion, for without this divine power, the full flowering of interaction between gods and men is impossible. (Eros, Ἔρως 2010. Online: ORPHIC HYMN TO EROS. 2010 by HellenicGods.org. Photo: User: Jastrow who has kindly placed the image in the public domain. Corruption of the pottery cleaned up with Corel Paintshop. File: Eros bobbin Louvre CA1798.jpg – Wikimedia Commons [20 April 2022].



**Figure 3:** Hypnos (left) and Thanatos (right) carrying the dead Sarpedon while Hermes looks on (Thanatos Wikipedia 2022. Online: <http://yamm.finance/wiki/Thanatos.html> [20 April 2022].

Encapsulated by these two bipolar forces, a religious consciousness is constantly challenged to control all cosmic forces that endanger the prolonging of human life. Thus, the reason why religiosity and religious experiences are intrinsically engaged with the *meta*-question of life: What are the factors beyond the physical realm that contribute to either our fate or fortune?

Due to technology and the introduction of the internet, the options disclosed by virtual reality contribute to the fact that *homo spectans* has become fascinated by the computerised meta of cyberspatial metaphysics. The prospection of the World Wide Web sets free the dynamics of an optimised kind of hope online within the realm of a digitalised version of fortune/wishful imagination (customising your avatar shape).

From floppy disks and compact discs to flash drives and the cloud, we live in an age of great optimising:

where we can program home appliances to optimize energy usage, where Amazon and Netflix can mine our purchasing histories and those of similar customers to recommend other books and movies we might like, where crowdsourcing services like Chowhound and Waze harness the power of the hive mind to prevent us from wasting money on bad restaurants or wasting time in bad traffic (Grunwald 2014:35).

#### 4. THE INTERPLAY METAVERSE-CYBERSPATIAL METAPHYSICS: *HOMO RELIGIONIS* WITHIN THE CYBERSPATIAL REALM OF RELIGION ON LINE

Karaflogka (2002:191) refers to cyberspace as a polymorphic conception. Since its creation and until the beginning of the 1990s, the internet was a territory occupied solely by computer specialists. However, in light of the widespread usage, the internet and the computer world now support a new and real social or public space where people can “meet” to interact; exchange ideas, knowledge, information, and experience; give substance to creative, imaginative, and innovative new concepts and ideas, as well as relocate and deconstruct old concepts and ideas in a new setting of virtual reality.

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); it creates an “utopia online”.

We can say that *homo spectans* has been transformed into a new citizen, the so-called “netizen” (Karaflogka 2002:192). The internet has become an environment that supports and nurtures the

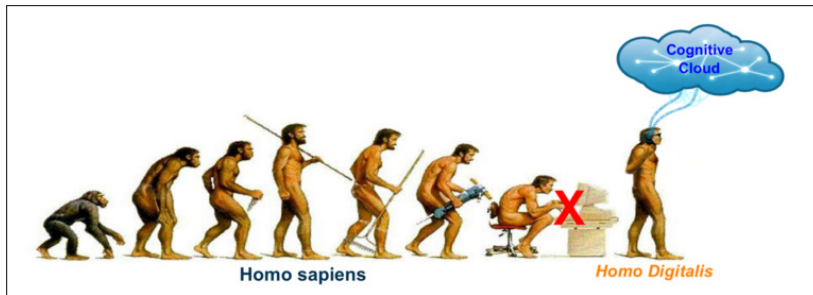


rise of a new conceptual framework and language for religious experience suited to the changed environmental conditions of postmodern society (Karaflogka 2002:193-194).

It is even changing our self-understanding as human beings; it creates a digitalised version of slim human self-understanding (the anthropological implication of digitalisation).

#### 4.1 “Slim anthropology”: Transforming human beings into “trans-human beings” by means of metaverse thinking

Digitalisation and cyberspatiality are shaping our self-understanding as human beings on a daily scale. As said, *homo sapiens* functions according to electronic devices and computerised networks.



**Figure 4:** *Homo digitalis* framed by the trans-dimension of cognitive clouding. *Homo sapiens* will not develop any more evolutionary according to environmental affairs and genetics, but according to processes of digitalisation and the science of computer clouding (D’Onorio [s.a.]. Public domain. For academic purposes only.

Due to the optimisation of our being human by means of technical instrumentalisation, one becomes so absorbed by the fictitiousness of what is called virtual alter egos that the sublimation of life into the so-called “avatars” is becoming “real” and “genuine” to the computer user: I am a fiction and sublimised, therefore, I exist as an “avatar”.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, digitalisation creates a kind of “Second Life” for human beings.

5 “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

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 2022:1).

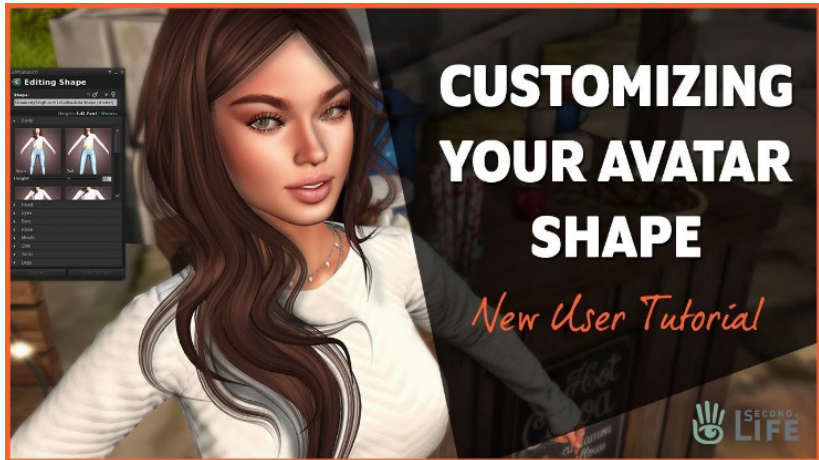


Figure 5: An avatar is a digital-shaped variation of oneself. It is created by means of sublimation, often with the intention to satisfy unfulfilled basic human needs and wishes (Customizing your avatar shape - Second Life tutorial).<sup>6</sup> (Second Life 2022). Public domain. For academic purposes only.

The utopia of “Second Life” is based on the notion of the superhuman being, thriving by means of “superconsciousness” (Ellis 2022). The digitalised superman of virtual reality and Space X could be summarised by the following:

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be derived. Definition of avatar: An electronic image that represents and may be manipulated by a computer user (as in a game) (Avatar 2022).

- 6 “Second Life users, also called residents, create virtual representations of themselves, called avatars, and are able to interact with places, objects and other avatars. They can explore the world (known as the grid), meet other residents, socialize, participate in both individual and group activities, build, create, shop, and trade virtual property and services with one another”. “Developed and owned by the San Francisco-based firm Linden Lab and launched on June 23, 2003, it saw rapid growth for some years and in 2013 it had approximately one million regular users. Growth eventually stabilized, and by the end of 2017 the active user count had declined to ‘between 800,000 and 900,000’”. In many ways, Second Life is similar to massively multiplayer online role-playing games; nevertheless, Linden Lab is emphatic that their creation is not a game: “There is no manufactured conflict, no set objective” (Second Life 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 ... In a future world where it's illegal to drive cars because self-driving vehicles are so much safer, and there aren't any jobs or even household chores to occupy us, making a fresh start on Mars doesn't actually sound like such a bad idea (Dockrill 2017:).

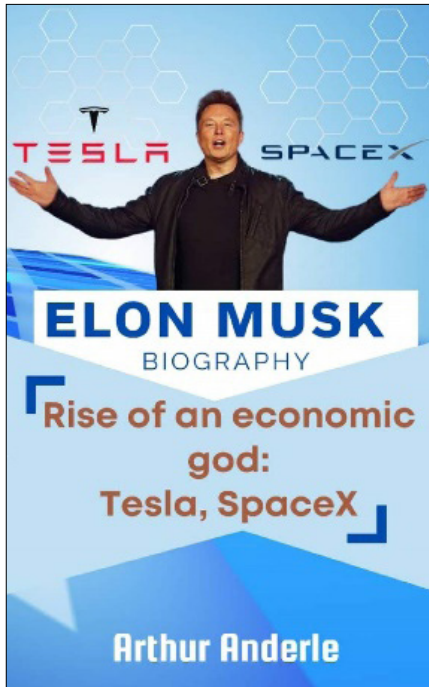
The combination between meta and Facebook implies, *inter alia*, “evolving connection”; “optimisation of direct communication and instant information”, “expansion of growth and development”, and “creative vision”. This form of digitalised optimisation leads to the notion of transhumanism.

In religious circles, transhumanism can easily contribute to what can be called a kind of “spiritual superiority”. For example, as in the case of Twitter, overtaken by Elon Musk's all-powerful super-empowerment, transhumanism can lead to a mode of superconsciousness, pretending to overshadow all forms of religious expositions of spiritual empowerment. Ultimately, *homo digitalis* can thus pretend to move into the super structure of transhumanism.<sup>7</sup>

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) (Transhumanism 2022).

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7 The real danger lurks that even “lived religion” can evolve into “smart religion” (the spiritual quest for the extraordinary) under the pressure of contemporary “smart living”. The possible thread to *homo religionis* and lived religion is that the meta-realm of life and the notion of metacenic transcendence become so occupied by the utopia of “smart living” and the virtuality of “second life” that the normative position of religious institutions is gradually replaced by the aspirations of digitalised values and lifestyles (see Ball 2022:39).



**Figure 6:** 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 owe credit of their successes to an economic god in the person of Elon Musk. This is a biography about this great man, turned god, whose humble beginning is a reflection of 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? (Anderle 2021). Public domain. For academic purposes only.

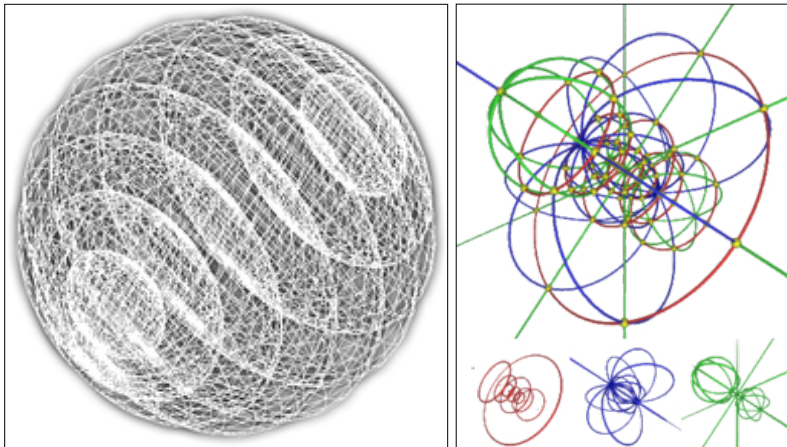
To conclude, instead of one stable domelike construction, cosmology is currently depicted in terms of the dynamics of expanding, optimised dimensions dominated by the paradigm of superconsciousness within the multidimensionality of 3D-spheres.

## 4.2 Metaverse thinking within three-dimensional spaces (3D-spheres) (cyberspatiality)

The traditional and ancient Semitic understanding of cosmology followed the pattern of a layered whole of hyperbolic spheres founded on pillars to constitute an undisturbed whole that can be called a firmament. The whole of the cosmos was perceived as a dome-shaped vault.

Due to cyberspatiality and technology, the notion of a firmament is being substituted for the dynamics of expanding dimensions. Space is constituted by height (vertical dimension), extensiveness and width (horizontal dimension), as well as depth/length (back and forth). We are already living within the multidimensional culture of 3D-spheres, shaped by inexhaustible sequences of meaningful connections and variation in terms of interconnectivity.<sup>8</sup>

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).



**Figure 7:** Depiction of multi-dimensionality of 3D-spheres (Spheres 2022). Public domain. For academic purposes only.

8 "While the multiverse is deterministic, we perceive non-deterministic behavior 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 towards multidimensionality and the notion of the metacene world. "After the Pleistocene came the Holocene, the current epoch of Anthropocene and when our species is as endangered as the Neanderthal, the Metacene has begun" (Ferguson 2022).

The idea of metaverse and its connection 3D-spheres underline the fact that an ever-growing share of our life, labour, leisure, time, wealth, happiness, and relationships will be spent inside virtual worlds, rather than simply aided through digital devices. The digitalisation of life within virtual reality has become a new way of living, a life shaped by digital networking (collaboration) and virtual fiction (invention and sublimation).

The next evolution to this trend [online being] seems likely to be a persistent and 'living' virtual world that is not a window into our life (such as Gmail) but one in which we also exist – and in 3D (hence the focus on immerse VR headsets and avatars) (Ball 2022:38).<sup>9</sup>

*Homo sapiens* is no longer merely *homo ludens* (the playing human being) or merely *homo religionis* (the believing human being). Digital and electronic categories have shaped *homo sapiens* from being formed by exclusively social, psychic, pedagogic, and religious categories.

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).

As hyper mode of existence in metaverse, digitalisation 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 premodernist, modernist, or postmodernist humankind (Karaflogka 2002:200).

Thus, the link between metaverse and “cyberspacialism”.

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 (Thomas, quoted in Karaflogka 2002:200).

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9 Furthermore, human life is becoming encapsulated by 3D technology 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).

The fact is that metaverse<sup>10</sup> and the digitalisation of life brought about a revolution not only in cosmological thinking, but also in reflection regarding anthropological categories applied to capture the impact of cyberspace on human behaviour as well as the human quest for transcendence and meaning. The prefix “*meta*” challenges anew reflections that are involved in questions regarding the reframing of the *meta*-physical realm<sup>11</sup> of life. Meta does not project instant solutions to the human quest for meaning in life, but rather contributes to the complexification of life,<sup>12</sup> probing into the crypto-<sup>13</sup> sphere of life events.<sup>14</sup>

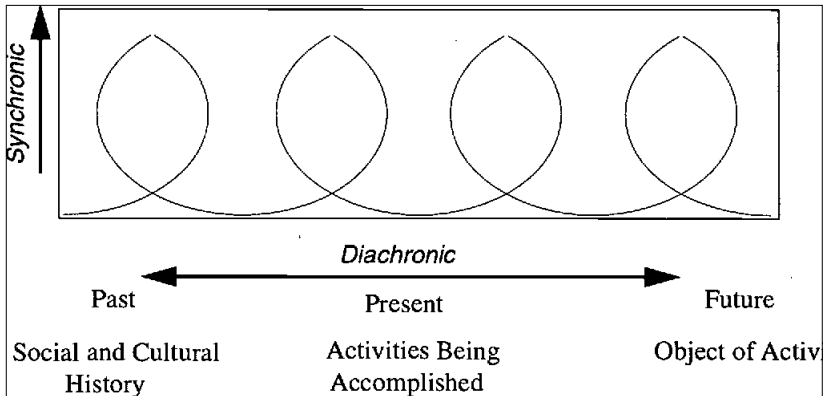
The previous outline regarding the impact of metaverse thinking on human disposition and the quality of life on earth for both human beings and the whole of the cosmos raises the following question: What exactly is the philosophy beyond metaverse thinking and its impact on our being human (anthropological question)?

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- 10 “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).
- 11 “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).
- 12 Truth is framed by what Rescher (1998:56) calls complexifications. Rather than the offering of “cheap solutions”, complexification 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 parts, despite obvious levels of contradiction (Collen 2003:61).
- 13 According to the Dictionary.com (2022), crypto is about the following: “A combining form meaning ‘hidden’, ‘secret’, used in the formation of compound words: cryptograph”.
- 14 According to Davies (in Montuori 2008:xxix), “[f]or three centuries, science has been dominated by the Newtonian and thermodynamic paradigms, which present the universe as either a sterile machine, or in a state of degeneration and decay. Now there is the paradigm of the creative universe, which recognizes the progressive, innovative character of physical processes. The new paradigm emphasizes the collective, and organisational aspects of nature; its perspective is synthetic and holistic rather than analytic and reductionist.”

### 4.3 The fundamental paradigm shift: From a solid universe to multidimensionality and diachronic thinking

Due to fundamental paradigm shifts emanating from cloud computing and cyberspatiality, a new pattern of thinking developed: diachronic thinking. In this regard, the digitalisation of social media such as Facebook and Instagram, a spirituality of diachronic networking and digital immediacy set in. I start to exist through and via (Greek: *dia*) the digitalised other, here and now, irrespective of virtuality and the spiritual power or attractiveness of sublimation and optimisation. (Diachronic Definition [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 2022).



**Figure 8:** Diagram in Gutiérrez *et al.* (2012:1). For academic purposes only.

According to research in socialisation (Gutiérrez *et al.* 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 by means of polymorphic computing.



To conclude, the spirituality of metaverse implies the following paradigmatic changes:

- The notion of polymorphic complexity. The occurrence of different types and forms at different times. Substance is, therefore, not static but dynamic and in flux. Different spatial forms of intelligence become possible and feasible.
- The notion of cyberspatial presencing. Nowhere has become everywhere. In this sense, presence is not static. Thus, the paradigm shift from the quantification of presence (the temperance of now) to the qualification of presencing (the ontic and diachronically mode of being there).

What is the impact of metaverse spirituality on religious thinking in pastoral and practical theology?

## 5. HOMO RELIGIONIS WITHIN A PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL MODE OF DIVINE PRESENCING

In the tradition of religious spirituality, specifically in the Christian tradition, the interplay *homo religionis-homo transcendentalis* often leads to theological categories that project an imperialistic and theistic deity rather than a kind of divine diachronic presence. In this regard, the notion of *deus omnipotens* comes into play: The very abstract *meta*-physical image of an impassible God beyond developed.<sup>15</sup>

### 5.1 The *pantokrator* image of an impassible, immutable deity

In many translations of the Bible, the notion of “omnipotence” became established as the Greek version of the Hebrew phrase “*El Shadday*”.<sup>16</sup> The fact is that paradigms, stemming from Hellenistic thinking with its roots in the so-called Roman cult, were used in translation of the Old Testament into Greek and Latin. This hermeneutical praxis is understandable. Classic metaphysics emphasised, for example, the immutable of a transcendent

15 Due to the tradition of the confessions (see, for example, the Westminster Confession), Carson (2023:23) points out that, “although Aristotle may exercise more than a little scarcely recognized influence upon those who uphold impassibility, at its best impassibility is trying to avoid a picture of God who is changeable, given over to mood swings, dependent on his creatures. In this way, impassibility is connected to the immutability of God, which says that God does not change, and to the aseity of God, which says that God does not need anything. Carson affirms that God is able to suffer, but argues that, if he does so, “it is because he chooses to suffer”.

16 Hieronymus used the Latin version, *deus omnipotens*.

supreme being. Hence, the tendency to translate the “Otherness” of Yahweh (*El Shadday*), in rather Platonic categories and paradigms stemming from abstract metaphysical thinking.<sup>17</sup>

In this respect, it is important to refer to the thorough exegetical research done by Van der Toorn (1995:749-751, 1421). Van der Toorn points out the difficulty to translate the notion “*šadday*” in any other language. The fact that *šadday* is a many-layered concept in Hebrew makes any translation a nightmare. 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*, contributed to the very confusing meaning of *šadday* as pointing to a deity with superhuman powers.<sup>18</sup>

I want to promote and argue for a more Semitic understanding of *šadday*. Furthermore, *šadday* has different meanings in different narratives and different books in the Old Testament. Various texts articulate different modes of thinking about the splendid glory and unique majesty of divine engagements with his covenant people. However, it is crystal clear that “*El Shadday*” should not become confused with a substantial or personified or psychic or abstract version of a metaphysical hermeneutics based on Platonic ontology.

“*El Shadday*” functioned most of times when the unique character of God is compared with the rather dubious character of the so-called other gods. The uniqueness (sovereignty) and greatness of Yahweh should be interpreted within the unique covenant of Yahweh with his covenantal people. It is meant to strengthen the faith of Israel in the presence of God during their exodus and confrontation with other nations who relied on their rather stubborn gods. It should be considered that Yahweh reveals himself not in abstract metaphysical terminology but rather in compassionate engagement categories. Due to covenantal thinking, the fundamental attributes of God align much more with the tribal and familial metaphor: God as a Father and the living God of the covenant. The name of God has thus future, hopeful implications for the quality of life emanating from the vivid presence of the Lord (YHWH): “I am that I am”, or “I will be who I will be”. In this name, his *El Shadday* cannot be compared with the mighty power of Farao who presents the power of the sun god Ra.<sup>19</sup> Yahweh’s power, his all-empowering presence,

17 This is the reason for the emphasis, in many translations, on the fact that God is the Almighty: “[t]he Lord appeared to him [Abraham] and said, ‘I am God Almighty’” (Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 49:25; Ex. 6:3).

18 See the notion ‘omnipotence’ as a divine attribute in English.

19 Ra is the god of the sun and the king or father of all Egyptian gods. He is often shown in human form with a hawk head, a golden disk, with a serpent on top of his head as a crown, a scepter in his left hand, and an ankh in his right hand. The ankh was the ancient Egyptian symbol for life.

should rather be understood in terms of unconditional love, as displayed in different modes of co-suffering yielding to encouragement and a vivid form of hope. The point to understand is that *El Shadday* should always be linked to a form of spiritual empowerment upheld by the faithfulness of Yahweh to his covenantal promises unfolding actions of comfort and care (the praxis of God).

Since the name of God refers more to a verb in the continuous tense than a fixed substance in the past tense, the following theological paradigm shift is proposed, namely from the omniscience of God to the infiniscience of God.

The infiniscience of God indicates that his power is less about a causative threat power and more about a compassionate comfort empowerment. Infiniscience displays sustainable and ongoing faithfulness and grace. God is the living God within the covenantal infiniscience: The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Divine infiniscience is continually displayed in biblical narratives referring to relational categories and verbing terminology.

According to Moltmann (1993:14), divine power is displayed within the network of empowering and caring relationships such as “indwelling”, “sympathising”, “participating”, “accompanying”, “enduring”, “delighting”, and “glorifying”. The presence of God becomes, in this sense, a kind of cosmic diachrony. Presence in the verbing process of presencing should thus be reframed in a praxis of pastoral caregiving, as a pneumatic category describing a cosmic community of a living perichoresis between God the Spirit and all his created things (Moltmann 1993:14). Antithetical categories should, therefore, be exchanged for categories that are more sympathetic and, as in the case of metaverse thinking, diachronic and polymorphic.

## 5.2 Toward a diachronic reframing of “panentheism”: Divine presencing

The cosmic indwelling presence of God causes a kind of “bodily immanence of God”. McFague (1987:72) calls this diachronic interwovenness, panentheism. It is a view of the God-world relationship, in which all things have their origin in God, and nothing exists outside God, although this does not mean that God is reduced to things.

God has an empathetic, intimate, and sympathetic knowledge of the world which implies that ‘the action of God in the world is similarly interior and caring (McFague 1987:73; 1993).

Therefore, Moltmann’s (1993:xi-xii) plea to exchange the traditional notion of “God and creation” with the panentheistic notion of “God in creation” through and by his indwelling *pneuma*.

The tree is not God and should not be worshipped but God is pneumatologically *in* the tree and should be glorified.

In this regard, the notion of “presencing” becomes a very appropriate and vivid indication of both the multidimensionality of God’s pneumatic presence and a polymorphic description of God’s being within the different trajectories of life, even the digitalised hypersphere of cyberspatiality.

“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). According to Scharmer (in Kempen 2015), presencing links origin and immediate experience through the senses together, so that past, present, and future are blended and merged. For example, extraordinary experiences in a transcendental spirituality are no more dependent from rational analyses but become penetrated by sensuality, feeling, and immediate experience.<sup>20</sup>

“Precensing” describes a kind of spiritual habitus, a spiritual disposition, that reflects an existential mode of trust in life (worldly spirituality). Life becomes iconic,<sup>21</sup> sensual,<sup>22</sup> and experiential for transcendent and divine interventions in daily life events.

As a new mode of a “worldly spirituality”, “presencing” expresses a diachronic mode of being there. It reframes transcendence as a kind of sensual awareness of divine engagement and transforming act of penetrating religiosity (lived religion) with immediate impact on forms and modes of existence.

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20 “The boundaries between three types of presence collapse: the presence of the past (current field), the presence of the future (the emerging field of the future), and the presence of one’s authentic Self. When this co-presence, or merging of the three types of presence, begins to resonate, we experience a profound shift, a change of the place from which we operate” (Scharmer, in Kempen [2015:140-141]).

21 Pentcheva (2010:45) coined the term ‘sensual icon’. In iconic viewing, an interconnected exchange of spiritual realm and sensual experience takes place; an interconnection through the interweaving of sounds, smells, singing and seeing: “*osme* (smell) is phonetically close to *Asma* (song, hymn); *dakrya* means both ‘tears’/‘drops of incense’ and ‘acoustic cries’, and finally the sacrifice (Eucharist) of the Spirit (*en pneumatī*) is matched by the human voice exerting its organs of breath (*organois pneumatōs*) to produce the beseeching chant”.

22 Christian thinking was heavily influenced by the Platonic dualism between the ‘spiritual realm’ and ‘sensual experiences’. Sensuality was interpreted as *hēdonē*. When rendered as a ‘gift of nature’, Plato called it good, true, and beautiful (*hēdonē*). Aristotle used it as a synonym of *chara*, joy, in expressing pleasure in practising it as a virtue. In Numeri 11:8, it represents the Hebrew *ṭa’am*, good taste rendering man pleasure (Beyreuter 1975:459).

Every human act and form of embodiment is an ingredient of lived religion. Lived religion, within the mode of diachronic thinking, exhibits the presence of God as even a vivid, sensual experience of care and compassion. In this regard, “presencing”, as a pneumatic category, supplements “presencing” as a virtual category. Thus, the reason why the notion *homo digitalis* should be supplemented by the notion *homo sympatheticus* to prevent digitalised spirituality from becoming merely the disillusionment of a computerised, electronic version of dystopia.

### 5.3 The threat of dystopia – Limitation of virtual reality cyberspatiality (“*Messianismus der Vernetzung*”)

Virtual reality operates according to technological manipulation, the fictitiousness of sublimation and imposed forms of superhumanity, optimisations and spatiality by means of cloud computing. The utopia of “Second Life”, internet-facilitated communication, and virtual friendship is immediately exposed to dystopia and disillusionment.

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 neighborhoods (Dawson & Cowan 2004:8).

The optimisation of artificial intelligence also creates a shadow side, namely the suppression of the creative mind and imagination of the human spirit. “Wikipedia killed the encyclopaedia. Apps killed maps” (Grunwald 2014:14).

Han (2012:6) calls the digital illusions and utopian expectations the “messianism of networking digitalism” (“*Messianismus der Vernetzung*”) (Han 2013:65). The key point in Han’s critical analyses of digitalisation amounts 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). Hence, the real threat that internet communication and digitalisation could endanger the multidimensional dynamics of the human spirit and curb the mysticism of soulful variations within the irreplaceable vitality of our being human (*élan vital*).<sup>23</sup>

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23 In a very poignant manner, Bergson (1946:190) captures the mystery of a soulful meta-physics, the indetermination of human soulfulness: “We call intuition here the sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it.”

Religious spirituality (*homo religionis*), reinterpreted as a vivid mode of diachronic disposition (“precensing” as the verbing of God in terms of a polymorphic expression of a divine mode of being-there), should become expressed and exemplified in categories of a compassionate and caring mode: *homo sympatheticus* (being-there for the suffering other and stranger). Thus, my core theological argument is that, if pastoral caregiving should become reinterpreted as a hermeneutics of diachronic exemplification of divine “precensing”, the notion of compassion becomes imperative to care to netizens and *homo digitalis*. The notion of an illusionary divine nowhere becomes the pneumatology of a divine cosmic infiltration everywhere.

#### 5.4 Diachronic presencing within the interplay *homo digitalis-homo sympatheticus*

The Christian poet Lactantius (in Davies 2001:235), who lived from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, combined the concept of compassion, *misericordia*, to the notion of *humanitas*.<sup>24</sup> 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).

Furthermore, sympathy as compassionate being-with the other is essentially shaped by the notion of *splanchnizomai*. The verb *splanchnizomai* is used to make the unbounded mercy of God visible; it displays the very being of God as comforting faithfulness: Being there, where we are.<sup>25</sup>

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

25 “*Ta splanchna* reveals God as a Presencing Entity, “a Companion, ‘your God’” (Hall 1993:147). In praxis-thinking, it is not the task of the church to demonstrate that God must be, but to bear witness to God’s being-there, being-with, and being-for the creature. In terms of Hall (1993:155), the test of the church’s God-talk at any point in time is its contextual authenticity, its praxis-thinking: Does it illuminate God’s being-with-us?

In general, the Greek *splanchnon* refers to the valuable parts, the heart, lung, liver, the spleen, and the kidneys. During the sacrifice, they are removed for the sacrificial meal. With reference to theory formation in a pastoral anthropology, one should note that *ta splanchna* refers to the human entrails, especially for the male sexual organs and the womb, as the site of the powers of conception and birth. In metaphoric speech, *ta splanchna* expresses pity, compassion, and love. “The oldest form of the verb is *splanchnēuō*, eat the entrails, prophesy from the entrails” (Esser 1976:599).

## 6. TOWARD A REVISED PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL PROPOSITION FOR CAREGIVING (CONCLUSION)

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 presencing<sup>26</sup> God in caregiving – the bowel categories of pity emanating from divine *hēsēd* as a new mode of lived religion.
- The theological grammar not of definite language (definitions of God) but of infinitive language (God as active verb – infinitions of God). Toward a multidimensional understanding as of the presencing God, displaying polymorphic and cultural modes of divine and diachronic infinitions (different polymorphic modes of God’s caring being there where they are).

In the realm of metaverse and the quest for meaning and a worldly spirituality (*weltlichen Spiritualität*) (Gräb 2018:121), *homo electronicus* should be supplemented by *homo sympatheticus*. In practical theological reflection, human disposition should thus be reframed by diachronic thinking. In this way, the realm of cyberspace represents a religious praxis, shaped by the *ta splanchna* of a compassionate God. Compassion makes God’s nowhere everywhere. Even in the realm of cyberspace.

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26 ‘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).

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