

“Redefining Connectedness: A Response to Wes Avram” by Raj Nadella for *@ This Point*,
© Columbia Theological Seminary

Most would agree that technology—and the rapid growth of the social media in particular—has changed how people see themselves and their surroundings and how they relate to each other, but there is less agreement regarding the nature and implications of those changes on various levels. Wes Avram’s essay “Faith and Facebook” skillfully calls attention to some of the problematic implications of the growth of the social media, while also highlighting its positive contributions. In what follows, I will engage Avram’s reservations about the impact of social media on our culture, interpersonal relations and theology. As I would name it, his reservations are threefold: the collapse of the distinction between the public and private spaces; the loss of connectedness; and the reduction of the theological to the technological.

Public and Private Spaces

In discussing how technology adversely affects the gap between public and private spaces, Avram argues that just as the telephone changed the public threshold from the door to the living rooms decades ago, social media and the smartphones are bringing that threshold into bedrooms, even at odd hours. Things that have traditionally belonged in public spaces—things that one can only see or hear in public spaces—have now come into personal spaces via the social media. Conversely, things that belong in the private realm are often made public. Paradoxically, however, there is now more physical space between people even as individuals seem to lose their private space. The “out there” is indeed “right here,” as Avram observes, but on a different, more literal level, the “out there” is now more distant than before, possibly affording more personal space for the individual. Social media have introduced a new reality in which each individual can create a threshold that works for him or her and move it as needed. Facebook allows individuals to redesign space, to collapse the distance between disembodied and embodied and between public and private spaces in ways that suit each individual. The result is not always a loss of privacy or of private spaces but creation of new kind of private spaces. Contrary to fears that technology has turned the private into public or the public into private, social media allow people to decide how much they want to share, with whom, when, and in what fashion.

The issue, therefore, is not so much that the private space no longer exists (it still does, largely) but that, with the spread of social media, there is a certain loss of specificity associated with

spaces. People have traditionally interacted in specific physical locations and if there are spaces where significant, life-altering events have occurred, such spaces become personal and sacred. These spaces could even be public spaces like a park or a school but still they acquire personal significance if there is personal or collective memory associated with those spaces. In the context of the new cultural reality where people meet and interact primarily on social media such as Facebook, the specific, personal space makes way for one, mammoth virtual space that seemingly belongs to everyone but does not actually belong to anyone. This phenomenon has ecclesial and theological implications. On an ecclesial level, if spiritual formation and Christian communities were to occur primarily in virtual places, as Cynthia Rigby envisions, then particular sacred spaces and a community's experience of those spaces would be lost. To build upon Heidegger's insight that what makes a being a being is the act of "be-ing,"¹ I want to suggest that to belong to a community is to "be" with that community and to be connected to it in a particular space rather than in a vast impersonal space like Facebook, where bodies are replaced by profile pictures, smiles by smileys, hugs and handshakes by likes. On that front, Avram's reservations about community formation in disembodied spaces are understandable.

There are also theological issues at play here. Philip Sheldrake has illustrated how, although the divine represents and embodies the universal space, human experience of the divine primarily occurs in particular spaces.² If incarnation is primarily about the universal God encountering humans in particular spaces (and times), such particularity of space, as well as the sacredness associated with it, is lost when interactions occur solely in the domain of Facebook. Still, Avram's theological anxiety is not entirely justified. His anxiety seems to stem from an assumption that an individual's encounters with God occur only in the traditional embodied spaces and ways. Does one connect with God only in the "physical, patient, and prolonged" spaces/forms of connection, as he seems to suggest? It has yet to be established that the new social media prevent people from experiencing God. While there is no denying that connecting with God in these new spaces might be difficult for those who have experienced God in the way Avram defines (as "One who will suffer our silence as much as our hyper activity"), not everyone understands God's nature and connectedness in the same way. A different understanding of God as one who is more present in virtual spaces makes it possible for some to connect with God in newer ways and spaces, not instead of the traditional spaces but in addition to them. If someone finds this new way of connecting with

the divine to be meaningful, who is to say that the old “meaningful” way is more meaningful than the new?

Facebook and Relationality

Social media change the way we relate to each other as humans, as Avram has observed. Nevertheless, to a great extent, social media merely replicate the ways of relating that occur in physical spaces. There is a direct correlation between the relationality that occurs in the two realms. Those who are popular in embodied spaces also tend to be popular on social media, as their virtual presence builds upon their connectedness in physical spaces. As a result, there is often a correlation between the popularity of a person in embodied spaces and the extent of response—the likes, comments, retweets—he or she receives on social media. Furthermore, the patterns of reciprocity on the social media (if you like my status, I will like yours ☺) closely mirror those in real life. On a related note, as shown by a recent study in *The Guardian*, “People who score highly on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory questionnaire had more friends on Facebook, tagged themselves more often and updated their newsfeeds more regularly.”³ Seen this way, the virtual space is just another realm in which patterns of relating from the embodied realm are replicated. Social media are tools that highlight vividly how people relate to each other but they do not necessarily cause one to relate to others in ways that he or she would not relate to others in embodied spaces.

At the same time, increasingly, the virtual, disembodied realm has shown the potential to determine and set the tone for embodied interactions. An article in *The New Yorker* a few months ago featured “Klout.com,” a new website that measures an individual’s worth based on his or her clout on social media.⁴ The website assigns a score, akin to a credit score, based on one’s activity on social media and the responses—likes, comments, retweets—one receives from others. The founders of the website predict that in the near future, one’s social capital, acceptance and desirability will be based on this Klout score. In other words, according to their predictions, the higher the Klout score, the more one is likely to be invited to a high-profile dinner. The anxiety with which people sometimes seek visibility on social media—as evidenced, for instance, in the act of liking one’s own status update to prevent it from losing its place in the newsfeed—does not necessarily reinforce the premise of Klout.com. But it reveals an anxiety about non-existence, a fear of not being noticed, of being ignored. More importantly, it shows a fear that one’s invisibility and lack of clout in the disembodied realm might extend into the embodied realm. The notion that one’s

worth in the embodied realm is dependent on one's presence on social media, on one's ability to be connected and, more importantly, on one's ability to demonstrate that connectedness to others has implications. Avram's observations about the ontology of technology are relevant here. If one's personal worth can be quantified by likes, comments and retweets, it is indeed a new way of being and relating. If the virtual presence determines whether and to what extent the physical presence counts, it is a new way of existing. This is certainly ontological.

Connectedness, Authenticity, Responsibility

Perhaps another problematic aspect of the spread of social media is the loss of connectedness and authenticity in human interactions. Avram correctly observes that interactions on social media can be impersonal and lacking in depth. One might be able to friend and communicate with hundreds (and sometimes thousands) on Facebook but it is hard to imagine any depth to those conversations. Over the last four years on Facebook, I have noticed a gradual decline in qualitative communication among my "friends." At first, the engagement seemed to be in the form of people commenting on each other's status updates. Gradually, "likes" replaced comments, even among close friends and in situations where "like" was not called for. I noticed two months ago how a Facebook post about the death of a friend's cousin received way more likes than comments expressing sympathy. Needless to say, no one liked the death of this friend's cousin but the lack of connectedness and depth in relationships prevented people from posting anything substantive. Furthermore, even as Facebook offers new spaces and channels for connecting as well as for connectedness, the physical distance afforded by it allows people to post things they would not in embodied spaces. Anyone can post anything in the comfort of distance allowed by social media without necessarily taking full responsibility for it.

About two hundred years ago, Søren Kierkegaard lamented what he considered the loss of authenticity in human interactions and writing. Writing in the context of the rise of popular print media, he argued that people wrote a lot but very little of it had real substance. He lamented that nothing was really happening and yet there was so much chatter.⁵ He worried that it was possible to write in the newspaper without real commitment to what was written. Kierkegaard's point was that the new media (what is now the traditional press) was giving people opportunities to build up and spread ideas without really making them act on those ideas. Some of the interactions on social media seem to illustrate Kierkegaard's fears on a grand scale. Facebook has made it easy for people to

“like” a cause or a movement, without having to carry out that commitment in any fashion. Such a façade of commitment is evident in the fact that one can virtually commit to hundreds of causes without any practical commitment in the embodied realm.

During recent demonstrations in Turkey, it was encouraging to see thousands “like” the protest movements and even virtually walk with the protesters. Kierkegaard, though, might describe this as an excellent example of lack of authenticity. Considering the fact that the people on Facebook did not get pepper-sprayed or get hit by water cannons, one might consider their commitment inauthentic. Still, commitment on Facebook not only takes a different shape but also has different implications. It is not solely about whether the solidarity expressed on social media is authentic and if it involved taking a risk, but also about whether, and to what extent, such expression of solidarity offered moral support to those already on the ground at Taksim Square protesting the policies of the government. There is a certain level of shallowness associated with the new social media, yet what is superficial for some can prove to be meaningful for others.

On a different note, a similar issue can be raised from an ecclesial point of view in the context of conversations about social media churches. What does it mean to be part of a virtual church? What level of commitment is required? Can one be a full-fledged member without making the kind of contributions and sacrifices one would in an embodied community? Can one participate in the church without actually participating and partaking in the life of that community? Would it be an authentic participation in the community? There are certainly more questions than answers.

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (San Francisco: Harper Perennial, 2008).

² Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2001).

³ Damien Pearse, "Facebook's 'dark side': study finds link to socially aggressive narcissism," *The Guardian* online, March 17, 2012. www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/mar17/facebook-dark-side-study-aggressive-narcissism. Accessed on June 12, 2013.

⁴ Nicholas Thompson, "Klout is Evil, But It Can Be Saved," *The New Yorker*, April 27, 2012. www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/comment/2012/04/klout-is-evil-but-it-can-be-saved.html. Accessed on June 12, 2013.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Two Ages* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978).