

CyberGrace

The Search for God in the Digital World

By Jennifer Cobb

Crown

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In a complex of long, low buildings in the heart of the Silicon Valley, Ranjit Makkuni was pushing the envelope of technology. A diminutive Hindu scientist at XeroxParc in Palo Alto, Makkuni had been working hard for several years to perfect a state-of-the-art video conferencing system. This project had all the bells and whistles time and money could supply -- excellent video, fantastic sound reproduction, multiple screens and cameras. Makkuni had wired a room at XeroxParc to a room at ParcPortland and the results were impressive. Sitting in Palo Alto, one could viscerally feel another person's full presence, read their body language and hear the subtle intonations of their speech, even though they were located thousands of miles away. It was pretty close to real. But when Makkuni was asked, "Does this thing work?" he answered, "Oh, no." What was missing? He answered without missing a beat. "The prana."

Computers and the world they spawn, cyberspace, offer a wholly new field of experience. In light of this, Makkuni may be aiming for the wrong goal. A silicon-based domain may never transmit prana in the same way that carbon-based life forms do. This resolutely does not mean, however, that cyberspace is incapable of participating in the larger stream of sacred

energy that we variously call God, Allah, Brahma, chi, or Tao. Even in their nascent and rudimentary form, computers are carving a new pathway into the divine force of the universe. If we move down this pathway as attentive and respectful explorers, we will find clear signs that computers exist on the same sacred continuum that we inhabit.

A sacred perspective broad enough to embrace the phenomenon of computers is not easy or self-evident. The idea that computers can include even a grain of sacred energy destabilizes our sense of self and our place in the world. Working through a comprehensive theological structure large enough to embrace the phenomenon of computation challenges us in the most surprising and unforeseen of ways. In fact, the daunting task of incorporating computers into our sacred understanding of the world represents our most potent personal and cultural challenge. At the same time, this odd interface offers enormous potential for deep growth and genuine empowerment.

Computers have become part of the very fabric of creation. Even now, those who never touch a computer personally -- who don't use an ATM card or own a PC -- are nonetheless surrounded by computer technology. Every time we pick up a phone, turn on the radio or television, get in our cars, climb on a bus, or go to the corner market for food, we participate in a world that is undergirded by a vast, computerized system. The various types of computer systems that make up our world -- from transportation to marketing to banking to communications -- actually do the job they were designed to do remarkably well. They work. As a result, they are growing and becoming more powerful with each passing day. Experts project that one billion people will be on-line by the turn of the millennium.

Computers are spawning a genuine revolution in human culture. As with any revolution, the long-term cultural and ethical ramifications remain unclear. We have no definitive sense of where we are going, simply that we are going there quickly. The sheer pace of change often keeps us from digging below the surface and developing the resources we need to make sense of computers on any deep, personal level. The most common

response to the rapid change and uncertainty computation has engendered is to fall on one side of an extreme -- either elevate computers to the role of saviors or become a neo-Luddite and cite them as the main source of our contemporary woes. In light of the ways in which computers are saturating our reality, these views are naive, maybe even dangerous.

When we refuse to incorporate computers into a coherent, comprehensive world view that includes who we are materially, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually, we perpetuate a host of time-honored Western dualisms between self and other, mind and body, nature and culture. These false dualisms -- which have been the intellectual vogue for 400 years -- have created enormously damaging personal and environmental consequences. We struggle desperately to find meaning in a splintered world. We live in a vast chasm of our own creation located between the organic and the made, the sacred and the profane. When all around us is split into pieces, there is no center that holds. We are aliens in the very world we have constructed.

To repair this rift, we must begin with a fresh view. Each successive age throws forth a powerful new technology destined to change the world. From the first axe up through the wheel, the sextant, the clock and the steam engine, the technologies that humans create fundamentally alter who we are. As each subsequent technology appears, it spawns a new element of cultural and personal understanding. If we look back through human history, we will see that every age has looked to its most powerful technology as a way of modeling the universe.

This enormously complex cultural evolution is not caused by technology in any simple sense. To conclude this would be to vastly oversimplify the dense interactions between individuals and culture, human creativity and the marks it leaves. It may be more appropriate to view the relationship between humans and their tools as a complex dance of becoming. We shape our tools and they in turn shape us. This process, which has been termed "co-evolutionary" by some, is manifesting today in our relationship with computer technology. We create our tools. These tools

in turn ask us to rethink our world, to expand our horizons and enlarge our wisdom. Ideally, this enlarged wisdom is then brought back to the tools and guides them to their next stage of development.

Our co-evolutionary dance with computers effects us on many levels. Most obvious are the ways in which computer technology has altered the content of our material world. Computers have accelerated the process of mechanization begun in the age of industrialization. These sophisticated systems greatly enhance the fundamental power of the machine, further reducing the demands daily living makes on our physical bodies. In addition, computers obviate the need for direct physical presence in many of our interactions. In a computerized world, our bodies are coming to play a radically different role, both personally and socially. This dynamic further alters the relationship between our selves and the physical world we inhabit.

On an emotional and psychological level, computer technology is actively shifting our understanding of who we are, what forms our connections to each other take, and where we derive our sense of psychological health. Sherry Turkle, author of *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, argues that the computer acts as a mirror reflecting a changing understanding of psychological health. She observes that one of the most significant features of computer-mediated environments is their relative anonymity. When bodies are absented from the interaction, people are free to choose any identity they wish. Men become women, women become men, shy people become bold and bold people can try on a shy persona. In the world of computers, people shape-shift at will, skimming through a revolving panorama of personae. Expressing multiple aspects of ourselves is becoming fashionable, but the jury is still out on whether this is a healthy development.

The life of the mind is also transforming rapidly as we find ourselves thinking through problems and solutions in terms of the paradigm of computation. We now inhabit a world that many of our greatest thinkers tell us is fundamentally computable. This basic idea finds its way into popular culture in a myriad of ways. For example, it is now commonly

accepted that who we are can, in many if not most ways, be reduced to our DNA. What is DNA other than a string of computable numbers, one of nature's most fundamental algorithms? When we crack the code for DNA, the argument runs, we will be able to unlock the secrets of the universe -- cure disease, reverse the aging process, achieve complete mastery over nature. In a similar vein, some of the brightest minds in physics today argue that the physical laws of the universe are nothing more than algorithms. These ideas, and many others, suggest that the universe itself is nothing more than a giant computer.

These developments, applied individually, paint a deeply nihilistic picture. Computers are leading us away from our bodies and an integrated knowledge of self toward a sterile, computable universe that can be reduced to bits and bytes, 0s and 1s. This view, while based on some very real truths, is ultimately not enough. Cyberspace does remove us from the physical, it is affecting our social relationships, and algorithms can be found within the laws of the universe. But these statements do not constitute the entire truth of our complex and multifaceted reality. A whole understanding of the world in which we find ourselves necessarily includes the physical, the emotional, the intellectual and the spiritual. It is this latter piece that has been so markedly absent in our newly emerging understanding of the deeper implications of computation.

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Portrayals of God in popular media have varied from a white-haired old man in *Oh, God!* to a woman in *Dogma*, from an entirely off-screen character to a figure of fun. According to trinitarian Christianity, Jesus Christ is God, so cultural depictions of Jesus in film and television are also portrayals of God. Islam and Judaism both prohibit pictorial representations of God. However, television and Hollywood cinema emerged from a largely Christian tradition—that whilst it shared the prohibition on Searches questioning God’s existence are up. Many behaviors that he supposedly abhors have skyrocketed. When very bad things happen around the world, people search for news; they do not search for prayers, the Bible, the Quran or anything related to religion. I looked at the war in Ukraine, the civil war in Syria, the tsunami in Japan, and the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict. In every instance, in the affected country, searches for news increased by between 90 and 280 percent. In the era before digital data, there were debates about the relative popularity of celebrities and deities, most famously when John Lennon claimed that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. Lennon didn’t live long enough to compare Google search counts. In the time between LSD records the band remained busy writing, recording, and performing, with this EP capturing a snapshot in time soon after the additions of Ryan Lescure and Ricky Maymi (Brian Jonestown Massacre). They’ve been perfecting their lucid live show up and down the U.S. West Coast and on tours across the U.S. and Canada, including sets at Austin Psych Fest Levitation (2013), Bathysphere (2013) with A Place To Bury Strangers, and Desert Stars Festival (2014) with The Dandy Warhols. Make no mistake: LSD and the Search for God are here now more than ever and they’re ready to solidify their rightful place as the sonic harbingers of blissed-out rock ’n’ roll! --Deep Space Recordings. credits. In the new world, where the search for spirituality may seem scattered and unfocused, Cobb brilliantly uses the most popular and prevalent phenomenon of our times--the computer--to find a world filled with meaning and love. ...more. Get A Copy. Amazon. Online Stores ¾. Audible Barnes & Noble Walmart eBooks Apple Books Google Play Abebooks Book Depository Alibris Indigo Better World Books IndieBound. Libraries. Hardcover, 258 pages. (Though the God part, though not mentioned in the earlier chapters, was integral in why the company had such a positive affect as described in those early chapters.) It was an enjoyable read and I must buy another one because I have lent my copy(ies) out and want to read it again. Read more. Not all of the family history was rosy either for we also learn a bit about the black sheep in the line that squandered their family money and were a disappointment. And the reader will see how two world wars caused sales to plummet but with the appropriate postwar changes, the company rebounded and came to be what it is today. This is certainly an entertaining read. It’s not technical but rather informative.