

**Contemplation in the
Digital Age
Analysis and Reflection**

Speech on the occasion
of
„Science Day“ at the University of Hamburg
for the
34th German Evangelical Church Congress
Topic information and the media

Prof. Dr. Ingrid Schirmer
Hamburg, 04.05.2013

Dear Church Congress guests, dear Church Congress community and all those interested in today's topic:

Contemplation in the Digital Age Analysis and Reflection.

A warm welcome to you all!

The digital era has only just begun, and yet its triumphal progress fascinates having developed at such break-neck speed. The unbelievable changes it has wrought - though seemingly superficial have already had a tremendous effect on our lives. This can be observed in a variety of contexts.

Thus please join me in an attempt to find a definition of this “digital age”, to discover what it is made up of, its undeniable influence and - inasmuch as is possible in the time available today – how it will affect all our lives in the future.

At the same time I welcome your efforts to join me in the search for a kind of “essence” of contemplation, tracing meaning and conducive to which factors. Presumptuous as this may sound, with regard to traditional ways of thought in the course of centuries and millenia.

Both areas are – in my opinion – variously preserved “dimensions of human-kind”. On the one hand a digital space, which man has created as a new operative dimension – of the memorized human being. On the other – contemplation, the act of human inner self via an internal threshold leading to transcendence as a congeneric different form of humanity.

The *cardinal point* between both dimensions is certainly man himself as self-responsible keeper and creator of the matter accorded him by this creation.

The digital age – in instrumentally with digital space – is constantly being constructed under great effort on a worldwide level to demonstrate to everyone that research, development, availability, adaptation and transformation takes place. Digital innovation enters usage, it spreads at a rapid pace, it offers “empowerment” for humanity, it alters human activity, human behaviour, human relationships, human communication etc. Simultaneously the digital world in its originated and ever-changing form impresses itself on human beings.

On the other hand, contemplation appears to have been somewhat neglected. It gains in meaningfulness particularly through the effects of the digital era. However it has to make itself heard. Human beings “need” contemplation, in my opinion it is part of their “purpose in life” and it follows its own “dynamics”. However contemplation takes place in secret, it is quiet, silent. It is not therefore ineffective. Particularly persons who are revered by mankind for their beliefs and firm convictions are acquainted with contemplation, are dependent on it for their development. In addition, in times of rapid change, perhaps contemplation can be essential to humanity as a kind of “compass”?

So in fact we must ask ourselves, how can digitalisation and contemplation work together? Are they opposites? Are there similarities or what is the relationship between the two factors?

Let us begin with the “digital age” which has occurred more or less in the space of a single generation.

We are looking at completely new dimension , hitherto unknown and an extended sphere of life of gigantic form.

May I point out the question of how we are to „label“ this dimension?

Perhaps we will have time after the talk to discuss this topic in general.

In the foreground – as a central distinguishing mark – we have “networking”. It is as if our earth has taken on a new layer, a new network, in short technical of indefinable size, has arisen, consisting of cables, computers, mobile telephone webs and waves, software systems, agents and in ever greater quantities sensors and embedded systems control the technique. A network with a complete architecture which is currently allowing the containment with an unbelievable potential for optimization with a world-wide dynamic and thus absolute synchronized control of free (computer-, data-, network-, service-) capacities which are completely impossible to realise in the analogue/physical world.

In addition to this technical networking, digital space also allows for – a growing accompaniment of its character (cf. Web2.0) – social network and multi-media communication between people, citizens, firms, customers. (Thus we speak no longer merely of IT, but of IKT). We are able to enter into a new space which suggests limitlessness,

appears to be liberated from time and space and at the same time - thanks to the new mobile gadgets – acts as an extended limb to the human being. Using a mouse-click or a touch we are able to lock into a world-wide memory bank, a scientific zone and much more.

Thus the usage of this technical network not only for research, controlling, the gathering of useful data is responsible for the emergence of “gigantic data amounts”, big data, which produce new potentials for the assessment and transparency.

Spending time wholly in the digital world can result in a kind of *parallel world* with the risk of addiction and of a dislocated sense of reality. Moreover the digital identity may develop a detachment from the real identity.

It goes without saying that we are all find ourselves within a “gigantic market” for newly developed services, which are either “completely” dependent on “digitalism” or are at the least “interlocked” with actual service components, whose purpose is to procure our purchasing power by means of publicity, commercial offers etc.

Concurrently this digital dimension permeates our analogue world, hereby altering our work, our daily lives. An increased dependency can occur. Digital and real world together combine to create a “socio-technical monster cyborg”, a “business ecosystem”, a “hybrid world”, that cannot be “shared”.

This “enhancement” by cognitive systems, agents, sensors, robotic- and imbedded governments leads to “scenarios” of a “cyber physical space” where not “only humans but also physical objects” are linked to the web and form an “object of examination, of government, of business models”.

Hereby this digital dimension demonstrates “varied facets” that we may briefly have touched upon, a virtually “unlimited pool of information”, a “communicative medium” capable of “reaching millions of people”, on the other hand however “parallel world” and a “gigantic market” for modern services and – as mentioned earlier – a cyber-physical space. These varied facets combined with the access of billions of people give rise to a dynamic force which is practically impossible to control.

What is the result? A “gravitational pull into digitalism. This digital space acquires ever-increasing powers, growing to be a constant companion”. Not only do we spend more and more time there, but we also “shift” great amounts there. And it is this “rearrangement” of the real and the digital which in fact offers the massive potential for our lives, our working time, our economy, our society and our reasoning.

Thus a transformation of our analogue world is unavoidable.

The common denominator of these transformant processes is not only the “speed” of our

technological and socio-technical progress, but also the “acceleration” of our individual pulse rate, the “compression” and a distinct “focus on efficiency” in every area.

Relate this to the human capabilities (as a creator and developer), but also to human limitations. The result is a bottleneck, a dead end.

(Not to mention further results on companies, whole industrial branches and our commercially oriented society. But further, that the digital realm with its content-oriented achievements faces what we regard as good and evil. Additionally, what are the dangers faced through reliance on the technical functionality of this space, while we – following the gravitational pull – deposit so much and find ourselves in a hybrid world made vulnerable and fragile due to its tightly webbed nature and its openness.

What developments and/or bottlenecks can we see:

In “work processes” e.g. task concentration and the alienation of work through constant surveyance, burn-outs due to increased communication while at the same time facing staff repletion,

In “leisure time” the customer involved who has to carry out many processes independently and increasingly with interchangeable call-center employees or with speech recognition systems, the plethora of opportunities concentrating life time, the eternal acoustic over-exposure of multi-media -. The remark comes to mind: people are confused by endless visuals – the social networks enabling participation but also triggering disinhibition.

The “tools” that enable access but demanding operation time, set-up, maintenance, attention, technical skills and last but not least financing.

If therefore human beings constitute the „bottleneck“ in an increasingly pervasive digital environment, they must adapt in order to come to terms with the abundance and complexity. Can they find the time and attention span to encounter one another?

Moreover will there be space to “enable self-encounter”? Our soul will surely be buried beneath the avalanche of information and communication. Or it will be severely restricted. There is no space left. Where can our souls find solace?

Another increasingly pressing problem: are we able to „switch off“? Or does our highly fragmentary life form take place more and more in the after-work phase? Will we still find time to read a good book and to contemplate?

Here we may note that according to the hybrid dimension in which we live, these changes are not merely the product of digitalization, yet their form is “intensified” by the digital.

Let us now regard „contemplation“.

May I begin with a simple image: the image of “returning home” after a long journey, perhaps with glorious memories or alarming memories of danger. Whichever, we feel comforted by the prospect of repose, of warmth or coolness and thirst quenched. A beautiful image.

Thus contemplation - the retreat to our inner self, returning to the inner home - could bring refreshment after our external tasks, and hopefully also become part of our daily routine.

However this retreat to our inner self is not only a positive act. Our world is currently experiencing a “quake” which not only affects our external habitat, the outer sphere but also our innermost self.

Let us approach this definition (concept) – or perhaps my own personal understanding thereof – from a different perspective. Some of you will perhaps remember the phrase “retreat”, denoting time spent in withdrawal, perhaps at a special place that is prepared supported by others’ prayers and thus facilitates the process of our retreat.

“Withdrawal” from externa and dedication to one’s inner dimension - similar terms – being silent, collecting ones’ thoughts, reflecting on one’s own life. Allowing space to the inner sphere of our being, organizing its chambers, becoming aware, arriving at and enduring oneself – hopefully an acceptance of one’s own ego. Realising your own identity, how we tick, what makes us happy, what frightens us. What is the essence of the inner self. (May I point out that it’s a mystery that our own inner self can be almost unrecognisable to us so that we need to get to know it better. Who are we in reality?)

A beautiful example is described in US’s book „Seeking and desiring“.

“I seek myself. I have lost myself. Among life’s tasks and demands of I seem to have lost myself. Yet a familiarity deep in my heart remains.

Putting on my boots, the waterproof ones with the xxx non-slip soles – I search for my own yearning. Even while doing up my laces I can feel the strength of my decisiveness. Every day brings me closer to myself. Brings me closer towards the being that I myself incorporate deep in my soul.”

And yet my eyesight shows me things “not only pleasant”, face-to-face with myself, with my own uniqueness, my inevitable decisions, my irreproducible justifications, my shortcomings, my yearnings, questioning all that I do, sharpening my conscience, being purified by

counselling and confession. Here awaiting despair, the gaping abyss, emptiness, bitterness. Depending on one's own character traits, there are many ways of dealing with this question. We may equally be obsessed with memories and desires that we cannot resist, we are unfree.

"I am a wretched man, who can rescue me from this degenerate body. Thanks be to God by Jesus Christ, our Lord". And earlier: "For I desire God's law towards the inner man. Yet I perceive another law in my limbs which decries the law in my heart and imprisons me within the law of sin that occupies my limbs".

We are made of flesh and blood.

Thus we are unwilling to enter our own house. We "avoid contemplation". Preferring recreation. We are struck by our own needfulness (for redemption). Teresa of Avila mentions in her book „The innermost Castle“ the various chambers, the external ones that are crammed with refuse and unrest, but which we must pass through in order to reach the internal ones. This can be a life-long process. Our humility will then increase.

„Contemplation however never stands still“. Following the battles and struggles – a necessary part of the dark nights of our soul – peace will grow within us or surprise us. To reconcile ourselves to our own life. With God's grace until we depart this earth.

Truly, the inner man when compared to the outer is a kingdom of its own. As we see from the new testament, these can cause antagonistic conflicts. Myself, I was often startled by Jesus' harsh wrath towards those who were then pious Christians:

„Beware the false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, in truth these are savage wolves“. ... "On the surface you appear to be pious, yet your inner soul is full of hypocrisy and unjustness".

² Römer 7, 24.25

³ Römer 7, 22.23

⁴ Teresa von Avila, „Die innere Burg“, Diogenes, 2006

⁵ S. Johannes vom Kreuz, „Die Dunkle Nacht“, Herder, 1995, 5. Auflage

⁶ Matthäus 7,15

⁷ Matthäus 23,28

What is the definition of the inner self: the heart and the soul are familiar concepts. As a matter of fact, they are not only our possession. No, from time immemorial they are the places of interaction with God, godliness is tangible here.

“God is here without being invited, He is present and functions from inside our soul”, says Frere Christian, a monk from Tibhirine.

And Augustus: describing in retrospect his conversion.

“Late in life I have loved you, o beauty, eternally old, eternally new, late I have loved you. And behold, you were inside, and I was outside, and there I sought you ...”

“you were inside, and I was outside”. Circumstances may dictate that we are unable to hear God’s voice because we are not within ourselves, but on the outside.

Here in the inner self, man may develop superhuman qualities. God may reach out and touch him, and vice versa. Here is the place for prayer, as expressed in the psalms.

“Have mercy, o God, have mercy on me! For my soul is yours. My soul is silent with God, who aids me. Why be afraid, my soul and why so uncertain, be patient and await your God.”

This is the wonderfully precious and “sublime sphere” of man. Power, fortification, adjustment flows into strength. Here is the power to let go, a retreat for the storms of the heart. Furthermore, joy and the source of life and light. This is the home of the pilgrims. In this place the distorted may be raised up. We are perceptibly fed from our inner selves, by Christ, by God himself.

The “legitimacy of a nobleness of heart” differ admittedly from efficacy. We are talking about development and maturation on the stations of the cross – to die with Christ and be re-born with him – the individual experience, nothing less than that. It is a matter of patience, an extremely long-drawn-out procedure.

⁸ Stefan Liesenfeld (Hrg.), „Dem Leben auf der Spur – Meditationsgedanken der Mönche von Tibhirine“, München, Verlag Neue Stadt, 2012, S. 4

⁹ Augustinus, „Confessiones – Bekenntnisse, Lateinisch und Deutsch“, München, Kösel-Verlag, 3. Auflage, 1955,

10. Buch, S.547

¹⁰ Psalm 57, 2

¹¹ Psalm 62, 2

¹² Psalm 42, 6

¹³ s. Römer 6, 3 ff und Kolosser 3, 1 ff

Anyone who ventures on to the road towards God will recognize that flash, a temporary experience, diving into the peaceful sensation e.g. at the end of a holy service or an evensong or of a special moment of perceiving the beauty of creation. A serenity that is not of this world, that surprises us and emphasizes God's word and transforms us.

This may happen during contemplation in a matter of days, achieving that peace and tranquility, that one must leave behind. It may also be a life-long journey leading to growth and maturation.

There are ways of practicing this. Contemplation, tranquillity, minor rituals within our daily routine, or on Sundays. I for example adore "settled places", whether a park bench or a niche in the apartment, which serve as places for prayer. They welcome us in. And there exist those holy places „thin places“, where we find it easier to relax and be open. Even other people - who e.g. have this peace through consecration and emulation – are able to unlock this feeling and communicate it.

I'm thinking of our faithful fathers and mothers and of especially talented spirits, hermits, mystics, who went before and bequeathed us their experience and whose knowledge of this dimension surpasses our own. Even today we can find them, on this road to contemplation encouragement and supervision from the outside, especially to discern. This place of the heart, of the soul can be so precious that it reaches immortality.

But now to return to the subject of digital life and contemplation in association

Every epoch holds its own challenges. As we mentioned: the digital age is influenced by networking and its sheer incredible opportunities from efficacy through to the dazzling speed of technological progress. Thus we are presented with conveniences and life-helping devices. We also experience becoming more and more drawn into the digital world.

If man is to escape being overrun or swept away by this magnetic pull, and the bottleneck effect, whereby he runs the risk of having to adapt to an ever more efficient system, man must remember who he is. Therefore contemplation becomes more and more a necessity. As we reach a conclusion, let me name three important aspects:

"Hitherto unimaginable opportunities" in the fields network, information, and offers necessitate self-restraint. The desire for more has ever been an enemy of peace and tranquility. "Better a little with the fear of God than a great treasure with inquietude. Better a simple cabbage meal with love than a fatted calf with hatred". from the Sayings.

The church congress motto contains a central message. "less can be more". Let us find (how?) this moderation. For our desire to experience as much as possible in one lifetime can be very difficult to subdue. Our greed for life can take on multiple forms, it affects everything this world has to offer. Do we buy – according to Jesaja – what cannot satisfy us?

„Why do you pay money for that which is not bread, and your earnings for something that does not satiate you? Heed my words and you will eat well and be refreshed with delight“ as God’s invitation to his mercy covenant.

It takes much wisdom and determination to practise abstinence. Abstinence can be painful. In the brightness of contemplation we find it easier to draw the line. Contemplation means abstinence but also gain. Who can say what is proclaimed in the wonderful song “The golden sun”:

„Will you give me the wherewithal to nourish my life, then let me ever hear in my heart the holy words: God is the greatest, most beautiful best, God is the sweetest and most knowledgeable of all the treasures the noblest hoard“

„Efficiency and technology“ are attractive, fascinating. Having completed my first semester of informatics studies, I asked myself whether it had altered me. At the time I replied that I had been taught efficiency by means of ever more subtle methods and algorithms. This may be fascinating and positive. It helps us to develop our talents. If we are also aware of that which cannot be forced, and we can respect and also create space for it, then all is good. Contemplation shows us that the splendid experiences we enjoy can be especially valuable when they “elude our powers of disposition” because they are gifts. They remind us that we are “not machines”. Allow me to quote Heinrich Seuse, a mediaeval mystic and Dominican monk.

„Should the bright morning star rise within my soul, then all suffering is gone, all darkness enlightened, the heavens become lucid and bright and my heart is serene; my mind and soul are gladdened; a festive mood overtakes me and all that is within me praises You on high. That which was burdensome, heavy and impossible suddenly becomes easy and pleasant; abstaining, awakening, praying, suffering, renouncing and all the austerity in my life vanishes when I feel Your presence. Even a boldness overcomes me which was lacking in my solitude. My soul is bathed in clarity, truth and pleasantness that she forgets all cares and hardship. My sight is with a pious heart clear, and my tongue is full of expectation, my body can effortlessly seize every task. He who searches will be rewarded with all that he desires and wise words. I feel as though I could overcome both space and time and stand on the threshold of eternal blessedness. O Lord, who may grant me such a state for all time? For alas it is all too often over in a moment and I am left alone and naked almost as

if I had never experienced such bliss - until after hours of heartbreaking– it returns to me as a realization”.

¹⁴ Sprüche 15,16.17

¹⁵ Jesaja 55,2

¹⁶ Evangelisches Gesangbuch, Text Paul Gerhardt 1666, Strophe 10

And it becomes clear, as in the daily work routine. Efficacy topics today are just not enough. Particularly with regard to complex sociotechnical systems in applied informatics, character-building, wisdom and how to develop these play a major role. Our department has chosen as its general principle „Human Centered Complex Systems“, and how to develop them. We face the challenge of how to effectively connect this principle with the digital sphere.

In this connection there follows a quotation, that most of my students will recognise from my lectures:

It hails from Peter Checkland’s bestselling book „Systems Thinking Systems Practice.“ In it he quotes Merton, who in turn quotes Ellul. „Ellul means that the ever-expanding and irreversible rule of technique is extended to all domains of life. It is a civilization committed to the quest for improved means to carelessly examined ends. ... Technique turns means into ends.“ Are we a civilisation that constantly uses improved means towards poorly examined ends? Does technology turn means into ends? Should we not alter the focus towards „carefully examined – and developed - ends“? The latter are not easy to define: They demand reflection, familiarity with the context, by-passing analysis and design, the determination of varied perspectives. They need time, resources and responsibility. They cannot be achieved over night, nor without effort and conviction. And they come at a “price”. And examined aims are surely connected with “who we become in the process”. Contemplation is the basis of all our actions.

¹⁷ Heinrich Seuse in: Werner Richner, „Klöster – Orte der Stille“, Freiburg, Verlag Herder, 2001, S. 21

¹⁸ s. www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de

¹⁹ J. Ellul in: Peter Checkland, „Systems Thinking Systems Practice: Includes a 30-Year Retrospective“, John Wiley & Sons, 1999, S. 145

... And yet my greatest fear is the question of who shall govern the world and the responsible development of the digital and our hybrid world when we are at risk of “no longer – being - ourselves”, but instead of this being “out there, immersed online – lost in the sheer endless flood of multi-medial information, communication and systems”? The greatest danger is the hustle and bustle, too many fragmentalised impressions, an overkill of communication, fatigue, the demand for amusement rather than for concentration, and thus rob us of the inner power found in contemplation.

Let us consider the present day. Yes we need events like the church congress. The new and the old methods of contemplation, a collective contemplation, the company of others, perhaps more contemplative sites in the familiar media of the web, so that one can dip into as into the daily news channels. And new ideas that need to be discussed. So that the digital age can actually produce personalities that have retained “contemplation” and reflection for their lives and their creativity and who are able “to connect to their inner compass”.

I am truly convinced that it is here – in every heart and mind before God – that “positive energy is restored” and we can “gladly shoulder responsibility” in this clamant and unruly new human digital dimension. Contemplation leads to responsibility, and here we discover the connection between these dimensions. Thus I reach the conclusion:

That we are “not only driven” by these new opportunities, but custodians thereof with the chance to design, discover and exploit such sublime potential but also to warn ourselves and others of its possible perversion and to counteract hidden dangers therein. This is my dream for us all.