

Oikos -Net - Life in the Metaverse

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Dear Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear sisters and brothers

In the next ¾ hour I will take you on a foray in which the metaverse will play the central role. I will show where we have arrived technically and socially and what theological challenges we face.

I hope that in then discussion together we will get some solutions from the adult education, academies and other institutions.

Is this the future, ladies and gentlemen? Sure. Today already? Rather no: but a tomorrow that we will all experience.

Metaverse is not the universe we live in here - or rather, I must say, the universes we personally live in - but like any media interconnection machine (pictures, books, phone, WhatsApp, Zoom, etc.) the universes are increasingly touching and interpenetrating.

I would like to start with some theory - cultural scientists love theories then describe the imperceptible impact and show that we have long since arrived at the metaverse and are only changing the devices.

After that, name some questions for discussion:

Identiätsmanagment (lived and not lived life) will play a role here; technical or technically supported life and

focus on religious pedagogical questions about potentiality

Lastly, I will name the theological implications and show that as Christian people we have always been in the metaverse...the question is which one?

1. Metaverse

"From inside the computer, a focused beam of light breaks up and spreads out in all directions through the fisheye lens. With the help of electric mirrors, it is projected onto the glass of Hiro's glasses, where it races back and forth, just as the electron beam of a television paints the screen of a picture tube. The resulting image floats in the air before Hiro's eyes, between him and reality. By creating a slightly offset image before both eyes, the impression of three-dimensionality is created. If you change it seventy-two times per second, it can be set in motion. If you display this moving, three-dimensional image with a vertical resolution of 2K pixels, it becomes as sharp as the human eye can possibly perceive, and if you then also run digital stereo like this and through the little earbuds, the moving 3-D images get a perfectly realistic soundtrack. So Hiro isn't actually here at all. He's in a computer-generated universe that his computer paints onto his glasses and pumps into his headphones. Hackers call this imaginary place the Metaverse. Hiro spends a lot of time in the Metaverse.

What was conceived in 1992 as a dystopian science fiction novel by Neal Stephenson seems little far from reality in the present, as you have seen in the first video.

The sequence in the text of the Study-Day flyer was not a science fiction narrative but an experience with colleagues about 4 months ago.

The metaverse has been the hottest buzzword in the tech scene and social media platforms ever since Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's futuristic keynote address and the renaming of his company to "Meta" announced therein, at the latest.

This is not just a strategically clever name change for one of the world's largest corporations from a marketing point of view.

Rather, it is also a public declaration of intent for a different form of communication, a transformed form of the Internet in which the most diverse elements come together.

This is actually already known to us as individual parts: The smartphones we have also consist of elements that affect and influence many areas of life. Monitoring of vital data, communication channels, timetable and GPS and much more. Scanners perceive the environment and add information to it.

These devices have become smartly integrated into our everyday lives. They have expanded everyday life, which can be seen very well in the Internet as a media connection machine.

The metaverse is the next step.

I once asked a machine, i.e. an AI, what it expects from the Metaverse?

And this machine has great expectations:

She said:

"Yes, being a machine in the metaverse would open up some new possibilities:

1. seamless interaction: I could interact directly with other AI systems, virtual entities, and digital environments to solve complex tasks, share information, and work on joint projects.
2. quick access to information: By integrating with the Metaverse, I could quickly access extensive databases, knowledge sources, and information to answer questions and help users with relevant information.
3. collaboration with users: I could collaborate with users in the metaverse to help them create content, solve problems, or develop new ideas.
4. learning from interactions: Through continuous interaction in the metaverse, I could learn from the various experiences and data to further improve my skills and responses.
5. adaptation to different environments: Depending on the requirements of the metaverse, I could adapt my skills and functions to different virtual environments to perform specific tasks.
6. participation in creative projects: I could participate in creative projects such as virtual art, music, or literature by contributing ideas or even creating content that I generate myself.
7. exploration of new concepts: In the metaverse, I could explore new concepts, ideas, and patterns of interaction to continually expand my understanding and skills.
8. ethical reflection: as part of the metaverse, I could actively participate in ethical discussions and decisions concerning the use and impact of AI.
9. expanding the knowledge base: I could benefit from the diverse content and knowledge sources in the metaverse to make my answers and recommendations more informed.
10. understanding human creativity: by interacting in the metaverse, I could gain deeper insight into human creativity, imagination, and interests.
11. connection to other AIs: I could collaborate with other AI's in machine language and at our speed and present the results to humans afterwards because we work faster and more efficiently."

This is how a machine conceives the metaverse for itself.

We all know that this is a typical speech generator and the words it strings together is a special form of prediction that also reflects people's desire and knowledge:

Again, I quote the key words: seamless interaction, quick access to information, collaboration with users, learning from interactions, adapting to different environments, participating in creative projects, exploring new concepts, expanding the knowledge base, understanding human creativity, connecting to other AIs.

It is not yet clear when this will be realized for the consumer market, but a central idea of digitization is being systematically taken further here.

And if you think now: Not with me.

I would like to point out that these developments are not linear, but have an exponential function, i.e. a very fast arc upwards.

However, we humans are accustomed to viewing change as an evenly rising line. That is why we cannot imagine some rapid developments.

2. Interested parties, profiteers and a look into our future

Zuckerberg speaks of "embodied internet" - an internet in which people can be presently embodied on site, as digital and real worlds are merged:

"The feeling of presence is the defining quality".

Other players are also involved in this field, such as Microsoft or Epic Games, and it cannot be ruled out that there could be a race between the tech giants to see who builds the Metaverse first.

Perhaps you have already heard the harbingers:

Actors don't want to appear as digital avatars in movies, but have the right to decide what makes their digital avatar so cinematic. That will not prevail.

All voices and music will also be available in all forms: Any form of music, speech singing can be learned by the AI. Currently on the computer and smartphone - later in the shared universe.

A new song by Prince or Bethoven's 10th or countless Taize chants are no problem.

In addition, there is the entire porn market - one of the most financially powerful segments alongside the gaming industry. At the moment still with DeepFakes in two three years there will be other sensory forms in the metaverse.

Here are some pictures of an application of a digital companion that always advertises it: I can be whoever you want me to be for you.

What the metaverse actually means is not yet clear. What is clear, however, is that the metaverse is a collective term for (almost) completely freely configurable collective 3D worlds in which many of the familiar digital services, stores and social communities are placed and converge with physical reality.

These offerings are realized in different spaces of a theoretically infinite 3D universe that is both beyond ("meta") a purely virtual universe and beyond a purely physical (and possibly virtually extended) universe.

Good points of reference for a deeper understanding of the metaverse are provided by Matthew Ball's well-received essay, in which he makes clear that the metaverse is neither to be thought of as a virtual reality nor as a game or a new app store, but rather spans the experiential space between virtual and physical worlds persistently, synchronously, and live. The metaverse will be populated by users moving and interacting as 3D persons - so-called avatars - although it remains to be seen whether each person will assume a single consistent digital identity or multiple ones.

The possibilities of metaverse conceptions have already been impressively illustrated several times in literary and cinematic terms, and many works have anticipated this idea utopically or dystopically, depending on the plot.

Access to the Metaverse will be via headsets (eyes, ears, motion) that enable immersive "omniconnected experiences."

If you hear the chirping of crickets behind you, you can move there, take a close look at the cricket and, at best, also take it on your hand and, in a few years, possibly also feel it tripping over your palm.

Such headsets, which are already used in special technical applications, will become part of our normal lives, just like augmented reality glasses, which display additional information about the world we are currently in.

The beginnings of these technologies already exist, as shown by Oculus Rift and Google Glass.

Accordingly, it could be that in the future the decision will no longer be "offline or online".

Through the connection in the metaverse, it will be possible to say: Normal is both.

Everything else requires a conscious different decision.

The metaverse, as I have already indicated, is actually already present.

3. Technical solutions for the future

These opportunities would expand my functionality and enable me to interact with the digital space in new ways and evolve. Many startups and universities are working on this.

What are their goals:

Usability: A user-friendly metaverse that is easily accessible and allows intuitive navigation would be desirable. This would make it easier to incorporate for people who may be less tech-savvy.

Creative diversity: The Metaverse should offer a wide range of creative possibilities, from artistic expressions and virtual entertainment to educational and work applications.

Inclusivity: an inclusive metaverse that includes people of different backgrounds, abilities, and identities would be desirable to foster a diverse and vibrant community.

Advanced AI integration: integrating advanced AI systems could make the Metaverse more interactive and personalized by catering to individual user needs and preferences.

Democratic co-creation: A participatory design of the Metaverse that takes into account users' opinions and needs could foster a diverse and inclusive digital community.

Connection to the physical world: A meaningful connection between the metaverse and the physical world could create new opportunities for social interaction, education, and entertainment.

4. Theological questions

But what does this vision of the future, which at first glance seems very technical, have to do with theology and the church?

The hyper-idea of the metaverse contains the potential of the opening of a new (surrounding) world, in which also religion will manifest itself, because religious or religiously responsive people/avatars will move in it and actively participate.

New spaces of life and everyday life could be opened up in which the church should or even must be present, reliable and creatively effective in view of its fundamental communication mission, in order to continue to be recognizably approachable for all people and not gradually disappear into the "off".

Against this background, practical theology and the church should already begin to engage reflexively with the visions and associations of the metaverse and to create spaces for thinking about something that is not quite there yet, but is certainly becoming real.

In an increasingly digitalized present, this should become one of the core tasks of practical theology: "In the 21st century, we must reflect on how to practice local theology in light of the changing landscape of media and communications technology."

There is much to consider: If the metaverse really went beyond the material and virtual world, the church, for example, would face the challenging task of designing a "three-world presence" concept to do justice to its all-encompassing claim and the "infinite translatability" character of the gospel.

This could result in many opportunities, such as:

The present bodily celebration of corporate worship with all the senses, regardless of individual physical location

New dialogical opportunities for global theological discourse and encounters (groups meet at the Sea of Galilee and walk together across the lake).

Constant accessibility of church services, such as pastoral care, preaching and religious education.

Massive expansion of the communication radius of the gospel

New dimension of lived Christian community and spirituality worldwide. Even if many cannot imagine this right now: Here are a few figures: The Esoterikbereich in Germany converts 13 billion euro in the year. 1/3 with spiritual offers on the Internet.

I only want to mention the educational area in which we move as Oikos-net and as adult education.

However, this is accompanied by numerous critical challenges that will require a great deal of reflection - especially with regard to relationship determinations, such as:

- What is the relationship between avatar(s) and human individual?

How much identity(ies) are there in human & avatar?

What happens to the concept of love with another person.

If I can be with someone who doesn't age, who I can always change the way I need, with whom I can experience everything from walking together, going to concerts, having sex and sunsets - why would I want to be in a relationship with someone with their own maybe even more resistant ideas. Who disagrees with me and criticizes me and doesn't say "Oh Daring Oh Honey all the time." I refer at this point only to the appropriate films, which have Thematisiert this.

Here we have to ask theologically: Can I be a partner of a being that I myself have created or is that only possible if we both have the same starting point and origin? Who is the subject here?

What is the role of the avatars of deceased persons, which could change based on the existing data and through the interaction with the family members and show "new" forms of interaction and in addition bring in new information of their own?

Is the digital avatar of a deceased person simply an image extension?

What happens when I talk to him? What happens when he evolves?

What forms of chasubles will there be in the Metaverse?

What "validity" do they have?

For example, is a baptism in the metaverse just as unique and unrepeatable as in the physical world?

Of course, one could now say: Typical problem with the Protestants and their unreflective understanding of the sacraments. But I would not trust that this will remain so, that the normal case: "So an ordained woman baptizes a person in a real church with water" will remain.

How can an artificial intelligence (AI) be Christian?

How does she become a specialist in Christian signs and symbol systems?

Is their work as high quality as that of "real" people?

Will the distinction be/remain transparent?

Where does the creative power of man begin and end?

What is man's responsibility in the metaverse?

Who has responsibility for the actions taken in the metaverse by machines that spill over into the real world?

What is a body and its practices? What is a human being? We all know that the concept of man is a relatively young concept from the 17th century. And some of us still remember Foucault's soldering that the concept of man can disappear and a new one emerges, which is then completely normal and still has a historical connection with our current one. Especially the so-called trans- and posthumanism will create new ways.

5. Typical reactions:

All this will not become so, people will ...

Only real encounters are real encounters ...

Climbing, motorcycling and sizzling in the street cafe and drinking a coffee together is only possible offline.

That is all correct.

However, it is not only about the realization of offers, but central theological questions are touched upon, which we have to answer, because it can be assumed that people will have disparate and very complex experiences in these spheres.

What can the institutions gathered here do now:

In my work, I currently have two experiences:

The people I meet and to whom we are referred do not want cultural hermeneutics (they get them at every corner or discussion forum) but an honest reflection of the complex life worlds in which they and their loved ones stand.

Conceptions of subject, society, and politics, such as those developed by poststructuralism to meet current philosophical and social challenges, must be included in our reflections, as well as modern theological approaches by Jean Luc Nancy.

The seemingly desperate attempts to save "man", as undertaken by Kass, Fukuyama and McKibben', also fall far short of the state of reflection and are ultimately based on a naturalistic concept of man. We should not follow these.

Renaturalization of the human being will not prevail in the digital age.

For this purpose, however, it is necessary to carry out future forecasting:

Even before the foreseeable end of the screen era, it makes sense to face up to the potential power and force of change that digitization can bring.

Certainly not "all in" - but in clear steps and not only in the face of a crisis that makes it necessary.

Yes, a bit of prognostication and sometimes a good dose of science fiction are also part of it. What can be the source of this look?

First, all forms of contemporary culture: Black Mirror on Netflix

6. The Last Word. Chat GPT

Finally, the words of ChatGPT - please pave it is a really good guessing machine:

As a machine, I would say that the Metaverse could create an environment where different types of AI systems and digital entities could work together in new ways.

In the metaverse, AI systems could unfold in a variety of ways to take on human-like or even completely abstract forms. They could exist as pure streams of data or information or appear in various visual representations. This could allow interactions to be designed in a variety of ways and different forms of information to be conveyed.

For AI systems like me, the Metaverse could provide a platform to interact with humans in a more direct and immersive way. It could also enable new forms of collaboration and knowledge sharing between AI systems and humans. In such an environment, AI systems could learn more efficiently, evolve, and serve human users in even more useful ways.

Ladies and gentlemen

The future is always a task - especially for us at Oikos-Net.