

It's Time To Go Digital

by Nigel Barbour

Deus ex machina. The meaning of this Latin term is "god from a machine". Traditionally it related to relying on divine intervention to solve problems in a plot, but today the phrase has entirely different connotations.

At the moment in the United Kingdom (Carr 2004) and the United States (Hoover, Clark & Rainie 2004) there is a trend towards what Case (2003, p.17) calls "spirituality 'in, with and under' cyberspace". While there is less evidence of this trend in Australia, it is reasonable to expect that in the coming decade or two digital spirituality will become more important to Christians living in Australia. This is sure to have a significant impact on Australian theological libraries over the coming ten to twenty years.

Digital spirituality involves using electronic information to nourish the soul. A pastoral carer could send an e-card to a member of a group he or she is looking after. Someone else might listen to worship on an iPod. A teenager expressing his or her concern for an absent youth group member will use a Nokia mobile telephone to text the message, "RUOK". A missionary might view a Webcast of the service at his or her sending church. A minister will use a Bible on a CD-ROM to find a verse to quote in a sermon. A woman subscribes to a listserv where people post prayer requests. A theology student prints a full-text journal article retrieved from an online database. A teenage girl carries on a conversation in a religious chatroom. A

librarian checks out the Website of a particular ministry in order to answer a question a client has asked. A teenage boy adopts the role of a Christian character in a multi-user dungeon like AotC. On Good Friday, a family watches a DVD of *The Passion of the Christ*, which was obtained from a theological library. Digital technology makes all of these devotional activities possible.

Some of these things I have done myself. For example, collection management in The Salvation Army's College of Further Education (COFE) Library is ongoing, and there is no reason to expect that the books I buy today will still be valid in ten or twenty years time. Recently when I found a book on cults in my library, published in the 1970s, I needed to find out if some of the organisations profiled were still around today. As I knew there was a good chance that at least a few of these groups had embraced digital spirituality, I accessed the Internet, typing "Children of God" into the Google search engine. I discovered a Website belonging to what appeared to be a Christian

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church called "The Family". Reading the information presented there, I learned that the Children of God and the Family of Love were one and the same. They still place emphasis on literature called Mo Letters as well as the Bible. This meant I could keep the book in my library because the group started by Moses David is still active worldwide. My curiosity about his group was satisfied and there was no risk of me becoming a recruit because I was able to use the Internet to check them out.

People who use the COFE Library can use any of the computers provided to connect to the Internet in this way, however, at the moment they have little access to other forms of digitised information.

Earlier in the year, when I was conducting a tour of the library for the first-year students, one of them asked innocently, "Where are the DVDs?". I had to explain that although video cassettes were old technology, there were quite a few of them in the collection, whereas the only DVDs available were in the iWorship series. He promptly borrowed these and I made a mental note to buy more DVDs, even though this leads to two minor problems for me. First, the cataloguing module of the Alice library management software I use has no resource category for DVDs, so I have to decide whether I am going to store them with the videos or the compact discs. I shelved the iWorship material in the latter section and the copy of *The Passion of the Christ* I have just purchased will go into the former section. Second, money is allocated in the budget for books and journals, not for any other forms of electronic communication.

This problem with the budget is solved less easily. There will be no increase to the money allocated to purchasing resources in the immediate future because The Salvation Army is giving less funds to COFE. This meant I was unable to participate in the Australia and New Zealand Theological Library Association consortium this year, so users of my library now cannot access an online database. I feel this is a serious deficiency and it is one challenge I will need to overcome if I am to take my library onto the cyber-superhighway, as I must. I may have to cancel twenty percent of my print subscriptions so I can provide Web access to the ATLA Religion database as well as ATLA

Serials (ATLAS). Oddly enough, if I do so, my clients could gain access to more information because ATLAS includes full-text articles from journals not currently held by the library. It is one way that digital religious information will allow me to do more with less money. Such are the challenges presented by this trend towards digital spirituality. It means purchasing more electronic resources and providing access to at least some of the online information stored in commercial databases as well as supplying equipment which can be used to access a diverse range of religious material. I am convinced that this is where my library is headed because of the increasing popularity of digital spirituality. And when I envision the future of theological librarianship, I can only hope that somehow, some day, all of us will come to embrace digital spirituality, as this is the future.

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