

Who Will Tame the Giants?

An Investigation of Principalities and Powers in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates tech giants such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter in the light of the Pauline concepts of principalities and powers, using the theologians Amos Yong and Walter Wink as its main dialogue partners. It is argued that as people subjugate themselves to the digital frameworks of these modern giants, the way they perceive and interact with the world changes. Furthermore, individuals who live their lives according to the frameworks of these modern-day principalities become participating members of the giants' bodies and are thus influenced by their *telos*. As people increasingly access the world through these placeless platforms and thereby giving sustenance to the principalities' hollow bodies, their own existence becomes more and more disembodied. As modernity recedes, this kind of excarnation seems to have an accelerating effect on the shift in people's worldview. The world which is formed by the tech giants' frameworks is found to be less embodied and quite polytheistic. In a final discussion on whether it is possible to exorcise or redeem these online principalities and powers the concept of *egregore*, or shared thought form, is introduced. It is described how online activists try to manipulate these egregores through the reshaping of viral narratives by means of so-called "meme-magic". It is concluded, however, that any attempt by the church to exorcise these demonic egregores on their home turf seems to necessitate participation in the tech giants' hollow bodies, which in turn might result in a sort of excarnation. A word of warning is therefore given against over-estimating one's capacity to tame the tech giants through any form of social exorcism (Yong) or political action (Wink).

Keywords: Big tech, spirit, body, worldview, excarnation, egregore.

INTRODUCTION

The famous slogan of Google, “Don’t be evil”, has become something of an internet meme. When Alphabet, Google’s parent company, changed the code of conduct for its employees in 2015 to “do the right thing” the news spread like wildfire among computer enthusiasts, who reacted with a mix of sarcastic jokes and serious worry (Moyer, 2015). The Internet was supposed to be the land of freedom, but instead, it was increasingly being ruled by a monopoly of tech giants.¹ The purpose of this article is not to judge whether Google’s business practices are good or evil; neither is it to determine whether they are doing the right thing or not. Instead, I want to offer a few theological reflections on how the tech giants of our digital age are related to the Pauline concepts of principalities and powers, thereby deepening our understanding of both in light of each other (Eph. 6:12).² The main research question of this investigation is thus: *How are we to understand the nature of tech giants from a theological perspective?* The answer to this, as we will see, is closely connected with the interpreter’s worldview. The analysis also raises several practical questions: How do the concepts of principalities and powers, if applied to our digital age, relate to the mission and activities of the church? What are some of the possible pitfalls for the church, as it comes into contact with the unseen forces which shape our virtual landscape? And is it possible to tame these modern giants, that is, to redeem them? If so, how, and most importantly, *who* would be up to the task?

In this article, I will primarily engage with the ideas of the Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong, who is promoting a social exorcism of the powers, and the American theologian Walter Wink, who is famous for his work on political action in relation to principalities and powers. Both are examples of Christian scholars who have started to reinterpret the concepts of principalities and powers in a time when modernity seems to recede and people’s worldviews shift. In his article “Identifying the Powers” Wink (2012) claims that

a rapid and fundamental sea change has been taking place in the contemporary worldview. It has gone largely unnoticed, but more and more people are beginning to become aware of it. A new conceptual worldview is already in place, like the wiring in the hard drive of a computer, and can be activated by its mere articulation. (p. 361).

My aim is to activate some of these wirings through this article. And since there is, at least according to Wink (2012), “a growing recognition, even among secular thinkers, of the spiritual dimension of corporate entities”, I am also going to introduce the concept of *egregores* in order to broaden the discussion (p. 364). But before exploring these spiritual domains, I want to start by offering a few reflections on the tech giants from the perspectives of mythology and journalism.

A MYTHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON TECH GIANTS

As modernity recedes the mysterious giants are making a return from our mythical past. It is by no means a coincidence that the “Big Five” (Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft) are called *giants*. In mythology, giants are usually associated with the primordial past and the forming of the world. According to Norse mythology, for example, the world was fashioned by the gods from the corpse of the slain giant Ymir. The Swedish folklorist Ebbe

¹ By “tech giants”, sometimes also called Big Tech, I refer to the powerful technology companies such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft.

² All Bible quotes are from the 21st Century King James’ Bible translation.

Schön (2008) explains that “these [succession] myths, which can be found all over the world, depict a primordial development from chaos to order” (p. 24, my translation). As the younger gods kill the primordial giant(s) they are in a sense establishing a new world order. From a mythological perspective, every civilization is therefore standing on the shoulders of giants. And just as the world was made from Ymir’s corpse in Norse mythology, the digital landscape is now being formed by new kinds of giants. The tech giants have come to constitute the very “place” where we, the users of the internet, are standing. And just as the giants of old shunned the sunlight, sometimes even turning into stone, the tech giants of today evade inspection and prevent inquisitive journalists from trying to shine a light on their hidden activities.

A JOURNALISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON TECH GIANTS

In his investigation of Google and Facebook Jason Whittaker (2019), professor of English and Journalism, similarly highlights how the tech giants form the frameworks through which we view the world while at the same time hiding their inner algorithms from external inspection. He also points out that “gatekeeping and disseminating information” is no longer done primarily by legacy media, as in the old days, but increasingly through “algorithmic journalism produced by software” (Whittaker, 2019, p. 8). Whittaker is concerned by automated journalism, but he claims all the same that “the myth of a singularity, that moment when computers become more intelligent than their creators, seems no more than fantasy at present” (p. 165). Still, the prevalence of automated narrative creation is ever-increasing. “Information is often freely available,” Whittaker continues, “but until it is provided in a narrative format, audiences struggle to understand it. More and more, software will provide the role of an agent in transforming those data into something more usable by us” (Whittaker, 2019, p. 170). In other words, the tech giants wield the power to shape the narratives through which we both interpret events and view the world.

Another consideration is the way in which the tech giants relate towards people. There are those who still believe that we, as users of the internet, primarily are customers of Google, Facebook, or Twitter. Even the editor-of-chief of the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, Peter Wolodarski (2018), wrote in an editorial that “the tech giants are not our friends... These monsters of the internet have to be put on trial when they commit crimes. But they can only be tamed by their customers, by us” (last paragraph, my translation). This is, according to Whittaker, the wrong way to think about it. In order to understand the reason why corporations like Google and Facebook pose such a threat to traditional journalism we need to realize “how the balance [and financial rewards] has shifted between content creators and distributors” (Whittaker, 2019, pp. 62–63). The tech giants are basically gigantic advertisement companies, which means that it is the advertisers, not the users of their services, who constitute their customer base. Regular human beings, just as in the stories of old, are simply the giants’ source of food. “Information”, the anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2014) explains in his book on globalization, “is rapidly becoming a central value generator for business and the most valuable raw material in the world economy” (p. 44). It could therefore be said that the powerful tech giants are, in a sense, building their castles using *human* resources. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) proposes a similar metaphor as she declares that

We are no longer the *subjects* of value realization. Nor are we, as some have insisted, the “product” of Google’s sales. Instead, we are the *objects* from which raw materials are extracted and expropriated for Google’s prediction factories. Predictions about

our behavior are Google's products, and they are sold to its actual customers but not to us. *We are the means to others' ends.* (p. 94)

The metaphor of raw material lends itself very well to Zuboff's analysis of the tech giants' business models and their impact on human society. But I argue that the food analogy is more appropriate to my particular investigation as I will try to shine a light on how the tech giants' spiritual aspects relate to the theologically important concept of a body.

PRINCIPALITIES AND POWERS

I would now like to turn to what the apostle Paul referred to as "principalities and powers", and how these concepts might give us some clues as to the nature of our contemporary giants. The Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong (2010), who will be my second dialogue partner along with Wink, claims that they "help us to avoid either a rigid dualism on the one hand or a polytheism on the other" (Section 4.3.3). He also notes that the principalities and powers are, in the terminology of the missiologist Paul G. Hiebert (1982), examples of "the excluded middle" (p. 43). Hiebert's term refers to the imagined domain between the human and the divine, that is, between the two tiers of the modern worldview, which he claims to have come about through "the secularization of science and the mystification of religion" (p. 43). According to many church traditions, this middle level is inhabited by spirits, angels, demons, principalities, and powers etc. Yong (2010), however, prefers to lean on the work of Hendrikus Berkhof as he describes these forces as "primordial structures of earthly existence" (Section 4.2.2). He asserts that they are part of God's creation, and therefore essentially good, but have fallen (just like humanity) and become distorted.

Yong emphasizes that these concepts are by no means particular to Paul or the New Testament. For example, the "prince" of Persia in the book of Daniel seems to refer to a similar reality, as he is compared to the angel "Michael, one of the chief princes" (Dan. 10:13). In the ancient world it was common to imagine that the nations were governed by spiritual principalities, whereas the human rulers were seen as their embodiment on earth. However, according to Wink (2012), "the angel of a corporate entity is not simply the sum total of all it is, but also bears the message of what it ought to be" (p. 364). The angel or principality of a nation could therefore also be considered to represent the nation's *telos*.

Both Yong and Wink take these concepts very seriously, and in doing so they are reintegrating the spirits of the middle sphere, which modernity has been excluding for so long. However, for Yong, the issue of ontology poses a problem. For instance, could these powers really be said to "exist" in a similar fashion to humans? To answer this question, Yong (2010) seeks the advice of Augustine, whose demonology asserts that "the gods of the nations are no more or less than demons, fallen angels who were created good but have defected, and thus cast out of their heavenly abode, because of deformed pride, defective wills, and distorted desires" (Section 2.1.3). Yong agrees with Augustine that these powers have to possess *some kind* of existence since they have been created as parts of God's good creation. But as soon as these "structural domains" (or "creational spheres"), as he calls them, stop adhering to the order that was intended by God, they start to manifest the demonic (Yong, 2010, Section 4.3.3). These manifestations, however, should not be considered as created by God according to Yong. The deformity, defectiveness, and distortion that Augustine reflected upon do not possess any real being. Rather, the demonic might better be described as an emergent reality, or possibly as a spiritual parasite that is always dependent on the substantially real structures of God's good creation. It cannot exist on its own (Yong, 2010, Section 4.3.3).

THE IMPORTANCE OF WORLDVIEWS

This raises several questions. For example, how exactly are we supposed to conceptualize the ontology of these demonic principalities and powers? Yong (2010), once again relying on Berkhof, suggests that they are

the invisible, intangible interiority of collective enterprises, the invariant, determining forces of nature and society, or the archetypal images of the unconscious, all of which shape, nurture, and all too often cripple human existence. These mighty Powers are still with us. They are not “mere” symbols – that too is the language of the old [modern] worldview that is passing, for we now know that nothing is more powerful than a living symbol. As symbols they point to something real, something the worldview of materialism never learned to name and therefore never could confront. (Section 4.2.2)

Yong, while willing to speculate up to a certain point, decides, in the end, to play it safe. He promotes what he calls “an apophatic theology of the powers” since we “must not claim to know too much about the powers” (Yong, 2010, Section 4.3.3). Wink, on the other hand, is prepared to go a bit further. In order to identify the nature of the principalities and powers, he believes that we need to reflect on the issue of worldviews. Firstly, he describes **1) the ancient worldview** as consisting of heaven and earth mirroring each other:

Some first-century Jews and Christians perceived in the Roman Empire a demonic spirituality which they called Satan (the “Dragon” of Revelation 12). But they encountered this spirit in the actual institutional forms of Roman life: legions, governors, crucifixions, payment of tribute, Roman sacred emblems and standards, and so forth (the “beast” of Revelation 13). The spirit that they perceived existed right at the heart of the empire, but their worldview equipped them to discern that spirit only by intuiting it and then projecting it out, in visionary form, as a spiritual *being* residing in heaven and representing Rome in the heavenly council. (Wink, 2012, p. 361)

According to **2) the spiritualist worldview**, on the other hand, spirit is seen as primary while matter is secondary: “The world is a prison into which spirits have fallen from the good heaven” (Wink, 2012, p. 356). Reality is therefore seen as primarily emanating from above. **3) The materialist worldview** is in many ways the complete opposite. According to this view, reality is believed to emerge from below and any talk of principalities and powers possessing real existence is off the table since everything that exists is considered to be material. The position that Wink calls **4) the theological worldview** acknowledges both a spiritual and a material dimension of reality. However, he thinks that it is a somewhat “schizoid view of reality” since it advocates slogans such as “science tells us *how* the world was created, religion tells us *why*” (Wink, 2012, p. 357). The scientific and religious aspects are always kept apart.

Instead, Wink (2012) claims that the best way to interpret the principalities and powers is through **5) an integral worldview**, which “sees everything as having an outer and inner aspect” (p. 358). While he has a certain sympathy for the liberation theologians who started “to reinterpret the ‘principalities and powers,’ not as disembodied spirits inhabiting the air [as in some of the ancient worldviews], but as institutions, structures, and systems”, he believes that this kind of approach suffers from a form of reductionism (Wink, 2012, p. 360). It does not do sufficient justice to the biblical passages which depict a world consisting of both a spiritual (unseen) reality and a social (visible) reality. In Wink’s opinion, we need to take *both* of these aspects of God’s creation into account when trying to conceptualize the principalities

and powers. Viewing them as the inner and outer aspects of reality seems, therefore, in his opinion, to fit the biblical account the best.

However, in what way are we supposed to conceptualize the inner aspects of reality that Wink describes? Would it, for example, make sense to consider these spiritual entities to be “personal” in any way, as they traditionally have been viewed? Do they possess their own agency, or are they simply the symbolic representations of a collective as the convinced materialist might contend? Wink (2012) readily admits that he knows of no sure way to settle the question, but he is inclined to think of them as impersonal entities:

My main objection to personalizing demons is that by doing so, we give them a ‘body’ or form separate from the physical and historical institutions through which we experience them. I prefer, therefore, to regard them as the impersonal spiritual realities at the center of institutional life. (pp. 362–363)

Wink’s integral worldview, where spirit is viewed as the inner reality of an entity, while the material is its outer manifestation, certainly has its merits. For example, the division between an inner and outer world seems to be part of human experience. However, I am not as convinced of its applicability to the nature of a tech giant. Instead, I would argue that a more “incarnational” way to go about things would be to say that we, the users, *are* the body of the tech giant. This seems to be the logical consequence of the analogy of us being the giants’ source of food. Just as the physical body of a human being consists of the digested food it has consumed, so the tech giants’ “spiritual” bodies are primarily being nourished by digesting the information of their users (although this digestion obviously needs the internal organs of employees, hardware etc. in order to work). This is one of the main reasons why all tech companies are so obsessed with capturing (and keeping) our attention. Thus, it could be argued that *we become the giant’s body through our participation in its spirit*. In a sense, as we offer ourselves to the principality by giving it our attention, personal data and patterns of behavior, in other words, our “worship”, we inevitably strengthen its power and spiritual dominion over us.

After this brief discussion of the ontology of principalities and powers, I would now like to address how the tech giants shape our view of the world.

THE SPIRITUAL FRAMEWORKS OF THE TECH GIANTS

Hylland Eriksen makes an interesting observation as he draws attention to the ramifications of Microsoft’s monopoly of word processors. Firstly, he notes that “all word processors influence the way we write and think by laying down incentives and constraints” (Hylland Eriksen, 2014, p. 69). As I write this sentence, I am in a sense subjugating myself to the power of Microsoft. A word processor is, as the term suggests, a digital tool that is designed to process written language. But just as the size of my screwdriver determines what kind of screws I can use, Microsoft Word determines what kind of texts I can write. Microsoft does not decide the actual content of my text, but they control the very frameworks in which my writing is taking place. Functions such as predictive text or Google Docs’ “Smart Compose”, where the word processor or messaging app is guiding the users’ thoughts by suggesting words as they write, would be an obvious example of this. However, it would be a mistake to focus too heavily on particular features. Instead, we need to look at the power dynamics at play. Although we, as individual users, might think that we are simply wielding the technology as a tool, what we need to realize is that in doing so we are willingly subjugating ourselves to the rules of the overarching framework. Thus, according to the philosopher of technology Peter-Paul Verbeek (2011), rather than characterizing this kind of human-machine relationship as a form of “use

configuration”, it is more appropriate to describe it as a form of *immersion*, in the sense that “people are immersed in ‘smart environments’ that react intelligently to their presence and activities” (p. 28). In a similar fashion, Google has gained control of large parts of human behavior on the internet through people’s immersion and participation in the company’s carefully crafted environments. The tech giant’s dominance affords it the power to set the standards of the web, to decide the range of functions of our browsers, and to build the digital bridges which enable us to connect with each other. This means that Google is in control of some of the most foundational frameworks of our globalized world.

If we want to understand how Google and the other tech giants utilize their global power, I suggest that we view them similarly to Hylland Eriksen’s (2014) view of globalization as a phenomenon, namely as “form” rather than “content” (p. 15). An example of this would be how journalists provide most of the world’s news content, while Facebook is in control of the form in which we consume said content. Another example would be how YouTubers create original content for their respective channels, while Google has the power to distribute their videos in the form that affords them the maximal amount of personal data to feed on. Again, Facebook and Google do not have bodies of their own. We, the users, *become* their bodies through our continual participation. The tech giants are simply creating participatory frameworks for people to grow the size of their bodies and influence in the world.

Furthermore, if we understand a tech giant’s digital framework as a form of institution, it becomes even more apparent why it has such power over the individuals participating in its body. In his book *Himmelska kroppar*, the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson (2009) criticizes Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body for over-emphasizing perception and language as the primary way of relating to the world while neglecting the importance of institutions.

Perception, as well as language, is always embedded in institutions, which define what can be seen and said in accord with their respective discursive structures. Perception and language never exist independently of the inherent logic of these institutions. Therefore, it is the inherent logic of the institutions, rather than our perception or language, which primarily determines how we relate to fellow human beings and our surroundings... Thus, it is not perception or language which is primary, but the institutions. (p. 324, my translation)

If we were to apply Sigurdson’s argument to the way our worldview is being shaped by tech giants, it would mean that the content we look at while browsing (perception) and the information we digest (language), are in fact secondary to the inherent structure of the web.

The political theology of Luke Bretherton points in a similar direction. When analyzing the way market forces shape our worldview, he observes that “we live in an amoral universe on which ‘I’ bestow value. Within this framework, modern economics makes subjective value primary and so inherently fosters a relativistic worldview” (Bretherton, 2010, p. 344). In other words, it is the *framework* of modern economics that primarily shapes us, not the specific products we buy. “Understanding economics as amoral or neutral”, Bretherton continues, “undermines and delegitimizes the need for judgments about what should and what should not be up for sale” (p. 345). I would suggest that the same logic is also inherent to tech giants such as Twitter. While the content of people’s tweets might influence our opinions, the frameworks created by Twitter have the power to not only dictate the range of valid opinions but also to shape our understanding of human communication as amoral and subjective in nature. Once again, we see how the tech giants’ frameworks are shaping their participants’ view of the world at a more fundamental level than the specific content could ever do.

THE HOLLOW BODIES OF THE TECH GIANTS

The tech giants are also influencing our view of the body, both our physical bodies and the more abstract bodies of principalities and powers. Hylland Erikson (2014) has described social media as “an ongoing, deterritorialized conversation between people” (p. 33). The placeless nature of a principality like Facebook, however, also applies to its body. Whereas the prince of Persia in the book of Daniel and the beast of Rome in Revelation had concrete bodies consisting of emperors, armies and institutions, Facebook’s body is both everywhere and nowhere. It is, in a sense, hollow. The author Tom Goodwin (2015) has made the observation that this hollowness is in fact a shared feature among most of the giants of our time:

Uber, the world’s largest taxi company owns no vehicles. Facebook, the world’s most popular media owner, creates no content. Alibaba, the most valuable retailer, has no inventory. And Airbnb, the world’s largest accommodation provider, owns no real estate. Something interesting is happening. (para. 1)

As we increasingly access the world through the placeless platforms of the tech giants, thereby giving sustenance to their hollow bodies, our own existence becomes more and more disembodied. This process could arguably be described as a form of “excarnation”. In the early days of the internet, when online giants were still emerging, the theologian Gary Mann (1995) labeled this phenomenon “tech-Gnosticism”.

Tech-Gnosticism is the exponential expansion of a disembodied technical reason which can virtually create a world without the body... As the alternate artificial reality becomes the more dominant paradigm for our hermeneutic of reality, the more we will retreat from any notion of this world as a gift of a gracious God into the dark recesses of our individual universes, our individual consciousness – the most radical of tribalizations. (pp. 208–210)

This process of excarnation, which is fueled by our interactions within the frameworks of the tech giants, seems to bring the ancient spiritualist worldview back to life. In the past, the gnostic spirit tried to topple materialism in the popular imagination through movements such as idealism, esotericism, and New Age. But perhaps the tech giant will turn out to be the spiritual worldview’s greatest champion yet. When speculating on the future of virtual reality, Sigurdson (2009) similarly warns that “the ‘hyper-Cartesian’ consequence of this is that our consciousness will eventually be severed from our bodily existence” (p. 169, my translation). If this development continues, our physical bodies may become mere attachments to our “real” selves, regardless of whether this self is conceptualized as a consciousness, a soul, or a spirit.

EGREGORES IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

The concept of *egregores* might also be relevant to our discussion. The term has received quite some attention lately, but its roots can be traced all the way back to the ancient Enochian tradition, where these spiritual entities are commonly translated as “watchers”. However, the term should not be endorsed uncritically, as it has been used in various occultist contexts over the past centuries. Still, I believe that the concept of *egregores* might shine a light on the demonic aspects of the tech giants and what our participation in their hollow bodies might entail.

Egil Aspren (2020), professor in the history of religions at Stockholm University, describes *egregores* as “an artificially created entity or thought-form with a will of its own,

brought into existence and kept alive through the use of magic” (p. 28). The type of egregore that I want to focus on in this discussion is the thought forms that we encounter on social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter. In legacy media, these are often vaguely referred to as “dark forces” since they cannot be pinpointed to the thoughts of any specific individual. Rather, they are the manifestations of the collective thinking that come to dominate the online discourse. According to Asprem, these thought forms can also be created deliberately by means of so-called “meme-magic”. Just as occultists might worship a thought form with a demonic *telos* through rituals to gain power in the regular world, similar practices are now being performed in the world of social media. In his study of the online war during the United States presidential election of 2016, Asprem (2020) notes that “the goal [of meme-magic] is to create a web of associations, manufacturing distrust through the networking of negative affect, especially contempt and disgust” (p. 27). This is primarily achieved by methodically shifting the narrative of comment threads and the atmosphere of online communities, thereby transforming the “spirit” of the discourse. “Magical mobilization through synchronized ritual protest or the sharing of sigils is a form of affective networking,” Asprem continues, “feeding and creating collective effervescence which, in turn, can be converted into real-life political capital in the shape of votes cast for a charismatic leader” (p. 36).

I would contend that the process of creating and maintaining egregores through rituals is fundamentally a religious activity. And, as Sigurdson (2009) reminds us, “there is always a ritual mediation taking place between social and individual bodies” (p. 353, my translation). The meme-magicians could therefore be seen as playing the role of priests, mediating between the thought form and its individual members, thereby influencing the minds of the unsuspecting participants of the discourse. This kind of ritualistic interaction with egregores seems to correlate with the descriptions of principalities in the New Testament. Just as people who participated in the rituals of the emperor cult were shaped by the principality of Rome, the same is arguably true of ritualized practices on social media. These rituals can be anything from posting a rainbow flag in support of the LGBTQ+ community, or a black square in support of Black Lives Matter, to showing one’s allegiance to #Gamergate or any other competing viral narrative. Asprem (2020) describes this phenomenon as an “enchanted crowd psychology”, where “the actions of the group feed the egregore and the egregore protects the group” (p. 36).

It is certainly possible to analyze egregores through this kind of psychological lens. However, I would argue that the fundamental reason why magical thinking has returned, and why the “spells” of these meme-magicians seem to have real effects, has more to do with the rapid shift in worldview that Wink identified. The reason why magic “worked” in antiquity was mainly due to the polytheistic worldview. According to the Jewish scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann (1960), the ancients’ view of ultimate reality was not God, but rather a “meta-divine realm” out of which the gods emerged (p. 23). The pagan gods were thus subservient to the laws of the cosmos, instead of being the laws’ originators (as in the case of the God of the Bible). And just as the pagan gods fought among themselves for dominance *within* the framework of the meta-divine realm, the competing viral narratives of today vie for people’s attention *within* the frameworks of the tech giants. To put it simply, the mythological and technological giants make up the “arena”, whereas the gods and the egregores lead their respective worshippers into battle. Consequently, just as pagan priests used their secret knowledge to manipulate the principalities and powers, the meme-magicians of today try to wield the egregores on our social media platforms for whatever purpose they seek to achieve.

Not only does our participation in the hollow bodies of the tech giants lead to a disembodied form of tech-Gnosticism, as Mann claimed, but the rise of a subjective and amoral digital universe also seems to have reawakened the polytheistic worldview. I would even argue

that there is a mythological awakening taking place. In the spring of 2022, a typical example of mythological thinking occurred in the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* when Irena Pozar drew attention to a smear campaign with more than five billion total views on TikTok against Amber Heard, the ex-wife of the actor Johnny Depp. In her column, Pozar (2022) claimed that “the combination of inadequate source criticism and propaganda creates a monster consisting of otherwise sensible people” (para. 7, my translation). This “monster” that she perceived is a perfect example of a shared thought form, an egregore, consisting of a body of (in the words of Pozar) “otherwise sensible people”.

Now, how are we supposed to interpret this phenomenon theologically? In my estimation, Wink’s integral worldview does not hold up as an explanation. It would not make much sense in describing the egregore as the inner aspect and the “otherwise sensible people” as its outer manifestation. Instead, I would argue that the egregore, or thought form, is a spirit that is quite literally *influencing* everybody who participates in its body. The Latin term *influentia*, it should be remembered, originally referred to a kind of “flowing in” from the heavenly spheres.³

However, there are those who are not as willing to equate egregores with spirits or grant them any kind of transcendence. The metaphysician René Guénon, one of the key figures in the Traditionalist school, prefers to draw a distinction between the psychic collectivity that emerges from below on the one hand, and the spiritual influences which emanate from above on the other. “A collectivity”, he cautions, “is only a union of individuals, it cannot by itself produce anything of supra-individual order, for the higher can never proceed from the lower” (Guénon, 2004, p. 39). Although I agree with Guénon’s distinction in theory, the actual evidence seems to indicate that the online egregore, such as Pozar’s TikTok monster, is more than simply a union of individuals. By all appearances, it is acting very similar to a spirit in that it both influences the thoughts and shapes the imagination of those who partake in its body through the meme-magicians’ mediating jokes and memes.

EXORCISING THE EGREGORES

The discussion above raises the question: Which agency is the strongest, that of the egregore or that of the sensible people? In many ways, it is the same question as whether we are capable of taming the giants of this world or not. Both Yong and Wink are optimistic, although it should be noted that they are not discussing tech giants specifically but rather principalities and powers in general. Yong (2010) promotes a “social exorcism” by means of liturgical rites, which according to him can “oust the demonic distortions that have come to infest, infect, and infiltrate the various spheres of human life” (Section 4.3.3). I agree that the liturgy of a local congregation could have an exorcising effect on its surrounding community through its body of members. But what kind of liturgy would the church need in order to exorcise the demonic aspects of an online egregore with a body of millions of “otherwise sensible people” spread out in a globalized world?

³ In his study of the medieval worldview, the professor of Medieval and Renaissance English C.S. Lewis claims that the church was never principally opposed to the concept of *influentia*. However, it often fought against problematic offshoots, such as 1) trying to interpret these influences in order to make astrological predictions, 2) doctrines which emphasized spiritual influence to the degree that free will was excluded, and especially 3) all forms of worship in the form of “planetolatry” (Lewis, 2013, pp. 103–104).

Wink (2012) is similarly optimistic as he points to Ephesians 3:10 and declares that the spiritual task of the *ekklesia* is to “recall the Powers to the created purposes in the world” (p. 363). In other words: to redeem them. It should be noted that he comes to the task from the perspective of his integral worldview, and consequently emphasizes that “only by confronting the spirituality of an institution *and* its physical manifestations can the total structure be transformed” (Wink, 2012, p. 364). Once again, the problem in a digital world is to identify where these physical manifestations are to be found. Furthermore, exactly what would this confrontation look like and what methods would be used?

The most obvious solution is perhaps regulations. From a theological perspective, however, it would be quite idolatrous for the church to put her final trust in the government to exorcise the tech giants. Jesus asks how Satan can cast out Satan, which points to the fact that human governments are equally in need of redemption (Mark 3:23). Furthermore, from a purely practical standpoint, regulations suffer from an inherent paradox. The stricter regulations we impose on the tech giants to protect individual rights the more dependent we become on their services, since startup companies lack the inexhaustible resources of the Big Five and are thus unable to meet the high requirements. The harder our governments bind the tech giants, the stronger their monopolies seem to become. In his book *Cloud Empires*, Vili Lehdonvirta (2022) also notes that we cannot solve the problem on the individual level by simply switching platforms.

The choice between alternative institutional frameworks is not an individual choice – the kind that happens on a market – but a collective choice. Institutions govern interactions between people; one person cannot choose to play by different rules than those used by the people they are interacting with. People can choose to leave the entire community and start afresh in another one, but that means that they are giving up on a lot more than just a rule set. They may be giving up on their contacts, their reputation, their name recognition, their repeat customers, their fluency in the local culture, and so on. Because of such drastic switching costs, a market for rules is rarely liquid enough to be a sufficient constraint on rulers’ power. (p. 221)

Consequently, there are no easy answers as to how the tech giants are to be tamed by social exorcism, through political action such as regulations, or by individual choice.

However, the greatest hurdle to overcome in order to exorcise demonic manifestations on the internet could arguably be the following: egregores exist, for lack of a better term, *one level up* from human beings. Christians might simply conclude, based on Paul’s descriptions of principalities and powers, that these shared thought forms belong to the spiritual realm and leave it at that. But if a materialist worldview were to be assumed, just for the sake of argument, where the belief in spirits is dismissed, the following illustration by the self-professed culture war objector B.J. Campbell might help to explain the dilemma at hand (VanderKlay, 2022, 1:17:50).

The relationship between individual human beings and a thought form could be said to resemble the relationship between neurons and the brain. The single neuron cannot “know” what the brain is thinking. It is simply a node in a larger neural network. And since the thought process is taking place on the level of the brain, which is to say “one level up” from the neuron (ontologically speaking), the agency of a single neuron is extremely limited. In a similar fashion, the individual users of social media networks are behaving like neurons in a brain when they are participating in viral narratives and transmitting information by sharing, liking, subscribing, and commenting etc. But just as the neuron’s synapses are insufficient to understand the brain’s thoughts, it would be impossible for us to understand what the egregores are “thinking” on the ontological levels above us. How could we even imagine what personal agency would

mean for any sort of power or principality? Just as the agency of God and the agency of humans cannot be of the same category, the agency of the excluded middle is most probably beyond our comprehension as well. Although we might be able to discern the effects of the spirits, just as we hear the sound of the wind, we will never be able to fully control that which is above us (John 3:8).

In the final analysis, the spirits will only heed that which is above them, that is, their creator. Consequently, only the Word of the “Father of spirits” has the power to subjugate the principalities and powers of the world (Heb. 12:9). This should not be interpreted as a form of defeatism but rather as a message of hope and an invitation to faith. Because, as Jesus tells the Pharisees, “if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God is come unto you” (Matt. 12:28).

CONCLUSION

In the end, I remain skeptical of the prospects of individuals, local congregations, or political movements taming the social media giants of today. However, that does not mean that people cannot have an effect on the way companies such as Google, Facebook, or Twitter do business in the world. It is simply an acknowledgement that none of us are able to subdue the chaotic spirits of cyberspace through our own strength in the way Jesus showed his mastery over the storm on the Sea of Galilee. The most influential of us are at best nothing more than powerful meme-magicians trying to feed the egregore of our choice.

The church, however, is also facing a dilemma. It seems that the more it tries to engage the spirits of the online world the less embodied it becomes, since it inevitably will have to subjugate itself to the frameworks of the tech giants. Any attempt at exorcising the demonic egregores on their home turf would simply force the church to participate in the tech giants’ hollow bodies, which in turn might result in a sort of excarnation. Instead, as in the words of Paul G. Hiebert (1982),

the church and mission must guard against Christianity itself becoming a new form of magic. Magic is based on a mechanistic view – a formula approach to reality that allows humans to control their own destiny. Worship, on the other hand, is rooted in a relational view of life. (p. 46)

Worship, I would argue, is the crucial point here. Instead of trying to come up with a formula to control the giants of this world, it is through the church’s communal worship and its shared focus of attention that the body of Christ is being formed and its members can come together in one spirit (1 Cor. 12:12–14). Although this might sound similar to my earlier descriptions of the bodies of giants, the spiritual framework of Christ is in fact an inversion of the polytheistic order. The collective bodies that people purposefully create, or that emerge by themselves online, are parasitic in nature and therefore need to feed on those who are below in order to grow in power and influence. The complete opposite is true for the body of Christ, which according to the apostle Paul is being nourished and cherished by its head (Eph. 5:29). Participation in this body does not mean becoming food but being fed.

Therefore, before diving headlong into spiritual warfare or social exorcism on the internet (or even worse, engaging in a culture war in the belief that a righteous order can be established by means of a *Chaoskampf*), the church has to realize that both the demonic egregores and the tech giants are simply competing over us for food. The Father of spirits, on the other hand, wants us for His children. Therein lies the Christian hope of true redemption, a redemption which in the end will include even the principalities and powers of the digital age.

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