



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Curiosity and Smartphones
(*Virtual Lives*, pp. 11-19)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Curiosity and Smartphones

Mobile connectivity is both compelling and unsettling. Whether or not our time in virtual reality runs contrary to the soul's deep need for the love of God and others depends on why we pursue virtual lives, what they teach us to desire, and how we cherish the things they provide.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 11:29-32

Meditation¹

Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday and today and tomorrow, calls his disciples "friends." His earthly ministry was in a different day — before friendship across continents was possible and "friending" became a casual verb. In our techno-savvy world we face new ways of living, yet life is still about relationships with God, our neighbors, and the creation.

So we examine our virtual lives in light of God's call to virtuous living. May God open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to understand as we pray, reflect, and sing together as his friends.

Anne Bell Worley

Reflection

Androids, Blackberries, and iPhones can provide instant access to an amazing amount of information, significant and trivial alike. This is a great blessing, Doug Henry avows, yet he worries that "living in a world of perpetual mobile connectivity can be spiritually distracting, and even deforming, for those who succumb to its inducements." Wait a minute — could we really be deformed by our smartphones? Henry believes their impact on us depends in part on the kind of intellectual appetite, or desire for knowledge, that we indulge and nurture when we use them.

In the Christian tradition, *curiositas* names a sinful form of intellectual appetite and *studiositas* identifies a praiseworthy appetite for knowledge. Henry explains how these "have different purposes, seek different things, and occupy different worlds."

- ▶ *Why we desire knowledge.* The curious want "to possess, conquer, own, and sequester for private purposes an intellectual good that could benefit others." The studios seek "participatory intimacy" with knowledge. They "delight in the joy of creaturely proximity to truth, regarding it as an inexhaustible good not diminished in the least when others share in it."
- ▶ *What knowledge we seek.* While the curious think the world consists of mere objects to be taken as one's own, the studios experience it as filled with God's good gifts to receive. "Conquerors do not receive or celebrate gifts, and neither do the merely curious," notes Henry. "They can feel important in owning or in knowing something that nobody else possesses. For them, though, delighting in something that is graciously shared comes, if at all, with difficulty."
- ▶ *How we are oriented toward knowledge.* The curious seek novelty. They want to be the first one to know things, and want to tell others what they know, because sharing their information, news,



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or gossip marks them as a step ahead of their competition. Most of all, the curious can savor a spectacle—an attention-grabbing, merely entertaining glimpse of violence, damage, or distortion. Once Jesus rebuked the swelling, but shallow crowd of followers for “seeking a sign” —or as *The Message* puts it, “something to titillate your curiosity.”² They wanted some sort of spectacle, rather than a relationship with Christ (Luke 11:29-32; cf. Matthew 12:38-42; 16:1-4).

“*Studiositas* differs in every relevant way in how it orients us toward knowledge,” Henry says. “The studious prefer repeated, deepening encounters with what they can always know only partially.... In addition, because the studious have little concern to be known as knowers, they have no cause to broadcast their grip on the truth.” Rather than spectacles, the studious prefer the deep beauty that (in the words of Paul Griffiths) “beckons the gaze into something deeper than itself by opening its surface beauties...into something much more beautiful than itself,” ultimately the life of God.

Henry concludes, “By developing habits of *studiositas* rather than *curiositas*—especially when wielding potent tools such as smartphones—we can see God’s love more clearly in the graciously given gifts that we receive, seek to understand, and embrace as goods that direct us back to delight in God alone.”

Study Questions

1. Discuss the differences between *curiositas* and *studiositas*. How have you experienced each of these appetites?
2. Doug Henry writes, “A smartphone connected to the Internet is the ideal technology for cultivating and satisfying *curiositas*.” Do you agree?
3. On the other hand, how can we use mobile communication technologies to encourage and satisfy *studiositas*?
4. When should we turn our smartphones off?

Departing Hymn: “Full of Love and Christian Virtue”

Full of love and Christian virtue, may God’s people always be living out the new creation with faith, hope, and charity, prudence to discern the truth, justice to give all their due, fortitude to conquer fear, temperance toward earthly goods.

In a world that’s ever-changing, you, O God, are constant still. Help us in each age and season, your high purpose to fulfill: dare us to embrace new boundaries, grounded in your liberty; teach us how to be good neighbors, building true community.

Let us be a mindful people, walking in the way of Christ; keep us from the base and shallow of a merely virtual life. Meet us in our work and worship, at the table, with our friends; usher us to life abundant with your love that never ends.

Ann Bell Worley (2010)

Tune: RUSTINGTON

1 From Ann Bell Worley’s worship service, *Virtual Lives*, *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, 37 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics), 53.

2 Scripture taken from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.

Curiosity and Smartphones

Lesson Plans

| <i>Abridged Plan</i> | <i>Standard Plan</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Prayer | Prayer |
| Scripture Reading | Scripture Reading |
| Meditation | Meditation |
| Reflection (skim all) | Reflection (all sections) |
| Questions 1 and 2 | Questions (selected) |
| Departing Hymn | Departing Hymn |

Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish two forms of intellectual appetite, or desires for knowledge, in the Christian tradition – a sinful desire called *curiositas* and a praiseworthy desire named *studiositas*.
2. To consider how mobile information technologies like smartphones can be temptations to *curiositas* or tools to cultivate *studiositas*.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Virtual Lives (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

For several years it has been my privilege to share a coffee break with Doug Henry and other friends at Baylor University a few mornings each week. We are often glad that Doug is so “wired.” With his smartphone he can quickly access the Internet to settle a debate about the basketball team’s shooting percentage, read a key passage from an editorial we are discussing, or simply share a YouTube gem that one of us has discovered. Doug knows what he is talking about when he says, “These pocket-sized gadgets provide easy access to new knowledge on demand.” Yet he worries, “Androids, Blackberries, and iPhones also present ample opportunity to be known as in the loop, so much so that simply sporting one implies the possession of knowledge. Someone carrying the latest smartphone model, after all, must be smart – right? Around my workplace, dueling iPhone users are ubiquitous, each one reporting to the other the *even more recently posted* Facebook entry, blog comment, or random news item. Smartphone savants, by and large, cannot keep silent about what they know” (*Virtual Lives*, 17).

Doug would rather be completely present to us in our conversation than go surfing the Web. The sort of love and focus on others that he demonstrates every day is what he reflects on here.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for discernment to use our interactive gadgets wisely – to love God and others.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 11:29-32 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In this study Doug Henry explores how we are using new technologies of mobile connectivity – Androids, Blackberries, iPhones, and the like – to either cultivate or deform our heart’s desire to love God and to love others in God. Since smartphones provide quick access to vast amounts of information, he focuses especially on how they are shaping our intellectual appetites, or types of desire for knowledge. Today we do not think

curiosity is an unalloyed good – after all, we say that it “killed the cat” – but members may be surprised to learn this trait has long been called a vice in Christian moral thought. Don’t get sidetracked into a debate about the proper usage of this word (which might be an example of *curiositas*); it is much more important to be clear about the form of intellectual appetite that undermines our love of God and others.

Study Questions

1. Doug Henry discusses three aspects of *curiositas* and *studiositas* – the why, what, and how of these desires for knowledge. The curious (1) want knowledge as something they can possess for themselves, (2) experience the world of knowing as things that can be taken, and thus (3) they want to be the first to know things, want to let others people know that they were the first to know them, and can really only savor the meaningless spectacle that takes them no deeper into reality. The studious on the other hand (1’) seek a joy of participation with the truth that is sharable with others, (2’) see their intellect and the knowledge they gain from it as gifts from God to be shared, and thus (3’) they prefer the beauty of knowledge that can be revisited and which draws them ever deeper into relationship with it.

Some things, like the mere spectacle, are always lures for curiosity and are too superficial or distorted to sustain the studious gaze. Other things, like a person or significant idea or natural system, can be approached with *curiositas* or *studiositas*. Encourage members to give specific examples of each of these intellectual appetites from their experience.

2. Smartphones often cultivate several aspects of *curiositas*, Henry writes. They feed the hunger for novelty by providing “easy access to new knowledge on demand ... inadequate though it is for real intellectual sustenance.” Simply carrying one is a statement that one is fashionably in possession of knowledge. “Smartphone savants, by and large, cannot keep silent about what they know.” And they readily tempt us with “heartbreaking images of desecration and desolation ... [that are] spectacles”

Ask members to prayerfully reflect on *why* they like their smartphones, *what* they use them for, and *how* they have become oriented toward knowledge and other people as they use their smartphones.

3. Henry says he uses technology to nourish and satisfy *studiositas*. “Especially when traveling, I use my iPad to search, read, and study Scripture. It can access virtually anything on the Internet, including the issue of *Christian Reflection* containing these very words. It gives me pictures of nature and works of art that, under the aegis of *studiositas*, inspire my contemplative gratitude to God. In tandem with a Dropbox account, my iPad allows me to review my lecture notes, read my colleagues’ work, and make progress on my latest scholarly article.”

Let members add to Henry’s list some examples of how they use mobile connectivity to better love God, other people, and the creation.

4. Henry offers some general guidelines: “Because we long for the right ordering of all our loves, we must pay attention to our intellectual appetites. We should desire to know certain things but not others. We should cherish knowledge for particular reasons but not others. We should take satisfaction in fulfilling some intellectual appetites but not others.”

Divide members into groups to draw up three lists: (1) of *things* we could find on the Internet with our smartphones, but we should not seek to know them at all; (2) of *occasions* when we should be so present to God and others that smartphones could only be a distraction; and (3) of inappropriate *motivations* for knowing things (which we might resist by turning off the technology that could satisfy them).

Departing Hymn

“Full of Love and Christian Virtue” can be found on pp. 50-51 of *Virtual Lives*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.