

On Evangelizing an Avatar:  
An empirical exploration of the expression of faith in virtual  
reality

by

**Steffen Michael Schulte**

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Promotor: Prof Dr C Sauer

Co-Promotor: Prof Dr T Faix

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Student number: 45322651

### Declaration

I declare that “On Evangelizing an Avatar: An empirical exploration of the expression of faith in virtual reality” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steffen Druhl', written in a cursive style.

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SIGNATURE

05 Nov 2017

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DATE

## **Summary**

Mission is a central aspect of the Christian faith and much thought is given to the challenge of proclaiming the gospel in a new context or to a different people group (i.e. contextualization). In recent years, a new context has come to the forefront that has been and is being created through technology, namely virtual reality (VR). The purpose of this study is to explore *how contextualization, with regards to evangelization, needs to be done in VR*. The proposed thesis is that *VR provides a new context in which the Christian faith is, or should be, shared in a contextualized way*.

Although much thought is given to the question of religion in VR, it mostly focuses on the nature of communities online. This study addresses the issue of online evangelization, which has so far received less attention.

This doctoral thesis is structured after the *empirical-theological praxis cycle* of Faix (2007a), and the Policy Delphi Method (PDM) is the research technique used. Through the PDM, a panel of experts from different backgrounds (theologians, sociologists, and practitioners) discussed the various ways in which VR affects evangelization, the way people form their religious identity, and how contextualization could take place. The aim of this research is to contribute to the field of missiology by investigating VR as a new context in which to proclaim the Christian faith.

### **Keywords:**

Contextualization, evangelization, internet, virtual reality, religious identity, expert-interviews, ETP cycle, Grounded Theory, Policy Delphi Method, Action Research.

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## List of abbreviations

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| AoG       | <i>Assembly of God</i>   |
| BGEA      | <i>Billy Graham Evangelistic Association</i>                   |
| CWMRW     | <i>Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World</i>            |
| ETP cycle | <i>Empirical-Theological Praxis cycle</i>                      |
| FR        | <i>First Reality</i>   |
| GDM       | <i>Grounded Delphi Method</i>                                  |
| GMO       | <i>Global Media Outreach</i>                                   |
| GT        | <i>Grounded Theory</i>   |
| IT        | <i>Intercultural Theology</i>                                  |
| JA        | <i>Journey Answers</i>   |
| LMPG      | <i>A Statement on the Prosperity Gospel, Lausanne Movement</i> |
| MMORPG    | <i>Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game</i>          |
| NIV       | <i>New International Version</i>                               |
| PDM       | <i>Policy Delphi Method</i>                                    |
| PwG       | <i>Peace with God</i>  |
| Qs        | <i>Qualitative sampling</i>                                    |
| R1        | <i>Round one of the Policy Delphi Method</i>                   |
| R2        | <i>Round two of the Policy Delphi Method</i>                   |
| R3        | <i>Round three of the Policy Delphi Method</i>                 |
| RSST      | <i>Religious-social shaping of technology</i>                  |
| SEO       | <i>Search Engine Optimization</i>                              |
| SL        | <i>Second Life</i>   |
| SNS       | <i>Social networking sites</i>                                 |
| SST       | <i>Social shaping of technology</i>                            |
| TJ        | <i>Talk Jesus</i>  |
| TS        | <i>Theoretical sampling</i>                                    |
| VR        | <i>Virtual Reality</i>   |
| WOW       | <i>World of Warcraft</i>                                       |

# 1. Introduction

Mission is a central aspect of Christian life. Christians throughout the ages have joined God, the great missionary, in his endeavour to reconcile the world with himself (*missio Dei*). Much thought, therefore, has been given to the challenge of proclaiming the gospel in this new age filled with people from different backgrounds. It is understood that contextualization is necessary to ensure a successful and accurate presentation of the gospel. The core idea of contextualization is defined as “taking the gospel to a new context and finding appropriate ways to communicate it so that it is understandable to the people in that context” (Moreau & McGee 2004:12).

Contextualization often takes place when missionaries journey to foreign countries, where few people may be familiar with the gospel. Yet, in recent years, technology has brought a new context to the forefront.

Douglas Estes suggests in his book, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*, that virtual reality (VR) ought to be considered a new context in which the gospel needs to be communicated.

The Christian church is engaging far less than 1 percent of the seventy million people who are active in the virtual world. This means the virtual world is by far the largest unreached people group on planet earth.

(Estes 2009:29)

However, VR is not simply bringing about a new context for the gospel to be presented in, it is impacting religion. Presently, we are witnessing a further mediatization of religion through the rise of new technologies, such as virtual reality (Lundby 2013b:195). This process of mediatization makes it necessary for established religions to adapt but mediatization can also lead to transformation.

[M]edia are crucial factors for the formation and transformation of religion, both internally (regarding relations between leaders and followers) and externally (regarding religions position in society). From the perspective of mediation, the incorporation of a new medium into established, longstanding religious sensational forms is not a simple transfer. My point here is that what a medium is and does is not fixed, but subject to negotiation and incorporation within a religious tradition, both on the level of theology and actual religious practice. What a medium is and does is constituted socially. Therefore, as researchers, we need to explore debates about media—media “talk”—that are articulated especially explicitly with the rise and accessibility of new technologies and media formats, but not limited to these particular moments.

(Meyer 2013:10)

Such processes of negotiation and incorporation have also been witnessed in the past. Most recently the mass-media.

Television as a mass media tool was introduced in the 1950s and, along with other electronic media, was used for evangelism and constituency building. By the 1980s, there were 1,370 religious radio stations and more than 220 religious television stations. Three Christian networks broadcast 24 hours

a day to nationwide audiences. The Golden Age of televangelism, from approximately 1980 to 1987, brought religious broadcasting to national attention.

(Swatos 1998)

These mass-media have obvious similarities to the internet with regards to evangelization. For example, TV and radio made it no longer necessary to be physically present at a church in order to hear a sermon, and thus, as a rule, the consumer can remain anonymous until he or she decides otherwise.

Similarly, the internet has been used to provide information about the Christian faith (e.g. sermons) but it offers more than traditional mass-media, as it can offer interactive and much more diverse services such as online counselling (e.g. <http://www.christliche-onlineberatung.de/>) or online classes on biblical teaching (e.g. <http://www.nationsu.net/>).<sup>1</sup>

Yet, as stated earlier, the internet, and VR in general, offer more than just another medium through which information can be provided. Some, like Weber, suggest that VR will change the way we see the world and ourselves.<sup>2</sup> VR is affecting us as human beings, especially with regards to our understanding of presence, identity, and community as well as the way we communicate. Therefore, VR deals with various aspects which are highly relevant to religion.

Yet, the usefulness and compatibility of new media for religion has also been challenged. Lorne L. Dawson, for example, asks with regards to the internet if we can actually “do religion online, in the more demanding sense of participating in shared religious rites?” (Dawson 2005:15). His conclusion reveals the complexity of the issue:

The Internet may be ill-suited to the mediation of religious experience, [...] because it is too exclusively ocular, image-driven, textual, change-oriented, individualistic, detached and disembodied medium.

(Dawson 2005:19)

While Dawson’s description of the internet is correct, his conclusion can be challenged. One could also argue that people actually want to experience faith as “ocular, image-driven, textual, change-oriented [and] individualistic.”

At present, it can be noted that most religious offers and pastoral services found on the internet have been altered in order to become more interactive, to enable virtual participation in religious activities (e.g. a church service) or pastoral service (e.g. online counselling). The

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive overview of the use of media by evangelicals see Schultze, Quentin J and Robert H Wood Jr., eds. 2008. *Understanding evangelical media: The changing face of Christian communication*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.

<sup>2</sup> “Sie [die Virtuelle Realität] existiert neben dem ‘real Life’, wird aber zunehmend an Präsenz gewinnen. Weit tiefgreifender als alle bisherigen Erfindungen ändert die ‘cybertechnologie’ das Angesicht der Erde. Die sozio-kulturellen Folgen der Industriellen Revolution verblassen dagegen. Aber nicht nur das. Der Mensch selber wird sich verändern: seine Wahrnehmungsformen, und damit sein Selbst- und Weltverständnis. ... Der Mensch wird sich mehr und mehr von den ‘Fesseln der Materie’ befreien” (Weber 1999:2).

quality of these services, as well as their level of interactiveness, changes as technology advances. This has been an on-going development.

However, it is only recently that such internet platforms like *second life* and Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) like *World of Warcraft* (WOW),<sup>3</sup> as well as social networks such as *Facebook*, allow large groups of people to engage with each other in VR, or for the creation of an alternative personality, or even *life*, online. In November 2012, it was reported that WOW had 10 million subscribers, making it by far the most used MMORPG and VR.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, although the idea of VR is not new,<sup>5</sup> its popularity, accessibility and acceptability is growing, and this development is also affecting current religious online offers. In the book *Religion Online*, Dawson and Cowan comment on the effect of cyberspace on religion:

Cyberspace is not quite as unusual a place as sometimes predicted. Life in cyberspace is in continuity with so-called “real life”, and this holds true for religion as well. People are doing online pretty much what they do offline, but they are doing it differently. Activity is being mediated electronically, and this mediation allows things to be done in ways that are somewhat new and sometimes entirely innovative. [...] The consequences for religion are as yet largely unknown.

(Dawson & Cowan 2004:1)

Thus, while there is some continuity between *First Reality* (FR)<sup>6</sup> and VR, technology also creates or offers something new for religion at large and for evangelization in particular. Some examples of these innovations include the presence of a church in the virtual world *second life* and a church service offered by Pastor Craig Groeschel’s multi-site church (at <http://live.lifechurch.tv/>), where the online church is listed along with their various campuses.

With regards to the focus of this research, the concern is less with evangelization via the spread of information on the internet or manifestations of online churches, but rather how individuals introduce the gospel to other people inhabiting a shared VR and to observe to what extent they take the uniqueness of the new context into account. Thus, rather than researching services that people can go to (e.g. visiting a website), the concern here is to observe how

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<sup>3</sup> Since the subscription comes with an annual fee, one can assume that the majority of the subscribers are active. The duration of an average session is around 2 hours. “The top 11% of all players generated +50% of all the playtime hours. In fact, the top player for World of Warcraft on Raptr clocked in 149 hours in one week.” <http://blog.raptr.com/2010/12/17/raptr-world-of-warcraft-cataclysm-report-top-11-of-players-generate-50-of-total-playtime-hours/> [Accessed: 23.9.2012]

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.statista.com/statistics/208146/number-of-subscribers-of-world-of-warcraft/> [Accessed: 23.11.2012].

<sup>5</sup> *MUDI* (Multi User Dungeon) was developed by Roy Trubshaw and Richard A. Bartle in 1978 and is considered the first virtual reality.

<sup>6</sup> I chose to use the terms *first reality* to avoid the phrase “real world” which would imply that VR is less, or not truly, real. *First reality* thus refers to the culture the person grew up in and was part of before entering VR or whenever a person leaves VR. This term is also used by Haese.

Christians<sup>7</sup> engage with people of other or no faith about issues relating to faith, spirituality, religion of specifically the Christian faith. This thesis seeks to gain an understanding of human-to-human online interaction mediated through avatars, as a virtual identity. Avatar is a term used to describe someone's online persona:

An avatar is a stable identity that someone using [...] cyberspace has created. The existence of an avatar means someone has used some of cyberspace's resources in ways that result in other avatars recognising a stable online personality. [...] More than one avatar can be created, and the relationship between the identities and someone's offline life is complicated.

(Jordan 1999:59)

People that engage in such interaction in VR can experience a form of cross-cultural communication, namely from FR to VR. Erisman indicates this idea in an article written in preparation for the Lausanne 2010 meeting in Cape Town. There he writes:

We need to think about the communications challenge [on the internet] similar to a cross-cultural challenge. A missionary would not go to the Philippines without trying to understand the language and culture of the people there. So is it important for both church leaders and missionaries to understand the culture of the digital generation.

(Erisman 2010)

Yet, are people actually treating VR as a different culture? And if so, how does contextualization manifest itself in their evangelistic endeavours?

Evangelization in VR is further complicated by the use of avatars. People in VR can hide their identity more easily than with any other medium (for example, over the phone). Thus, an avatar may resemble the actual computer user, or it could be an entirely fabricated alternative identity (i.e. of a different gender, age or ethnicity). Often there are no means to confirm another person's FR identity. Yet it is this ability to freely create one's identity – and resulting anonymity – which may actually allow for easier exploration of religion, faith and spirituality. As one pastor of a church in *Second Life* phrased it:

What I have found so far is that there are definitely people in Second Life who simply want to hide behind their avatar and say/do things they normally would not say/do in real life. However, it is the same lack of inhibition that leads people to ask questions about God they would not normally feel comfortable exploring. Creating an avatar becomes a very non-threatening way for people to explore more about God.

(Quoted in Estes 2009:91)

Thus, VR is like every other culture in that it provides challenges and opportunities for mission.

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<sup>7</sup> The term Christian will always be short-hand to mean those people that identify themselves as Christians without referring to a specific set of doctrines or praxis.

## 1.1 Research question

Since little research has been done on online evangelization, this research is necessarily explorative in nature as it attempts to identify the relevant issues. This intent is reflected by the breadth of the research question: *How does VR affect evangelization?*

More specifically, our interest lies in exploring (1) the influencing aspects of VR on evangelization, (2) how evangelizers respond to these changes, and (3) the larger theological and missiological questions that arise. Thus, taking these three aspects into consideration, six sub-questions were developed.

### 1.1.1 Identity: Does an avatar affect the evangelistic process?

One of the unique features of VR is the ability to create an avatar. Yet, as stated above, it is generally acknowledged that the relationship between a user and his or her avatar is complex, and the expectation of how one's avatar should align with FR often differs depending on the platform being used.<sup>8</sup>

It is also of interest here to see how relationship and community differ in VR due to the use of an avatar.

The question of identity is itself a highly debated and rather philosophical question, but the interest here is not in that larger issue but on the specific issue of how people using avatars and, in particular, those evangelizing, view them.

### 1.1.2 Cyber Culture: How does VR impact evangelization?

In the above quote from Estes (2009:29), he considers internet-users to be a people group that shares a common language and culture. Likewise, the term *cyber culture* and the more recent term *digital culture* imply a culture distinct from FR. This creates cultural and sociological questions. For example: do online users see themselves as having a distinct culture and if so, what are its distinguishing factors? How do evangelists respond to the changes brought about by modern technology and to the distinct culture(s) created by VR? Finally, is there intentional adaptation by those who evangelize in VR?

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the expectations in a role-playing game are significantly different than an online-dating platform. Yet, between these two more obvious examples are those where the expectations of correlation between VR and FR are not as clear.

### **1.1.3 Evangelization: How is evangelization modified for VR?**

Whereas the previous question deals more closely with unintended or unwanted effects of media and the way evangelists respond to them, the intention here is to explore the possibilities of using technology (e.g. VR) for evangelization. O'Leary argues in his article "Cyberspace as Sacred Space," that our religious discourse will have to reinvent itself in a profound way:

As the introduction of the printing press profoundly altered the symbolic world of Western cultures and forever changed the course of Christian history, so too religious discourse will have to reinvent itself to keep pace with modern technology.

(O'Leary 2004:45)

This leads us to the following methodological questions: How might evangelization be reinvented in light of advances in modern technology? And are evangelists intentionally using the benefits of VR? This would correspond with Campbell's (2010) theory that we can shape technology in a positive way, thereby challenging the determinism proposed by McLuhan (1967) in his famous maxim: *The medium is the message*.

### **1.1.4 Credibility: How are authority and credibility established?**

The literature review and initial conversations with online-evangelists indicated that the areas of authority and credibility are particularly complex as it tied to issues of identity and avatars. The assumption is that for an audience to be receptive to finding their religious identity, the guiding person needs some form of credibility and authority. Yet, how is authority established in a context where it is difficult to determine or confirm the other's identity? And how can one's witness be trusted when there are so many competing voices suggesting who one should construct one's religious identity? These questions are, of course, not limited to VR, but VR does heighten them.

### **1.1.5 Ethics: Which ethical considerations need to be made?**

The dissertation by Stamper (2013) indicated that online evangelization might have particular ethical challenges (see chapter 3.3.4). She particularly challenged the way web design and site architecture was used to manipulate the experience of the visitor. Others have challenged the way conversions online are counted and presented. Thus, although there is a general debate with regards to the ethics of evangelism (e.g. Thiessen 2014), evangelization online might have its own particular ethical challenges which are discussed in this research.

### 1.1.6 Games: How can one evangelize in and through games?

The particular context of games, as a distinct form of VR, was taken explicitly into consideration. It became evident at an early stage of the research that games are being used by individuals, and particularly by the organization *GameChurch*, for evangelization. Yet, is such a usage acceptable and how does evangelization function in such an environment? Researchers such as Wagner (2012) have further addressed the religious nature of games themselves and have shown how they often include religious themes and imagery. The question then arose if a game itself could evangelize.

### 1.1.7 Conclusions

As the above questions reveal, the nature of this research is inductive and explorative. The research questions have undergone a continuous process of modification based on the literature review and the expert-interviews. Thus, although the intent was to formulate the research questions as early as possible and as clear as possible, within the research process these questions were refined in order to make them more concrete and focused. This demonstrates the cyclical nature of the ETP cycle which guides the research.

## 1.2 Rationale of this research

The questions in the previous section indicate that the general rationale of this study is missional, namely to explore evangelization in a new context and to inform praxis. This research is written in order to help those who seriously engage in evangelization in VR, knowing that this is no simple task and will require what the *Lausanne Covenant*<sup>9</sup> calls “imaginative pioneering methods” (1974). Thus, this research is written out of the theological perspective and missional understanding of the Lausanne movement with the hope of determining if mission in VR is an “imaginative pioneering method” worth pursuing. However, there are also three particular reasons for researching evangelization in VR.

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<sup>9</sup> The *Lausanne Covenant* is a document formed by the *Lausanne Movement* in 1974 representing many evangelicals' understanding of evangelization (cf <http://www.lausanne.org/about.html>). One of its main and most prominent contributors was the British theologian John Stott.

### 1.2.1 The potential for significant theological implications

First, it has been generally argued that VR impacts religious practice, as Prokes, for example, writes in her book, *At the Interface: Theology and Virtual Reality*:

No other 'sign of the times' requires greater attention of the Church and contemporary theologians than the rapidly developing complexity summarized in the term Virtual Reality.

(Prokes 2004:161)

How fundamental these changes are, is best described by Postman. As far back as 1998 he noticed that the technological changes we are experiencing are ecological rather than additive in nature.

Technological change is not additive; it is ecological. I can explain this best by an analogy. What happens if we place a drop of red dye into a beaker of clear water? Do we have clear water plus a spot of red dye? Obviously not. We have a new coloration to every molecule of water. That is what I mean by ecological change. A new medium does not add something; it changes everything. In the year 1500, after the printing press was invented, you did not have old Europe plus the printing press. You had a different Europe. After television, America was not America plus television. Television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry, and so on.

(Postman 1998:4)

Thus, as with other major technological changes, VR does not add something to religion at large (and evangelization in particular), it changes it. What Postman addressed in 1998 is now discussed and labeled as *Digital Religion*. "Digital Religion is a religion that is constituted in new ways through digital media and cultures" (Campbell 2013:3). Thus, precisely because VR, and any Christian engagement in it, is a complex issue and has the potential for significant implications, further research is needed.

### 1.2.2 The potential for contextualization

VR brings a new culture and medium for religion to unfold in. Statements such as those from Estes (2009:29) quoted in the introduction and others suggest that this digital culture needs to be taken seriously and that evangelization should be done in a contextualized way.

Like any other culture, VR offers aspects that are suitable and helpful for the presentation of the gospel to those who are in need of redemption.

Furthermore, younger generations are comfortable and familiar with a high level of technological integration in their lives, most particularly with regards to communication. In the book, *Grown up Digital: How the net generation is changing everything*, Tapscott, writes about his research on, what he calls, the "net generation":

[Y]oung people [age 11-31] have a natural affinity for technology that seems uncanny. They instinctively turn first to the Net to communicate, understand, learn, find and do many things. ... But it's not just about how they use technology. They seem to behave, and even be, different. ...

Grown up digital has had a profound impact on the way this generation thinks, even changing the way their brain is wired.

(Tapscott 2009:9–10)

Thus, VR seems to create a new way of acquiring information, forming opinions and consequently impacts on one's religious identity.

### 1.2.3 The need to shape technological developments pro-actively

Technology at large, including VR, does something to our lives, even if this something is as basic as creating new opportunities. For example, a person can decide to not answer the phone during family dinner, but the existence of the phone forces an instance of decision making. Forcing oneself not to answer one's phone requires a certain exertion of will. Thus, *instrumentalism* (i.e. the suggestion that technology is merely an instrument, and we can fully control its impact on our lives) provides an insufficient model for understanding technology, for it does not take these concerns into consideration.

On the other end of the spectrum, we find *technological determinism*, which states “that technology is an unstoppable power that has become the driving force in society” (Dyer 2011:85). This view suggests not only that technology has an effect on us but that we are also victim to its impact. This kind of determinism often has a dark outlook. An example of this can be found in Spitzer's (2012) book *Digitale Demenz*, subtitled *Wie wir uns und unsere Kinder um den Verstand bringen*. He argues that through the use of the internet we lose the ability to remember and think. Spitzer aptly portrays ways in which the internet can affect the way we process and store information. However, he fails to suggest that this is an inevitable development. For the most part, both the anticipated negative and positive effects of technology have not been fulfilled to the extremes that were predicted.<sup>10</sup> Rogers makes this point well, responding to the previously mentioned article by Erisman when he writes:

The very popular notion that technologies are neither good nor bad (i.e. neutral) and that what users do with them is what may be good or bad is clearly false. The embedded decisions and commitments of the designers give moral significance to the technical content of technologies. There is a complicated interplay between the moral implications of the technologies themselves and the intents and purposes of future users.

(Rogers 2010)

Consequently, Christians need to take an active step in shaping technology.

In response to the more deterministic view of technology associated with McLuhan, Campbell suggests that we can also shape technology. She calls this *social shaping of*

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<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, technology is often either presented as the problem (lack of concentration due to internet use) or the solution (world peace through easy access to information through the internet).

*technology* (SST). This coincides with a Christian understanding of technology as it is outlined by Dyer in his book *From the Garden to the City* (2011) where technology is seen as something that has to be subdued.

This leads us to a middle ground position on technology. We don't want to say that technology is inert like instrumentalists, and we don't want to claim that technology is responsible for everything like the determinists. Instead we want to acknowledge that individuals and cultures interact with technology in a complex way.

(Dyer 2011:87)

Thus, this research recognizes that technology and culture not only interact in a complex way but that this complexity carries implications for religion, and consequently evangelization. This complexity needs to be acknowledged and investigated in order to inform practice.

## 1.2.4 Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be noted that this new technology is being embraced and increasingly impacts on our everyday life. As McLuhan and Gordon wrote:

Media are agents of change. ... They must be studied for their effects because the constant and inevitable interplay among media obscures those effects and hampers our ability to use media effectively.

(McLuhan & Gordon 2003:xv)

Thus, it is proposed as a thesis that *virtual reality changes the way that those people who engage in it form their religious identity but also provides a new context in which the Christian faith is, or should be adapted to and shared in a contextualized way.*

The present research explores the limitations, possibilities and the nature of practicing the Christian faith, especially evangelization, in VR.

## 1.3 Demarcation of the study

The way Christians express their faith in VR, which includes but cannot be limited to evangelization, is a wide and rich subject and can be viewed from many angles such as philosophy (how real is VR?), theology (is a virtual community real and what is presence?) or communication (how does VR affect our communication?). Even within theology and missiology many of these aspects remain relevant. Given this width of issues and perspectives, this research aims to inform practice instead of prosing new practice. Thus, this is an explorative study that intends to map out this new field of research and therefore the demarcation is intentionally wide. However, the following two areas are kept in focus:

### 1.3.1 Focus on contextualization

The first area of focus is the issue of contextualization as already indicated in the proposed thesis and research question. The essential question is: how is the unique environment of VR, as a cultural and communication medium, taken into consideration? How does evangelization online differ from offline? Thus, from all the missiological questions that can be raised with regards to evangelization online, the issue of contextualization will be given priority.

### 1.3.2 Focus on the use and effect of avatars

Whereas the first demarcation focuses the *question* this research wants to answer, the second demarcation focuses on the investigation of the aspects of VR. This research looks specifically at conversations between Christians and non-Christians via an avatar.<sup>11</sup> As will be shown later, the use of an avatar plays an important role. It allows for a playful way to create and modify one's online persona. This offers the potential to change the way we understand identity and likely change the way we engage with each other. Hence, the role of an avatar and the impact it has on an evangelistic encounter is of special concern.

## 1.4 Sequence and summary of chapters

This first chapter, *the introduction*, provides an overview of the research. It introduces the reader to the research question (“*How does VR affect evangelization?*”), the rationale for this study. The introduction further provides this chapter overview of the entire research.

*Chapter 2* proceeds to define three important terms that emerge from the thesis statement, namely evangelization, contextualization and virtual reality (VR). With each definition an historical overview is presented, the current debate is described and a working definition for this particular research is proposed.

*Chapter 3* consists of the *literature review* and begins with a brief history of the research on VR and religion in general. The second section of the *literature review* is structured thematically and introduces various topics that relate to evangelization in VR and incorporates the work of various authors. The contribution of this thesis will be situated within this larger research. Following this more general overview, three important researchers are presented: Campbell, Wagner and Nord. Finally, the dissertation from Stamper is presented more extensively due to

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<sup>11</sup> This excludes evangelistic offerings such as a banner advertising the Christian faith or documents explaining the Christian faith, for they do not require person to person interaction (through avatars).

its particular relevance for this research. Her work deals with persuasion online in the context of evangelization.

*Chapter 4* introduces the research design, presents the research methodology, method and technique. Action Research and the empirical-theological praxis cycle have been chosen as the research methodologies. The data collection has a dual approach: it starts with expert-interviews which are analysed using *Grounded Theory* while the interpretation of the data is supported through the Policy Delphi Method (PDM), which allows the different experts to engage with the findings from the others interviewed.

*Chapter 5* describes, documents and summarizes the first round of the PDM (the initial measurement of opinions). It introduces the different experts interviewed, the rationale for their selection, the half-standardized questionnaire for the interviews and the data analysis through *Grounded Theory*.

*Chapter 6* constitutes round two of the PDM (statistical group feedback). The results from the first round were summarized into 55 thesis statements and a few questions. During this round, the panel itself was able to engage with the findings of the others. In order to facilitate this discussion during the second round, participants are asked to rank the different theses according to reliability,<sup>12</sup> desirability<sup>13</sup> and feasibility.<sup>14</sup> By rating the different statements, the panel revealed which areas needed further analysis and reflection. A comment section further allowed the panel to clarify or critique the different theses, thereby furthering the discussion.

*Chapter 7* entails the final round of the PDM (saturation of opinions). Here the panel focused on those issues which were most controversial in the previous round, allowing them to further explain their argument or critique. The purpose was to discover the rationale behind the areas of controversy.

*Chapters 8 to 10* constitute phase 6 of the ETP cycle and thus begin the missiological interpretation covering the topics of identity, cyber culture, evangelization, credibility, ethics and relationships.

This is followed by the missiological-methodological reflection of the research, found in *chapter 11*.

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<sup>12</sup> How reliable is this thesis? Here the participant is asked to rate how reliable he or she finds the proposed thesis.

<sup>13</sup> How desirable is this for online evangelization? This category describes how desirable one considers the proposed thesis.

<sup>14</sup> How feasible [achievable] is the pursuit of the thesis? Is it feasible to positively respond to the thesis in order to improve evangelization online? Thus, one might agree with a thesis, and even consider it very desirable, but not think that anything can be done about it.

The conclusion, *chapter 12*, offers a summary of the findings by returning explicitly to the various research questions formulated in chapter 1 and suggesting areas and questions for further research.

## 2. Definitions

The title of this thesis describes the research as an *empirical exploration of the expression of faith in VR*. It assumes, firstly, that faith expresses itself and, secondly, that the context in which it is expressed (e.g. VR) has an effect on that expression. Based on these assumptions, the following three terms will be more fully defined: *evangelization*, *contextualization* and *virtual reality*.

Evangelization is the specific expression of faith on which this research focuses. VR is the new context in which evangelization is expressing itself and contextualization is the theological rationale for assuming that evangelization needs to be done differently in VR because evangelization necessitates contextualization.

However, before we can engage more specifically with evangelization and contextualization it is important to describe the missiological understanding and foundation which underlie this research.

### 2.1 Missiological foundation

The way mission is understood has changed throughout history<sup>15</sup>, particularly in the last century. A landmark moment was a conference at Willingen where mission began to be understood in the context of the *missio Dei* (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:445).<sup>16</sup> According to this concept, God is the great missionary through whom all missional work finds its origin and becomes possible. This has been widely accepted among conciliar Protestants but also among Eastern Orthodox, and many evangelicals, as well as Catholics (Pachua 2017:73).

Prior to Willingen, mission was commonly understood either in (1) soteriological terms (i.e. leading people to Christ and thereby away from eternal condemnation), (2) cultural terms (i.e. bringing blessings and privileges from the Christian West to the rest), or (3) salvation-historical terms (i. e. bringing about the Kingdom of God). As Bosch astutely noticed:

In all these instances, and in various, frequently conflicting ways, the intrinsic interrelationship between christology, soteriology, and the doctrine of the Trinity, so important to the early church, was gradually displaced by one of several versions of the doctrine of grace.

(Bosch 1991:389)

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<sup>15</sup> This is also reflected by the different terms (i.e. mission, missions and missional) used throughout history. For our discussion, the missionary-crises caused by the conflation of missions and colonialism is of interest since it coincides with the acceptance of the *missio Dei* as a new theological framework and the implementation of the term *missional* to express a more holistic approach to mission (Pachua 2017:351-354).

<sup>16</sup> The documents of the second Vatican also reflect an adaption of the *missio Dei* as the foundation for missions.

Thus, mission is a theological problem (Bosch 1991:390), and through the *missio Dei* not only are all three above mentioned aspects brought together, but the church is also made a participant in God's mission.

[The *missio Dei* describes] God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate. *Missio Dei* enunciates the good news that God is a God-for-people.

(Bosch 1991:10)

Consequently, at least theologically, mission has moved from an organization-based to church-based responsibility, since mission was inherent to the very existence of the church.

In the new image mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. ... Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is church because there is mission not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God's love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.

(Bosch 1991:390; also :372)

Out of love, God sends his son to reconcile humanity with himself and us with each other (Wright 2006:63). Thus, the *missiones ecclesiae* cannot be reduced to one particular form, such as the planting of churches, or soul-saving but must "witnesses to the fullness of God's reign" (:391; Herbst 2006:161).

Yet because the church participates in God's mission and not its own, it needs to be in constant reflection in order to pay attention to what God is doing.

Central to God's mission was the sending of his son, and thus the *missio Dei* leads to the *missio Christi* (Reimer 2009:152).

The *missio Dei* has always been the gospel, the good news about God's goodness revealed in God's Word through Israel's experience, leading up to its climax and culmination in Jesus Christ. ... The Father sends the Son.

(Guder 2000:47-48)

In the *missio Dei* the incarnation is the pivotal moment in the unfolding of God's redemptive and reconciling purposes. God entered into our context (e.g. Phil 2:6-7), and through his son that redemption and reconciliation are made possible, but it also serves as an example. For to participate also means to mirror the attitude and methods of God. Therefore, to participate in the *missio Dei* means that the church too needs to inculturate into the lifeworld of those to whom God is sending them.

If we see the *missio Christi* as a model for our mission (cf John 20:21) it also consequently applies to the *missio Spiritus*. It is in the power of the spirit that the church participates in God's mission (Acts 1:8). Without the spirit the church is powerless, and without the spirit true transformation is not possible (Reimer 2009:165-167). In addition, it is through the spirit that we now experience the presence of God and his transformative work.

Thus, *missio Dei* calls the church to participate in God's mission through entering into the lifeworld (incarnation) to which the spirit is leading them. Wrogemann helps us now to move from the how of mission, to the why with his concept of "Oekumenical Doxology". He writes:

Mission has to be understood as a doxological endeavor. My thesis is: Christian mission is grounded in the glorification of the triune God and mission aims at opening up human beings who have experienced help, liberation and reconciliation to glorify God, be it in the name of Jesus Christ or for the help people have received from Christian witnesses. The goal of life is to become transparent to its meaning: to take part in the glorification of God through praise and action.

(Wrogemann 2014:61)

Thus there is constant glorification as Jesus has come to glorify the Father through a life of joy and suffering, as well as obedience and freedom, and in turn the Father glorifies the Son, and through the Spirit we participate in the endless joy present in the Trinity.

For Wrogemann, "mission in doxological perspective takes into account that glorification has something to with the human sense" (:63). Thus, with regards to this research it raises the question of how the church can have a gathering of people online where "the beauty of the gospel can be experienced" (:63).

It is also noteworthy, that the church participates in mission – mission is a communal activity. Just as Israel was to be a "light to the nations", so too does the church witness as a community. Individuals might engage in individual aspects of the mission but together and through the community, they are a witness.

I further follow Wrogemann in that we can no longer assume that the church building is the place to which people come when they seek spiritual guidance or are interested in faith. The church needs to expand its ministry beyond the physical building into all the spheres of life naturally inhabited by people. As Wrogemann writes with regards to the Hip-Hop scene:

To open up a Hip-Hop Christian network would require somebody who is already member of the Hip-Hop scene. So, how is the extension of Christian networking possible? This kind of mission is not viable through the application of different techniques, but only through the *kenotic* character of a congregation which gives space of this kind of activities.

(:64)

The same can be said about VR. The church needs to give room to gamers and others who naturally inhabit VRs. As Wrogemann rightly asserts, "God wants to be glorified among a broad variety of tongues, peoples and cultures" (:64) – including cyber cultures.

With regards to this research, incarnation requires us to try to understand how people live online, what their questions and needs are, and how (if at all) they want to engage with us about these things. Stereotypes of lonely nerds who play video games all day are just as unhelpful as condescending views of the relationships and communities formed online. The intention of this research is to create categories for understanding the nature of relationships

online, as well as the way an avatar is used. The question is not if FR is better than VR but how the church can participate in the *missio Dei* online.

Thus, it is proposed that mission always needs to embrace the other and the unknown. It calls for an interest in the culture and worldview of the other and an assumption that God is already present in it. As shown later, culture and technology are closely linked. Thus, if we want to be open to different cultures we need to show an interest in technology. As Reimann writes in an article for the WCC entitled “*Uncharted Territories*” *The challenge of Digitalization and Social Media for Church and Society*”:

As a church, we both can and should join networks, even those about which we sometimes have reservations, so as to reach the people who use them. Even if I consider Facebook to be part of the world of sin, this should not prevent me from proclaiming the gospel there because this is what we owe to “all people.” If more than 30 million Germans communicate via Facebook, then we must also spread the gospel there. ... However, I do not see such presence in the networks of the Protestant church in Germany. Notwithstanding all critique about Facebook & Co, we have been placed by God in these networks. The issue, theologically, is thus the “how” and not the “why.”

(Reimann 2017:73-74)

The *missio Dei* answers the *why*; through this research we want to engage in the *how*.

## 2.2 Evangelization

This section will provide a definition of evangelization suitable for this particular research while also introducing the current debate on mission and contextualization. There are different ways that the terms mission and evangelization can be defined, and particularly their relationship to each other. This section will introduce the debate but it should be mentioned that the terms mission and evangelization will not be used synonymously but evangelization is seen as one aspect of evangelization. This is not a theological decision but rather serves to create clarity.

Bosch thus rightfully uses the subtitle “*Evangelism: A Plethora of Definitions*”, in his work *Transforming Missions* (1991:409), when describing the richness of differing understandings which have emerged over the centuries. While this plethora of definitions arose for theological reasons, it also reflects the reality that evangelization can differ greatly depending on context. As will be shown later, VR has its own particular context which requires a new understanding of what it means to evangelize.

This section on evangelization will focus more on form and method of evangelization, whereas the subsequent section on contextualization will specifically address the content of

evangelization.<sup>17</sup> Recent historical examples will be presented in greater detail for it speaks, in part, to the rationale of this study and is helpful in defining evangelization as distinct from mission.

### 2.2.1 Introduction

Depending on how one defines evangelization, it can be seen as a recent practice of the Christian faith rather than a common practice throughout church history (Scharpff 1997). A definition which would describe evangelization as this would highlight the organizational nature and event-character that evangelization has taken on since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Erst in der prot. Bewegung der E. entstehen bestimmte Aktionen, Organisationen und Berufsbilder. Die E. wurzelt im Pietismus des Kontinents und den Erweckungen des 18 Jh. in Großbritannien. ... Von der E. ergriffen werden sollen also die "Namens-Christen."<sup>18</sup>

(Guder 2008:1702)

As will be shown at the end of this section, evangelization has been practiced throughout church history, but during the 18<sup>th</sup> century a particular kind of evangelizing arose that was particular in two ways: firstly, with regards to the audience and, secondly, with regards to the style.

In the past, the term evangelization was to describe ministries aimed at a particular audience, namely those who were *no longer* Christian (Bosch 1991:409), in contrast to those who were *not yet* Christian for whom the term "mission" was used. This meant that evangelization took place in Christian Europe or North America whereas mission was practiced when people from Europe or North America went to other countries where there were few or no Christians.

Though this was a useful distinction, for it describes two very distinct target groups, the separation assumed a reality that existed – if at all – only for a short moment, namely when the Western world was "Christian" and mission was from the "West to the rest." While this differentiation by aim is still common among lay people, missiologists now seldom differentiate the terms in such a way.

The second kind of evangelization came to be associated with a particular style of evangelization, namely that of organized events which were held at particular times and locations, and were sometimes, unfortunately, labelled evangelistic *crusades*. These events

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<sup>17</sup> This is not to suggest that evangelization that evangelizing is concerned with form and not content but in order to avoid redundancies, the issue of content will be discussed under contextualization.

<sup>18</sup> "Only within the protestant movement does evangelization constitute certain events, organization and job profiles. Evangelization has its roots in pietism on continental Europe and revivals in the 18th century in Great Britain. ... Evangelization should reach nominal Christians" [my translation].

were often marked with a clear call to repent, which was signaled by the act of coming forward. This particular style of evangelization shall be referred to here as *event-evangelization*.

However, neither the particular aim (nominal Christians) nor the particular style (events) are inherent to evangelization and when the meaning of evangelization is disconnected from these narrow connotations its presence throughout church history becomes evident.

Scholars like Green have shown that the early church used their particular environment for evangelization. Thus, although different in style, evangelization is not a recent phenomenon.

When we think of evangelistic methods today, preaching in a church building or perhaps a great arena readily comes to mind. We must, of course, rid ourselves of all such preconceptions when thinking of evangelism by the early Christians. They knew nothing of set addresses following certain homiletical patterns within the four walls of a church. Indeed, for more than 150 years they possessed no church buildings, and there was the greatest variety in the type and content of Christian evangelistic preaching.

(Green 2004:194)

It is perhaps most helpful to cleanse a definition of evangelization from all aspects relating to method, form and aim.

A good starting point for defining evangelization can be found in its original meaning. The English word evangelization has its roots in the Greek verb *euangelizo*. The noun *euangelion* means “gospel” or “good news.” As a verb it means to announce good news. The *Lausanne Covenant* includes this in its definition:

To evangelise is to spread the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that as the reigning Lord he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gift of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. Our Christian presence in the world is indispensable to evangelism, and so is that kind of dialogue whose purpose is to listen sensitively in order to understand. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God.

(Lausanne Movement 1974)

With regards to the Lausanne understanding of evangelization, Bevans and Schroeder make the following observation:

How the gospel is proclaimed is not the issue; evangelism is only concerned that it *is* proclaimed – by word, by deed, by film, by music, by drama, by fiction, by a transformed life.

(Bevans & Schroeder 2004:335)

Thus, any good definition of evangelization must stress that it is an expression of a concern or desire, rather than a particular style.

Presently, there is growing reluctance over event-evangelization, at least within Germany (and perhaps in the Western world). Michael Herbst tries to capture some of this in his engagement with the *Emerging Church*.

Sie [die Emerging Church, SMS] sehen in vielen Evangelisationsstrategien einen Verrat an der Liebe Jesu: Die Freundschaftsevangelisation sehen sie z.B. in der Gefahr, nur aus taktischen Gründen

Beziehungen aufzubauen, um den betreffenden Menschen möglichst schnell via Bekehrung der eigenen Schar hinzuzufügen. Sie sagen: Hier wird Beziehung aufgebaut, hier wird vielleicht sogar in den Gottesdiensten viel Rücksicht genommen, aber letztlich gibt es eine "hidden agenda", die der andere erst nicht durchschaut: Er soll zu etwas gebracht werden, was er mindestens jetzt noch nicht will.<sup>19</sup>

(Herbst 2008:71)

This, to my mind, does not necessarily mean that the actions of those participating in event- (or friendship-) evangelization lack integrity, but that the present context of evangelization is changing and the old style no longer expresses evangelization properly (cf Kallenberg 2002:10–12). Thus it can appear strange to a new generation emerging from a new context.

Furthermore, some people see evangelization as the imposition of one person's worldview upon another. Thiessen has addressed this in his book, *The Ethics of Evangelization*, by stating that it might be helpful to use terms such as commending and witnessing. *Commending* is preferred here because evangelization is not about winning an argument but applauding what one has discovered. Likewise *witnessing* highlights that what one is sharing is one's own experience, thus not assuming that the other will have the same experience. Faith can be experienced in different ways by different people.

This is a very challenging development since evangelization is an integral part of Christian life (e.g. Mt 28:18ff.); so much so that Stott (1980) can speak of "our guilty silences" when it comes to our lack of evangelization.

Yet, evangelization should not be seen only as a duty but rather as an expression of one's joy of God, for it is a natural human behaviour to share what we are excited about.

Thus, there is a danger that people will reject evangelization because it is so closely associated with a particular style or method rather than effectively reflecting its core, namely an expression of one's joy and excitement about the nature and workings of God.

In summary, two characteristics of evangelization can be noted. First of all, evangelization is not a method or program but an expression of one's desire to share one's joy. Secondly, if one allows evangelization to express itself freely, it can emerge effectively in a new context.

However, another debate has overshadowed the practice and definition of evangelization, namely its relationship to the other tasks of the church. To this, we now turn our attention.

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<sup>19</sup> "They [the emerging church] view many evangelistic strategies as a betrayal of the love of Jesus. Friendship-evangelization, for example, they see as relationships in danger of being built for tactical reasons. Relationships are built to convert people and add them to one's own group. They acknowledge that relationships are built and church services are designed with seekers in mind, but there is a hidden agenda, which the seeker is at first unaware of. He or she is supposed to do something for which they are, at first at least, not ready" [my translation].

## 2.2.2 Understanding evangelization within mission

The above-quoted definition of evangelization from the Lausanne movement indicates another debate which has dominated many discussions within the Lausanne movement and beyond during the past decades, namely the proper relationship between the pursuit of social justice (and other ministries of the church) and evangelization.

This, in turn, has led some to define evangelization as a part of mission, giving mission a wider scope in meaning. However, overall, there still remains a great diversity of understandings.

Bosch (1991:409) suggests that these various definitions are best understood on a continuum, where, on the one end, evangelization is equated to soul-winning and understood as the single most important task of the Church and of each Christian individual. On the other end, evangelization is understood as the pursuit of social justice with little or no reference made to the need for personal salvation. At each end of the spectrum, mission and evangelization are used as synonyms.

Representatives from what Bosch labels *evangelism as soul-winning* often use the terms evangelism and mission synonymously or differentiate them by aim. It is their highest priority to share the good news that Jesus died for our sins and that, through faith in him, one receives forgiveness and eternal life and escapes eternal condemnation. Sider identifies the evangelist Billy Graham as the best-known representative of this approach. Graham defines evangelization as “the announcement of the good news that ‘Jesus Christ, very God and very Man died for my sins on the cross, was buried, and rose the third day’” (Sider 2008:185). To proclaim this message is seen as the primary task of the Church, and although the work for social justice is understood as being part of the Christian mandate, it has no priority over, or equal priority to, evangelization as soul-winning.

Furthermore, there are those, even among those who see the verbal proclamation of the gospel as the primary task of the Church, who find it right and helpful to address physical needs, so that people might be more open to the gospel message. Stott walks a fine line trying to affirm the need for both aspects. His discussion, in particular, focuses on the role of social justice while giving evangelization priority if both cannot be engaged in.

[T]here will be times when a person’s eternal destiny is the most urgent consideration, for we must not forget that men [*sic*] without Christ are perishing. But there will certainly be other times when a person’s material need is so pressing that he would not be able to hear the gospel if we shared it with him.

(Stott 1975:28)

However, the rationale remains that the verbal proclamation has to be prioritized for it offers the possibility of salvation from eternal condemnation which surpasses any earthly and thus temporal suffering. The other end of the spectrum is formed by those who also see the terms mission and evangelism as synonymous but understand them solely as the work of social justice.

[M]ission/evangelism is [here] understood virtually exclusively in interhuman and this-worldly categories [...] [and thus] salvation becomes entirely this-worldly, God's kingdom a political program, history one-dimensional, and mission/evangelism a project to change the structure of society.

(Bosch 2008:6)

Here evangelization is not the proclamation of salvation but the pursuit of liberation and social justice. The pursuit of social justice is evangelization because in its pursuit the Kingdom of God grows. Thus, the good news is not understood as the saving of souls from eternal condemnation, but the end of earthly suffering – suffering created by human injustice, oppression, greed and hatred. Between these two extremes, other positions can be found which try not to prioritize one task over the other.

A way forward in this debate can be found by drawing from the idea that the Christian faith is based on a meta-narrative which describes God as the one acting to bless all nations, and Christians have the opportunity to participate in God's redemptive work. This participation in God's work (*missio Dei*) is here understood as mission. Following Wright, mission is defined as follows:

Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation.

(Wright 2006:22–23)

Evangelization is *one* form of participation in this mission. However, mission is wider than evangelization. Following Bosch and Wright, in this research, mission is thus further understood in a *multi-dimensional* sense, describing the plurality of tasks that originate from the *missio Dei*.

Bosch (1991:512) lists the following tasks as part of the multifaceted ministry: “witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting, contextualization, and much more”.

The exact relationship between the different aspects of mission and evangelization has been strongly debated. Some argue for an intrinsic priority of evangelization (see footnote 13), believing that evangelization should be given priority over the other parts of the multi-dimensional mission. This has created an ongoing debate particularly among evangelicals which led to a variety of definitions of evangelization and mission.

Yet, as Wright has correctly pointed out in his book, *The Mission of God*, the term priority is unhelpful because it can convey a sense of exclusivity of evangelization over and above the other dimensions of mission.

[T]he language of priority and primacy quickly tends to imply singularity and exclusion. Evangelism is the *only* real mission. We are back to so exalting the New Testament evangelistic mandate that we think it absolves us from all other dimensions of God's mission that the rest of the Bible clearly requires of God's people.

(Wright 2006:317)

Rather, evangelization is ultimate in the sense that it is the good news of God's workings which makes all other tasks of the Church possible. Evangelization communicates explicitly the meta-narrative conveyed in the Bible, inviting people to profess Christ as the true king over all. As Newbigin writes:

[The Bible] sets before us a vision of cosmic history from the creation of the world to its consummation, of the nations which make up the one human family, and – of course – of one nation chosen to be the bearer of the meaning of history for the sake of all, and of one man called to be the bearer of that meaning of that nation. The Bible *is* universal history.

(Newbigin 1989:89)

The communication of the meta-narrative can be seen as crucial because it is within the framework of the *missio Dei* that all Christian action derives its meaning including our own lives.

Meaningful action in history is possible only when there is some vision of the future goal. But the future is hidden from us – our own personal future and the future of the world. The curtain of death lies across the path. The good news is that Jesus has opened a way through the curtain and has come to lead us on the way which he has opened and which he is, the way which consists in abiding in him, sharing his passion so that we may share his victory of death.

(Newbigin 1989:114)

Evangelization is thus both the explicit formulation of the meta-narrative presented in the Bible as well as the invitation to participate in it and reorient one's life accordingly.

Within this debate the question is raised: is the pursuit of social justice not also evangelistic as it can be a witness of love, compassion, etc.? The rationale is sometimes used that pursuing social justice can make people more open to hearing the gospel. This is true – a hungry person is unlikely to be receptive to words. Yet, the pursuit of justice, as with all the ministries of the church, does not need to derive its legitimacy from evangelization. All tasks of the Church receive their mandate from being part of God's mission.

In general, the discussion seems to rely on the assumption that the full scope of God's mission cannot be carried out and thus priority must be given to either evangelization or social justice. This assumption can be challenged.<sup>20</sup>

It is my belief that if we participate in God's mission and seek to remain in Christ (e.g. John 15) we will naturally desire to participate in all aspects of God's mission. The particularities of our own context will determine how we carry this out. It should also be noted that the call to engage in the mission of God is the responsibility of the church, not of an individual who could not possibly do justice to the whole scope of God's mission.

In summary, the debate around the proper relationship between mission and evangelization is complex and is yet to be resolved. Evangelization is here understood as *one* aspect of participating in God's mission. The particular role of evangelization is to proclaim explicitly the redemptive purposes of God, evident through the meta-narrative portrayed in the Bible while calling people to submit to his lordship and to participate in his mission.

### 2.2.3 Defining evangelization for this research

Within the context of this research, evangelization needs to be understood in a way that captures the practice of those engaged in online evangelization. Though the following definition from Bosch fits well with what has been said so far about evangelization and reflects the opinion of this writer, it might not adequately capture the empirical reality for it aims at describing evangelization at its best, rather than as it is.

[Evangelization is] that dimension and activity of the church's mission which, by word and deed and in the light of particular conditions and a particular context, *offers every person and community, everywhere, a valid opportunity to be directly challenged to a radical reorientation of their lives*, a reorientation which involves such things as deliverance from slavery to the world and its powers; embracing Christ as Saviour and Lord; becoming a living member of his community, the church; being enlisted into his service of reconciliation, peace, and justice on earth; and being committed to God's purpose of placing all things under the rule of Christ.

(Bosch 1991:420 [italics added])

Within this empirical research, I presume that not everyone shares the width of Bosch's definition, but rather limit it to the aspects set in italics, namely the creation of an opportunity to respond to the gospel. Some may even reduce it to only the proclamation of the gospel.

Thus, the following definition is proposed. Evangelization is here understood as *any attempt* to engage in an interaction with people of other or no faith with the intention of

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<sup>20</sup> In recent decades the term 'missional' has been implemented to describe a more holistic approach which aims at engaging in the entirety of God's mission by the church.

informing them of the reality, nature or workings of God and with the intention and hope that people would respond positively and believe what was shared.

The phrase *any attempt* is used because evangelization should not be reduced to verbal communication but can also be expressed through other means such as art or music. Furthermore, the definition purposely uses wide terms such as *interaction* and *informing* in order to allow evangelization to express itself in new ways. Yet, two limiting factors are included in this definition in order to distinguish evangelization from other interactions about faith. Firstly, it is informative about the reality of God (i.e. God exists), his nature (e.g. God is loving) or his workings (e.g. his work of reconciling humanity with himself). Secondly, evangelization desires for people to put their faith in God.

It would naturally follow to define what is to be understood as *the* gospel, a question also raised in the next section on contextualization. Yet, for empirical research, it is not necessary to pre-define gospel, but rather to explore what gospel is presented online. Matters are further complicated in that Christians differ in their understanding of what the gospel is and what an evangelistic message should entail.<sup>21</sup>

The next section presents some landmarks and key elements which help to define the gospel.

## 2.2.4 Conclusions

Evangelization is not limited to a particular style or method. Furthermore, it was shown that evangelization is one way in which the church participates in the mission of God which is a multi-faceted ministry. The desire to evangelize is best found in the joy a Christian finds in the nature and intentions of God. It is out of this joy that a Christian wants to share his or her faith with another person. How this joy is expressed is always dependent on context, so much so that evangelization always necessitates contextualization. This concept is addressed in the next section.

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<sup>21</sup> One example is the American evangelistic ministry Young Life (YL). In November 2007 YL fired or accepted the resignations of 10 staff members who could not support a document presented by the senior leadership which put forward six essentials of the gospel proclamation, as well as a sequence for the gospel presentation. In this document the senior leaders of YL state that “while our methodology may change, our message does not” (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/february/1.13.html> [accessed: 08/21/08]).

## 2.3 Contextualization

In this section the term contextualization will be defined. It will be argued that contextualization is a necessary part of evangelization but also goes beyond evangelization, leading to what some have called *contextual theology* and the field of *intercultural studies*.

### 2.3.1 Introduction

The term contextualization was first used in 1972 in the *Theological Education Fund (TEF)* in the article *Ministry in context* and has since become a frequently discussed topic when debating how context (e.g. cultural background) relates to our interpretation and understanding of the Bible as well as to cross-cultural communication (Hesselgrave & Rommen 2000:28–29).

In the past, terms such as *accommodation* and *indigenization* have been used to generally differentiate between the content and the form of the gospel. Accommodation is defined as a “missionary practice of accommodating the rituals, practices, and styles of the missionary’s sending church to those of the recipient culture” (Hunsberger 2000:31). Accommodation was a term typically used by Roman Catholics, whereas evangelicals tended to prefer the term indigenization. Both describe “the ‘translatibility’ of the universal Christian faith into the forms and symbols of a particular culture of the world” (Conn 2000:481).

Both terms have in common the assumption that form and symbols would be in need of adaptation when the gospel is communicated to a different culture but that the content remains the same. This understanding is still carried over into contextualization.

There is a core message of universal truth which must be translated into each new cultural setting in a way that remains faithful to the core. Because the content of that message is absolute and authoritative, the contextualizer’s task is to change the form of the message.

(Moreau 2010:169)

However, this notion of a fixed content that is isolated from culture has been challenged by many – especially theologians from the majority world. Contextualization thus suggests an adaptation of form *and* content. As shown in the next section this is again a highly debated concept. Yet, there is, at the very least, consensus that the gospel must be rooted in a particular culture. The reason for the interconnectedness of gospel and culture is rooted in the incarnation itself. The *New Dictionary of Theology* defines contextualization as follows:

Contextualization is not a passing fad or a debatable option. It is essential to our understanding of God’s self-revelation. The incarnation is the ultimate paradigm of the translation of text into context. Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnated as a Jew, identified with a particular culture at a limited moment in history though transcending it. [...] In his life and teaching he is the supreme model of contextualization. His every command was *de facto* a command to contextualization, whether to love one’s neighbour or to disciple the nations.

(Nicholls 1988:164)

Hence, God's revelation happened in a particular culture at a particular time and is thus contextual. Consequently, it is argued that theology is inevitably contextual, the only question is of how self-aware we are of this fact (Feldtkeller 2008:41).

Contextualization, besides rooting itself in the incarnation, is also based on a hermeneutical paradigm shift, namely a reversal of the hermeneutical process.

In the past, theory preceded practice. Now it is common, to begin with practice. Bosch argues that the breakthrough of contextualization is found, at least partly, in the "priority of praxis" (Bosch 1991:423), critiquing the Western paradigm of "theory of praxis."

Die wissenschaftliche Vorgehensweise innerhalb der kontextuellen Theologie verläuft in der Regel induktiv – von den Menschen und ihrer Situation ausgehend zur Theorie und Theologie hin.<sup>22</sup>  
(Faix, Weißenborn & Aschoff 2009:123)

One very important development for the establishment of contextual theology and the rise of Empirical Theology comes from Liberation Theology in Latin America and particularly the work of Clodovis Boff together with his brother Leonardo. Simply put, they reversed the order in which theology is done. No longer did theory precede praxis, instead they suggested "the primacy [or priority] of praxis" (Boff & Boff 1987:32). This does not mean that praxis is more important than theory, but that it is the starting point for any theological discourse, and although Liberation Theology still has some problems (it is younger than other theological traditions) as Klein (2005:85–86) shows, it has significantly helped in laying a theological foundation for contextual theology.<sup>23</sup>

Liberation theology is often characterized by a socio-economic and political concern, whereas contextual theologies which emerge from Africa and Asia often (but not exclusively) have a cultural-religious concern. Consequently, the form of contextualization practiced in Africa and Asia can be described as one of dialogue and inculturation.

The terms accommodation or adaptation are presently seldom used since a clear distinction between context and text has been challenged. However, the concept is still practiced, particularly among evangelicals, although currently the term *translation* is often used. Yet, as the quote below indicates, it operates upon the same assumptions as accommodation did.

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<sup>22</sup> "Within contextual theology the scientific procedure is inductive – starting with the person and his or her situation and developing a theory and theology from there" [translation mine].

<sup>23</sup> On example of this can be seen through the emergence of the virtual church communities. Many theological questions remain unanswered, particularly with regards to the sacraments. Nonetheless, people are self-identifying themselves as churches, and this praxis of church creates various theological questions and discussions.

Contextualization is the idea that we need to be translating gospel truth into language understood by our culture. Cross-cultural missionaries and Bible translators have been doing this for centuries. They take the unchanging truth of the Gospel and put it into language that fits the context they are trying to reach.

(Tchividjian 2010)

Thus, contextualization can take on different forms.

|        | Liberation                    | Inculturation      | Dialogue   | Accommodation           |
|--------|-------------------------------|--------------------|------------|-------------------------|
| Focus  | social-economic and political | cultural-religious |            | Spiritual               |
| Region | Latin and South America       | Africa             | Asia       | West (past colonialism) |
| Method | Liberating                    | Including          | Dialoguing | Translating             |

Table 1: *Approaches to Contextualization based on Küster (2011:56-60)*

All approaches hold that a proper understanding of the context is necessary. Reimer argues that in order to communicate clearly, one first needs to understand the questions and needs of the other:

Erst wenn man weiß, wo die Menschen stehen, was sie bewegt und was sie wirklich bedürfen, kann der Theologe [sic] nach theologischen Antworten fragen. Theologie kann nur als Antwort des Glaubens auf reale Fragen des Alltags eine relevante Theologie sein. Hat man aber die Fragen der Menschen in Sprache gekleidet, so kann die Antwort des Glaubens gesucht und gefunden werden.<sup>24</sup>  
(Reimer 2009:201)

Thus, contextualization, especially with regards to evangelization, starts with listening and not with proclaiming. Only after hearing and understanding the needs, fears and hopes of a culture can adequate evangelization take place.

### 2.3.2 The controversies around contextualization

The priority of observing the context (i.e. praxis) has raised some concerns because it gives substantial authority to the context. Guitérrez, for example, has been critiqued by other Latin American theologians, such as René Padilla, for creating a “truncated gospel” (Nicholls 1988:164). Newbigin similarly cautions an overly praxis-orientated approach by warning against turning the gospel into a solution against felt needs.

[A]uthentic Christian thought and action begin not by attending to the aspirations of the people, not by answering the questions they are asking in their terms, not by offering solutions to the problems as the world sees them. It must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so that

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<sup>24</sup> “We first need to understand what concerns people and what they really need before the theologians can search for theological answers. Theology can only be relevant if it gives the answer of faith to real everyday problems. Once the questions of the people are put into words people can search and find the answers of faith” [my translation].

it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people in the way that Jesus attended to them, knowing that the real need is that which can only be satisfied by everything that comes from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4).

(Newbigin 1989:151)

An extension of this concern is the fear that the context might become the text. Thus, although many would whole-heartedly agree that any evangelistic endeavour needs to be contextual and that contextualization is a “theological imperative” (Bevans 1992:1), the text must remain protected from the context. Johannes Reimer addresses this concern:

Seit der Entstehung der kontextuellen Theologie ist eine Fülle von Veröffentlichungen erschienen. Während die einen den Ansatz als revolutionär preisen ..., warnen wiederum andere vor den Gefahren einer Theologie, die potentiell synkretistische [sic] Züge trägt, weil sie bewusst einseitig auf den Kontext hin konzipiert wird. ... Die Gefahr, dass damit die Einheit der christlichen Theologie und des Bekenntnisses verlassen wird, also ihre Katholizität aufgeben wird, ist nicht zu übersehen. ... Wenn die offenbarte Wahrheit beliebig interpretiert werden kann, ist sie dann immer noch, was sie beansprucht zu sein – Gottes Offenbarung?<sup>25</sup>

(Reimer 2009:197)

Yet, the challenge goes deeper. It is not only the challenge of keeping a proper relationship between text and context (i.e. not letting one become the other), but the hermeneutical and epistemological dilemma stemming from our subjective nature. In other words, how can subjective humans make objective claims?

Some would argue that it is the reader who creates the meaning and not the original author (reader-response criticism) – it is all interpretation. Others argue that we ought not to take statements in the Bible at face value but to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion, which urges us to ask what the motives of the author were (Newbigin 1989:149).

With regards to hermeneutic of suspicion, the solution suggested is that the oppressed have an “epistemological privilege” and can see more clearly.

Although the oppressed and poor have an important (potentially the most important) view of Scripture, it is the researcher’s understanding that the author-intended meaning is still sufficiently accessible to the contemporary reader, particular if it is read in the community of the world-wide church. However, this requires what Vanhoozer calls a “hermeneutics of humility and conviction” (Vanhoozer 1998:455).<sup>26</sup> This communal reading of Scripture is one

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<sup>25</sup> “Since the rise of contextual theology, many publications have praised this new approach as revolutionary whereas others warn us, that such a theology can have strong syncretistic tendencies because it is developed lopsidedly towards the context. ... This danger of contextual theology threatens the unity of Christian theologies and departs from the historical confessions, cannot be ignored, for this means to sacrifice catholicity. ... If the revealed truth can be arbitrarily interpreted, is it still what it claims to be – God’s revelation?” [my translation].

<sup>26</sup> Meaning, including an understanding of the gospel, is not possible only through human effort (e.g. historical-grammatical exegesis) though these efforts are necessary and the historical-grammatical exegesis is the researcher’s preferred approach to understanding Scripture. However, it does not provide a guarantee for a proper communication between different cultures that are also separated by thousands of years. Confidence is

of the contributions of contextual theology that contributes to a more faithful interpretation of Scripture.

Because we are also driven by our selfish desires and interests we will be aware that we require constant correction and that for this we look to those who share the life in Christ but inhabit different cultural situations. We must always be ready to recognize that we have misrepresented the intention of Jesus because of our own interests.

(Newbigin 1989:151)

This again raises the question of continuity. What connects Christians around the globe and throughout Church history? Looking particularly at evangelization, one might want to ask: what is *the* gospel that needs to be contextualized?

In order to answer this question, it becomes evident that contextualization does not only require a good understanding of one's own culture and the culture of those one wishes to communicate with, but also of the culture that the gospel was first presented in. As Newbigin writes:

We must start with the basic fact that there is no such thing as a pure gospel if by that is meant something which is not embodied in a culture. ... The Bible is a book which is very obviously in a specific cultural setting.

(Newbigin 1989:144)

Thus, contextualization is a twofold task which involves looking closely at the present context as well as the contexts in which Scripture was first situated.

However, what could be the universal core of the gospel? Some suggest it is found in the death and resurrection of Christ, specifically understood as *atonement*, while others propose that the gospel is found in the story; that is the grand narrative portrayed in the Bible.

The God revealed in the Scriptures is personal, purposeful and goal-orientated. The opening account of creation portrays God working towards a goal, completing it with satisfaction and resting, content with the result. And from the great promise of God to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 we know this God to be totally, covenantally and eternally committed to the mission of blessing the nations through the agency of the people of Abraham. [...] The Bible presents itself to us fundamentally as a narrative, a historical narrative at one level, but a grand metanarrative at another.

(Wright 2006:63)

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not, and cannot be, based on human effort but rests on God's nature and particularly the Trinity. Vanhoozer writes: "From a Christian perspective, God is first and foremost a communicative agent, one who relates to humankind through words and the Word. Indeed, God's very being is a self-communicative act that both constitutes and enacts the covenant of discourse: speaker (Father), Word (Son), and reception (Spirit) are all interrelated. [...] The triune God is therefore the epitome of communicative agency: the speech agent who utters, embodies, and keeps his Word. Human speakers, created in God's image, enjoy the dignity of communicative agency, though as sinners their speech acts (and interpretation) are subject to all the imperfections and distortions that characterize human fallenness" (Vanhoozer 1998:456–457). Hence, meaning can be discerned from a text because of the *imago dei* but also because God continues to work in communicating his truth through the Holy Spirit.

Newbigin highlights the communal aspect when he suggests that true contextualization takes place when there is a local community which “remembers, rehearses, and lives by the story which the Bible tells” (Newbigin 1989:147). His explanation is worth quoting at length:

Where there is a believing community whose life is centered in the biblical story through its worshipping, teaching, and sacramental and apostolic life, there will certainly be differences of opinion on specific issues, certainly mistakes, certainly false starts. But it is part of my faith in the authenticity of the story itself that this community will not be finally betrayed. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. But where something else is put at the center, a moral code, a set of principles, or the alleged need to meet some criterion imposed from outside the story, one is adrift in the ever changing tides of history, and the community which commits itself to those things becomes one more piece of driftwood on the current.

(Newbigin 1989:148)

Yet, every story needs continuity and coherence. Thus, following Reimer, it is suggested that the boundaries for contextualization are crossed when Christ is no longer confessed as the Lord of the Church and when Holy Scripture is no longer considered normative for the Christian faith (Reimer 2009:198).

Thus, it is proposed that contextualization needs to root itself in Scripture by placing itself, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in the wider story as it is presented in Scripture, which includes acknowledging Christ as Lord and glorifying God by seeking liberation and reconciliation with God and with each other.

### 2.3.3 From contextualization to intercultural theology

This attentiveness and growing awareness of the impact our culture has on evangelization does not solely carry implications for evangelization, but also for theology at large and has led to further reflections, now often summarized as *intercultural theology* (IT) (Wrogemann 2012).<sup>27</sup>

Intercultural theology is essentially a continuation of contextualization, for it creates a platform to engage, learn and be transformed by the different *contextual theologies* (like African or Asian theology) (Küster 2011:131).<sup>28</sup> Thus, intercultural theology goes beyond contextualization and contextual theologies because it does not simply aim at developing a

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<sup>27</sup> Within the Catholic context this development is seen through the switch from *inculturation* to *interculturalization* and it was Joseph Blomjous, a spokesperson at the second Vatican council, who first proposed this new term because of the rise of pluralism (Blomjous 1980).

<sup>28</sup> Intercultural theology is still a young discipline. Significant proponents of intercultural theology were at first Hans Jochen Margull of Hamburg University, Walter Hollenweger of Birmingham University and Richard Friedli at Freiburg University. Later Theo Sundermeier of Heidelberg and Werner Ustorf of Birmingham established a *Department of Intercultural Theology* in the theological faculty at Heidelberg.

theology for a particular context but allows the different contextual theologies to interact with each other.<sup>29</sup>

With the rise of non-Western Christianity (Buhlmann 1976), these churches have emancipated themselves from the West and started developing their own theology. IT can be understood as an attempt to integrate local theologies (or contextual theologies), which emerge out of a particular historical and cultural context, within the universal church so they do not become isolated or loose connection with the whole.

Thus, IT itself is not a theology but rather a *new perspective* (Hollenweger 1978) whose purpose is to “reflect on its own premises in the presence of others” (Margull 1962:121). Hence, intercultural theology gives room to strengthen contextual theologies while simultaneously strengthening the catholicity of the universal Church.

This connecting of the local with the universal shows how intercultural theology rises beyond the limits of contextual theology or inculturation. As David Bosch has expressed it:

In a very real sense what we are involved in is not just inculturation but intercultural. ... We need an exchange of theology in which one way of traffic is suspended first by bilateral and then multilateral relationships. When this happens, the old dichotomies are transcended ... and the partners in this interaction are not only benefactors but also beneficiaries. By the giving and receiving at the same time, a kind of osmosis is taking place. This calls for a new disposition, to rethink the necessity and blessedness of receiving.

(Bosch 1991:456)

Thus, it is not a theology proper but rather a hermeneutic – a way of developing theology.<sup>30</sup> “Intercultural theology is intercultural hermeneutics, as it allows us to see one’s own theology within a larger framework” (Hiebert 1985:16).

This being said, one has to acknowledge that intercultural theology carries within it certain theological assumptions and values, which also need to be made transparent. For example, it claims that contextual theologies need to stand in dialogue with each other and that all theology is contextual.

As we look at contextualization as a response to a cultural development, or as in our case, a particular technological development, the question is not so much if we should contextualize for VR but to what degree and for what reason. VR changes the way we communicate, build relationships and inform ourselves. The more precise question is what do we need to understand about this culture, and how far-reaching does our contextualization need to go? Faix (2016:78)

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<sup>29</sup> Intercultural theology is being used to replace the terms mission or missiology at many seminaries and universities (e.g. University of Göttingen).

<sup>30</sup> Yet, it is here suggested that adding a historical perspective is also needed. For the dialogue should not only be done in a cross-cultural manner but also cross-historically. This can only be beneficial as such a dialogue adds further perspectives which show the diversity of the Christian faith as well as its commonalities.

adopted the C1 to C6 model from Travis (1998) to VR, thereby showing how diverse our degree and understanding of contextualization can be. The C1 to C6 model depicts the different steps of contextualization within an inter-cultural and inter-religious context. Travis uses the example of Islam. The C stands for Christ-centered communities. C1 describes a person who calls him- or herself a Christian. On the other end of the scale, a C5 person would refer to him- or herself as a “Muslim who follows Jesus”. They refuse to be called Christians and use the term MBB (Muslim Background Believer). The adaptation is appropriate and helpful because in both cases (MBB and VR) the degree of contextualization is related to the question of identity and cultural affiliation.

Furthermore, as Nord has shown through her research, there is a parallelism between understanding reality in VR, and the reality of faith (2008:4). Thus, perhaps Christians have a greater sensitivity to the complexity of what reality is, which could be helpful. A further indication for this parallelism could be the religious nature of many games, which suggests some kind of natural affinity between VR and faith.

### **2.3.4 Technology and contextualization**

Culture is affected by technology and vice versa. Thus, in this research contextualization for or because of technology is a central aspect.

MET [media ecology theory] deals with social impact of media and examines the relationship between technology and members of its culture. According to MET, society has evolved as its technology has evolved: society cannot escape the influence of technology and that technology will remain central to virtually all paths of life. Additionally, McLuhan suggests that we have a symbiotic relationship with mediated technology; we create technology, and technology in turn re-creates who we are.

(West, Turner & Zhao 2010:156)

In order to understand the relationship between technology and society and culture (and thereby contextualization), it is best to start with looking at the historical development of technology and theology.

In general, we can differentiate between three phases of the development of technology so far. The first phase involved the use of technology for craftsmanship (craft technology). This was the basic understanding of technology until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, after which came technology that enabled industrialization (industrial technology). This understanding of technology is currently being replaced by new technological developments that are far more integrated into our lives and affect all aspects of it. This is now referred to as *converging technologies* (Charbonnier 2016:7,34-36).

Within each period, technology always affects three distinct dimensions: (1) artifacts, (2) technological knowledge and abilities, and (3) social order. Thus, Charbonnier is right in

asserting that technology requires theological reflection in the form of individual ethics and our social responsibility because it affects our social order (2016:8). For this reason, too, ethics and the development of a code of conduct for online evangelization will be addressed.

To better understand the relationship between technology and theology, it is best to see it in light of creation and the eschaton. It is argued here that technology properly implemented and used is best seen as a continuation of the creation process and that technology is also a means through which redemption enters this world.

The understanding of technological development as a part of the creation process stands in contrast to a more static understanding where creation is to be preserved. However, precisely because technology and culture are in an interdependent relationship with each other, we cannot isolate technological progress from cultural developments. This means that the question cannot be *if* we use technology but rather *how* it is to be used (2016:30). In that sense the challenge is to preserve the creation process by ensuring that technology serves to cultivate creation (Gen 1:28) and to love God and neighbor (cf. Mt 22:37-40; Lev 19:18).

However, since the fall, creation is understood to be under a curse and so it can also become a means for individual and societal destruction. Thus, a Christian response to technology has to be discerning. Such a critical reflection on technology can itself be a form of witnessing. A “Gottesdienst in der Welt”<sup>31</sup> as Charbonnier (2016:32) suggests.

During the industrial age (particularly the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries), technology was seen with great optimism. In theological discourse, this manifested itself in the belief that technological advancements would prepare for the millennium (Groh 2010:495ff.). Technological advancement was seen as a means of bringing glory to God (:525), and to overcome the consequences of the fall (Charbonnier 2016:22). However, in that same period one can also witness the separation of theology and natural sciences (Snow 1961:19-58).

The clashing point of two subjects, two disciplines, two cultures – of two galaxies, as far as that goes – ought to produce creative chances. In the history of mental activity that has been where some of the breakthroughs came. The chances are there now. But they are there, as it were, in a vacuum, because those in the two cultures can’t talk to each other.

(Snow 1961:17)

As Snow noted many decades ago, the natural sciences and the humanities (including theology) need each other. A result, or perhaps premise, of this development, was the assumption that technology itself is morally neutral. Brunner, for example, wrote: “Das Problem ist also nicht die Technik; das Problem ist der Mensch”<sup>32</sup> (Brunner 1949:518). Such thinking as expressed

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<sup>31</sup> “A worship service in the world” [translation mine].

<sup>32</sup> “Technology is not the problem. Humans are” [translation mine].

by Brunner neglects the cultural impact technology has. Personal ethics are an insufficient response to this impact.

Yet in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several developments created a greater awareness of the indeterminism of nature and the strong connection between culture and technology (Charbonnier 2016:24-25). Thus, ways to better anticipate the consequences of technological developments, as well as the need to create ways for the society to negotiate communally the advantages and possibilities of a given technology are needed (Härle 1986).

Others argue that the self-reinforcing tendencies and momentum that technologies can create and may move beyond the realm of what humans can control, and thus do not allow for an ethical governing of technology.

An example of such uncontrollable potential is contained in the warning of several researchers against the use of *Artificial Intelligence* for military purposes. In an open letter by 116 experts to the United Nations, they state:

Lethal autonomous weapons threaten to become the third revolution in warfare. Once developed, they will permit armed conflict to be fought at a scale greater than ever, and at timescales faster than humans can comprehend. These can be weapons of terror, weapons that despots and terrorists use against innocent populations, and weapons hacked to behave in undesirable ways. We do not have long to act. Once this Pandora's box is opened, it will be hard to close.

(Open Letter 2017)

This example shows the growing awareness that some technologies have the potential not only for unintended consequences but for a permanent and devastating effect on humanity.

Yet, in my opinion, the fact that not all technological developments are predictable does not render the need for an ethically guided discerning process pointless, rather it shows that ethical reflections need to develop in tandem with technological developments. Given the speed in which technologies develop this may seem like a daunting task, but it is necessary and possible if both the natural sciences and the humanities see it as their joint responsibility.

Thus, it can here be affirmed that as an imperative that technological developments need to be complemented with theological and ethical reflections. Such theological reflections are a service and sign to the world. The unfortunate separation between natural sciences and theology has been unfruitful for both, and thus it is important that theology not only offers warnings about the use of technology but also guidance for a proper use thereof.

Thus, in summary, we can say that technology is an agent, a cause and a result of cultural change. Thus, the process of contextualization as it deals with culture needs to deal with technology, yet not simply with artifacts but with social orders.

### **2.3.5 Placing contextualization within this research**

This section moves from general observations made with regard to technology and focuses in on VR as a particular technology, and evangelization as a particular aspect of theology.

Contextualization also applies to VR since it provides a new context within which evangelization has to find new ways of expressing itself but also creates new questions requiring new theological answers.

The concept of intercultural theology serves as a framework for this study to allow understanding of the need for a *theology of virtual reality*. The importance of a contextualized theology for VR can be seen in the dialogue around the virtual church (e.g. Estes 2009; Campbell 2005) as it challenges our present praxis of community, pastoral care and accountability which are traditionally and generally seen as depending on physical presence.

To develop a theology of virtual reality is an *opus magnum*, which goes far beyond the ability and intentions of this particular research. This is not to say that a theology of virtual reality is particularly complex (although it might be) but rather it is such a vast endeavor since it challenges fundamental assumptions regarding community, identity, authority etc. To each of these challenges, various theologies of VR can be developed. Virtual reality might be even more complex, as it enters into all kinds of different cultures (e.g. European, Asian, etc) which in turn respond differently to its impact. Thus, a theology of VR developed in an Asian context will differ from one which emerged in a European context etc. Yet, all these interactions with the help of VR allow for new ways of understanding the triune God and his working among us (Adeney 1995:141). Thus, those who find, share and express their faith online, offer new perspectives for our theological understanding which can benefit us all.

Nonetheless, this study aims to contribute to the process by participating in the first step of addressing the issue of evangelization in VR.

Since evangelization has a longstanding relationship with contextualization, this makes it a promising place to start by observing if and how contextualization for evangelization online is taking place.

### **2.3.6 Criteria for contextualization**

Contextualization is a delicate process. There are many ways it can be done incorrectly and there are many invalid reasons to do it. Thus, it is appropriate to articulate here what constitutes proper contextualization. In doing so, some other important issues which have not yet been addressed will also be acknowledged.

First, good contextualization acknowledges that the church and the individual Christian are always part of a particular cultural context, and thus a proper understanding of the cultural context is important.

Second, a contextual theology is one that is biblically based. The Bible remains authoritative and provides the standard against which we measure our traditions and practices (Hiebert 1987:110).

Third, due to its origins in the developing world, contextualization has more clearly exposed the Western focus on exegesis as an individual process and not a communal one. This is a helpful corrective and is not only true of exegesis but also of contextualization. The formation of local theology or ecclesiology needs to be done by the community. According to the priesthood of all believers, the work of the Holy Spirit occurs in all believers, but this is not “a license for theological lonerism” (Hiebert 1987:110).

Fourth, contextualization can lack the prophetic voice that challenges the particular sins that have become unchallenged in a culture. Presumably out of a good desire to reach many with the gospel, evangelists may be hesitant to name the idols particular to a given culture. As Mortimer Arias writes:

The announcement of the gospel implies the denunciation of everything that is not in agreement with the gospel. No evangelism is authentically evangelical if it is not at the same time prophetic. The Church cannot make compromise with any force that oppresses or dehumanizes man [sic]. It cannot name Jesus Christ if it does not name also the idols and the demons that must be cast out from the inner life of man [sic] and from the structures of society (Luke 3:1-20, 6:20-23; Matt. 23).  
(Arias 1975:19)

Thus, good contextualization challenges the particular sins and creates a “counter community” that exposes the wrong within a culture while living out an alternative. Brueggemann writes:

This counter-community [i.e. the local church] has as its core task the naming and confronting of alien spiritual powers that govern the conventional society into which we are all, in many ways, inducted.  
(Brueggemann 2008:227)

Fifth, in light of point four, good contextualization acknowledges that we often see the mistakes of others better than we see our own. Thus, every dialogue is done in the hope of becoming aware of one’s own blind spots.

[W]e need Christians from other cultures, for they often see how our cultural biases have distorted our interpretations of the Scriptures. This corporate nature of the church as a community of interpretation extends not only to the church in every culture, but also to the church in all ages.  
(Hiebert 1987:110)

Sixth, the hermeneutical reversal underlying contextualization is based on the assumption that we ought to start with practice. Yet, we never operate without a theory (or theology). Our actions can be misguided if they are based on wrong theories, for example those of God, self or other.

However, more important than what comes first (theory or practice) is the interaction between the two. Theory ought to lead to practice, and practice needs to lead to theory. Both are legitimate ways to enter into this dynamic interplay. The danger arises where no interaction exists. Proper contextualization reflects humility that comes from an awareness that one also has a cultural bias and is in need of the other in order to see more clearly.

Seventh, contextualization is an act of love because every effort is made to understand the other within his/her context, including dreams, hopes, fears and burdens. Furthermore, this love expresses itself by engaging with the rituals and traditions of the other and by a humble spirit when challenging another person. Critique should never be done from a feeling of superiority, but with the strong belief that the critique will help the other to live more fully in the grace of God.

Eighth, contextualization ought to create dialogue and interdependence between different cultures. Contextualization allows every people group to create their *own* theology, through which each group may discover something unique that is true and beautiful. However, if all truth belongs to God and all beauty is a reflection of God, then should not all truth and beauty be shared with God's people? Thus, liberation theology is not simply the theology for Latin America – for example – as it contains a truth with regards to the oppressed which is also needed in the developed world.

Likewise, if the cultural specifics are emphasized too much, the overarching themes that unite all cultures might be missed, such as the fear of death or the desire for freedom. Such unifying themes help differing cultures overcome their differences. Thus, it is also right to emphasize the richness found in the *one* gospel:

The Christian message is, indeed, abiding and universal. It is for all men [sic] of every time in history and of every culture on earth.

(Hesselgrave 1992:C-52)

Therefore, proper contextualization must be local but it must also be global, helping others to see more than they are able or willing to see alone. Thereby contextualization should not lead to independence of the different local theologies but to interdependence (Küster 2011:27).<sup>33</sup>

Thus, contextualization creates unity among the worldwide body of Christ. It is “one faith” that reconciled Jews and gentiles, men and women, slaves and masters. This means that an “and” needs to be spoken more often than an “or.” The question is, for example, not if the

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<sup>33</sup> Küster suggests that one should not search for a dogmatic consensus or a “canon within the canon.” Instead he speaks of *generative themes* as a set number of themes which can be found in the Bible. They unite the Christian faith as every contextual theology relies on them (Küster 2011:61).

gospel is about personal sin *or* liberation from oppression, but rather to what else is God calling us?

### **2.3.7 Conclusions and proposed definition**

Unlike with evangelization, the definition of contextualization is fairly established. What is debated is the degree to which contextualization takes place and how to ensure continuity. The historical development went from adaptation to contextualization and from inculturation to contextual theology and has now reached intercultural theology.

With regards to the research undertaken here, contextualization and, to a smaller degree, intercultural theology, constitutes the theoretical background. Here the researcher refers to the assumption that theologies need to be locally embedded, even in – as in this case – a virtual context.

Thus, contextualization is here understood as an attempt to take the interrelatedness between technology and culture seriously and seeks to understand how God is active in this particular context in order to discern how the church can participate with him and what the church in VR can learn through that participation about itself and the nature of God.

For the purposes of this empirical research, contextualization is understood as any attempt to adapt content or form of evangelization for VR, thereby including all above-described methods of contextualization.

## **2.4 Virtual Reality**

### **2.4.1 Introduction**

For decades, the idea of a VR that humans can create and inhabit has fascinated the imagination. This fascination is reflected in popular culture through the *Holodeck* in the science fiction series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* or in the blockbuster movie *The Matrix*. While the Holodeck allowed crewmembers to seek out fictional or non-fictional places for recreation or training purposes, in *The Matrix* people were permanently living in a VR. Unlike the Holodeck, people in *The Matrix* are born and raised within a VR and are unaware of the fact that they are living in a computer-simulated world, which actually functioned as a *golden cage*. These two examples also reflect the dreams and horrors associated with VR.

Though present-day technology is far from these scenarios, technological advancements are ever increasing and humans are spending an increasing amount of time using technology to

play, chat, shop, build relationships and – also – to worship online. Developments like Google Glass suggest that science fiction may indeed become science-fact.

An indication of the increased use of technology can be found in the *ARD/ZDF-Onlinestudien* survey. Not only are the number of internet users increasing, but also the amount of time spent online. The number of internet users went from 6.5 million people in 1997 to 65.1 million people in 2016. Within this same period, the average number of hours spent online increased from 76 minutes a day to 128 minutes a day<sup>34</sup>. This research was conducted in Germany, but it can be assumed that there are similar trends in the Western world, such as in the US (e.g. Tapscott 2009:21), for example. Perhaps even globally.

Yet, while VR incorporates the internet, it cannot be equated with it. The term VR takes different technological developments such as the internet, visual devices, communication platforms, etc. and combines them in a new way which offers a truly “unique experience that grew up separate from the document-centric Web” (Damer 2009:1).

## 2.4.2 Defining Virtual Reality

There is no clear consensus on how to define VR (Prokes 2004:9–10). In general, one can say that there are two approaches to defining VR. One is to define it narrowly as a particular technology (Prokes 2004; Heim 1993) and the other is to define it wider as the user-experience (Haese 2006:155–157; Wagner 2012). The latter definition is the one chosen for this research and also the one used most consistently in recent research history, especially among those who study VR within the social sciences.

### 2.4.2.1 VR as a technology

Heim, who defines and understands VR as a technology, further classified those related definitions into different groups based on the different pioneers of VR (Heim 1993:109–116).<sup>35</sup>

*VR as artificiality*: This is arguably the widest understanding of VR. Here anything humanly constructed is considered VR. Though this is helpful in alerting us to the fact that technology is entering our lives in many different forms and has been for a long time, the width of the definition is unhelpful as it encompasses too much and renders VR too vaguely.

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<sup>34</sup> <http://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de/index.php?id=onlinenutzung-mio00> [Accessed: 22.7.2015] and [http://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de/fileadmin/Onlinestudie\\_2016/0916\\_Koch\\_Frees.pdf](http://www.ard-zdf-onlinestudie.de/fileadmin/Onlinestudie_2016/0916_Koch_Frees.pdf) [Accessed: 19.10.2016].

<sup>35</sup> Although Heim’s list is dated, it is still frequently referred to (Prokes 2004) and remains foundational to the understanding of VR in terms of its technologies.

*VR as simulation:* Here VR is seen as the technological ability to simulate a FR activity (e.g. a flight) to a degree that is close to or even indistinguishable from FR. Photorealism and real-time texturing are two important features of this technology. Though it is true that simulations and/or recreations of images, sounds and animations are a major aspect of VR, it is insufficient as a definition. This is because this definition does not incorporate communication with people.

*VR as interaction with virtual objects:* In this case VR is defined as the ability to interact with virtual objects. Heim uses the windows desktop and trash bin as an example. Though nobody would mistake the trash bin on the windows desktop for a real trash bin, it functions as a real one. Unwanted files are placed in the trash bin and thereby removed (deleted). This definition is helpful in showing that a correlation between FR and VR exists while also showing that the aim of VR is not to simulate something so well that it cannot be distinguished from FR. Heim also includes “virtual place” (a kind of online class room) and “virtual persons” in this category. A virtual person is someone known only through computer networks (Heim 1993; Prokes 2004:11). Thus, here the emphasis is on the user’s way of interacting with virtual objects.

*VR as immersion:* In this view, VR is seen as “sensory immersion in a virtual environment.” Thus, it is very similar to the definitions of “VR as simulation” but the technological means are different (e.g. head-mounted displays and gloves). “The purpose in using the head-mounted displays is to cut off visual and audio sensation from the real world in order to replace them with computer-generated sensations” (Prokes 2004:12).

*VR as telepresence:* Here the emphasis or accomplishment gained through VR is the overcoming of distance. Telepresence means to be present in a different location through a robot (cf Prokes 2004:12). An example of this is seen in the movie *Surrogates*, where humans can go about their daily business through robots which they control from their homes.

*VR as full-body immersion:* In comparison to VR as immersion, here an “environment in which the user moves without encumbering gear” (Heim 1993:115) is created.

*VR as networked communication:* Heim is not primarily referring to communication like we have today (such as Skype), but the fact that a user can create an object in a VR which others can see. “Because users can stipulate and shape objects and activities of a virtual world, they can share imaginary things and events without using words or real-world references” (Heim 1993:116). Among Heim’s different definitions this one comes close to understanding VR less as a particular technology and more as an experience.

### 2.4.2.2 VR as a user experience

Since it is technology that made VR possible, it is understandable that one is tempted to understand it within those terms, but that neglects an important aspect, namely that VR offers a new kind of experience.

Haese prefers to understand VR in this broader sense:<sup>36</sup>

Für computergenerierte virtuelle Räume, die einen anderen Erfahrungsrahmen bieten als die gegebene Alltagswelt, verwende ich exklusiv den Begriff der *virtual reality* (VR). [...] Ausdrücklich sollen damit jedoch nicht nur wenige HighTech-Installationen, – die auch nur ausgewählten Menschen zugänglich sind – gemeint sein, die per Datenhelm und -handschuh eine vollkommene Immersion in einen dreidimensionalen Raum ermöglichen, sondern auch der Flugsimulator am heimischen PC oder ein MUD [...] in textueller Form oder 3D-Grafik.<sup>37</sup>

(Haese 2006:155)

Thus, VR can include complex simulation devices but it can also exist in a pure textural form. However, the fascination with VR is based on the experiences it allows for. Two of these experiences will now be presented.

### 2.4.2.3 VR as physically disconnected and emotionally connected to FR

Haese suggests that actions in VR only affect electronic things, and do not affect physical objects or people (Haese 2006:156). In other words: “What happens in VR stays in VR.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, there is a gap between FR and VR. If an avatar is injured, the body of the user remains intact. However, as Haese suggests, psychologically the user can be affected. This psychological effect can carry over into FR. As Haese writes:

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<sup>36</sup> Haese suggests six markers of VR (Haese 2006:155–157). Most of them are concerned with what David Bell describes as cyberspace, namely the architecture of a VR: how we move in it, how information is represented, etc. The marks are: “Real-time”: Whatever the user does in FR instantly happens in VR. “Immersion”: The user views the world from their natural angle: He or she is in the situation. “Outlook”: The user can control his/her point of view. This is a common feature of so-called first-person shooter games. The user is free to look at what he or she wants. As an example of the opposite, Haese suggests a movie where the user can select different sequences with different plots. “Time and space”: A VR must have a sense of space and to move within it requires time. “Freedom”: The users can choose their actions. The amount of freedom available is dependent on the technological resources available and the options the software allows for. Yet, the patterns are not predetermined. Even in a *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game* the player has a considerable amount of freedom.

<sup>37</sup> “For computer-generated virtual realities which offer a different experiential framework from our everyday life I use the term virtual reality. However, this is not to limit this term to those few high-tech instalments which are only accessible to a few people who use head-mounted displays and gloves for total immersion in a three-dimensional room but also flight simulators on a PC at home or a MUD ... text-based or graphic” [translation mine].

<sup>38</sup> This contradicts Heim’s view of VR as telepresence. Yet, as Haese’s later comments show, he is more concerned with the physicality of the user. Thus, it is correct to list this as a characteristic of VR, for the ability to fly an airplane without endangering one’s physical well-being is a significant advantage of VR, especially for training purposes (cf Haese 2006:157).

Auf der einen Seite schützt der intermediäre Raum die Spieler, weil das Erlebte „nur“ eine Simulation war, auf der anderen Seite sind ihre Wirkungen oft so eindrucklich, daß sie auf das individuelle und soziale Leben Einfluß haben.<sup>39</sup>

(Haese 2006:158)

Haese also uses the controversial example of a virtual rape in 1992 in the VR LambdaMOO to show that it is *impossible* to separate the soma completely from the psyche (Haese 2006:158).<sup>40</sup> Thus, it can be said that VR is physically disconnected, but emotionally connected with FR.<sup>41</sup>

In connection with this study, the attractiveness of VR becomes evident. A person can inquire about another religion or partake in a sacred event without having to reveal his or her physical identity, etc. Thus, VR provides safety by limiting the impact of events in VR on FR.

VR also allows for unique experiences which are not possible in FR. This kind of usage of VR can even be noted in the earliest versions of VR, such as *MUDI*, which went online around 1978, to which we now turn our attention.

#### 2.4.2.4 VR as an opportunity to hide, re-create and alter one's identity

*MUDI*,<sup>42</sup> which is an entirely text-based game and which lacks most of the above defined technological features, was still very popular and it allowed for the plausibility of creating a new identity. Lober suggests that VR was born with the text-based multiplayer game MUD1 because it gave the user the option to choose his or her sex (i.e. altering one's identity). As *Illustration 1* shows, the question is not “What sex are you?” but “What sex do you wish to be?”

```
Origin of version: Thu Sep  8 01:23:40 2011
Welcome! By what name shall I call you?
*Dilbert
Creating new persona:
What sex do you wish to be?
*[* Server has disconnected.                *]
```

Illustration 1: Login text from MUDI

As Lober writes, VR can exist with very limited technological features:

Auf den ersten Blick kann man [bei MUD1] kaum Gemeinsamkeiten mit heutigen virtuellen Welten erkennen: Heute streifen aufwendig und individuell gestaltete Avatare durch die anspruchsvoll animierten, dreidimensionalen und dem Auge schmeichelnden 3-D-Welten. [...] Der Grundstein wurde in anderer Beziehung gelegt. Schon der erste MUD erlaubte es den Spielern, eine andere

<sup>39</sup> “On the one hand, the intermediary environment protects the player because what is experienced is “only” a simulation, yet on the other hand the experience can be so impactful that they affect individual and social life” [my translation].

<sup>40</sup> In 1991 a rape was reported in MOO environment LambdaMOO which ignited a conversation on the reality of the experience and the ethical implications for the perpetrator.

<sup>41</sup> Arguably, it would be possible to create devices which could do to the body in FR what is happening in VR but usually the user-interface is not that sophisticated or intentionally protects the user.

<sup>42</sup> MUD1 is widely recognized as the first VR. MUD is an abbreviation of Multi User Dungeon. First it was known as MUD, but later changed to MUD1 to distinguish it from further developments, i.e. MUD2.

Identität anzunehmen. Dass sich Männer als Frauen ausgaben und umgekehrt war erlaubt, gar Teil des Konzepts.<sup>43</sup>

(Lober 2007:7)

Thus, this new possibility needs to be understood as an important element to VR.<sup>44</sup>

To some, the possibility to present oneself as a different gender may seem small or even trivial, but it can be seen as a token of the potential associated with VR. This is because VR allows for a whole new experience of being the creator of a world and even of one's own identity.<sup>45</sup> Thus, it is also no surprise that according to Kollock "MUD owners are often referred to as 'gods'" (Kollock 2002:7). These gods could delegate their power in whole or in part to selected participants, who commonly take on the status of *wizards*.

### 2.4.3 Conclusions and proposed definition

We can conclude by noting that VR provides privacy and safety by allowing the user to disconnect what is happening in VR from FR, though this disconnection has limitations. Furthermore, VR allows the user to take on different identities and to be creative in ways that are impossible in FR.

Thus, by integrating what has been said so far by Haese, Lober and also Turkle, the following is proposed as a working-definition for this research.

*VR describes computer-mediated experiences in which users can inhabit a space, through the use of an avatar, and where they can interact with each other, engage in various activities and even alter or hide their identity through the avatar and none of these actions need to bear any physical consequences.*

With regards to this research, the following criteria need to be met in order to be applicable for the empirical research:

- The possibility to hide and alter one's FR identity or to create a new identity
- The possibility to communicate with others

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<sup>43</sup> "At first sight, only a few commonalities can be seen between MUD1 and present virtual world. In today's 3D-environments, individually created avatars walk through sophisticated and eye-pleasing 3D-worlds. However, the foundations were already laid. Even the first MUD allowed a player to take on a different identity. That men presented themselves as women and vice versa was not only possible, but part of the concept" [translation mine].

<sup>44</sup> Of course this is more applicable for VRs that are designed for leisure and less for business- or education-orientated VRs.

<sup>45</sup> Turkle even connects the experiences in MUDs with postmodernism and identity. "MUDs offer an experience of the abstract postmodern idea [...] and] exemplify the phenomenon [...], that of computer mediated experiences bringing philosophy down to earth" (Turkle 1997:17).

- The possibility to engage in activities or relationships which do not have to (but can) have direct effect on FR

#### 2.4.4 The blurring of the worlds: Hybrid and Augmented Reality

Traditionally VR and FR were viewed as two distinct ways of being and so far this distinction has been maintained. This was mainly because it mirrors the research of VR which first saw VR as a clearly distinguishable reality. Present research, however, has now shifted to what is labelled *augmented* or *hybrid reality*. This shift in interest is based on the realization that it is not always helpful to try to juxtapose FR and VR. Haese noted this in 2006:

Jeder Versuch, Virtualität als Gegensatz zur Realität des menschlichen Lebens zu stilisieren, geht in die Irre. Stattdessen kann man parallel zu einer steigenden Komplexität der Lebenswelt verschiedene Ausprägungen und Differenzierungen von Virtualität benennen.<sup>46</sup>

(Haese 2006:172)

It is thus suggested that VR and FR are collapsing into each other and that the borders which used to separate them are blurring due to technological developments. In a way, augmented or hybrid reality is the next generation of VR. As interfaces become more user-friendly and more integrated into FR, the back and forth, or even the parallel, of the two realities becomes narrower. Simply watching the development of *cellphones* to *smartphones* and now the integration of social-networking features into cars shows the integration of VR in FR.

Szaba, Assistant Research Professor at Duke University, lists several examples of the blur between FR and VR:

When we move from the real world to a truly virtual space, such as that of Second Life or World of Warcraft, we cross clear entry thresholds as we log in and “become” our avatars. These boundaries between the real and the virtual clearly signal to users that they are leaving “meatspace” [her label for FR] to enter virtual space. We know our roles in that space—who we are, what we experience, and the implicit values that inform our conduct—and that these roles change as we move from one world to another. In contrast, hybrid reality systems blur the boundaries between meatspace and virtual space, with no clear and definite thresholds between one and the other. For example, the social application Foursquare seamlessly connects GPS-enabled mobile device users in meatspace to virtual elements—from online information to virtual gaming. Make enough visits to your local Starbucks, and you can be designated as that store’s “mayor.”

(Szabo 2011)

This fusion can also be noticed with regards to religion. Wagner writes:

Now we see the Internet becoming a tool to extend a church’s offline ministry into online spaces. For instance, we see the rise of Internet campuses within many multisite churches, and webcasting of services via iPhone and Facebook apps (for example LifeChurch.tv) becoming common. Thus,

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<sup>46</sup> “Any attempt to place virtuality in contrast to the reality of human life leads us astray. Instead we can recognize that parallel to the growing complexity of our life, different forms and differentiations of VR become evident” [translation mine].

rather than being an alternative social space for few, digital technology becomes an important platform extending and altering religious practice for many.

(Wagner in Campbell 2013:1)

Purely online offers continue to exist, but a hybrid approach dominates current practice. A few churches have been founded in purely virtual environments like *Second Life*, but they do not draw much attention after their initial hype.

No literature was found that made a distinction between augmented reality and hybrid reality, thus the terms are used here synonymously. The term augmented reality will, from now on, be used to describe what is not clearly FR or VR.

## 2.5 Conclusions

When the Christian faith encounters VR and expresses itself within this context, new questions arise demanding new answers. This is particularly evident when one observes the discussion over church communities that organize themselves online. In that context, new questions are emerging with regards to physical presence as well as the practice of the sacraments.

Building on the theological concept of *intercultural theology*, it is assumed that VR needs its own contextual theology. Such a *theology of virtual reality* cannot be designed in isolation, but needs to interact with other contextual theologies which correct and challenge each other.

The intention of this research is not to develop a theology of virtual reality, but to offer a contribution to such an endeavour by empirically exploring how contextualization (with regards to evangelization) takes place for VR. Evangelization is particularly suitable for such an investigation because contextualization is an intrinsic part of evangelization.

This chapter also defined the three most relevant terms for this research, namely: evangelization, contextualization and virtual reality (along with the related term augmented reality). The current debate around each of these terms was briefly described and working definitions suitable for the empirical research were formulated.

Thus, *evangelization* was defined as *any attempt* to engage in an interaction with people of other or no faith with the intention of informing them of the reality, nature or workings of God and with the intention and hope that people would respond positively and believe in what was shared.

*Contextualization* is here understood as the continuous engagement with the way technology and culture affect evangelization. Furthermore, contextualization acts out of the conviction that God is already active and calling the church to participate with him.

And *virtual reality* describes computer-mediated experiences in which users can inhabit a space, through the use of an avatar, and where they can interact with each other, engage in

various activities and even alter or hide their identity through the avatar and none of these actions need to bear any physical consequences.

Now that the key terms have been presented and defined, we can survey the research and literature, which looks at the intersection of religion and VR.

### 3. Literature review

The literature review consists of four parts. The first section provides a brief history of the research on VR and religion. However, since a lot of literature regarding VR and religion comes in the form of articles from a wide range of authors, the second section is structured thematically and introduces various topics that relate to evangelization in VR. The third section introduces the reader to the primary researchers whose work offers some foundational considerations for this research. The final section deals with the doctoral research from Stamper, since it deals directly with the issue of evangelization online, whereas the previous researchers dealt more generally with religion online. Thus, the literature review narrows down from the general to the specific.<sup>47</sup>

#### 3.1 The history of research on VR and religion

The impact of VR on religion, and especially the formation of religious identities, is a comparably young research field. It is an interdisciplinary endeavour, drawing mostly but not exclusively on religious, social and media studies. A survey of past research reveals three distinct waves (or phases):

The *first wave* of research is dated loosely to the mid-1990s. During this early stage of research, “the very novelty and potential of the subject were grasped with enthusiasm” (Højsgaard & Warburg 2005:2). Radical changes were anticipated. Yet, this enthusiasm soon vanished. Religion online closely resembled what was done offline, and many people have remained suspect of VR. But most importantly, it has not had as positive an influence on humanity as first anticipated by – for example – facilitating tolerance. Even early enthusiasts like O’Leary, while not denying the impact of VR, are now uncertain if the changes are for the better.<sup>48</sup> Expectations, too, have been lowered. Dawson, for example, now expects in his article *Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community* that “to the extent that they [i.e. virtual

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<sup>47</sup> The literature review reflects the start of the research which laid the foundation for the empirical research. Research which evolved during the research was added within the later reflections upon the empirical findings.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen D. O’Leary wrote in an article published in 2005: “In the light of the terror attacks of the past few years, I have found it difficult to maintain the optimistic tone of my earlier writings. In many ways, I now see my early essays as naïve and even utopian. ... I argued that computer-mediated communication (CMC) represents a cultural shift comparable in magnitude to the Gutenberg revolution. However, I am now considerably less optimistic about the future that this revolution portends for both religion and humanity. ... [T]he decisions made by both the developers and users of new technologies will have a profound effect on who we are, and what we will become.” (O’Leary 2005:38)

communities] ever become common, [they] are unlikely to operate as substitutes for more traditional forms of social relations. Life online will likely complement life offline, and there is no reason to expect that religious use of the Internet will differ” (Dawson 2004:79).

This sobering experience has led to the *second wave* of research (Campbell 2013:9), which is now coming to terms with “what kind of knowledge we *actually* have about the religious usage of the Internet” (Højsgaard & Warburg 2005:2). Although VR has not affected religion in the ways first anticipated (correlating with the overall experience of early VR), the effects are still noticeable and profound, especially with regards to computer-mediated-communication (CMC), but also on the way people develop their religious identity (Radde-Antweiler 2008:1).

The *third wave* of research focused on theoretical and interpretive research (Campbell 2013:9) and asked how one ought to research religion in VR (we will return to this discussion in the *research design*).<sup>49</sup>

A *fourth wave* is currently anticipated, which could further refine the results of the third wave and create “typologies for categories and interpretation” (Campbell 2013:10).

## **3.2 How to evangelize an avatar: A thematic overview**

This section is structured thematically in order to introduce some themes which are relevant for evangelization online and have contributed to the development of the questions used for the expert-interviews. The remainder of this literature review is guided by the question: *Which challenges and opportunities does VR offer for evangelization?* As with so many cultures and developments, it will become evident that VR contains aspects which are suitable and helpful for the presentation of the gospel and others which are opposed to the gospel and are in need of redemption.

### **3.2.1 The challenge of the reality of VR: Is it real (enough)?**

Even if we agree that the concept of an augmented reality best describes today’s use of the internet, CMC and the like, for most people what is done in VR (e.g. *Second Life*) is considered less real or not real at all. As Nord (2008:85–100) has shown, this raises various metaphysical questions. Yet, the concern here is not with the reality of VR or FR on a philosophical level, but instead on the nature of people’s VR experiences. Estes, for example, makes the following

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<sup>49</sup> Wave two and three often go hand-in-hand with each other as is most clearly visible in the work of Campbell.

provocative suggestion with regards to realness of religious actions in VR: “I would challenge any Christian who says that virtual churches are not real to go to a temple of a non-Christian God in Second Life and bow down and worship an idol” (Estes 2009:33). His point being that for most of us this would feel real enough to be wrong, thus why should a church service held in VR not also be real enough?<sup>50</sup> Even if one wanted to challenge his logic, it still shows that what is done in VR is not irrelevant to FR.

Furthermore, Wagner seems to have found indications that *some* people consider something done in VR even more real than in FR.

[Prayer apps] beg the question of why users feel compelled to issue the prayer through virtual reality, rather than simply closing their eyes. The authenticity of the prayer, in this case, seems to be dependent on passage through virtual space.

(Wagner 2011:103)

Thus, it is proposed here that the realness of VR – at least to some degree – depends on how the user sees it.<sup>51</sup> While for some VR is nothing but a communication medium, for others it is an essential part of their life (reality), and has a redemptive dimension (see 3.2.6).

And yet, even for those who see VR as a lesser reality, it can still be the best available reality. A common critique of VR is its inability to convey physical affection, such as a hug. However, a person who does not receive hugs, comfort or the community he or she longs for at a *brick and mortar* church might gladly receive a “feel hugged” from somebody met in VR. Thus, Campbell argues that although a virtual community is considered to be inherently less meaningful than a FR community (even by users), for the individual it can still be the best option. She observes that it is possible for people to be in the physical presence of one another and yet “they are together alone”, while people gathering online can be “alone together.” She writes: “Online community is not the same as embodied interaction. Yet when offline options do not provide the spiritual connection many individuals so long for, it can become, as one member of a Christian email list stated, a ‘Godsend’” (Campbell 2005:xvii).

As addressed previously (3.3.1) this raises the question of how evangelists evangelizing online incorporate this communal aspect.

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<sup>50</sup> The basis for his argument is that Western culture holds on to a wrong dualism between the body and the soul. He believes this is due to the influence of Descartes. To him he accredits the notion that “[o]nly the body is capable of interacting with the real world; the soul cannot” (Estes 2009:61).

<sup>51</sup> Wagner identifies three different approaches to VR. *Technophobes* do not believe that one can enter into VR and who believe that it is impossible to identify with an Avatar in any meaningful way. *Technomediators* see VR as a communication medium. “For technomediators, using virtual reality for religious purposes is not necessarily wrong – so long as it doesn’t overshadow real, embodied religious practices and communities.” (2012:114). Only *Technomonists* see VR “as a legitimate and authentic new space into which human beings can actually enter in some meaningful kind of way, and which they can enter in plural and hybrid ways” (2012:116).

### 3.2.2 The challenge of authority: “Like” is the new true

For the formation of one’s religious identity, people now “cobble together a religious world from [all] available images, symbols, moral codes, and doctrines [while] exercising considerable agency in defining and shaping what is considered to be religiously meaningful” (Roof 1999:75). The established authority of traditional religions (particularly, but not exclusively) are currently being challenged. The internet is filled with different voices and they all seem to come with equal authority.

The obviously constructed and pluralistic character of religious expressions online tends to have a relativizing effect on the truth claims of any one religion or its authorities. [...] Moreover, the easy coexistence of so many different and openly heterodox views in cyberspace exposes the Net surfer to a more fluid doctrinal environment, one that has the potential to encourage individual religious and spiritual experimentation.

(Dawson & Cowan 2004:3)

Thus, people can be exposed to a greater plurality of religions. This could lead to a change of course towards or away from the Christian faith. Alternatively, it can lead to a unique blend which results in a form of hybrid or augmented religion.

Furthermore, the reliability of the information found on the internet is not so much based on the author’s credentials in FR, but on the number of people in one’s network (i.e. group of friends) “liked” this source. For example, a user might consider reading a new blog because many of its followers/subscribers are people whose own work the user has appreciated in the past.

What happens when we start seeing the Web as a matrix of minds, not documents? Networks based on trust become an essential tool. You start evaluating the relevance of data based not on search query result but on personal testimonies. (“This information is useful because six minds I admire have found it useful.”)

(Johnson 2003)

Thus, religious beliefs remain a work in progress, fluid and negotiable (Wagner 2012:99), where orientation is found through loosely held networks.

Wagner further points out, that these networks provide us with a sense of grounding:

By utilizing social media apps connected to a specific community, we can argue against our own postmodern dissolution, suggesting that we may be entities-in-motion, but we can ground ourselves [...] in singularly defined religious communities. [...] Social media apps work as portals into such communities, but they also signify our *desire* for such grounding.

(Wagner 2012:106-107; cf Campbell 2005:188-189)

Thus, these social media apps provide a sense of belonging and community, but a very loose one. One could say that perhaps there are many opinions online without many convictions. In

the end, the person relies on his or her own rationale for determining the validity of his or her beliefs.<sup>52</sup>

For those evangelizing online the question arises with regards to how authority is established online and how one can present an integrated and coherent picture of the Christian faith in an environment where so many different opinions are presented and where people patchwork their religious beliefs.

### **3.2.3 The challenge of liquid identity: The creation of multiple identities**

Not only are one's beliefs more liquid in postmodernity (Bauman 2005), but so is one's understanding of identity (including one's religious identity). VR enhances this development by allowing us to "painlessly manipulate our identity" (Filiciak 2003:90) and even to create several identities.

People use virtual identities to work on their FR lives (Turkes 1997:192). A good example of how people use their online identity to explore other religions comes from Wagner. She reports a Muslim woman who attended a Synagogue in *Second Life* because she was too self-conscious to attend one in FR (Wagner 2012:110).<sup>53</sup>

More than with any other medium, VR enables one to hide or alter one's identity. Yet, it is uncertain how much this is actually practiced.

The Internet may enrich the process of identity construction through providing new possibilities of creating and acquiring the tools, skills and knowledge needed for handling the increased insecurity and ambivalence of late modern society. Thus, the Internet might expand the possibilities of the individual in his or her project of constructing a meaningful, integrated self-identity that might also be communicated in social interaction.

(Lövheim & Linderman 2005:125)

Yet, as Lövheim concludes in an article published 8 years later, the early research, which focused on how the internet would allow for the use of multiple and fluid identities "inspired by discussions of a cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity" (Lövheim 2013:43), has not been supported by empirical research. In other words, people have the tools in VR to reconstruct their identity but – so far and for the most part– they have chosen not to.

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<sup>52</sup> Of course this development is by no means bound to VR and can be seen as a general expression of postmodernism, but VR does seem to heighten this phenomenon.

<sup>53</sup> This is also a good example how an avatar is used to create a *magic circle*. The social confinements which hindered her to attend a synagogue in FR cease to exist in VR.

For those interacting with others in VR (i.e. online-evangelists) the questions of how an avatar affects the interaction, how this relates to the person's understanding of him- or herself, and is that actually important, still remain to be answered. These are questions which are addressed in the expert-interviews and are further reflected on at the end.

### **3.2.4 The challenge of anonymity: Whatever happened to civility?**

Despite the early, and at times prevailing, optimism for the benefits of VR, it has the potential to bring out the worst in people. Much of *Second Life* has been taken over by pornography and gambling (Mayr 2008), and in forums or chat rooms much of the dialogue can be described as rude, even hateful (Schirrmacher 2009). The situation is so bad that Introvigne (2005:113) comes to the conclusion that: "The Web is not the best place for recruiting; it is an excellent place for spreading rumours, slander, and defamation against a given target."

Although others have had the opposite experience, it still provides challenges for those who want to evangelize in this context and also raises further questions: How do evangelists deal with insults or threats? Is there a need for them to protect themselves? Can self-disclosure become dangerous? This is of particular interest because one way of creating credibility is through self-disclosure.

### **3.2.5 The challenge of continuity: Bridging the worlds**

Robinson-Neal explores the impact of VR on FR with regards to worship services and her findings are rather sobering.

In response to a question about whether participation in virtual church impacts real-world worship, sixty-four per cent felt that there was no impact, twenty-nine per cent felt that virtual church enhances their real-world worship, and seven per cent did not have a response. ... [Thus, O]nline worship exists less as a support to real life worship and more as an outlet for curiosity about the experience for many who participate in it.

(Robinson-Neal 2008:237-238)

However, the strength of her research and conclusions is somewhat in question. Of those interviewed, only 57% were Christian. This would explain the lack of impact on real-world worship since the virtual church, for many, would be the only actual church service attended. However, this also reveals that 43% of the people are willing to do something online which they would not otherwise do, showing the great opportunity that VR offers. A more in-depth research has been done by Campbell in which she concludes that people have a general desire to integrate FR and VR.

Online communication often creates a desire for individuals to go beyond the screen and transcend the limitation of online textual interaction. [...] It is [...] misleading to identify online interaction,

especially online community relationships, as mutually exclusive, distinctly separate from an individual's offline relationship. Many have described online community as complementary to offline relationships.

(Campbell 2005:148)

The same conclusion is drawn by those looking at online education.<sup>54</sup> Thus, as stated at the beginning, people seem to naturally create a hybrid world (especially communities) and augmented reality is presently enjoying a wide reception.

However, this seems to be truer of social-oriented platforms and less of those which are game-orientated. Games can be connected with FR – so called *augmented reality games* – but this is presently still considered a fairly new development.

Yet, as Haese argues, that the user remains emotionally connected in VR. The psychological effect experienced in VR can carry over into FR (see 2.4.2.3). This transfer of what is experienced in VR into FR, especially emotion, has been identified in the field of psychology where studies have shown that phobias can be lessened through virtual exposure (cf Schubert & Regenbrecht 2002:255-274).

This raises the fundamental question of how a conversion online expresses itself offline and even more fundamentally, if there is even such a dichotomy. This study can contribute to an answer by showing how online-evangelists create bridges between VR and FR or intentionally decide not to.

### 3.2.6 The challenge of VR as a religion and an escape

In 1984 Gibson wrote the sci-fi novel *Neuromancer*, in which he coined the term *cyberspace*. Through this novel he not only ignited the imagination of sci-fi fans, but also those of computer scientists, hackers and academics (Bell 2007:17) by forging a new vision for the future. Offering more than technology, VR can offer a new way to see the world, identity, reality, life, etc. To some, VR satisfies the desire of escaping death: *Virtual Immortality*.

The idea is that, with virtual 'tracking data' collected over a long period of time, one can preserve much or even most of people's idiosyncrasies, including a large set of behaviours, attitudes, actions, appearances, etc. One will not be able to 'relive' life through an avatar, but nonetheless, a digital being that looks, talks, gestures, and behaves as they once did can occupy virtual space indefinitely.

(Blascovich & Bailenson 2011:141)

Regardless of how probable or desirable such a technological capability is, it reveals how VR itself communicates hope and has an eschatological perspective and thus can become a religion. Wagner notes, "[b]oth religion and virtual reality can be viewed as manifestations of the desire

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<sup>54</sup> [http://future.fuller.edu/Discussion\\_Points/Discussion\\_Point\\_6\\_\\_Augmented\\_Reality\\_\\_Technology\\_and\\_Personal\\_Presence/#sthash.psmr9QtA.dpuf](http://future.fuller.edu/Discussion_Points/Discussion_Point_6__Augmented_Reality__Technology_and_Personal_Presence/#sthash.psmr9QtA.dpuf) [Accessed: 9.7.2013]

for transcendence, the wish for some mode of imagination or being that lies just beyond the reach of our ordinary lives” (Wagner 2012:4).

Two implications arise out of this. First, it affirms that VR is not a neutral ground, but contains its own meta-narrative. Every VR, from *Facebook* to *World of Warcraft* (WOW), is also designed to achieve certain goals (e.g. profit) and is based on particular values. At times, these values can be in contradiction with Christian values.

This correlates with McLuhan whose famous phrase, *the medium is the message*, is often understood in the sense that the medium corrupts the message, but what he is saying is that the medium itself has a message, distinct from the one I wish to communicate. This message of course interplays with and potentially corrupts the message one wants to communicate.

Secondly, it indicates that VR is indeed a suitable place to talk about religion, and the Christian faith in particular, for it itself raises existential questions. Wagner goes even further to perceive the interest for VR to be based in our need for religion as well as our desire to escape FR.

Our engagement with virtual reality clearly reveals our desire for “religious” things and provides us with secular forms of ritual that offer us meaning, imaginative engagement, enchantment, desire and temporary escape from our ordinary routines. Games may even offer us kinds of proxy religions, giving us a temporary sense of structure and order in an increasingly chaotic world. The virtual “worlds” we enter into offer us a means of escape, a mode of imagining, and a never-depleted well of possibility for imagining ourselves all-powerful, infinite, beautiful, desired, even worshipped.

(Wagner 2012:7)

VR can, therefore, create a virtual religion. Similar to the Christian faith, VR can function as a new meta-narrative, where the programmer is the new god who gives meaning to our existence.

VR has an attractive meta-narrative because it simplifies life, as Wagner explains:

In our messy, postmodern world values are often seen as up for grabs; institutionalized religion is largely in decline; and people increasingly craft their own moral codes from scratch. So might our fascination with virtual experiences reveal, at least in some respects, a desire for greater order and structure? Is there some form of existential comfort in the assumption of a programmer, and for fixed trajectories of experiences that mimic the notion of a predestination? Do we long for experiences, however temporary, in which we know exactly who the bad guys are, in which we know there is some order to be discerned, in which we can assume the well-ordered hand of a programmer at work, guiding the unfolding of our quest and directing us about what we should do? [...] So might it be fair to suggest that our fascination with virtual reality is a signal of our disillusionment with the postmodern, the fragmented, the uncertain?

(Wagner 2012:13-14)

Thus, VR not only has religious features, it also serves as a means of escaping from FR (an attribute that can also be found in other religions). In conversations with regards to this study, escapism has been a great concern. However, VR is not the first “genre” to be accused of escapism. *Fairy tales* have undergone the same critique. Both Lewis and Tolkien have responded to this critique by pointing out that fairy tales (similar to VR) provide a closed world that offers a means by which one can reflect upon our own world and that *to escape* does not

need to be something negative. In *Tree and Leaf*, Tolkien (1975:60–70) argues that it is wrong to blame a person for trying to imagine a better world or life just as it would be inappropriate to blame someone for wanting to escape imprisonment. Thus, though one might escape into *Narnia* or *Middle Earth*, these worlds allow us to see our own world afresh and can lead to changed attitudes or beliefs in our world.

Thus, what some might consider the greatest problem with VR may be its greatest strength. VR can become an escape but so can a book, film, and many other things.<sup>55</sup> VR allows us to escape social confines for it is a place where the usual rules do not apply. People implement different moral and social rules when they are online. An unfortunate expression of this is that people view pornographic material, act more hostile in conversations, and so forth. On the other hand, it also allows them to explore themes (such as religion) which they would not otherwise feel comfortable to explore due to social constraints (Nord 2008:33–34). Hence they escape their normal world but this is not necessarily an escape from reality but an escape from social confinements.

This suggests that evangelization in VR can be evangelization in what is often called a *magic circle*, that is a particular context in which social norms and expectations can be altered or even eliminated. Such alterations can make it easier for people to inquire about the Christian faith. Whether or not this is actually practiced, and what is done to create such a magic circle, is explored through the expert-interviews.

### 3.2.7 Conclusions

As has been made evident, VR can exist distinct from FR or as an extension of FR, but either way, it introduces its own set of challenges and opportunities for evangelization. However, no legitimate concerns were found against evangelization in VR in theory, although, further theological reflection is needed.

These findings provided a basis for the questions addressed in the expert-interviews and possible questions and topics for further exploration were briefly described at the end of each section above.

None of the above research has directly addressed the question of evangelization and even those who address the more general question of digital religion, do so as social scientists.

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<sup>55</sup> Gibson defined Cyberspace as a “consensual hallucination” (Gibson 2004:69) suggesting that VR allows one to share an imaginary experience with many others and to even engage with it. Thus, VR offers more than a novel.

### 3.3 Current related research

A survey of the most current research on religion and internet reveals several leading experts,<sup>56</sup> most of whom come from a sociological perspective. There are also, of course, theologians who engage more generally with technology and their contributions are integrated into the missiological interpretation of the empirical findings in chapters 8 to 10.

The publications from the social sciences described in this section detail the actual practice of religion online. Although none of the publications presented in this section address the issue of evangelization directly, their empirical findings have served as indicators for areas that are relevant for evangelization online and thus also served as a framework for the questions formulated in the empirical research presented in section 5.1.3.

In other words, the findings from the literature review map out the general findings on religious practice online and this study contributes to the general research on digital religion by focusing on the practice of evangelization and engaging with the findings from a missiological perspective (see 4.2).

The findings presented here, though not directly focusing on evangelization, all address related issues since the different Christian practices such as preaching, worship, community, etc. do not stand in total isolation from one another. Thus, these previous findings have contributed significantly for the preparation for the expert-interviews of the empirical part of this thesis.

#### 3.3.1 Heidi Campbell: Religious communities online

Campbell has published widely in the area of *digital religion*,<sup>57</sup> but her most significant contribution lies in her research and reflection on the formation of religious communities in a virtual environment (e.g. forums) through empirical research from a social-scientist perspective and her theoretical and interpretative reflections. She shows how the community is understood

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<sup>56</sup> In the recent work from Wagner, *Godwired. Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*, Wagner lists the most important contributions to the research in religion and VR (2012:10). Her findings correspond with my own and are as follows Campbell, H 2005. *Exploring Religious Community Online: We are one in the network*. New York: Peter Lang.; Dawson, L & Cowan, D E (eds) 2004. *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*. New York: Routledge.; Detweiler, C (ed) 2010. *Halos and Avatars: Playing video games with God*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox. Hillis, K 2009. *Online a Lot of the Time: Ritual, Fetish, Sign*. Durham; London: Duke University Press. Højsgaard, M & Warburg, M (eds) 2005. *Religion and Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge. Wagner's work itself can now be added to this list, as well as another essay collection by Campbell (2013) entitled *Digital Religion. Understanding Religious Practice in the New Media Worlds*.

<sup>57</sup> *Digital Religion* is the term Campbell has recently proposed to establish a new and distinct discipline (Campbell 2013:2).

online, how it is enacted, how it connects to the offline community and what challenges VR poses to traditional religious communities.

Since her earlier publication, *Exploring Religious Communities Online*, Campbell has continued to be an important figure within the research of digital religion. Of great relevance for this particular study is her methodological framework, as well as her description of the way religious communities develop online.

Her methodological contribution (labelled *a religious social shaping of technology*) highlights the role that religious communities have in determining the usage and influence of technology.

Technology is seen as a social process and the possibility is recognized that social groups may shape technologies towards their own ends, rather than the character of the technology determining use and outcomes.

(Campbell 2010:50)

This does not stand against technological determinism but shows that the effect technology has on society and individuals is complex and that people can still shape technology. Thus, it is also expected that evangelists not simply use technology, but that they shape it and even use it in opposition to its intended design (cf 5.4.7). This is further explored and developed under section 8.2.

Her findings on religious communities online are interesting because they contradict two common assumptions. First, her research suggests that people tend to supplement their offline religious community with their online-community rather than using online-communities as a substitute. This contradicts the common assumption that offline-communities are threatened by those online, in which people only interact with others from behind a screen.

Many who have studied the internet as a social technology have observed that people often conceptually integrate their online and offline social activities and experiences. Online social networks are not seen as isolated, simply located online, but are considered embedded in the “real,” or offline world. This means people are active participants in both realms and move seamlessly between the two. They do not consider their internet friendships to be only online, but see them as part of their general social network.

(Campbell 2005:148)

Thus, this also shows that the dichotomy between an online and offline life (or VR and FR) is theoretically possible. However, most people choose an augmented life, which is evident in the success of social media which integrate VR and FR.

Furthermore, Campbell herself was surprised and somewhat concerned to discover that the reason people supplement their offline church-communities is not for more information, but rather for better relationships (2005:148). She identified six characteristic expectations people have for their online-communities which she sums up as follows:

People look for relationship, to be connected and committed to others. They desire care, to be cared for by their community. They desire value, to be seen as valuable as an individual and part of a community of value. They long for intimate communication, where individuals share openly about their beliefs and spiritual lives. Finally, they gather around a shared faith that influences how they see others online and how they understand the interconnection between online and offline aspects of life. This presents a picture of community based on communication, commonality, cooperation, commitment, and care. It portrays community as more concerned about how individuals are treated than about the structure or focus of the community.

(Campbell 2005:187)

Thus, people use VR to supplement the relational aspect of their experience of Christian community and not, as Campbell seemed to assume, for information. Her surprise might have been caused by the fact that people find it more likely to discover these six characteristics online instead of offline.

With regards to this study, this could suggest that people who want to evangelize online should not focus on presenting information, but rather on improving or providing relationships. This is further supported by the research from Stamper and her concept of a “persuasive community” (see 3.4.4.4).

Further findings of Campbell are also integrated into the next section and we will return to her work in the analysis of the empirical data.<sup>58</sup>

### **3.3.2 Rachel Wagner: Games and the construction of religious identity**

In her most recent book, *Godwired* (2012), Wagner examines several questions from a religious studies perspective involving how VR, games and their embodied meta-narratives “serve as means of making sense of our own world” (Wagner 2012: back cover) and the development of religious identity. In contrast to Campbell, Wagner uses story-telling and game theory as a means for understanding VR and religion.

Wagner argues that VR does more to and for faith than just providing a new form of communication. It can be a means for, and object of, faith.

If religion is about finding meaning, order and a sense of predictability – if it is about imagining the way the world might be – if it is about stories that animate our lives, rituals that shape our consciousness, and modes of interacting that define who we are, then it seems to me that virtual engagement is doing some of the very same things. Our desire for greater and greater immersion, coupled with the structure and order that come with that very immersion, may signal a hunger for the real that suggests a religious function for some of our most popular pastime.

(Wagner 2012:14)

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<sup>58</sup> A summary of her findings can be found in the most recent book that she edited, *Digital Religion* (Campbell 2012:57–71).

VR thus can create a virtual faith. An expression of this is, for example, *transhumanism*.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, she shows how VR too can function as a new meta-narrative, in which the programmer is the new god who gives meaning to the user's existence.

Virtual reality can, therefore, provide us with a meta-narrative which presents an ordered and understandable world, which gives meaning to our lives similar to the way religion functions. Thus, religion is not only found in VR, but VR itself can be religious in nature.

Yet, finding meaning in a virtual world does not necessarily lead to escapism as one is perhaps tempted to think because VR and FR are not isolated entities. Wagner argues, for example, that "games are not just discrete experiences with no effect whatsoever on daily life. Games can and do affect us when we put down the joysticks and turn off our screens" (Wagner 2012:3). This effect can help us in FR.

Virtual worlds, and games in particular, create what has been called a *magic circle*, a place where traditional rules do not apply (e.g. murder is acceptable in a first-person shooter game). What is experienced in such a magic circle, however, reveals certain aspects of ourselves.

If the selves we "play" online have anything at all to do with the selves we are offline, then absolute demarcation between "here" and "there" or "online" and "offline" seem increasingly naive. [...] Experiences that are acquired online can have real life effects in mood, in sense of self, in relationships, and even in the choice to meet people in real-life that one meets online.

(Wagner 2012:159–61)

Thus, this self-knowledge gained in the magic circle can be insightful for FR. According to Wagner (2012:186), how effective this carry-over is depends on the participant's intentionality.

Returning to the topic of this research, games could be used for evangelization because they have storytelling potential.<sup>60</sup>

However, games also have inherent limitations, which Wagner also addresses. In a chapter entitled *The Play Is the Thing: Interactivity from Bible Fights to Passions of the Christ* from the book *Halos and Avatars* (Detweiler 2010), Wagner tackles the question of why the story of Jesus is so popular in the film (and literature) but is seldom adapted to video games. Her first observation is that film and video games tell stories in very different ways (Wagner 2010:47)

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<sup>59</sup> Transhumanism is essentially the belief that technology will better human life.

<sup>60</sup> Also building upon her observations that VR itself can provide a meta-narrative and the concept of a magic circle, Wagner suggests that games can function similarly to Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. "Apocalypses may have offered early Jews and Christians comfort precisely because the "game" they invited us to play was infinite, so the rewards of "winning" had some lasting consequences, and so could offer real comfort in daily life. The popularity of fabricated apocalyptic visions of the sort encountered in today's video games mark both the appeal of the genre and also its ineffectiveness in times of generally accepted moral relativism. The complexities of morality in a globalizing world make easy dualism difficult to maintain beyond the "magic circle" of play, but they also suggest that we should think carefully and deliberately about what we believe and why we believe it" (Wagner 2012:204). In other words, video games function as a retreat by offering simplicity in an increasingly complex world.

and that the greatest difference is that video games require a non-linear and flexible storyline in which the player can influence the development of the story.

The experience of watching a film and playing a video game remain fundamentally different, marked most obviously by the film viewers' passive absorption of images on a screen and by the game player's kinetic engagement with images via hand controls, headsets, and perhaps even larger bodily movements. [...] Games are not suitable for portrayal of the passion of Jesus precisely because they disrupt the linear view of sacred time, inject the possibility of other outcomes, invite immersion with the characters in a sacred story line, and stray far from the fixed narrative of the Bible.

(Wagner 2010:61–62)

Thus, Wagner's observation shows how fundamental the medium (e.g. video games) is for the message and how important a proper understanding of the strength and weakness of each medium is.<sup>61</sup> Gamers are usually able to control the development of the game-narrative which seems incompatible with the intention of an evangelist to communicate a linear story (e.g. the gospel narrative). Yet, despite this limitation, the idea of a video game that explains the Christian narrative is intriguing and explored further within the empirical research.

In conclusion, it can be said that VR in general (and games in particular) offers a unique place for religious discourse. Two of its particularities are the religious nature of VR itself as well as the different ways story-telling can take place in video games. How this impacts evangelization, and to what extent these particularities are being taken into consideration, were some of the questions posed within the empirical research.

### **3.3.3 Ilona Nord: The virtual dimension of the Christian faith**

Nord looks at the virtual dimension of the Christian faith from a theological (particularly religious education perspective) discerning points of connection as well as similarities between VR and FR, and offers implications for preaching. She offers an important foundation for this particular research by showing that a virtual experience is not a new development, but something intrinsic to the human experience. Tangible examples include the immersion into a good novel or film, or the many kinds of make-believe games that children engage in.

Her hermeneutical reflections are broad, as well as deep. In her reflections, VR moves outside the category of a technology and becomes a metaphysical phenomenon. She describes virtual world (or VR) as a *special reality* (German: *Sonderwirklichkeit*). That means a second, created reality which transcends objective reality. VR is the "reality of the possible."

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<sup>61</sup> However, as is revealed through the empirical research, not everyone shares Wagner's conclusion.

To engage more critically with Nord's argumentation would be lengthy and fall outside of the scope of this study. However, her description of VR is helpful regardless of whether or not one shares her theological and hermeneutical assumptions.

For instance, it is important and helpful to understand VR as a *Sonderwirklichkeit*,<sup>62</sup> as it corresponds with the concept of the magic circle. However, where the magic circle usually refers to the loosening of social constraints allowing people to behave in ways they usually would not, a *Sonderwirklichkeit* goes much further. For example, whereas the construction of one's identity is limited offline by physical constraints, virtual worlds offer no limitation (Nord 2008:88). In VR, anything that can be imagined can be constructed and one application of this is the creation of a new identity (i.e. an avatar).

She further proposes that faith is a form of VR, and faith is primarily understood as one's potential to exercise freedom (Nord 2008:176–198). All communication of religion relies on symbols, including text, gestures, pictures, etc. However, because VR allows for a holistic emergence into another worldview, the outsider can become the insider.

VR can, therefore, create a whole new way of perceiving reality, thereby showing that reality is always based on our understanding of it. For Nord, this means that people who would otherwise never have entered into such hermeneutical and philosophical questions can now experience them from a non-theological perspective.

Furthermore, VR shows us something which has always been a part of the Christian faith, namely that reality cannot be reduced to the possible or doable (Nord 2008:146). The tension between what is and what could be is an important aspect of faith.

Following George Steiner, Nord (2008:189-190) argues that word and speech can no longer serve as a guarantee for God's presence and existence, but that instead the arts (to which VR can be added) can provide an aesthetic experience of God. Emotions can be a way to experience God and an important aspect of experience is imagination or visualization (German: *Ein-Bildung*).

Wer das ewige Leben gewinnen will, muss sich neu in einen großen Raum gebären lassen, in dem Freude sein wird. Auf faszinierende Weise spricht Luther im Glauben das menschliche Virtualisierungsvermögen an. Dabei versetzt er sich in verschiedene Welten und schildert die Welt des Ungeborenen, die Welt des Geborenen und die Welt des Wiedergeborenen.<sup>63</sup>

(Nord 2008:196-197)

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<sup>62</sup> Nord (2008:86) seems to use the term *Sonderwelt* (special world) synonymously.

<sup>63</sup> Anyone wanting to gain eternal life must let him- or herself be born again into open space filled with joy. In a fascinating way, Luther addresses the human capacity for virtualization in faith. He puts himself in various worlds and portrays the world of the unborn, the world of the born and the world of the born-again [my translation].

Worship services and sermons, according to Nord, help us in this process of virtualizing, as described in her engagement with Luther.

Nord is helpful, particularly for understanding the discussion around games in the context of evangelization, because she sees VR not only as a place to communicate but also a place to virtualize another way of living.

Online evangelization could benefit from this understanding of virtualization by allowing people to immerse themselves in the Christian worldview, particularly through the rituals of a worship service, as well as through participating in a Christian community in VR.

### **3.3.4 Conclusions**

In this section, five particular concepts have been described which are of relevance for this research:

First, and perhaps most significantly, Campbell's approach of the "religious-social shaping of technology" serves as a foundation for understanding that technology does not simply affect us, as technical determinism would suggest, but that technology is shaped by both the designer and the user (Lundby 2013:232). Campbell has researched how religious communities negotiate this process.

This study examines the practice of evangelization in order to see how evangelists adopt technology. The empirical research will later reveal several different approaches to responding to technology. It will also be postulated that only by combining the different approaches can a helpful integration and usage of technology (e.g. VR) take place (see chapter 10).

Secondly, Campbell's research also shows that people use VR for community-building purposes which could suggest that online evangelistic approaches, which are relational in nature, are perhaps more appropriate.

Thirdly, Wagner has shown the religious nature of VR itself and that VR, and games in particular, can serve as a means of communicating a meta-narrative. Since a common element of an evangelistic encounter is the sharing of the meta-narrative of God's redemptive purposes, this raises the question of whether or not games could communicate the gospel and thereby be evangelistic.

Fourthly, the concept of VR as a magic circle has great potential for evangelization, since social confinement can be a reason for not raising questions regarding religion. For example, people of a different faith may find it easier to explore the Christian faith online rather than in discussion with a Christian offline or by attending a Christian worship service in public.

Fifthly, and related to the previous point, is Nord's description of VR as a *Sonderwirklichkeit*. VR offers more options than just the elimination of social confinements, it allows for a playful creation of one's identity. Not only can our online identity be fluid, but we can also *try out* a Christian identity. This raises significant questions with regards to our understanding of identity and the way we perceive each other online. With regards to this study, the focus is not to answer these questions on a philosophical level, but to describe the experience and practice of those evangelizing and how they perceive the other as he or she presents themselves through an avatar.

### 3.4 The rhetoric of online-evangelism

This section is an engagement with the doctoral thesis: *Witnessing the Web: The Rhetoric of American E-Vangelism and Persuasion Online* by Stamper.<sup>64</sup>

Her research is introduced here more extensively than the others since it is the only study that deals directly with evangelization online. As the title of her doctoral thesis indicates, she looks at online-evangelization in order to understand the rhetoric and the means of persuasion used.

The focus of her study is restricted to American evangelical organizations (Stamper 2013:12) and thus her findings cannot simply be assumed to apply to other contexts. Instead, they are seen here as indicative since most of these organizations have co-operations or branches in other countries and hold a global influence.

Stamper argues that many evangelicals feel a great urgency with regards to evangelization and this urgency is reflected in the desire to create an opportunity for a person to quickly make a decision for Christ. This, in turn, affects the way websites are designed and how the gospel message is presented.

[The] urgency that evangelicals feel in their mission has to do with their understanding of the divinely appointed task to share the Gospel with the world and the simultaneous sense that the time in which to share this message may be running short. As a result, in the context of evangelistic websites, designers are particularly focused on crafting a navigation experience that leads the visitor to make a choice, often indicated by clicking a "Yes, I have accepted Jesus" link. How the designers get the seekers to this point involves a variety of design principles, all centered on what I will refer to as the "architecture" of the site, an architecture that can be read in much the same way that the number of aisles or type of seating or lighting and color-scheme choices might impact our experience in a church, pushing us to behave, think, and respond in certain ways.

(Stamper 2013:58)

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<sup>64</sup> Her work was accepted at the College for Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky.

Using rhetorical-analysis, she shows how persuasion is done online and, secondly, how evangelicals have “altered the focus of the Gospel being preached” (Stamper 2013:16).

Based on the thesis by McLuhan that the medium is the message, she too argues for an inherent connection between medium and message.

Yet, such an impact of the medium on the message, Stamper argues, stands in contradiction to the belief held by many evangelicals who assume that the message can be separated from the medium through which it is delivered.

The notion that the medium is the message is, as we have seen, nothing short of antithetical to the evangelical reasoning for being attracted to diverse technologies for communication of the Gospel. Megachurch evangelical pastor Rick Warren summarizes the majority perspective when he writes that “[o]ur message must never change, but the way we deliver that message must be constantly updated to reach each new generation” (Hips 29). As we have seen however, the reality is that this is hardly the case. Not only does the use of websites for evangelism change the nature of the message being presented, but it is also changing the nature of the evangelical church structure, community, and approach to evangelism.

(Stamper 2013:203)

Thus, what is communicated while evangelizing online is not only determined by the content provided but also by the medium, particularly web design and site architecture. Stamper goes even further to suggest that the effect of the medium is not only on the message, but on the nature of evangelization itself. Stamper herself does not further research the possible effect the medium could have on evangelization at large, but her research does raise the question of how the self-understanding of evangelization is being changed. This point is further explored through the expert-interviews in this study research.

Furthermore, Stamper suggests that evangelists *intentionally* use web design, site architecture and other features available online as part of the communication. *Jesus2020*, for example, excludes external links and only allows for personal contact once a person has made a decision, thus creating a sense of isolation and loneliness.

Stamper’s work starts with an historical overview of the relationship between evangelicals and mass-media which shows that evangelicals have often been early adaptors of new media technologies. Stamper summarizes her findings as follows:

As a historical overview of the evangelical relationship with mass media reveals, any hesitation or concerns evangelists have had over the "corrupting influence" of mass media have been largely dismissed. Indeed, evangelists have been on the forefront of every major media revolution. The manner in which they adopt these media is unique, however. The ideology behind their involvement is particular to their faith as well: it is centered in the divinely mandated Great Commission [...]

(Stamper 2013:46)

Thus, Stamper, though also looking at the content, pays particular attention to the web design and the way a user is guided through a webpage.

### **3.4.1 Evangelistic websites**

In order to explore her research questions Stamper has researched five websites. First she reviews 3 evangelistic websites to discover the ideology imbedded in the design before exploring two community-based evangelistic sites. These are here briefly presented.

#### **3.4.1.1 Website: Jesus2020**

The first website Stamper addresses is called Jesus2020 and is offered by *Global Media Outreach* (GMO).

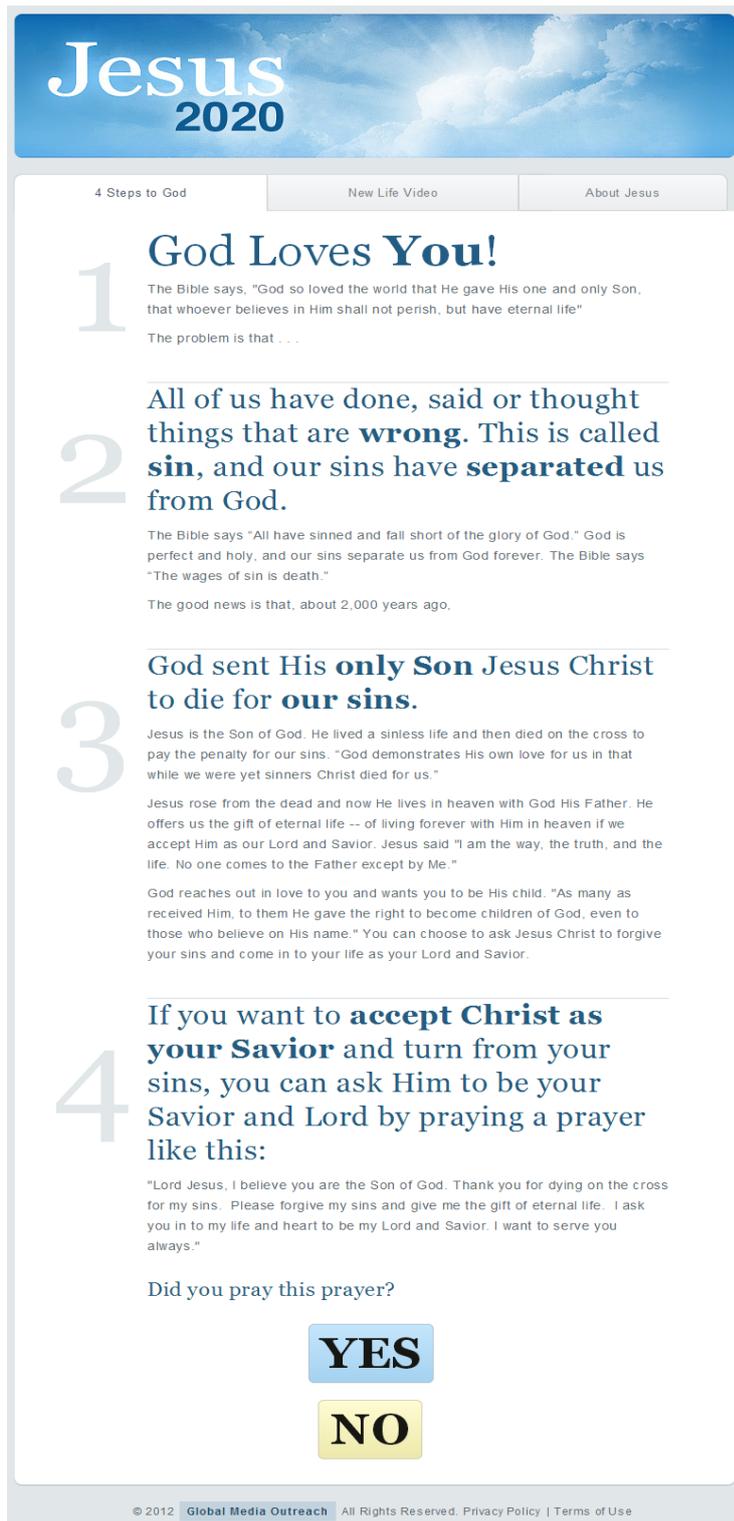


Illustration 2: Website Jesus2020

Through her assessment of the webpage Stamper comes to the following conclusion:

[T]he layout of the page, the lack of external hyperlinks, the limited options for internal navigation, and the centralizing draw of the Yes/No decision (and its repeated presentation) suggest that the website could be understood as a transitional space intended exclusively for the purpose of bringing individuals to make a decision about the Gospel. Regardless of the user's decision (Yes/No), they are put in touch with a mentor and are directed to the follow-up website GodLife. A closer examination of these design elements in combination with the visual rhetoric and content contained in the video and text reveals an ideology centered on three main assumptions: (1) that a Gospel

presentation has inherent draw, (2) that all individuals are seeking love, and (3) that the Gospel presentation and the appeal of love are enough to override both research on what causes a user to stay on a webpage and what causes them to convert.

(Stamper 2013:119–120)

Her assessment corresponds with this researcher’s impression of the website. Her analysis of the gospel message comes to some interesting conclusions. First, she noticed that phrases like “fall short of the glory of God” or to “believe His name” assume a certain familiarity with these theological concepts since they are not further defined (Stamper 2013:121). Yet, more than knowledge, the website assumes certain beliefs.

Implicit in the four steps are the assumptions that the audience already believes in God (Step One), that they already accept the Bible as an authoritative source (the textual evidence provided as support for the steps), and that they already abide by a belief system that acknowledges certain standards of right and wrong (Steps Two through Four). There is no attempt to persuade the audience of these points (the site is firmly grounded in a proclamational rather than apologetic approach to evangelism). .. As a result, a more complete look at the rhetorical features of the Jesus 2020 website reveals an interesting dimension of complexity in contrast to the apparent simplicity of the website design. In reality, GMO is heavily dependent on the simplicity and power of influence inherent in the design architecture ... to override the real complexity of the material presented and the limited audience that the text targets.

(Stamper 2013:122-3)

Thus, Stamper here already shows how the medium (in this case the website) also communicates by suggesting that the gospel is a simple message.

Furthermore, GMO used the *four spiritual laws* from Bill Bright, but altered them for their website (now called the *four steps*, a sequence of beliefs that the user needs to accept to become a Christian). By analysing the amendments, such as the change from *law* to *step*, she shows how the message is being modified in order to make it more personal but also to result in isolating the user. The following is her analysis of the first step<sup>65</sup>:

The first "Law" in the original tract is that "God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life." The Jesus 2020 variation is "God Loves YOU!" The emphasis on "you," the individual reading the step, creates a sense not only that the website is particularly designed to present this message to the unique individual on the other side of the screen, but it serves to isolate the individual, to call them out exclusively. The mentioning of the individual's life and God's plan for it are removed. This takes the individual outside of their own circumstances, historical context, personal issues, family structure, heritage, or spiritual background. The result is that the individual is simultaneously isolated, called out as an individual, and detached from the very elements of individuality which might make them unique.

(2013:125)

Furthermore, Stamper shows that GMO uses different font sizes, applies knowledge gained from eye-tracing theories and online-reading habits for displaying the evangelistic message in a way that can be quickly observed. Stamper, comes to the following conclusions and observations:

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<sup>65</sup> Stamper explains: “By choosing "step" over "law," GMO puts the website visitor in the position of feeling as though they have a much more active role in their decision to become a Christian” (Stamper 2013:125).

The transformation from laws to steps reveals an interesting rhetorical strategy on the part of GMO: their emphasis on isolation and separation forces the reader to a point of feeling detached, making them aware of both the difference between themselves and the speaker and the lack of relationship between themselves and God. GMO then offers a solution to the problem they have created: pray a prayer, and love and relationship can be restored. By creating a problem or pointing out what they perceive to be a problem in the reader's life, GMO creates an identity for them as isolated and lost and then sweeps in with a clear action point for how to resolve this problem. This strategy for evangelism is ideal in the online context where (at least not until the user decides to click "yes" or "no" and has the option to be put in touch with a mentor), there is no face-to-face connection made; no relationship offered; no options for chat, email, to connect with social media, or join a discussion board conversation. Both the design of the website and the manner in which the four steps presented are crafted with the purpose of bringing the reader to a point of crisis.

(2013:126-7)

Thus, as Stamper rightly concludes, although personal relationships are generally seen as highly important for evangelism, on this website they are “actually withheld.” Stamper describes the experience created on *Jesus2020* as one of isolation. No opportunities are given to ask clarifying questions. No testimonies of others are presented (even anonymously) to which one might relate. Rather, the entire site is aimed at leading the visitor to a decision. Stamper thus concludes:

This method of persuasion indicates a shift in the practice of evangelism. Studies of Christian conversion have repeatedly revealed that the most successful evangelistic efforts involve not only an individual finding themselves at a moment of crisis searching for answers to explain their situation or solutions for finding a better life, but they additionally involve established relationships with other Christians for, on average, a two year period . . . . As the strategy of the Jesus 2020 website indicates, however, the former criteria can be manufactured and need not necessarily be a pre-condition which brings the visitor to the website. Perhaps even more interesting is the fact that the second criteria – the establishment of a relationship – rather than being foregrounded, is actually withheld. It is the promise of a relationship (both via a correspondence with a GMO mentor which is only available as an option after the visitor has made a Yes/No decision in response to the prayer) that is held out as a resolution to the crisis.

(2013:129-30)

Thus, what is clear from Stamper’s findings is that GMO has contextualized the gospel message and method for the online experience. However, whereas Stamper assumes these changes are connected to particular motivations, GMO nowhere explicitly states what their motivations are. The sense of isolation which Stamper describes with regards to the website may indeed have been intentionally designed by GMO or it may have simply been the result of unreflected use of the medium and its impact on the message. Perhaps both factors come into play: GMO intended to create a sense of isolation and dualism which is made very easy through the medium of a simple webpage and magnified by it – perhaps to a degree which is greater than the one intended by GMO.

It would also be interesting to know why GMO decided to avoid personal testimonies, the opportunity for personal interaction prior to making a decision, etc. Unfortunately, GMO has not responded to the researcher’s e-mails (as of August, 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016). However, GMO has other evangelistic sites that follow a different strategy, thus it can only be assumed that the design and content of each evangelistic site has an intended aim and/or audience.

### 3.4.1.2 Website: Peace with God

The website *Peace with God* (PwG) is a joint offer of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) and *Jesus.net*. The website is best described by contrasting it to *Jesus2020*.

First, PwG always offers the visitor the possibility to chat and ask questions. Secondly, the website offers many testimonies from people who contrast their life before and after conversion.



Illustration 3: Website *Peace with God*

With regards to the content of these testimonies Stamper writes:

What these testimonies have in common is that [...] they depict salvation as a solution to major life problems; they indicate that their post-conversion lives are uncomplicated; and they employ language that suggests an intimate and personal connection with God.

(2013:140)

Similarly, to *Jesus2020*, PwG offers the gospel in four steps. However, in comparison to the *Four Steps* in *Jesus2020*, here they show a stronger emphasis on God's love and de-emphasize the issue of sin (Stamper 2013:132). This leads Stamper to the following conclusion:

The implications of forwarding the message of God's love, positioning God as ready and waiting for a relationship, and describing God and the way in which one speaks to God as intimate and colloquial results in what I see as a modification of the Prosperity Gospel: *God is ready to give exceedingly to us in exchange for nothing but our desire to have a relationship*. While there are certainly no promises of material prosperity offered on the Peace with God website, the prosperity comes in the terms of what is presented as uncomplicated and thorough peace and hope.

(Stamper 2013:140 [emphasis added])

Thus, again we find differences in method (use of testimonies) in comparison to *Jesus2020*. However, testimonials are not unique to this medium, nor to evangelization in FR, although here they are concentrated in one place and presented anonymously.

However, to suggest that PwG proclaims a modified version of the prosperity gospel is too strong of a conclusion. Most simply because, by definition, the defining factor of the

prosperity gospel is the promise of material blessings which requires the person to first give material gifts to God. The Lausanne Committee offers, for example, the following definition.

We define prosperity gospel as the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the “sowing of seeds” through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings.

(LMPG 2010)

However, Stamper is correct in suggesting that PwG portrays the benefits of the faith without showing the costs of faith. This is concerning but before assuming that the motives of the evangelists are false, we should consider the possibility that this is only an incomplete presentation of the gospel. Christians have often fallen prey to the temptation of highlighting the privileges of faith without naming the cost in the desire to make the gospel sound attractive. The PwG website is in danger of this since the impression given of a problem free post-conversion life.

### **3.4.1.3 Website: Journey Answers Network 211**

Journey Answers (JA) is a denominational offer from the Assembly of God (AoG) through the ministry organization *Network 211*. AoG is the largest Pentecostal denomination worldwide (Stamper 2013:142). She comes to conclusions similar to those of the PwG website:

An initial assessment of Journey Answers' target audience might indicate that Network 211 is using a similar approach to that of BGEA and Jesus.net in the Peace with God website. However, though the focus on an individual's felt needs as a bridge to offer the necessity of accepting the Gospel message is a common feature, the felt needs being targeted differ. [...] Journey Answers targets very specific conditions, many of which are clinically diagnosable disorders: anxiety, depression, and illness, for example, are specific issues that medical professionals might treat with medication or therapy. Nevertheless, they are included in the ranks of the problems which becoming a Christian can solve along with the more general conditions of feeling broken, empty, guilty, shameful, fearful, or insignificant or specific circumstantial trials like facing death or dealing with falsehood. The audience then for this website is clearly positioned as dealing with physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual trials.

(Stamper 2013:145-146)

Rather than exploring the way JA addresses the felt needs and how that impacts the evangelistic message and method, she focuses on the denominational background. In analysing their confession of faith, she notes that among the Four Core Beliefs of the AoG is the need of a *Baptism in the Spirit*, a belief and practice common among Pentecostals, but largely disputed among evangelicals at large. Thus, Stamper argues:

While both the Jesus 2020 and Peace with God websites presented salvation as a complete act unto itself with no subsequently required specific behaviors or beliefs that must be adopted, a position consistent with the ministries' Statements of Faith, Journey Answers provides the visitor to their website with only the first step in the progression to full faith that is requisite for membership in the AG denomination. Instead, the Journey Answers website does not reveal its AG associations nor does it mention any of the distinctive features of this denomination which a new member would be expected to adopt.

(Stamper 2013:144)

Stamper considers this an ethical issue because of the lack of full disclosure. However, since most denominations have particular requirements for full membership, this would hold true of most evangelistic websites with denominational backgrounds. However, this would likely be to a lesser degree, as those distinctives usually do not determine if one is considered saved. Yet, people will eventually learn that there is more involved in being a Christian than praying a prayer or pressing a button.

#### **3.4.1.4 Analysis of the websites**

Stamper showed that the elements of design (colour, font imagery, navigational features, etc.) are all part of the persuasion. Thus, she came to the conclusion “that form and content in the website’s context must be considered as part of a unified project of persuasion and the forwarding of ideologies” (Stamper 2013:148). Reflecting on evangelical use of media, Stamper, sees a naïve use which does not take into account how the medium changes the message and, at the same time, she often recognizes an intentional use of the media. She challenges the notion that using the medium internet does not affect the message. She observed that although evangelicals attest to an unchanging message among the organizations she researched, each presented a different message:

For visitors to the Jesus 2020 website, the Gospel becomes an opportunity for relationship; for visitors to Peace with God, it is a road to peace; and for visitors to Journey Answers, it is a cure to various ailments. This is not to say that Christianity cannot provide different functions for different Christians, but it is noteworthy that while, in some ways, the evangelical designers of these websites were able to harness the nature of the Internet to promote their worldview, the nature of the Internet shaped their ideology as well. While embracing the ability of a website to limit a visitor's range of available behaviors and convince them through layout and content that they are being presented with a full understanding of a subject, this same process of simplification necessarily impacts the ideology presented as well.

(Stamper 2013:149)

However, this points towards a weakness in Stamper’s research: while all the different organizations do differ in emphasis, each communicates a similar message. The differences discovered could well be characterized as an attempt to contextualize the gospel to a particular audience – a practice inherent and important for evangelization. This demonstrates the necessity of a serious engagement with contextualization. However, Stamper’s overall observation that evangelists should be much more careful with their use of media is particularly helpful and she confirms that message and medium cannot be seen separately:

Evangelicals have long been willing to adopt various media and transmission strategies to present the Gospel; however, they have also long been under the impression that dressing up the message in different ways does not change its essential nature. This may ultimately be the case, but what this examination of the rhetoric of evangelistic websites has revealed is that the media of choice forces evangelists to highlight certain aspects of the Gospel over others, to promote certain types of conversion over others, and to emphasize certain features of God's nature over others.

(Stamper 2013:149)

Elements of this *ideological persuasion* includes the conceptualization of the audience as “isolated individuals” and God as the “solution” to their life problems (Stamper 2013:151).

### **3.4.2 Evangelistic communities online**

Chapter five of Stamper’s dissertation focuses on the role that the community plays in the formation of religious identity and how evangelistic outreach is changing online. Firstly, Stamper gives some statistics that show the large amount of time people spend online. Subsequently she looks at the traits of a good community and ends with a brief introduction to the general discussion of the realness of a virtual community and how this debate has been taken up by Christians with regards to a *virtual church*. She summarizes the most recent research which suggests that virtual communities supplement FR church experiences.

Stamper looks at two online communities in order to show “how authority is established, how new members are attracted and engaged, the nature and rhetorical features of the discourse, and how dissent is handled” (Stamper 2013:166). She studied the chat room and forum of *Talk Jesus* and then the online church service from *lifechurch.tv*. Stamper’s research of these communities are based on her own observations as a participant, however she does not further describe her method or methodology.

#### **3.4.2.1 Talk Jesus**

Talk Jesus (TJ) is not linked to a denomination or larger Christian organization. Stamper analysed the webpage according to its evangelistic role and community support of a person’s journey to faith.

The chatroom is not limited to any particular topic other than the general theme of the whole site: The Christian faith. The majority of the chatters are self-confessed Christians.

Stamper describes her own experience of entering the chat room for the first time and it raises many questions, particularly with regards to the role of identity and the use of an avatar:

[W]ithin seconds of arriving, an automated greeter sounded a chime and shot out the message "Welcome to Bible Café, Amber Stamper!" This was quickly followed up by "Welcomes" from "jubilant," "shy," and "childoffaith." Immediately, I felt exposed and vulnerable: All of the attention was suddenly on me. And I was the only one who had chosen to log in to the chat room through my Facebook account. This meant that whereas everyone else had a nickname or first name only attached to a graphic avatar—childoffaith was a bulldog, eskimosuzy was a pool of running water lit by moonlight, jubilant was a lion, etc.—both my first and last name and my Facebook profile picture were posted. The "real" me—name and face—were right out there! Someone immediately asked, "Is Stamper your real last name, or do you just like to stamp things?" followed by a bright yellow grinning smiley face. I confessed I was new and had not realized that everyone else had registered accounts. Everyone "lol'ed" about it and showed me how to create an account and choose an avatar for more privacy.

(Stamper 2013:167-8)

Reflecting on her experience, Stamper writes:

Within minutes of entering the chat room, I was convinced that any concern or hesitation on the part of scholars regarding if online communities are "real" could not possibly be based in any first-hand experience.

(Stamper 2013:168)

Unfortunately, Stamper does not explain how she comes to this conclusion. Obviously the community experience felt real to her, but having entered a chat room where nobody revealed their real name and communicated through an avatar instead, does raise a lot of questions. Her reaction and descriptions suggest that the avatar might actually help to create a stronger community feeling. However, she also observed that the use of avatars for self-identification focuses on "spiritual and biographical characterizations rather than the physical traits made available by a Facebook profile picture" (Stamper 2013:171) and that people like to customize their avatar. This again supports the underlying assumption of the present study that the use of an avatar can play an important role in evangelizing online and does not necessarily mean that the interaction is less real. In the empirical section of this dissertation, the panel discusses whether people use an avatar to reveal or to hide themselves.

Stamper classifies the evangelistic method as "relational" or "friendship" evangelism and she observed three stages of relationship building: (1) "sharing personal details about their lives, (2) sharing personal details about their faith, and (3) attempting to encourage, uplift and provide answers to the questions of others" (Stamper 2013:173). However, Stamper also notes that the chatters ask many questions with regards to occupation, material status, children, etc. She assumes this is *not* done out of general curiosity but in order to identify if one is a Christian and how one can be best evangelized.<sup>66</sup>

I realized over time that the particular type of information they generate gives evangelists an idea of the support system that a new member has around them: what they were really wondering was, "Are you isolated?"; "Are you lonely?"; "Are you emotionally, financially, or otherwise in distress?" Answers to these questions provide a very clear path to evangelists for how to approach sharing the Gospel with someone. Once they found out that I am a Christian, they immediately began to discuss with me their experiences with chat room evangelism, providing me with tips for how to talk to antagonistic visitors, how to "Ignore" someone entirely if they seem to have malicious intents, and how to ask a lot of questions and listen to the stories of those who seem to be genuinely seeking spiritual help.

(Stamper 2013:173-4)

It is also noteworthy, based on the observations of the researcher, that there is no particular chat room or forum for people inquiring about converting to Christianity. Rather people can choose from various topics. This is very different from the previous websites, which were intentionally designed to guide a person through a conversion. With TalkJesus, it is only the purpose

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<sup>66</sup> Stamper fails here to consider other reasons for the questions besides the intention to evangelize. It is not apparent why she would exclude general curiosity as the main motivation.

statement (“Our Purpose: spread the Good News to the ends of the Earth [Mark 16:15]”) which reveals an evangelistic intention. However, people do raise questions about Christianity and have professed to have become Christian through TalkJesus (Stamper 2013:170). Stamper (2013:174), suggests that the chatters do not follow a “consciously-articulated plan”, but that they intend to use TalkJesus to share their faith. The possibility to evangelize a visitor seems to take top priority during a chat session.

The forums provide a place where arguments can unfold in much more depth since the chat room only allows for shorter messages (not exceeding 80 characters) whereas there seems to be no limit to the length of forum posts. Thus, as Stamper (2013:175) concludes, “the chat room discourages intense theological or apologetics-centered debate.” It could also be added that the real-time nature in which chats happen also does not foster thoughtful discussion because it does not allow for reflection and instead favours quick responses.

When she researched the forums, Stamper shifted her attention away from evangelization towards four particular questions, namely how *trust* and *authority* are established, how *spiritual guidance* is offered, and how one is *incorporated* into the community.<sup>67</sup> Stamper follows a person called Krista on the forum. This is a woman who confessed to believe in God, but did not consider herself a Christian. She developed *trust* through reading the personal stories of others:

Having spent time reading the testimonies of others and even taking part in the chat rooms, in her introduction she felt comfortable enough in the company of the Talk Jesus community to share intimate details about her past and her thoughts on Christianity.

(Stamper 2013:179)

*Authority* is gathered rather pragmatically. According to Stamper, Krista viewed those as authoritative “who could explain her predicaments and show her the resolution to them” (Stamper 2013:181). In the opinion of the researcher, this indicates a clear turning away from classical models of authority where it is gained through education and/or hierarchical position.

Stamper’s findings with regards to spiritual guidance and the incorporation into the community are not as clear. She summarizes them as follows:

Over the next few weeks before Krista made the decision to become a Christian, an analysis of her interaction with the forum reveals the fruits of each of these evangelistic strategies [e.g. friendship evangelism) and further directives from Christian participants encouraging her to continue in the directions of bonding over the common ground of life-details, building respect for the authority of the Christian participants, taking part in specific action strategies to lead her towards becoming a Christian, and incorporating more deeply and identifying more closely with the community. The series of posts before her conversion reveal the sincerity of her spiritual inquiry and exemplify a

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<sup>67</sup> It is not clear to me why Stamper chose these criteria and does not apply them consistently to the different webpages she researches. The downside of this approach is that comparison between the different webpages, or a further validation of her findings, is made more complicated.

gradual transition from an ever-growing dependence on the community as a company of guides and teachers towards, after her conversion, experiencing the community as a camaraderie of equals and friends.

(Stamper 2013:182-3)

Unfortunately, Stamper does not clarify what she means with “specific action strategies to lead her towards becoming a Christian” other than relationship-building.

Stamper suggests the term *persuasive community* for the type of community she discovered in the forums of TalkJesus:

This type of online community is unique in the history of technologically-mediated evangelism: at no other moment have evangelicals been able to control their audience in such a direct way while simultaneously maintaining interactivity and creating and building community. This type of evangelism is born out of the nature of the Internet medium and serves the ideology of the evangelical community particularly well: it allows for a dualistic worldview—in which individuals are identified as saved/unsaved and the lost are divided into seekers or disinterested—to thrive.

(Stamper 2013:186)

It would have been informative to know to what extent the Christians on TalkJesus had intentionally crafted the nature of their community and how much of what Stamper observes is based on the unintended influence of the medium – be it the chatroom or a forum – on the message communicated.

#### **3.4.2.2 LifeChurch.TV**

Finally, Stamper looks at LifeChurch.tv, which was founded by lead pastor Groeschel in 1996. LifeChurch.tv is not a virtual church, but a multi-site church with a virtual campus. With regards to this, Stamper (2013:189) argues that it “is establishing a new type of evangelistic online community: a community that is temporal, highly-structured, and, because of the urgency created within this persuasive space, highly-effective in bringing about conversion”. The question can be asked: in comparison to what? Is the virtual site more structured than the other multi-sites? She also offers no evidence that the virtual site is more effective in bringing about conversion than their other sites. Of course the community is temporary, but this matches online traffic trends, for example, people go online more or less frequently depending on illness, work, vacation, or other factors. It seems that Stamper does not sufficiently take into consideration that this is a multi-site church and not a pure virtual church, thus the community can be built on several sites. Her assumption is not necessarily wrong, but it requires more evidence.

Stamper describes a fascinating conversion narrative of a person called Nathan who joined the virtual community after receiving a link to the virtual church service while staying at a hotel. He experienced a conversion which eventually lead him to attend the church in FR. Stamper concludes:

The evangelistic challenge of overcoming geographic borders, the difficulties of face-to-face evangelism, and the social stigma seekers fear about coming to church "as they are" seem to have been overcome in the ideal medium of the Internet.

(Stamper 2013:191)

The chat which runs parallel to the service is not as strictly monitored (in contrast to that of TalkJesus): Antagonistic visitors were not blocked nor were their comments deleted, instead they were welcomed (Stamper 2013:192-3). Yet, also unlike the chatroom at TalkJesus, the discussion at LifeChurch.tv focused on the sermon and happens before, during and after the preaching. Participation is not only tolerated, it is welcomed. Stamper suggests that this is done for evangelistic purposes, though there is no reason why it could not be a general service also intended to help believers – particularly young believers – to follow the sermon by being able to ask clarifying questions.<sup>68</sup> Summarizing her findings from LifeChurch.tv under the chapter heading *A New Type of Cyberevangelism*, Stamper writes:

I have argued [...] that an examination of evangelistic communities online also has implications for studies of evangelism and the evangelical movement in America, noting how the pastor-celebrity model of televangelism has been replaced by a democratized community-model of evangelism in which a variety of voices are heard and work together for the purpose of evangelism, the only significant defining feature of these voices being their status as Christian, authority being established by commitment and contribution to the community.

(Stamper 2013:1999)

At various junctions, Stamper argues that online evangelization, unlike tele-evangelization, does not rely on well-known speakers (which she calls celebrity preachers), but rather encourages micro-celebrities for the various online communities.

### 3.4.3 Methodological reflections

Stamper's research offers a helpful contribution to the study of evangelization online. However, at times in Stamper's dissertation, the correlations constructed between the intentions assumed and actions analysed are very narrow.<sup>69</sup> One reason for this narrowing is based on her methodology. While her rhetorical analysis is helpful for understanding how persuasion occurs online, and thereby offering a unique and highly relevant perspective, it does not necessarily reveal other possible intentions that are not motivated by the desire to persuade. For that reason, the methodology used in this research complements Stamper's research by directly addressing those evangelizing online and allowing them to explain their intentions. Thus, the results of

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<sup>68</sup> Other churches such as The Meeting House in Ontario, Canada, allow the congregation to ask questions at the end of the sermon through text messages or notes which are passed on to the preacher.

<sup>69</sup> An example of this is her assumption regarding the prosperity gospel. Another is her analysis of the Christian chat room, TalkJesus, where she convincingly argues that the limited space in the chatroom to respond or ask questions hinders deeper theological and apologetical conversation. Her assumption is that it is intentionally.

Stamper's work and the questions addressed here are integrated into the expert-interviews conducted for this study.

### **3.4.4 Conclusions**

Stamper's findings not only confirm that the message is influenced by the medium, but also the complexity of this relationship and how factors like web design, site architecture, guidelines, etc. influence the evangelistic process – regardless of intention. Four findings are particularly relevant for this research:

#### **3.4.4.1 The adaptation of the message by the evangelist**

Based on the initial three web pages, Stamper shows how web design plays an important role in guiding (even persuading) the web user and also how it influences the message itself.

This further affirms the point that evangelists intentionally use the medium (internet) in the evangelistic process, verifying Campbell's thesis that religious communities shape technology for their purposes.

On another level, the practice of GMO raises ethical questions, such as: when does *atmosphere creation* constitute manipulation?

#### **3.4.4.2 The adaptation of the message by the medium**

Where the previous point highlighted the way in which evangelists can adapt the message and utilize the medium, Stamper's research also shows how the medium has an effect on the evangelists themselves.

Thus, it is suggested that the impact of technology goes beyond simply changing the message but has influences the worldview of users. This is further developed in chapter 8.2. Two findings from Stamper's research suggest ways which illustrate the larger impact that technology can have.

#### **3.4.4.3 The establishment of authority**

As shown in chapter 3.2.2, authority is established differently online and Stamper's research confirms this:

Web users have adapted to this lack of traditional authority and instead have found other ways to assess the credibility of a website: professionalism of design, regularity of posting in discussion boards, willingness to help others, and the provision of current and accurate information, for example. In addition, in a medium in which everyone can be an author, a democratizing effect has occurred in which an individual's professional or financial position is no longer a primary marker of credibility. Instead, web users are looking for reliability. As a result, the majority of evangelistic websites attempt to portray a lack of hierarchy and a sense of equality in community by including images of anonymous "every men" men and women of all races and ages. When chatting with

mentors, users usually receive only the mentor's first name or screen name, creating a sense of familiarity and camaraderie rather than hierarchy.

(Stamper 2013:213)

This suggests that the credibility of a particular person is generated through long-term involvement and transparency. Transparency online seems to focus on personal issues (being vulnerable, admitting mistakes, sharing struggles, etc.) and not necessarily on displaying personal information which would reveal FR identities. Thus, questions of transparency and the relationship between VR and FR identities, remains relevant for this study.

#### **3.4.4.4 Communal evangelization**

One of the key findings Stamper derives from her research is the important role that the community plays in supporting a person that is developing his or her religious identity. This conclusion is based on her research on the discussion board *TalkJesus* and discussions on *LiveChurch.tv* during and around the online church service.

Furthermore, Stamper's research suggests, that even such things as the guidelines for forum discussion or chat rooms have an impact on online evangelization. This further highlights the complex relationship between the message and the medium.

Stamper's research also highlighted the value of closely observing the role a community plays in the evangelistic process. Stamper seems to draw a clear distinction between the evangelist and the community, but the community can also be considered as the evangelist, i.e. the community commends their faith.

## 4. Research Design

This study intends to explore evangelization in virtual realities. Since this is a new area of research, the methodology and methods must foster an explorative study. For this reason, Action Research and the empirical-theological praxis (ETP) cycle have been chosen as research methodologies, and the Policy Delphi Method and Grounded Theory are used as data collection analysis methods.

The first part of this chapter begins with a general discussion on epistemology which underlies the very methodology and helps us understand what kind of claims can be made. Since qualitative research within practical theology and missiology has gained much appreciation in the last few years, the role and need for empirical research within theology will be discussed here (see 4.2), thereby also showing in more detail what kind of data is produced by qualitative research and how this relates to theology (see 4.2.1). Based on this general discussion the empirical-theological praxis cycle will be presented as the overall methodology for this research since it regulates this important interplay between theological and empirical research.

The ETP cycle will be supplemented by elements of Action Research methodology (see 4.3.2) through which the research participants can participate “in the design and collection of research evidence” (Fletcher & Marchildon 2014:4). This is necessary because of the unique and highly explorative nature of this research.

Furthermore, Action Research has shown to be a suitable methodology to support the Policy Delphi Method, which stands at the heart of the research as a participant-controlled data-collection and analysis technique for groups (see 4.4). According to Fletcher and Marchildon the Delphi Method is most helpful when dealing with an unexplored issue:

Despite its diverse applications, the key purpose for using the Delphi Method remains the collection of informed judgment on issues that are largely unexplored, difficult to define, highly context and expertise specific, or future-oriented (Helmer, 1967; Ziglio, 1995). [...] Because it is exploratory in nature, the method is not recommended for use in areas with abundant theory and empirical literature, or where topics are already well defined (Mead & Moseley 2001; Ziglio 1995).

(Fletcher & Marchildon 2014:3)

Thus, precisely because this research is of an explorative nature, PDM is the method of choice for this work.

### 4.1 Epistemology (Philosophy of Science)

At this level we ask “*What and how can we know?*” Different answers have been provided and the following is a brief introduction of the epistemologies which are relevant for this research,

namely *positivism*, *critical rationalism* and *pragmatism*, as well as Kuhn's *paradigm shifts* (Kuhn 1970).

The introduction of these various epistemologies serves to show the validity of qualitative empirical research by showing that the different epistemologies offer different ways of knowing (deduction, induction and abduction) and create different forms of knowledge (e.g. verification or falsification). The goal is to show what kind of knowledge is generated through this particular research, why it is valid, and what kind of conclusion can be drawn from the results.

The guiding question of this section is: which epistemology best supports the kind of research conducted in this study?

After a historical overview, the work of Kuhn and his concept of paradigm shifts is presented since it helps us understand how knowledge changes over time. Kuhn argues that what is considered proven or true is dependent on the dominant epistemology which itself can change over time. This has consequences for the attitude in which research is done, for the place of theology in empirical research, and for the need for contextualization, not only as one moves from one culture to another, but also through history.

#### **4.1.1 Moving beyond positivism**

Originating from Auguste Comte (1798-1857), and further developed by the *Vienna Circle*, *positivism* has been the dominating epistemological framework in the natural sciences in recent history (Heilbron 1990:153-162). It assumes that all knowledge has to be and can be verified by sensory experience (Cook 1988:395) and is gained through induction; in other words a statement is made or a rule developed, and subsequently verified (or not).

Yet, this method has been used predominantly (but not exclusively) in the natural sciences. It has been argued that the humanities – theology included – cannot operate in the same way, because a claim such as “All who seek God are loved by God” cannot be verified by the senses and cannot – therefore – be considered scientific. The theologian N.T. Wright summarizes this critique well:

Since it is obvious that not all human knowledge is of this type [i.e. verifiable by the senses], the sorts of knowledge that break the mould are downgraded: classically, within positivism this century, metaphysics and theology come in for this treatment. Since they do not admit of verification, they become belief, not knowledge.

(Wright 1996:33)

Positivism is thus marked by a strong belief in objectivity, at least at the level of data observation,<sup>70</sup> and leaves no room for the validation of either faith claims or subjective experiences.

However, during the 60's and 70's a debate arose between the Vienna Circle and Popper<sup>71</sup> on the one side and the so-called Frankfurt School (*Frankfurter Schule*<sup>72</sup>) with its *Critical Theory (CT)* on the other. *CT* strengthened the empirical credibility of the humanities thereby laying a foundation for empirical theology (see Mette & Steinkamp 1983:14). Whereas positivists second guessed the methodology used in the humanities,<sup>73</sup> others pointed out that the weakness of positivism is not simply the assumption that a statement could be verified, but its lack of appreciation of the influence of the “context of discovery” (see 4.1.3) on the entire research process.

The positivists believed that the [...] [context of discovery] was a subjective, psychological process that wasn't governed by precise rules, while the latter [context of justification] was an objective matter of logic. [...] The positivists would argue that it makes no difference how a hypothesis is arrived at initially. What matters is how it is tested once it is already there – for it is this that makes science a rational activity.

(Okasha 2002:78–9)

This strict exclusion of the context of discovery is later critiqued by Kuhn (see 4.1.3).

According to Spiceland, positivism's current presence within the sciences can be considered marginal.<sup>74</sup>

Among other problems positivism has encountered is the issue of the status of the verification principle itself. As a philosophical position its influence on the contemporary scene has waned. Its primary interest to contemporary thinkers is historical.

(Spiceland 1984:864)

Consequently, the epistemologies which have recently grown strong, like phenomenism, usually emphasize our subjectivity.

In response to, but also building on positivism, Popper proposed *critical rationalism*, through which he rejects positivism on the grounds that he disagreed with the notion that something could be ultimately verified. He believed that a thesis can only be falsified or be

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<sup>70</sup> The Vienna Circle and their so-called neo-positivism especially tried to emphasize this in the 20th century and attempted to develop *Protokollsätze* to create consistency and transferability at this basic level.

<sup>71</sup> Karl Popper is often associated with positivism and the Vienna circle although he eventually rejected it and also disliked the term *Positivismusstreit*. There are commonalities, yet Popper critiqued positivism and its idea of validating a thesis.

<sup>72</sup> A term used to describe the ideology and work of Hegel, Marx and Freud, and later Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Erich Fromm.

<sup>73</sup> Karl Popper was critical of the work of Freud and his psychoanalyses.

<sup>74</sup> The reasons for its decline are manifold, and besides the problems already raised and the critique of Popper (see 4.1.2), there is a paradigm shift in our culture, initiated by the failure of modernity (which relied heavily on a positivistic epistemology) to create a better world. This development is sometimes called the “end of modernity” (Guardini 1986) or postmodernity and has resulted in a greater scepticism towards objectivity.

made more likely, but not verified. To truly verify a statement would require comprehensive knowledge of everything.<sup>75</sup> Consequently he believed that scientists should use deduction<sup>76</sup> (Okasha 2002:23). Even though it does not lead to verification it can still prove a thesis wrong or determine its likeliness.

Thus, falsification took away some of the certainty which dominated the natural sciences, yet the general notion that one could operate objectively remained. Both positivism and critical rationalism operate under the assumption that scientific results can be explored objectively. They also start with the proposal of a thesis which then undergoes a process of verification or falsification. Furthermore, both of these schools of thought arise from the natural sciences and therefore carry values and standards relevant to their own field which are not necessarily relevant or helpful for research within the humanities or theology.

#### **4.1.2 Pragmatism – a basis for qualitative research**

*Pragmatism* offers an alternative epistemology more suitable to the humanities, including theology. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) was the founder of pragmatism (later labelled *pragmaticism* to distinguish it from other movements).

Predicting actions (behaviour) and solving problems while steering clear of describing reality are unifying principles for pragmatists. This approach offers a third way, acknowledging the critique put forward by the phenomenologists,<sup>77</sup> while affirming that statements can be made with regards to the outside world.

This Pragmatist position does not at all lead to radical relativism (as currently in one version of postmodernity). Radical relativism reasons that since no version or interpretation can be proven, therefore no certainty about any given one can be assumed. Instead the Pragmatists, like any practicing scientist in their day or ours, must make a couple of key assumptions. ... [One is that] the accumulation of knowledge is no mirage. They are careful to emphasize that acts of knowing embody perspective. Thus, what is discovered about ‘reality’ cannot be divorced from the operative

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<sup>75</sup> Following David Hume (1711-1776), Popper criticized the inductive process (where a particular case, or several cases, is used to form a rule) as scientifically unsound for it assumes what Hume called “the uniformity of nature” (UN), e.g. the sun rose in the past and thus will rise tomorrow. Hume suggested that induction is based on a “brute animal habit” but not on reason. Induction needs UN as an axiom. To argue that one can trust UN because it has worked in the past, is to argue inductively. Yet, even though Popper’s critique cannot be refused, others have pointed out that induction is fundamental to the way we operate on a daily basis. We are constantly using it (Okasha 2002:23–4).

<sup>76</sup> Deduction is understood as “a method of argumentation that proceeds from a general rule to a particular conclusion” (Faix 2007b:120).

<sup>77</sup> While positivism – and critical rationalism to some degree – still assumes objectivity with regards to the outside world, phenomenism suggests that we do not have direct access to the outside world but only to our own sense-data. Thus, one can only talk subjectively since all statements “bend back on to the knower” (Wright 1996:34). Thus, phenomenism emphasizes the subjectivity inherent to the researcher. For it is out of his or her own value-system (beliefs, cultural background etc.) that the research question arises and the data-interpretation takes place.

perspective of the knower, which enters silently into his or her search for, and ultimate conclusions about, some event.

(Strauss & Corbin 1998:4)

Thus, for pragmatists, epistemological questions are measured by their practical usefulness. For the pragmatist, as the name suggests, ideas ought to be helpful in dealing with problems (Faix 2007a:61).

Pragmatists focus on the interaction between subject and object, the known and the knower (Hildenbrand 2012:33). This in turn means that all knowledge is seen as preliminary and situational, and research is seen as a continuous process of constant revision: At this time and in this particular context, theory “A” was most plausible in explaining phenomenon “B.”

A theory is not the formulation of some discovered aspect of a preexisting reality >out there< To think otherwise is to take a positivistic position that [...] we reject, as do most other qualitative researchers. Our position is that truth is enacted [...] Theories are interpretations made from given perspectives as adopted or researched by researchers. To say that a given theory is an interpretation – and therefore fallible – is not at all to deny that judgments can be made about the soundness or probable usefulness of it.

(Strauss & Corbin 1994:279)

Thus, one could say that pragmatists make particular truth-claims rather than universal ones.

Yet, it may be possible to take these particular truth-claims and let them undergo the process of falsification. This means that pragmatism leads to a new way apart from induction and deduction – namely abduction. Abduction can be utilized when the researcher is confronted with a surprising result to which he or she has neither a rule nor a thesis. Abductive research can be described as a *bold hypothesis* or an *educated guess*. One could say that abduction provides a scientific “stab in the dark.”

Abduction can only prove the existence of something in experience and thus, as Faix points out, abduction is particularly helpful for the research of religious practice:

Abduction is particularly suited to interpret religious practices (experiences) because it can be used to refute particular facts and experiences. It is not possible to use abduction to prove that something does not exist, but it can show that something does exist (in experience). Thus its existence can be made probable in experience... Since missiology deals almost exclusively with religious attitudes of people that are experienced subjectively, this aspect of abduction is particularly important.

(Faix 2007b:122)

Thus, abduction is especially helpful when one discovers a phenomenon for which there is no frame of reference. Such is the case in this study.

In more recent publications, the need for the integration of the *context of discovery* has been emphasized among pragmatists (Heil 2006:24), as abduction incorporates the pre-knowledge of the researcher.

Pragmatism offers an epistemology suitable for the nature of this study. A qualitative approach is necessary due to the fact that the research is exploratory in nature and only a small group of people can be accessed. At this stage of the research on evangelization online, it is

necessary to start with developing bold hypotheses which might later be further falsified through quantitative research.

Yet, this also means that the theses developed are based on subjective experiences. In other words, the conclusions drawn are not general rules about evangelization online. Rather they are particular statements based on the experience of a few and serve as a foundation for developing new theses which can undergo further research. Thus, with regards to this research, the quality of its conclusions is not based on the quantity of interviews, but their quality.

In summary, pragmatism is a fitting epistemological framework for qualitative research, and particularly religious research, and is also the epistemological foundation for Action Research (Maskervielle & Myers 2004).

### 4.1.3 Action Theory

*Action theory* explores the links between the *agent* (the one acting) and the action. Action theory challenges scientific objectivity on two grounds: First, it highlights the imprecise nature of language, where words and their meaning are contextual. Secondly, as Parsons (1902-1979) who applied Action Theory in the social sciences suggested, motives are always part of our actions – including actions we consider scientific. Desires, intentions and values are part of every action, suggesting that every action is subjective and biased. Yet, it would be wrong to assume that this leads to an inability to do scientific work. It creates the necessity to situate research within the context of discovery<sup>78</sup> rather than the context of justification, in order to create transparency for one's motives. Thus, research cannot – and does not need to – be isolated from personal interest or separated from its application and implications for praxis. Thus, action theorists would deny that all knowledge is interpretation, while acknowledging that all knowledge comes to us interpreted. The remedy is not the withdrawal from science, but in making transparent the intentions, purposes and ideas related to the research.

Thus, this research follows the ETP cycle from Faix which requires as one of its steps the *constitution of the researcher*, where the researcher makes his or her pre-knowledge, values and intentions transparent. The subjectivity of the researcher is thereby made explicit, allowing others to understand the perspective out of which the research is written.

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<sup>78</sup> A research process can be roughly divided into three parts. The *context of discovery*, where the researcher explains how the research interest originated and what the motives are, as well as what the implications could be. The *context of justification* contains the collections and analyses of the data (what Popper categorizes as the actual research), and thirdly, the *context of application*, where the data needs to be reflected. With regards to this research this would mean missiologically reflected.

This same notion has been addressed by Kuhn, who demonstrates that particular values and assumptions are shared within a scientific community for a particular time period and that these beliefs change over time. These changes are labelled *paradigm shifts*, to which we now turn our attention.

#### 4.1.4 Paradigm shifts

Prior to the influential work of Kuhn, little to no attention was given to the history of science. This lack of interest was at least partially due to the lack of interest in the context of discovery.

Against this sharp separation Kuhn proposed a *research process of integration*, which includes the *context of discovery* into the research process itself. Kuhn argues that the motives and biases of a study are even reflected in the formulation of the research question. Thus, motives and pre-understandings are best made transparent and included into the research.

The context of application does not stand by itself but is intimately related to the other phases mentioned. Prior to collecting the data, the usage of the data must be clarified. Even the formulation of a problem and the resulting research questions are a scientific accomplishment and will influence the research project considerably [...]

(Faix 2007b:118–9)

Kuhn came to the realization that “normal science,” or the daily activities that scientists engage in, is governed by a specific paradigm. This paradigm is marked by two components: (1) a set of shared fundamental theoretical assumptions and (2) a set of exemplars, which are scientific problems that have been solved based on the shared assumptions (Okasha 2002:81).

This paradigm goes unchallenged as long as the scientist can explain his or her results sufficiently within the current paradigm. If the experimental results conflict with that paradigm the scientist first challenges the experimental technique. Eventually as more and more *anomalies* show up, they start to challenge the established paradigm.

When anomalies are few in number they tend to just get ignored. But as more and more anomalies accumulate, a burgeoning sense of crisis envelops the scientific community. Confidence in the existing paradigm breaks down, and the process of normal science temporarily grinds to a halt. This marks the beginning of a period of ‘revolutionary science’ as Kuhn calls it. During such periods, fundamental scientific ideas are up for grabs. A variety of alternatives to the old paradigm are proposed, and eventually a new paradigm becomes established.

(Okasha 2002:82)

Thus, through the accumulation of anomalies, a *revolutionary scientific change* can erupt which can result in consequences as deep as the level of epistemology. Kuhn suggests that scientific knowledge does not develop linearly, but cyclically, and is always dependent on the given paradigm. Bosch summarizes Kuhn’s argument the following way: “science does not really grow cumulatively [...] but rather by way of ‘revolutions’” (Bosch 1991:188). These revolutions can amount to a paradigm shift. Yet Kuhn argues that for a paradigm shift to occur,

an act of faith is required. Kuhn describes the paradigm shift as a “conversion experience which cannot be forced” (Kuhn 1970:151).

One consequence of Kuhn’s discovery of paradigm shifts is the levelling of the playing field between the natural sciences and the humanities, where the latter was often viewed as less scientific. Kuhn shows that even the natural sciences are influenced by the currently accepted paradigm and cannot claim objectivity. Thus, the context of discovery which reveals at least some of the researcher’s paradigm needs to be included in the research.<sup>79</sup>

Kuhn himself illustrates the development of paradigm shifts in physics where he identifies six paradigm shifts from Aristotle to Einstein (Faix 2007a:54). Küng (1987) and Bosch (1991) have applied this insight to theology and missiology, respectively.

Küng used Kuhn’s concept of paradigm shifts in order to assist him in interpreting the current theological conflicts he encountered as something that was not between different theologies, but rather between different paradigms. Küng applied Kuhn’s idea to church history, identifying six paradigms which all have a distinct understanding of the Christian faith. Bosch in turn identified six paradigms of mission.

Within every paradigm shift, church, culture and mission find each other in new ways and need to address questions that are unique to their particular culture and time.<sup>80</sup> Bosch writes: “In each era the Christians of that period understood and experienced their faith in ways only partially commensurable with the understanding and experience of believers of others eras” (Bosch 1991:183).

The way our surroundings and new developments impact our understanding of faith is recognizable through VR. The technological developments associated with VR confront missiologists and theologians with new questions, such as the question of how we define

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<sup>79</sup> Kuhn has been accused of promoting relativism and one can easily see why some would draw this conclusion. Yet, Kuhn is responding to positivists’ strong belief in objectivity. The way forward which Kuhn suggests is not relativism but the acknowledgement that although we only see partially, we do still see, or in the words of David Bosch: “It is misleading to believe that commitment and self-critical attitude are mutually exclusive” (Bosch 1991:186-7). Furthermore, a Christian’s relationship to the past is different from that of a natural scientist. New paradigms need to stand in continuity and harmony with God’s past work of revelation in particular.

<sup>80</sup> Yet, although the differences between various theologies throughout history and across different cultures is substantial, what is more surprising in my eyes is the level of continuity which bridges the various paradigm shifts the church has undergone and, with regards to this particular work of evangelization in VR, it is my belief that God is doing something new through technology but this something new can be discovered and recognized as something from God for it bears his handwriting (e.g. leading people out of bondage and towards reconciliation) and stands in continuity with his past doings.

presence and if physical presence is even necessary to enjoy community<sup>81</sup> or, as is the case for this research, how one takes the context created through VR seriously.

As Bosch has forcefully argued, we are standing at a special time in history where we are nearing a paradigm shift involving theological and epistemological changes. This time of change coincides with a certain level of disorientation, as it is still uncertain where the next paradigm turns to. Yet, the most unique feature might presently be our own awareness of an approaching paradigm shift and our reflection on it.

The concept of paradigm shifts is also important in order to understand an underlying assumption of the study, namely that theologies develop within the current paradigms of their times. The rise of the internet may not itself constitute a new paradigm, but certainly seems to be an important aspect of the currently emerging paradigm, which raises new questions for theologians.

#### **4.1.5 Conclusions**

We return now to the opening question: “How and what can we know?” It becomes obvious that the answer is rather complex. Neither positivism, with its strong belief in objectivity, nor phenomenism, with its strong disbelief in objectivity, is helpful for the missiologist.

Rather, while acknowledging that certainty of knowledge cannot be gained easily (phenomenism) and is always dependent on our present worldview (paradigm shift) and through the integration of the context of discovery into the research, a way forward can be found that avoids scientific triumphalism and total scepticism.

Furthermore, as we have seen with regards to pragmatism and especially through the work of Kuhn, what is considered scientific always depends on the current paradigm. Thus, the researcher always relies on a particular epistemological framework which goes unchallenged until it is unable to sufficiently explain a growing number of phenomena.

Küng and Bosch have shown that the same process can take place in theology, and in a small way, this study tries to understand our emerging paradigm by focusing on the role of VR within evangelization. But more generally, Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shifts shows at least one aspect of why we need to continue to develop theologies which rearticulate the Christian faith for the current framework. It also means that we will explore new aspects and encounter new questions with each paradigm shift.

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<sup>81</sup> This does not mean that one now has to develop a virtual ecclesiology, but previous generations would have never asked these kinds of questions.

The results generated through the research undertaken are based on pragmatism, as shown below. This means that the results produced are not general in nature, but instead describe particular experiences. This is adequate since this is an explorative study which starts by developing bold hypotheses upon which later research can build.

Since this research is interested in understanding a particular practice (i.e. evangelization) and is done in a particular context (i.e. VR), it requires an empirical dimension.

Empirical research is one way to gain an understanding of the context and underlying, existing paradigm. Empirical theology means that we allow theological propositions to interact with, challenge, confront or be challenged by empirical data (i.e. experiences).

Four questions now need to be addressed. First, *why does theology need an empirical dimension?* Secondly, *how do empirical findings relate to theological propositions?* Thirdly, *how can empirical research be integrated into theology with integrity?* Lastly, *why does this particular research require an empirical element?* To address these questions, we now turn to the issue of empirical theology.

## 4.2 Empirical Theology

The use of empirical research in theology is, in some ways, fairly new and thus debated.<sup>82</sup> Theologians often use different exegetical methods which are based on a particular hermeneutics to understand a biblical passage and uses deduction as its general mode of operation. However, exegetical methods cannot measure or describe the way people experience or practice their faith (Faix 2007a:18) which is the great benefit of empirical theology.

In the 1960's Practical Theology start to change from an applied science to an independent science (Klein 2005:42).<sup>83</sup> In the European context it was Norbert Mette (Mette & Steinkamp 1983) and Van der Ven (1990), among others, who further established and defended empirical research within theology.<sup>84</sup> Faix and Ziebertz have furthered their work for missiology and practical theology, respectively (Faix 2007a; Ziebertz 2011). Among other

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<sup>82</sup> Empirical research is not an entirely new development. It has been practiced in the New Testament and through Church History, but within the last 100 years Empirical theology has established itself as an independent research approach (Dinter, Heimbrock & Söderblom 2007:11) and gained in acceptance and popularity.

<sup>83</sup> One of its pioneers was Werner Gruhn (1887-1961).

<sup>84</sup> A similar development can be seen in North America (Klein 2005:51-3).

things, Mette suggested that practical theology needs to work inductively and must use empirical methods (see Klein 2005:45).<sup>85</sup>

Practical Theology and Missiology quickly proved to be suitable environments for empirical work, since both offer a point of connection between theology and culture as they are intrinsically interested in the present world. As Faix keenly observes, most theological disciplines work retrospectively, but only practical theology and missiology try to bring the word of God closer to the people of the present.<sup>86</sup>

In other words, empirical theology is contextual theology (Faix 2007a:31–35) for it takes the local communal or individual context into consideration from which theology is done. With regards to this research, the context of VR is explored in order to understand how it brings new questions and new perspectives to theology, perhaps contributing to a contextual theology for VR.

Thus, in response to the first question posed for this section, “*Why does theology need an empirical dimension?*” the answer is that empirical theology allows cultural developments and personal experiences to enter into the theological discourse. This leads to the more complex question, “*How do empirical findings relate to theological propositions?*”

#### **4.2.1 “Detecting God through science”**

While God cannot be the direct object of empirical research, people and their response to God can be accessed empirically (Faix 2007a:39). Van der Ven thus argues that empirical research and empirical testing do not study God as such but only the faith expression of religious people (Van der Ven 1993:111). In other words, God’s very nature (i.e. transcendence) makes him inaccessible to empirical research, but the response of humans (i.e. experiences of faith) can be accessed empirically, and although these very subjective claims cannot ultimately be verified,

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<sup>85</sup> Both Van der Ven and Norbert Mette together with Hermann Steinkamp developed different models of integrating empirical research and theology. Whereas Van der Ven uses terminology from the social sciences, Mette uses theological terminology.

<sup>86</sup> “Die verschiedenen Teildisziplinen der Theologie arbeiten mit ihren Methoden meist retrospektiv, wie zum Beispiel die Biblische Theologie oder die Historische Theologie. Auch die Systematische Theologie versucht bis in die Gegenwart hinein, die biblischen und historischen Aussagen im Rückblick zu systematisieren. Aus diesen Teildisziplinen kann kaum Hilfe erwartet werden, wenn es darum geht, in die Gegenwart und in die Zukunft hineinzuarbeiten. Das ist aber Aufgabe der Praktischen Theologie und auch der ... [Missionswissenschaften]. Diese theologische Disziplinen sehen ihre Aufgabe unter anderem darin, die Rede Gottes und sein Wort mit den Menschen konkret in Berührung zu bringen und erwarten dadurch ein Veränderung vom Mensch und Theologie” (Faix 2007a:30–1).

they can be falsified.<sup>87</sup> Immink, however, challenges the assumption that transcendence of God makes it impossible to talk about him:

It seems justifiable to conclude that we speak of God in our religious discourse. We speak with God and about God, and we do actually say something about him, and we use all kinds of words and images that mean something to us. When we say that God is merciful and gracious, we have some notion of the meaning of those concepts and intend to say that God is like that. We ascribe certain meanings to God. [...] How, then, is it possible that we are struck with such an enormous gap between God and humanity? Why is it that, in the legacy of Schleiermacher und Tillich, statements about the reality of God are so bent that they become statements about human experiences of God. [...] *The transcendence does not detract from the fact that God is a subject and can be known.*

(Immink 2005:254 [italics added])

Brouwer further explains and summarizes Immink's point:

[For Immink] ontology precedes epistemology, with existence having a logical priority over knowledge. Faith is really an experience of God as the Other and as the Word that created all things. In addition, faith lays claim to who God is – that is to say, a reality independent of human experience. Of course, faith is subjective, and has an affective dimension, which is a habit of the heart. However, there is also a propositional content to faith. Theological concepts and reflections on faith are propositions about God's performative presence. Immink (2005) admits, however, that the epistemic status of such propositions is confessional.

(Brouwer 2010:2)

Van der Ven does not deny an independent reality, but “contends that the only way we can access such reality is through our mind, and through ideas or theories that need to be tested and falsified” (Brouwer 2010:4).

In the article *Detecting God in Practice*, Brouwer portrays Ganzevoort's approach to empirical theology as a third option which could be placed at the other end of the spectrum in relation to Immink's position, with Van der Ven between the two.

Ganzevoort is concerned with developing a public theology by using a social constructionist approach. He has completely excluded the confessional propositions along with any statement about God or objective truth. For him experience and interpretation are all we have.

We leave behind the idea that we can identify some objective truth. We mourn or enjoy the loss of an ultimate and absolute certainty. We renounce the claim that we can grasp intellectually the world in which we live or the God with whom we live. I lost all of those securities a long time ago. What is left is the language of love, surrendering to the mercy of the unknown, to fragments of beauty, joy, justice, and tenderness. What is left – in short – is faith.

(Ganzevoort 2006:14)

Simply put, Van der Ven accepts the notion of an independent reality, but nothing can be said about the reality itself (e.g. faith), only the human experience of it. Ganzevoort disregards the question of an independent reality and is solely concerned with human actions. Immink on the

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<sup>87</sup> With regards to this study, one might discover a self-identified online-evangelist who states that he or she finds people more honest when they are met online. Verifying this subjective experience is impossible. However, a null-hypothesis like: “All self-identified online-evangelists find people more honest when they meet them online” could be falsified thereby making the statement more or less likely.

other hand, holds that not only an independent reality (e.g. God) exists and that ontology precedes epistemology, but that the confessional propositions which come to us through Scripture and the tradition of a faith community are not simply reflections of ourselves, but actual descriptions of reality.

[Theologians like Immink] give higher, or at least logical, priority to the word of God in the relationship between humankind and God. God directs himself to humans first, and, at the later state, the human discourse becomes the mediator of God’s revelation. The representation of God as a speaking, communicating God, implies personality and subjectivity on both God’s and people’s side.  
(Hermans & Moore 2004:308)

However, as Brouwer argues, each of them misses something if they ignore the other. As the table below (based on Brouwer’s article) shows they are not doing the same thing.

|                                  | Van der Ven           | Ganzevoort                 | Immink                    |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Audience                         | Academia              | Public sphere              | Church                    |
| Discourse                        | Empirical evidence    | Performance                | Persuasion                |
| “the God angle”                  | Aspectual perspective | Interpretation             | Subjectiveness            |
| Status of theological statements | Falsified hypotheses  | Narratives in dialogue     | Confessional propositions |
| Epistemology                     | Cautious realism      | Social construction vision | Naïve realism             |

Table 2: *Approaches to Empirical Theology according to Immink*

Immink’s position is helpful, for without it one could be in danger of, what some call, the *epistemic fallacy* which suggests that reality is limited to what we know, thus reducing ontology to epistemology (cf Brouwer 2010:5). Even more so, Immink’s approach allows an indirect approach to the transcendent reality of God, namely if our experience lines up with the experiences captured through confessional propositions which reflect a deeper reality. Brouwer uses *koinonia* as an example.

What was important to me in *koinonia*, next to its stratified content, was the heuristic question: What divine reality could be theologically identified with the concept of *koinonia*, and what might be the performative energy of this relational reality? Perhaps such a question is simplistic, but when Paul used the term *koinonia* in the context of its semantic field for the first time in the history of Christianity, he was thinking in terms of which words could best describe what the God of Israel and the father of Jesus Christ was performing in the life of the first-generation Christians and their congregations. He was looking for words to fit their experiences, which were not privately owned, but shared, with such sharing being part of the experience. God’s energy revealed itself in community. To describe such energised relationships, together with the community, the reciprocal obligations, and the mutual responsibility beyond the boundaries of class, sex, age, and race, Paul conceived of the term *koinonia*, coming to him as a revelation, I would say. Afterwards, the ecclesiological tradition took the ball and ran with it. By using the word *koinonia*, Paul constructed reality, though his reality was inspired by the reality of his experience. Beneath the multiple layers of interpretation in church history and systematic ecclesiology is still that reality that inspires experience. That is my presupposition, based on my own faith and that of others. *Koinonia* is interpreted experience that discloses God’s performance.

(Brouwer 2010:5)

Contrasting these three Dutch theologians shows that “the nature of an object decides how we deal with it, and how we generate knowledge” (2010:6). Thus, reality is multi-layered and can

be explored on different levels. McGrath (2004) suggests it is the correlation of the different layers which needs to be addressed. Thus, it is appropriate for theologians to look at faith from all perspectives and not in a departmentalized way. Conversion, for example, exists as a theological concept based on confessional propositions while simultaneously being a social construct which can be observed and accessed empirically.

Similarly, Kritzinger describes the function of contextual theology.

In a contextual approach to theology a constant interplay between text and context is suggested. For Protestants, the Bible is the textual source of knowledge about salvation history, whereas for Orthodox and Catholics the Bible is seen as the fountainhead of an ongoing Christian tradition that is entrusted to the church as the guardian of the truth. Over against this textual source, there is the context or real life situation. In a contextual approach, text and context have to be integrated and studied together. There should be a constant to and fro (= dialectical) movement between these two poles. Contextual theology exposes the fallacy that theology has to do with timeless truths that can be expounded objectively.

(Kritzinger 2012:4)

Though the final sentence of Kritzinger has to be read carefully, as has been laid out in the discussion on contextualization in chapter 2 and the previous engagement with Immink's position, as well as the remainder of this section, the biblical text does need to stand in dialogue with context.

It is true that no contextual theology is a universal theology although it may contain universal claims. Every contextual theology is an expression of the engagement with timeless truths (since God, in his nature and intention, remains unchanging). Therefore, our contextualization always has discontinuity and continuity with other contextual theologies. To consider context and biography does not stand in opposition to universal aspects of the Christian faith, but instead shows that God enters afresh into our lives, accommodates our particular struggles and ways of understanding without denying his own nature, purpose or intentions.

Empirical theology is a way to access the context and thereby allowing it to enter into the constant "to and fro" movement with the text. Thus, empirical theology becomes contextual theology when the empirical findings of peoples' experience of faith come into dialogue with our propositions.

Nevertheless, empirical theology, as all theological work, has to be done in humility, for we may err in our interpretation of the "ought" – the God revealed, and in our interpretation of the "is" – the subjective human experience and the conclusions drawn. Relevant and faithful theology can result, however, from remaining in this tension.

Furthermore, as pointed out during the introductory discussion on contextualization and intercultural theology, though there is diversity among the different theologies, there is also unity. A major element of the gospel is overcoming the differences that separate us (e.g. Eph 2:1ff.).

Thus, empirical theology makes it possible to add experience into theological discourse, not as an afterthought, but as the initiator of the theological process. It offers new questions, challenges and insights. Though Immink's position is closest to my own, I do agree with Brouwer that the various positions should be seen as complementary to each other, and as McGrath suggests, that the correlation between the different layers of truth needs to be explored.

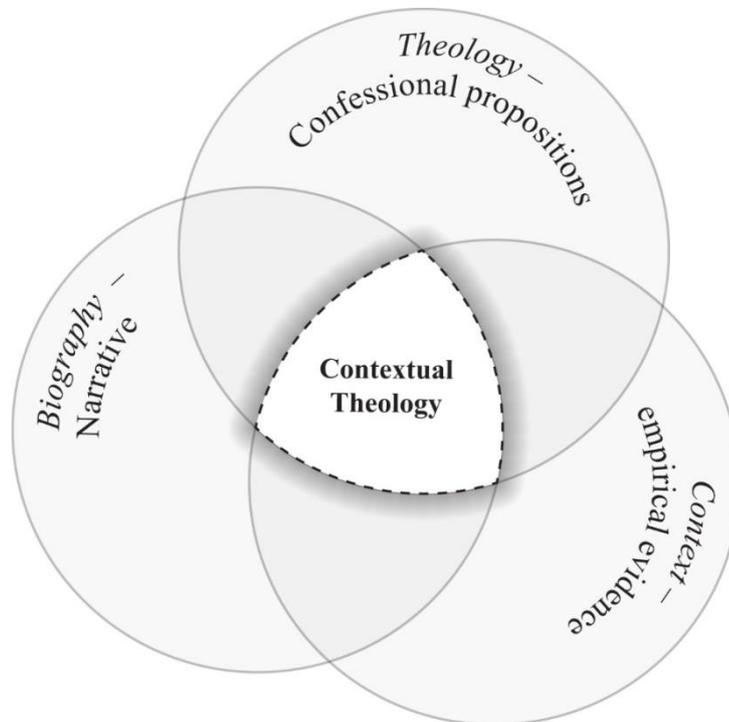


Illustration 4: *Contextual Theology*

Our experience or perception of reality is multi-layered and empirical theology takes this seriously by not simply exploring the different aspects, but also their interconnectedness. The researcher is part of this research project, because the context of justification is included in the study. Biography shapes theology and thus needs to be made explicit. But not only our biography, but also our context and the experience of others impact our theology. Here empirical research can help us understand others and ourselves better. Yet, theology also informs our understanding of God, self and other. Thus, the three stand in constant interaction with each other. Empirical Theology does not try to deny or exclude the influence our biography or context has but seeks to gain better understanding of it. Brouwer summarizes it as follows:

Reality is complex and layered, and consists of multiple interconnected segments. Theological reality has more branches than just Scripture or sacramentality. There are phenomena, experiences, rituals, texts, artefacts, groups, structures, actors, and so on. Researching the interconnected layers of reality, with cross-disciplinary strategies, is a challenging scientific and theological task. Somehow, it amounts to detecting God in practice.

(Brouwer 2010:6)

Yet, how can theology integrate another discipline (in our case the social sciences) with integrity? As has been stated, qualitative research has its roots in the social sciences. How then,

if at all, can empirical research be integrated into theology (particularly missiology) while remaining faithful to standards and intentions of empirical research and theology? Faix suggests that theology can become an empirical science when it dives into the existing world. This happens in missiology and practical theology, but that does not automatically make them an empirical science. In order for missiology or practical theology to become truly empirical they need their own methodology which incorporates the empirical research into theology.<sup>88</sup>

The context does not define theology or, more specifically, the empirical research does not define what the gospel is, but where it is spoken into, how it unfolds in VR, and how people experience and practice evangelization online. What we understand our theology to be is a product of the confessional truths we hold, our biographical experiences and our cultural influences. Together these aspects create a contextual theology, a theology which has roots and wings. Thus, the later chapters (chapters 8-10) of this thesis, following the ETP cycle, are the place where text and context can enter into dialogue with each other.

However, before moving on to the ETP cycle, the question of *how empirical research can be integrated into theology with integrity* will be addressed first. By dealing with this question we also affirm why theology needs its own empirical dimension and cannot rely on the humanities.

#### **4.2.2 Integrating empirical research into theology**

Different forms of integration have been identified by Van der Ven and others, and are here briefly presented.

The *mono-disciplinary* approach suggests that practical theology and missiology remain applied sciences and do not operate inductively. Thus, one is limited to deduction and is unable to inductively research cultural changes (Klein 2005:95). This also means that practical theology and missiology would not have their own way of exploring how people express and experience faith (Faix 2007a:36). Van der Ven makes an important point when saying that the mono-disciplinary approach is an application of theology, but not an applied theology because there is no context to which theology could be applied. Mette and Steinkamp describe this as

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<sup>88</sup> “Theologie kann also dann zur ‘Empirischen Wissenschaft’ werden, wenn sie in die real existierende Welt eintaucht. Dies geschieht sowohl in der Missionswissenschaft als auch in der Praktischen Theologie. Macht es sie aber dadurch automatisch zu empirischen Wissenschaften? Mit Sicherheit nicht. Genau hier liegt das Problem. Bisher haben beide Wissenschaften sich oftmals als reine Anwendungswissenschaft verstanden und keine eigene Methodologie entworfen” (Faix 2007a:45–6).

the *'ancilla'* paradigm. The weakness of this method is apparent: Theology has no means of accessing and thereby interacting with cultural and societal changes.

The *multi-disciplinary* approach can be described as a form of out-sourcing. Here theologians ask the social sciences to analyse a particular praxis, to which the theological department provides the theological reflection (Ziebertz 2004:211). However, as Kuhn has made clear, the entire research process is not neutral and thus the exclusion of the theologian from the empirical work has implications for the theological reflection. Ziebertz notes that empirical research is never neutral or objective, instead it is always influenced by numerous decisions which are made consciously or sub-consciously. Thus, by the time the theologian receives the empirical findings, they are already tainted from the previous decisions made by the sociologist.

Empirische Forschung ist nicht einfach "neutral" oder "objektiv", sondern basiert auf zahlreichen Entscheidungen, die in den Ergebnissen enthalten sind bzw. ohne die es die Ergebnisse in dieser Form nicht geben würde. Die theologische Reflexion der Daten ist nicht ohne weiteres in der Lage, diese Vorentscheidungen zu erkennen oder sie gar zu neutralisieren.<sup>89</sup>

(Ziebertz 2004:211)

Thus, Ziebertz concludes that theology (and in his case *Christian education*) needs to be part of the empirical research.

A solution to the problem created by the multi-disciplinary approach is the *inter-disciplinary* approach in which the theologian can work with the social scientist, each reflecting critically, evaluating and challenging the other. However, as Ziebertz points out, this requires a high level of willingness to cooperate as well as sufficient knowledge of the other's area of study in order to foster a fruitful and productive partnership. Yet, even if such a partnership was theoretically conceivable, large differences and potential problems remain (Ziebertz 2004:212). Theologians, for example, usually assume the existence of God as true and thus assume that certain truths are absolute and non-negotiable; whereas social scientists often see religion and the idea of a god as a social construct. Thus, they hold strongly differing axioms (i.e. God is a social construction vs God is real) (Faix 2007a:37) which can not only affect the data analysis, but also affect data collection. Thus, while an inter-disciplinary approach may work in particular cases, it is highly dependent on the individual researchers.

A further alternative would be an *intra-disciplinary* approach. This means that theology integrates empirical research into itself which allows the entire study to be done within the

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<sup>89</sup> "Empirical research is never 'neutral' or 'objective' but always based on several decisions which are included in the results, or without which these results would not exist in this particular form. Theological reflection of the data is not able to easily recognize these various decisions or neutralize them" [my translation].

framework of theology (Ziebertz 2004:213). This requires the theologian to familiarize him- or herself sufficiently with the empirical tools used in the social sciences. However, it also requires an independent methodology which reflects the epistemology of the theologian (e.g. critical realism) as well as making transparent how empirical findings are integrated into the theological discourse. A methodology for such an integration was first developed by Van der Ven and further developed by Faix. The Empirical-Theological Praxis cycle he developed provided a methodology for practical theology and missiology.

Thus, in conclusion, one can say that empirical research conducted with academic integrity with regards to the standards of social sciences and theology needs to be done in an inter- or intra-disciplinary way. However, as stated, the inter-disciplinary approach is complicated in its application and thus an intra-disciplinary approach has been chosen for this research since it enables careful yet complete integration of empirical research into theology.

Up to now, we have discussed the different ways theology can incorporate empirical research in a general sense. The next chapter will explain integration in greater detail, namely the methodology of the Empirical-Theological Praxis cycle.

### 4.2.3 Conclusions

Four questions were addressed in this section explaining the epistemological and methodological approach of this research.

The first question was: *why does theology need an empirical dimension?* The answer is that missiology and practical theology are particularly interested in engaging with the existing world and the way faith is experienced. This information can be gathered through empirical research. Furthermore, empirical theology is a means to understanding a particular context which is the foundation for developing a contextual theology.

Secondly, it was asked: *how do these empirical findings relate to theological propositions?* It was here proposed that empirical findings do not define theology, but inform it. The theologian needs to exegete the sacred text and the culture (i.e. text and context) with humility, but none the less with the conviction that theological propositions are more than interpretations, but reflect a greater reality. It is the researcher's belief that ontology precedes epistemology and that the confessional propositions which come to us through Scripture and the tradition of a faith community are not simply reflections of ourselves.

Thirdly, was the question: *how can empirical research be integrated into theology with integrity?* The answer proposed was that the *intra-disciplinary* approach is most suited. Here theology integrates empirical research into itself which allows the entire research to be done

within the framework of theology (Ziebertz 2004:213). This is important since the researcher is never neutral in gathering and analysing data. Therefore, to rely on the social sciences for the empirical work would mean dealing with data that has been influenced by another perspective.

Lastly, and for the purpose of connecting this foundational background with the current research, the question was posed: *why does this particular research require an empirical element?* The research questions require answers which cannot be answered sufficiently by engaging with the existing literature (as found in the literature review). Evangelization online is a new and emerging practice. Thus, this thesis is only an early step of the overall research endeavour. Further research beyond this dissertation will certainly be needed. The contribution of this study is to capture the practice and to offer some initial reflections on it.<sup>90</sup>

Qualitative research is chosen here for three reasons. Firstly, it is most suited for capturing experience. Secondly, it allows for research in an area where insufficient knowledge exists to formulate a thesis which could be falsified. Lastly, it is well suited for situations, such as this one, where there is not a large enough group of people for quantitative research, and it enables investigation on experiences that only a small group of people have.

## **4.3 Methodology**

In this section the Empirical-Theological Praxis (ETP) cycle will be introduced along with Action Research. Both methodologies supplement each other. The strength of the ETP cycle lies in the integration of theology and empirical research. Action Research, on the other hand, provides a framework for the integration of the participants into “the design and collection of research evidence” (Fletcher & Marchildon 2014:4). Action Research is thus the methodological framework for the Policy Delphi Method, which stands at the heart of the study as a participant-controlled data-collection and analysis method for groups.

### **4.3.1 The Empirical-Theological Praxis Cycle**

The ETP cycle provides the practical anchoring necessary for being truthful to theology, while integrating empirical research with integrity. Faix's work supplements Van der Ven's *five steps* by adding recent results from qualitative social science and empirical theology and thereby creating a six step procedure.

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<sup>90</sup> One could focus on analysing evangelistic webpages, but that has been done and is not the focus of this research which highlights online-interactions through an avatar.

The ETP cycle ensures integrity by creating structure and thus transparency and accountability.

#### 4.3.1.1 The large circle

Faix orders the six phases in a cyclical fashion. This is called the *large cycle* and it describes the entire research process. These six phases are a more detailed presentation of the context of discovery, justification and application. Each of the phases consists of a *small cycle* of deduction, induction and abduction.

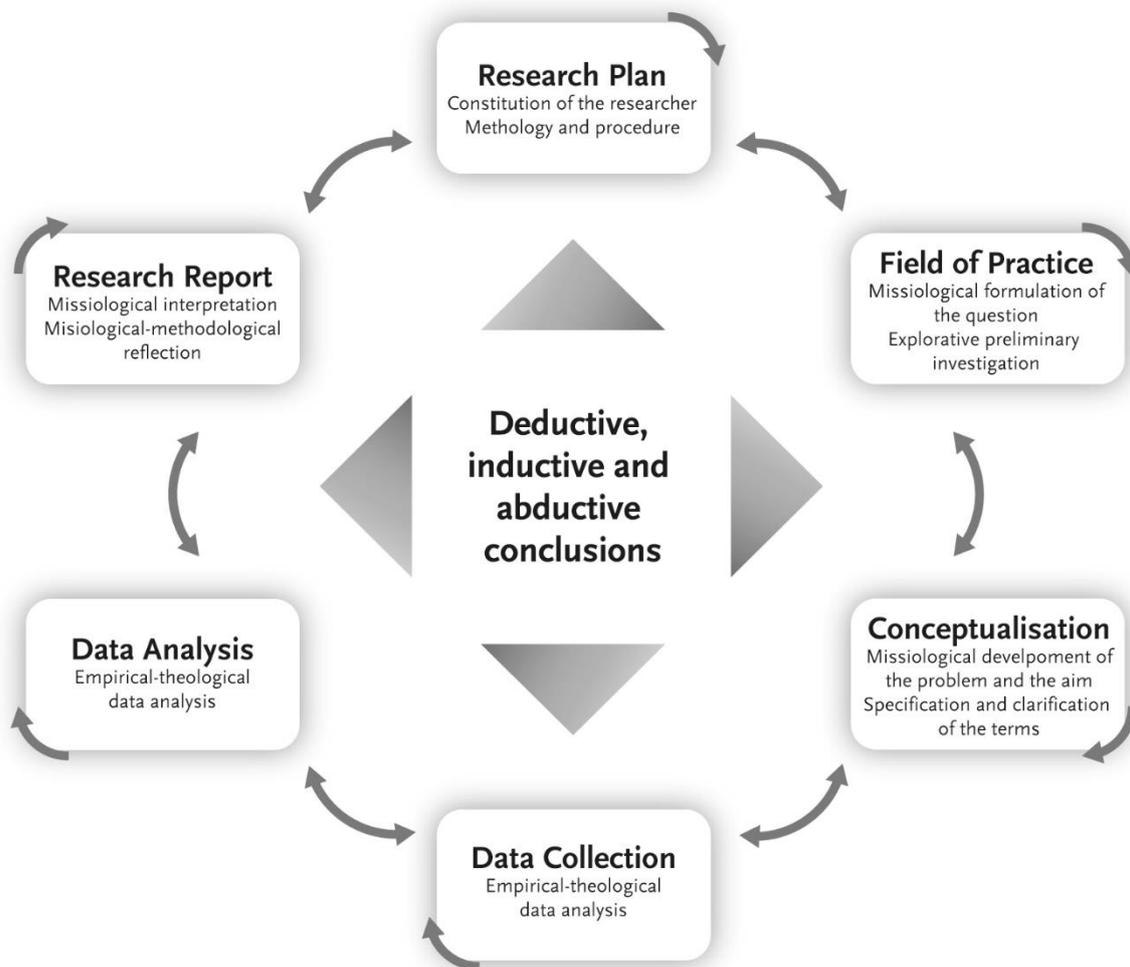


Illustration 5: ETP Cycle (Faix 2007b:119)

#### 4.3.1.2 The small circle

The inner square (displayed in the middle of the diagram above) helps to ensure impartiality of the research.

This “small circle” within the “large circle” is of crucial relevance since none of the various phases can be implemented impartially – the neutrality of the researcher cannot be assumed since the presuppositions of a researcher always play a role in the process of understanding. This lack of impartiality equally applies to the missiological development of the problem, to the guiding questions formulated for the research and to the first survey in the field of practice, to mention a few

aspects. Depending on the meaning of each phase, this can be inductive, deductive or abductive, or a combination of all three.

(Faix 2007b:120)

| Epistemology                    | Method   | Kind of knowledge      |
|---------------------------------|--|------------------------|
| Positivism                      | Induction (specific case → general rule)   | True statements        |
| Critical Rationalism            | Deduction (general rule → specific case)   | Falsifiable statements |
| Pragmatism                      | Abduction (specific, unexplained case → proposed, unconfirmed rule)                        | Working statements     |
| Paradigm Shifts (Action Theory) | The dominant and thus established method is dependent on the current context and paradigm. |                        |

Table 3: *Different Epistemologies* – according to Heil 2006:15–28

#### 4.3.1.3 Reasons for choosing the ETP cycle

There are several reasons why the ETP cycle has been chosen for this study. First of all, missiology is not an applied science and needs its own independent, yet scientifically sound empirical methodology in order to work inductively and interact with the world.<sup>91</sup>

Secondly, the ETP cycle creates scientific integrity by proposing a methodology that incorporates the standards of the social sciences while remaining faithful to its home discipline, namely theology. This is done by integrating the social sciences into theology, thus using the intra-disciplinary approach.

Furthermore, the ETP cycle takes the implications of Kuhn’s contributions, namely the integration of the *context of discovery* into the research. The ETP cycle draws upon Kuhn’s critique of Popper, who believes that the context of discovery (phase one and two in the ETP cycle) should be ignored by those doing true research.

Lastly, also building upon Kuhn’s idea of paradigm shifts and the adoption of his work into theology and missiology by Küng and Bosch, Faix breaks with the linear process proposed by Van der Ven. “In its centre [i.e. ETP cycle] lies the permanent missiological reflection of induction, deduction and abduction; thus the research process gains a circular dynamic and overcomes the linear structure, as was the case with Van der Ven” (Faix 2007b:117).

In summary, it can be said that the six phases of the ETP cycle contain the entire research process, thereby offering a framework for this current research and also ensuring connectedness with the praxis while remaining flexible, using induction, deduction and abduction to interpret

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<sup>91</sup> This has not always been the case as Bosch has shown. Often there was “only church, no world” meaning that theology only worked through deduction. Through this paradigm shift in mission, the world entered into a new relationship with the church. “Just as one could not speak of the church without speaking of its *mission*, it was impossible to think of the church without thinking, in the same breath of the *world* to which it is sent” (Bosch 1991:377).

the data. As such, the ETP cycle offers a scientifically credible and missiologically founded methodology which allows the research of evangelization in VR to be done with integrity.

### 4.3.2 Secondary Methodology: Action Research

Action Research is also known by other names, such as *teacher research* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1990) or *reflective practice* (Schön 1983), depending on the particular aspect that is focused on or the field to which it is applied. Therefore, though slightly different from each other, they all hold the emphasis of *practice-as-inquiry* in common (Newman 1992) and the illumination of the otherwise strong separation of the researcher (outsiders) and those researched (insiders), as well as the need for knowledge to return to action.<sup>92</sup> Thus, Action Research is seen as a participatory and egalitarian approach. Hence, although there are many other definitions of Action Research<sup>93</sup> there are four recurring aspects, namely: empowerment of participants, collaboration through participation, acquisition of knowledge and social change (Masters 1995:2-3). Not all Action Research leads to social change or concludes with a new action. Often the process is concluded when the problem is discovered and a solution is proposed or, as in the case of this study, the aim is not to propose a new practice, but to inform practice.

For the purpose of this study, the description from Greenwood and Levin will serve here as a working definition:

AR is a set of self-consciously collaborative and democratic strategies for generating knowledge and designing action in which trained experts in social and other forms of research and local stakeholders work together. The research focus is chosen collaboratively among the stakeholders and the Action Researchers, and the relationships among the participants are organized as joint learning processes. AR centers on doing “with” rather than doing “for” stake-holders and credits local stakeholders with the richness of experiences and reflective possibilities that long experience living in complex situations brings with it.

(Greenwood & Levin 2006:1)

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<sup>92</sup> Spiess writes that the researcher is part of the research process and observes a natural group in its natural environment. In other words, AR “allows insiders to do research in their own settings or outsiders doing research that views insiders as full participants rather than as research subjects or informants” (Herr & Anderson 2014:90). This stands in opposition to traditional randomization or sampling methods and where are taken out of their environment into a new setting such as a laboratory.

<sup>93</sup> Janet Masters lists three definitions: AR is a “systemic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry” (McCutcheon and Jung 1990:148). ‘A form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out’ (Kemmis & McTaggart 1990:5). ‘Action Research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework’ (Rapoport 1970:499 as cited in McKernan 1991:4)” (Masters 1995).

### 4.3.2.1 History of Action Research

Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) is generally credited for coining the term Action Research – although there is some debate (McKernan 1996). Despite some differing understandings of where and when the concept arose, the general consensus is that Kurt Lewin “made action research a method of acceptable inquiry” (Masters 1995:1). Lewin was unsatisfied with the research methods available to him in his time which did nothing, in his opinion, but produce books and he disliked the idea of a neutral observer who investigates the other (Lewin 1968:280). Lewin further demonstrates the priority of praxis since his aim was not to create truth but to educate. For him, Action Research and education needed to be brought together. Hence, Action Research has been successful in educational settings and education at large (from the science of education movement of the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries to the teacher-researcher movement at the end of the twentieth century) or in organizations where a group needs to solve a particular problem.

Over time Action Research has often been described as democratic, equitable, liberating or life-enhancing (Stringer 2007:11). The word ‘empowering’ could be added.

Various modifications have been made to the original process proposed by Lewin – the most significant being the participatory element. Though the term *Participatory Action Research* is sometimes used to describe this particular string of Action Research, it could be argued that most Action Research approaches currently have a participatory aspect.<sup>94</sup>

Action Research is inquiry that is done *by* and *with* insiders to an organization or community, but never *to* or *on* them. It is a reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken, and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions.

(Herr & Anderson 2015:3–4)

Therefore, most Action Research approaches encourage the active participation of co-researchers. This was desirable for this study.

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<sup>94</sup> With regards to this research the emphasis on equality and the empowering impact Action Research can have for those otherwise voiceless or marginalized, might seem to apply directly to those participating in this research, namely practitioners, theologians and social scientists. However, even where there is no direct oppression, it is hard for practitioners to have a real voice within a theological discourse. The language alone used within the academy can alienate them from the dialog. Participatory Action Research seeks the integration of theory and practice by not simply returning their findings to the praxis but by including them into the process.

#### 4.3.2.2 Challenges and opportunities of Action Research

Action Research shares much of the opposition that qualitative research has encountered. In general, Action Research can be considered a form of qualitative research, though it is slightly different in that it encourages or allows the researcher to become an insider.<sup>95</sup>

Like all qualitative research, Action Research is concerned with the trustworthiness of the knowledge created, thus refusing to be judged from a positivistic perspective. However, Action Researchers “are also interested in outcomes that go beyond knowledge generation” (Herr & Anderson 2015:61). This is where some tension arises.

For many academics, the acceptance of Action Research is given only on the condition that a separate category of knowledge be created for it. [...] For example, Richardson (1994) defined Action Research as “practical inquiry” that focuses on the “improvement of practice,” and then used her own definition to relegate it to secondary status vis-à-vis formal (read “real”) research. [...] Clearly, the formal/practical knowledge debate is about more than research epistemology and methodology; it is about the very nature of professional practise itself and what types of knowledge can best inform it.

(Herr & Anderson 2015:64–5)

Action Research objects to such a dualism and does not allow either side (practitioners or the academics) to claim a privileged access to truth. Instead, Action Research seeks to do justice to both perspectives.

While practitioners have a wealth of tacit knowledge and are what Geertz (1983) calls more “experience-near” to the everyday life of organizations, they do not have privileged access to Truth. As Carter (1993) argues, practitioners’ accounts of their reality are themselves constructions of reality and not reality itself. We cannot escape the basic problems of knowledge generation by elevating practitioners’ accounts of practice to a privileged status. *This is why collaborative and participatory research among insiders and outsiders hold so much promise.*

(Herr & Anderson 2015:65)

None of this suggests that Action Research does not need to present the data from these collective endeavours in an academically sound way (Herr & Anderson 2015:3–4). As these statements also show, epistemologically, Action Research is based on pragmatism (Maskervielle & Myers 2004:331).

Since this study is concerned with an action (evangelization) and because at least some of the required information about this action is found through insiders, they need to be seen as neither superior nor inferior to the outsider perspective offered by the researcher. Thus, in Action Research, the insider is allowed to be more involved in the entire process to the point of suggesting further or different research questions. In return, this allows the outside researcher

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<sup>95</sup> Herr and Anderson believe that “[t]hough somewhat overstated, a qualitative [researcher] wants to be a fly on the wall, observing a social setting as it develops independent of the researcher” (Herr & Anderson 2015:62). However, this seems somewhat disputable and may only be accurate in describing traditional approaches to qualitative research.

to observe more aspects. Action Research allows for the study of phenomenological, interpretive and hermeneutical aspects.

Formally, Action Research in its most effective forms is phenomenological (focussing on people's actual lived experience/reality), interpretive (focussing on their interpretation of acts and activities), and hermeneutic (incorporating the meaning people make of events in their lives). It provides the means by which stakeholders – those centrally affected by the issue investigated – explore their experience, gain greater clarity and understanding of events and activities, and use those extended understandings to construct effective solutions to the problem(s) on which the study was focused. (Stringer 2007:20)

Through the integration of insiders and outsiders and through their interaction with each other, all three aspects can be explored. As will be shown later, this process is guided by the Policy Delphi Method.

### 4.3.2.3 Action Research and Missiology

Lewin believed that knowledge should be created from problem-solving in real-life. This *practice-as-inquiry* approach shows some compatibility to the aims of the missiologist or practical theologian, whose desire is to address a real-life problem with the intention to inform praxis through academic research. This compatibility between Action Research and the missiological endeavour becomes visible by comparing the four steps Lewin proposed with the missiological praxis cycle from Karecki (2002:139)<sup>96</sup>.

| Action Research (Lewin) | Praxis Cycle (Karecki)          |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Observe                 | identification/context analysis |
| Reflect                 | theological reflection          |
| Plan                    | strategies for mission          |
| Act                     |                                 |

Table 4: *Comparisons of Lewin (1946:35-46) and Karecki (2002:132-143)*

Thus, Action Research is very suitable for missiological research. The addition Action Research offers to the *missiological praxis cycle* is the participatory aspect. Rather than isolating those interviewed from the interpretation of the data, they are here included. The inclusion is accomplished through the use of the Police Delphi Method as described below.

### 4.3.2.4 Conclusions

Action Research provides the most helpful methodology for this study for three reasons:

Firstly, Action Research fits the theological-missiological agenda. As seen under 4.3.2.3, Action Research is highly compatible with the missiological approach and it carries within it a

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<sup>96</sup> Karecki is chosen as representation for the basic setup. There are many others models such as the ones proposed by Kritzinger (2002:144-173).

high view of human beings. This is reflected in the act of bringing those researched into the research process itself as well as the imbedded value of Action Research to create actions that improve human life.

Secondly, as will be discussed later, there are no particular experts for this current research, but instead different groups who can offer certain expertise and experience. Thus, even if the emphasis Action Research has on improving praxis is disregarded, the academic findings will be of greater diversity if the different groups engage with each other. There are simply too few people who have extensively thought about the issue of evangelization in VR and the impact it has on the formation of one's religious identity from a theological or sociological perspective while also having experience with the matter itself. Thus, all participants can contribute something unique to the discussion. Action Research allows the participants to engage in the entire research process even to the point of co-formulating the questions and improving the research. Since the researcher is a theologian and not an active online-evangelist or social scientist, it is not possible to fully anticipate in advance all the questions that will need to be included in the questionnaires.

Lastly, Action Research creates a higher sense of ownership among the participants, often fostering a deeper commitment to the research process. This is helpful since the Delphi Method has the weakness of losing the interest of the participants over time since the entire procedure can take several months.

## **4.4 Research technique**

The research technique of this study is the Policy Delphi Method (PDM). It was chosen as the means of collecting the data necessary and its analysis, because it does justice to the specific nature of this research. The particular requirements the research technique has to meet are as follows:

Firstly, the research method has to be in line with the explorative nature of this research. The literature review has shown that some theologians have addressed the question of VR and religion, but little can be found on evangelization in VR.

Secondly, and in combination with the first requirement, the research method must allow for a collaborative approach in which theologians, sociologists and practitioners can all contribute and interact with each other.

Thirdly, the research method must allow for participation. Because little is known, it is desirable that those researched not only answer the proposed questions, but also suggest further issues or questions relevant to the research.

Fourthly, the communication process of the research method needs to allow people from geographically different places to communicate with each other. Most methods, like expert-interviews or group discussion, require a local presence.

As will be shown, the Policy Delphi Method meets all these requirements.

#### 4.4.1 The Delphi Method

The Delphi Method was developed by the RAND Incorporation during the Cold War to identify vulnerable targets. The name Delphi refers to the Greek oracle who was said to be able to predict the future. Likewise, the Delphi Method uses “a series of intensive questionnaires interspersed with controlled opinion feedback” (Dalkey & Helmer 1963:458) in order to create consensus on a particular issue or question, often (but not exclusively) relating to the future.

The Delphi Method begins with an explorative phase during which different experts are given open-ended questions which is followed by a process of consensus building during which the panel members review and adapt the results until consensus is reached. Often the number of rounds is limited because people tend to disengage after 3-4 rounds.

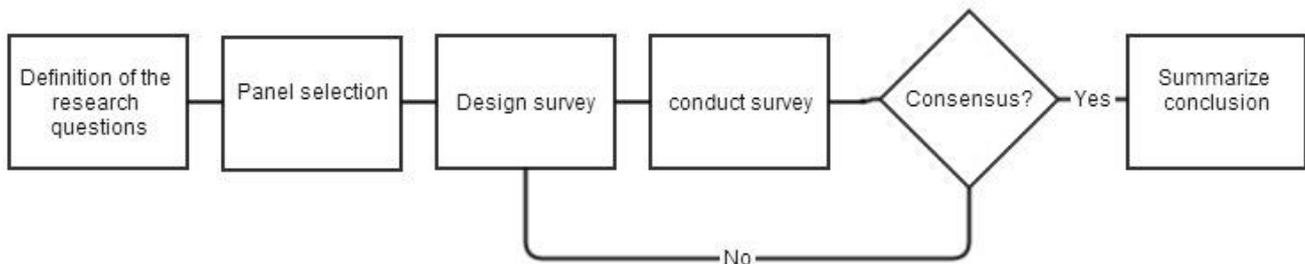


Illustration 6: *Example of the Delphi Method*

#### 4.4.2 Further development of the Delphi Method

Since its first use, the Delphi Method has been used in many fields such as tourism and management, but also in theology (Elkington & Lotter 2013)<sup>97</sup> and has established itself as a helpful method for highly explorative research.

Despite its diverse applications, the key purpose for using the Delphi Method remains the collection of informed judgment on issues that are largely unexplored, difficult to define, highly context and expertise specific, or future orientated. [...] Because it is exploratory in nature, the method is not recommended for use in areas with abundant theory and empirical literature, or where topics are already well defined (Mead & Moseley 2001, Zigli 1995).

(Fletcher & Marchildon 2014:3)

<sup>97</sup> Elkington and Lotter used the Normative Delphi Method to explore why Evangelical churches in Canada are in decline.

Not only has the Delphi Method been applied to different fields, it has also been modified. Each of these modifications respond to a problem or weakness in the original Delphi Method (also called Normative Delphi).

Policy Delphi “seeks to generate the strongest possible opposing viewpoints on a policy issue from an expert panel” (Yousuf 2007:2) Therefore it does not seek consensus on a particular question, but reveals all possible ways to respond to the question.

Unlike normative Delphi, panel members rate the different answers<sup>98</sup> or suggestions that are summarized from the first round of open-ended questions. In subsequent rounds, panel members can comment on the suggestions and the rating. By not seeking consensus, but rather differing opinions, Policy Delphi counters one of the main critiques of normative Delphi, namely that it forces consensus and thus does not present the best judgement but a compromised position. The diagram below shows the general pattern with which the Policy Delphi Method moves forward.

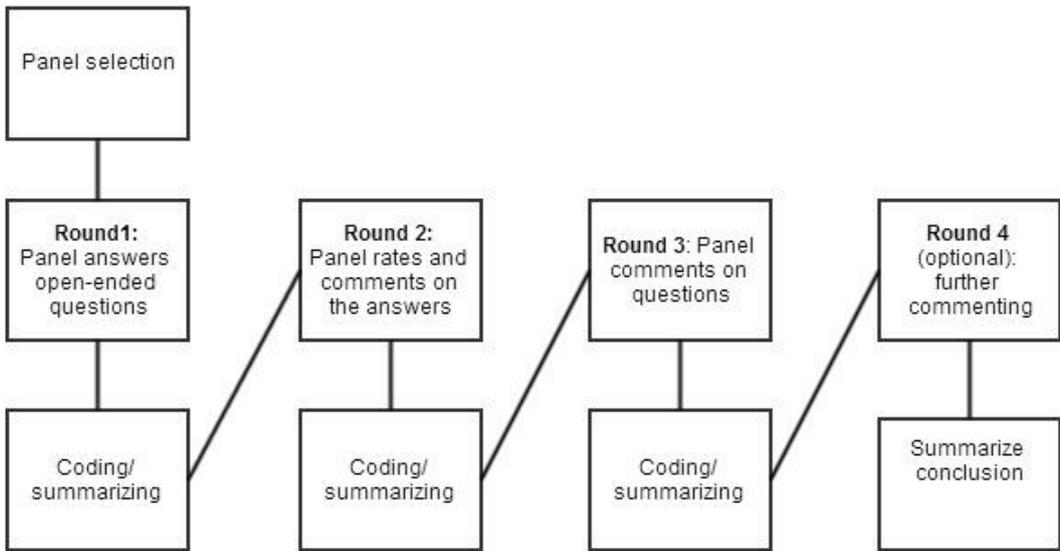


Illustration 7: Example of the Policy Delphi Method

The other inherent problem with normative Delphi is that people start to drop out of the panel as the rounds increase. Thus, the number of rounds is often limited to 3 or 4.<sup>99</sup>

In light of the requirements, it is clear that the Policy Delphi Method is the method most fitting for the study. It does justice to the explorative nature of this research by allowing for a

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<sup>98</sup> Rating can be done according to desirability (benefits), feasibility (practicality), importance (relevance) and confidence (in validity of argument or premise) (Turoff 1970:85).  
<sup>99</sup> An alternative to this is Real-time Delphi. Here all rounds are done at the same time, thus increasing the likeness of participants remaining till the end. However, this limits considerably the time for reflection and requires people to participate at the same time making it harder to involve people from different time zones. On a practical level, it would be extremely difficult to schedule a time when all panel members could participate.

collaborative and participatory approach that can be done without the physical presence of the panel members and will reveal the different ways evangelization in VR happens or could happen.

### **4.4.3 Auxiliary data analyses: Grounded Theory**

As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, epistemology determines methodology and methods. Thus, even the data collection and analysis must be in harmony with the underlying epistemologies. Grounded Theory is here chosen as an auxiliary method of data analysis, because it keeps in line with the epistemology (i.e. pragmatism) and the methodologies (ETP cycle and Action Research). The integration of Grounded Theory into the Policy Delphi Method is described in the next section.

Grounded Theory has established itself as a favourable method for qualitative research, especially in the social sciences, but it has quickly expanded into other fields. Grounded Theory “consists of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz 2011:2).

Having its epistemological background in pragmatism (see 4.1.2) and being well established in psychology and the social sciences, Grounded Theory has recently been implemented (also with the ETP cycle by Faix) in the fields of missiology and practical theology.

Particularly in the case of empirical research into the religious behaviour of people, the subjective perception of their faith or their own image of God, techniques have to be employed which record statements exactly as they are made and relate them to the inner coherence of the whole interview.  
(Faix 2007b:124)

As stated, Grounded Theory is a theory generating method, thus, as the research project unfolds the thesis will be constantly elaborated and adjusted. Hence, the thesis remains fluid due to the constant comparison of data and thesis. Grounded Theory is therefore also called the “constant comparative method.” Grounded Theory does not start with a theory. All that is necessary is a research field and it becomes clear what is relevant through engagement with the data (see Faix 2007a:79). Glaser and Strauss invented Grounded Theory because they were unsatisfied by the gap between theory and data that resulted from other methods.

Because the Grounded Theory method attempts to create a theory and not simply to gather and group data, it also requires the researcher to interpret the data and to include his or her own knowledge and even preconceived notions into the research. This is not a threat to objectivity because the researcher creates awareness and transparency of his or her own subjectivity and,

through the process of constant evaluation and elaboration, achieves greater and greater accuracy of theory.

An alternative to Grounded Theory is *qualitative content analysis*. Unlike Grounded Theory, here the research starts with a clear thesis and research question. Starting with a thesis helps to focus the research and allows the data analysis to be more efficient because only data relevant to the thesis need to be analysed. However, the disadvantage of *qualitative content analysis* is that because of the *a priori* thesis, important elements might not be discovered.

A thesis has been developed for the study and the *qualitative content analysis* method was favoured in its early stages. However, the risk of missing crucial information seemed too great and thus Grounded Theory was subsequently adopted.

#### 4.4.3.1 History and controversy

Grounded Theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss in order to bridge the significant gap between the proposed theory and the empirical data. Their early work, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), assisted qualitative research to establish itself as being capable of adequate verification.

Ironically, [*the Discovery [of Grounded Theory]*] soon achieved its third aim [to legitimate careful qualitative research], becoming an early instance of today's strong rationale that underpins qualitative modes of research. It took about two decades, however, before American sociologists, especially those doing qualitative research, showed much appreciation for the more explicit and systematic conceptualization that constitutes theory.

(Strauss & Corbin 1994:27)

As more studies using Grounded Theory were conducted, and as it was applied to other fields, its influence grew.<sup>100</sup> Through this further work and a controversy between Glaser and Strauss, the originally vague methodology became more defined (Strübing 2008:72). Strauss, together with Corbin, developed a more detailed way of coding the process (as described later) which allows for verification. This, however, is considered the reason why Strauss and Glaser parted ways. Glaser believed that the verification did *not* need to be an integral part of the theory-generating process.

The goal of Grounded Theory is to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behaviour which is relevant and problematic for those involved. The goal is not voluminous description, not clever verification.

(Glaser 1978:93)

Furthermore, Glaser encourages belief in Grounded Theory using almost religious language (Strübing 2008:71). He begins his book: *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussion*, with the following:

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<sup>100</sup> For a list of examples see (Strauss & Corbin 1994:275).

How are you doing? I'm doing. Just do it. Let's do it. Do it because it is meant to be. Do it because it is there to be done. Do it because it WORKS. Grounded Theory works and many people are doing it.

(Glaser 1998:1)

Glaser disliked the more structured way of coding proposed by Strauss and Corbin. Presently most scholars seem to favour Strauss, which is understandable since the work of Strauss and Corbin is simply more academically respectable (Strübing 2008:72–3).

More recently, Grounded Theory has been challenged through postmodern and narrative critics.

These critics [...] viewed Grounded Theory as clinging to an outdated modernist epistemology. For them, Grounded Theory fragmented the respondent's story, relied on the authoritative voice of the researcher, blurred differences, and uncritically accepted Enlightenment grand metanarratives about science, truth, universality, human nature, and word-views.

(Charmaz 2014:13)

However, this does not have to be the case. Referring back to the discussion on epistemology at the beginning of this chapter, it is important to understand what sort of knowledge Grounded Theory produces, for it does not describe objective realities, but offers constructions of it. Ground Theory, basing itself on pragmatism, makes no claims to a universal truth, but to the description of particular experiences.

These constructions are indeed influenced by the preconceptions of the researcher. Therefore, as was stressed earlier, it is important to incorporate the *context of discovery* and particularly the *constitution of the research* into the research process.

Moving beyond Grounded Theory, the use of the Policy Delphi Method further counters the danger of “the authoritative voice of the researcher” through its inherent participatory approach, which allows those interviewed to engage in the data analyses.

#### **4.4.3.2 Reasons for using Grounded Theory in this research**

There are several reasons for using Grounded Theory in missiology and in this research in particular.

The first one is the integration of interpretation. Grounded Theory shares certain features with qualitative research at large. These include the fact that qualitative research is interpretative work and that “interpretive work *must* include the perspective and voices of the people whom we study” (Strauss & Corbin 1994:274). However, Grounded Theory goes further:

[Those using Grounded Theory] accept responsibility for their interpretive roles. They do not believe it sufficient merely to report or give voice to the viewpoints of the people, groups, or organizations studied. Researchers assume the further responsibility of interpreting what is observed, heard, or read.

(Corbin & Strauss 1998:274)

Thus, the aim is not only to capture data, but to engage with the data. This is, of course, the intention of empirical theology, namely to engage and interpret what is observed from a theological perspective. In the particular case of this study, the aim is not simply to describe evangelization in VR, but to interpret and engage with the findings theologically.

Secondly, a theory is formulated with the aid of Grounded Theory. This approach allows the emerging theory to be influenced by interaction with the data. The researcher has ideas and expectations of what core categories could be for this research project. These have been developed through personal experience and informed by the literature review, but the starting point is not a theory (though one has been proposed to help structure the research process), but a research field, namely evangelization in VR.

The third reason for preferring Grounded Theory has to do with the fact that little empirical research has been done on online evangelization.

The Grounded Theory method of sampling is called *theoretical sampling*. Theoretical sampling helps strengthen the theory without necessarily increasing the number of interviews required, because it is permissible to return to those interviewed if, during the process of coding, new questions, discrepancies, etc. arise (Kelle & Kluge 2010:49).

Fourthly, (as is shown in 4.4.4), Grounded Theory counters some of the weakness of the Policy Delphi Method.

#### **4.4.3.3 Coding**

According to Corbin and Strauss (1998), the Grounded Theory method consists of three coding steps: open, axial and selective coding. Some include an initial step, namely the study of related and relevant literature in order to create sensitivity for possible topics (see chapter 3). This approach has been followed with this study, as is documented in the literature review. The following table presents a brief overview of the three parts.

|                         | <b>Aim</b>  | <b>Steps</b>  |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| <b>Open coding</b>      | Conceptualizing the entire data through labels (i.e. codes), without summarizing or interpreting the data | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Creating codes</li> <li>2. Grouping codes into categories and sub-categories</li> <li>3. Assigning properties to the different categories</li> </ol>  |
| <b>Axial coding</b>     | Identifying the relationship between the different categories within the various interviews               | Putting the categories into relationship with each other according to the six C's   |
| <b>Selective coding</b> | Discovering the central categories/phenomena and/or narrative across all interviews                       | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Identifying the story</li> <li>2. Connecting the central category with supplementing categories</li> <li>3. Validating the connections</li> <li>4. Further developing and enriching categories as needed</li> </ol> |

Table 5: Coding modes for Grounded Theory

The application of Grounded Theory is here slightly modified in order to incorporate it into the Policy Delphi Method, resulting in a focus on the open coding process. For a further discussion on this, see section 4.4.4.

#### 4.4.3.4 Sampling

*Theoretical sampling* (Ts) is an important part of Grounded Theory. Unlike quantitative research, which usually desires random sampling, Glaser and Strauss developed Ts as a method to look systematically for comparable data.

Ts is defined as “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges” (Glaser & Strauss 1967:45). This means that based on the collected data, the researcher decides which additional samples are needed. At times those interviewed can recommend other people that could be interviewed (Bogner & Menz 2009b:8). Then one has to either minimize or maximize the differences.

Selecting people from different ethnic, economic, educational, gender or age groups, which would make it more likely to discover greater differences. Any commonalities that remain despite maximization can be considered strong.

Minimizing the differences makes it more likely to find similar results, which in turn helps verify categories or create more precise properties (see Faix 2007a:84–85). The researcher continues collecting more data using Ts until the categories, and thus the theory, are considered saturated.

An alternative to Ts, *Qualitative sampling* (Qs), is used when some pre-knowledge exists. Unlike Ts, where data analysis (e.g. coding) and data collection are closely connected, Qs uses

the knowledge of prior research in order to develop certain criteria for the sampling prior to the data collection. Qs is thus ideal when some knowledge of the research field already exists (Kelle & Kluge 2010:50–55).

However, because of the use of the Policy Delphi Method, the sampling in this research occurs differently than traditionally with Grounded Theory and Ts.<sup>101</sup>

In Grounded Theory, the researcher can gather data flexibly and iteratively from new sources until theoretical saturation has been achieved, i.e. the emergence of core categories has halted. However, in Delphi studies the researcher needs to define both data sources and the initial research objectives clearly at the beginning of the study, as the experts need to be assigned to the panels. However, as the data collection process is asynchronous, there are no reasons for not involving new experts even after the first brainstorming results have been carried out and preliminarily analysed. Also, the use of so-called snowball sampling, where the experts may suggest new panel members according to their level of expertise, expands the size of the panels throughout the data collection.

(Päivärinta, Pekkola & Moe 2011:6)

This means that with each round of the Policy Delphi Method, the same people are addressed. However, as stated above, the panel can still be expanded. This is important since the Policy Delphi Method does not simply search for further information by interviewing more people, but rather invites the panel to engage with the data. Thus the panel now not only shares their experiences, but also starts making inferences about the experiences gained, a task usually delegated only to the researcher.

In the Delphi Method, the panel and the researcher define what is relevant and what should be considered a core category. Thus, the net, so to speak, has been spread widely in order to catch many themes.

#### **4.4.3.5 Memos**

Regardless of the phase, it is important to document the entire process, particularly the transition from the raw data to codes and the further categorization of the codes, in order to make the research transparent to others. These notes are called memos and can be attached to codes or categories.

#### **4.4.3.6 Software: MaxQDA**

The software MaxQDA is used in this research. It was specifically designed for qualitative research (and Mix Methods) and the Grounded Theory method. Among many things, the software aids the researcher with coding, category creation and the writing of memos.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Qs has some similarities with the method of searching for crucial cases, as used by the Chicago School. It starts with a strong thesis and the researchers proceed by searching for counter-cases which could disprove the thesis. If such a case is found it helps to fine-tune the thesis.

<sup>102</sup> For more information see: <http://www.maxqda.com/products/what-is-maxqda>.

#### 4.4.4 Integrating Grounded Theory into the Policy Delphi Method

A downside to all the variations of the Delphi Method is the lack of clear guidelines for data collection and analysis. Thus, the integration of Grounded Theory with the Delphi Method has been proposed. One of the reasons given is that, depending on the size of the panel and the depth of the conversation, an “overwhelming workload” faces the researcher (Päivärinta *et al* 2011:11).

The main advantage of integrating Grounded Theory into the Delphi Method is that it helps to generate categories. Furthermore, because Grounded Theory often lacks a clear justification of why certain categories are considered core and others are not, the panel from the Delphi Method can provide additional accountability.

Grounded Theory traditions have provided little methodological support for identifying the core categories, beyond the researcher’s judgment on the frequency or centrality of category manifestations or incidences (cf. Charmaz 2006; Goulding 1998). A researcher is supposed to have theoretical sensitivity (Strauss and Corbin 1998). However, not all researchers seem to possess enough theoretical sensitivity as Grounded Theory studies have been recently criticized for having a low level of theoretical development,

(Päivärinta *et al* 2011:2)

There are, of course, other ways to provide methodological support, but relying on the wisdom of the panel, at least as a guide, seemed reasonable to the researcher.

Thus, Päivärinta *et al* proposed a combination of the two methods, which they called the *Grounded Delphi Method*. The process can roughly be divided into 4 steps which are here briefly presented, including the way they are executed for this study.

|   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| 1. <b>Data Collection</b> (theoretical sampling, expert interviews) | ▶ Round 1         |
| 2. <b>Concept Discovery</b> (open coding; category development)     | ▶ Grounded Theory |
| 3. <b>Concept Prioritization</b> (rating through the expert panel)  | ▶ Round 2         |
| 4. <b>Theory Development</b> (final questions)                      | ▶ Round 3         |

This research differs from the Grounded Delphi Method only in the application of the Policy Delphi Method instead of Traditional Delphi. This means that, at the final step, the panel only addressed those areas where most disagreement was found. Therefore, the process was ended with the presentation of different positions rather than focusing on areas of consensus. This alteration is appropriate for this study since its priority was simply to explore a new field and lay the foundation for further research. Furthermore, the warning that Traditional Delphi tends to force consensus was convincing, and it seemed likely that moving towards consensus would create results that only confirmed what most would consider obvious.

The Grounded Delphi Method does not make use of selected and axial coding, at least not explicitly. However, differing positions were compared in developing the second round as

well as its execution, and the missiological interpretation (particularly chapter 8 to 10) fulfilled, in principle, the procedure of axial-coding.

Thus, this study integrated Grounded Theory into the first round of the Policy Delphi Method. Round two utilized a method from quantitative research. This means that the Policy Delphi Method, as applied here, is a Mixed Method approach.

#### 4.4.5 Policy Delphi Method as Mixed Method

In recent years there has been a growing appreciation for the need to connect quantitative and qualitative research (Kelle 2007). Mixed Method is defined as follows:

An approach to research in social, behavioral, and health sciences in which the investigator gathers both quantitative (closed-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, integrates the two, and then draws interpretations based on the combined strength of both sets of data to understand research problems:

(Creswell 2014:2)

The advantage of using Mixed Methods is that it allows for a multi-dimensional perspective. Thus, with regards to this study, the first round allowed for the generation of many bold hypotheses. The second round allowed the panel to view each other's results and provide statistical feedback. This, of course, is not as nuanced as direct interaction with the data would have been, but the use of a rating tool made it possible for the entire panel to deal with the majority of the findings in a manageable way. Two perspectives were added: firstly, that of the other panel members and secondly, a quantitative statistical feedback of their opinions. Because this research covers such a breadth of data, a quantitative element was necessary for the second round. Mingers writes:

[A]ll problem situations are complex and multi-dimensional, involving material, social, and personal aspects. An intervention should therefore be more effective if it addresses, within the limitations of time and resource, all of these features. This suggests that, wherever possible, a range of methodologies (or parts thereof), across the paradigms, should always be used. If a problem situation is approached through the perspective of a single methodology (or paradigm) then important aspects will be ignored, or will have to be dealt with in an ad hoc or intuitive way.

(Mingers & Gills 1997:414).

Thus, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is fitting for this particular research.

There are several possible ways to combine qualitative and quantitative research. The one used in this research is the *generalization model*, where individual cases are first examined qualitatively and the results subsequently reviewed and generalized through quantitative research method.



Illustration 8: Example of the generalization model

Creswell calls this an exploratory sequential design:

[Here] the intent is first to explore a problem with qualitative methods because the questions may not be known, the population may be understudied or little understood, or the site may be difficult to access. After the initial exploration, the researcher uses the qualitative findings to build a second quantitative phase of the project. This phase may involve designing an instrument to measure variables in the study, developing activities for an experimental intervention, or designing a typology that is then measured using existing instruments.

(Creswell 2014:6)

As the following section shows, such a usage of Mixed Methods fits naturally with the usage of the Policy Delphi Method in this research.

#### 4.4.6 Outline of the research

How the Policy Delphi Method is to be used is not clearly defined, so for this particular research the suggestions from Rayens & Hahn are followed:

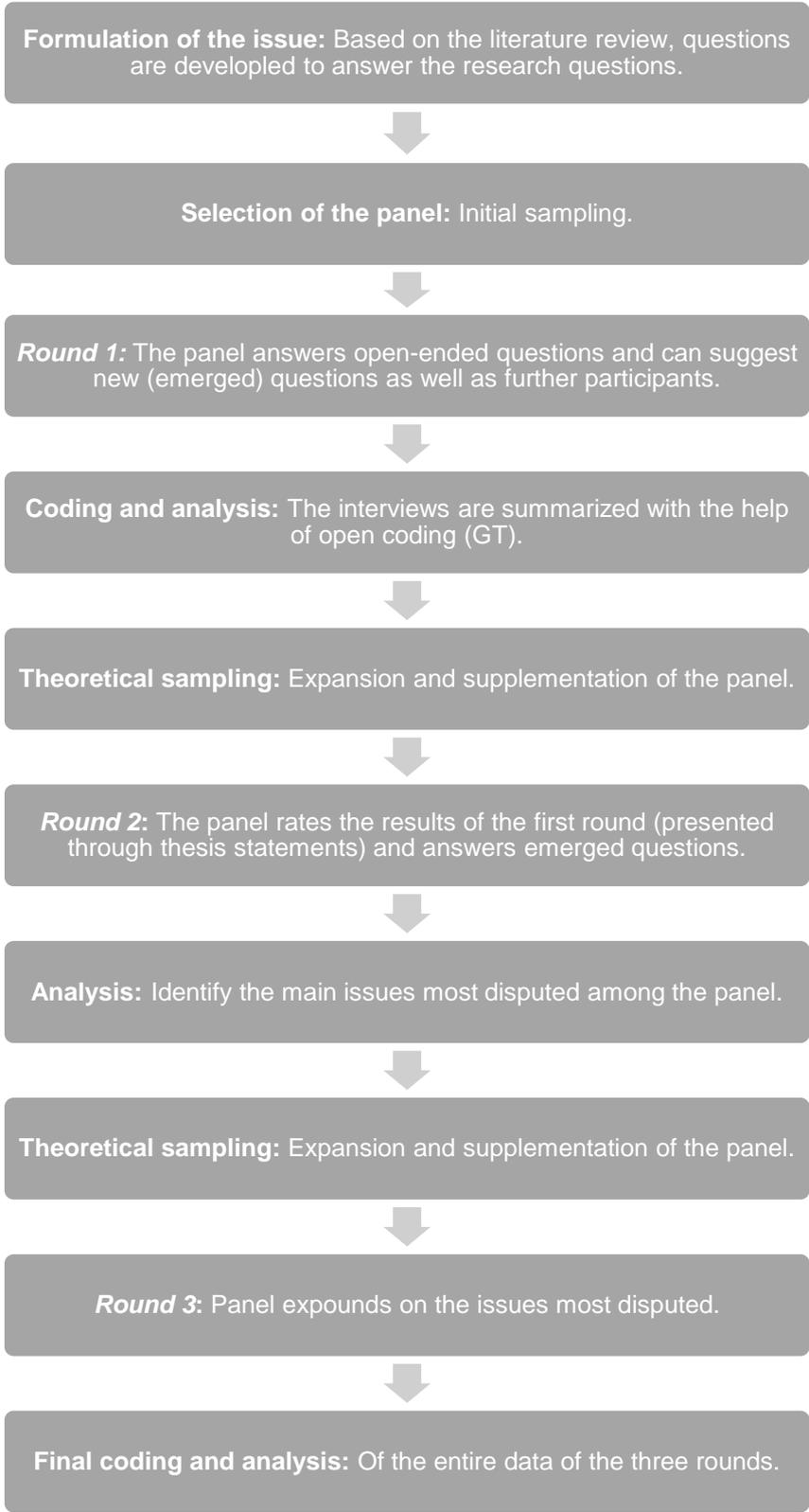
The policy Delphi Method is a multistage process involving the initial measurement of opinions (first stage), followed by data analysis, design of a new questionnaire based on group response to the previous questions, and a second measurement of opinions (second stage; McKenna, 1994). *Statistical group feedback—information about the beliefs of other participants during the first-stage interview—is used in the second-stage interview to facilitate consensus on policy beliefs.* [...] This process allows participants to reconsider their opinions in light of the views of other stakeholders and can be repeated until consensus is reached or saturation of opinion occurs.

(Rayens & Hahn 2000:309)

After the initial measurement of opinions, which is done with category development with the help of Grounded Theory, the findings are returned to the panel. Utilizing a quantitative method, the opinions from the first round receive feedback from the entire panel. Since the information presented in the first round and the feedback received during the second is voluminous, using the rating device to produce statistical feedback ensured that the all participants can engage in a majority of the findings. In a third and final round the areas where opinions differed were re-addressed in order to either reach consensus or to gain fuller insight into the various opinions and underlying rationales and assumptions. Thus, the three rounds can be summarized as follows:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <b>Round 1:</b> Initial measurement of opinions | ▶ Qualitative research (Grounded Theory) |
| <b>Round 2:</b> Statistical group feedback      | ▶ Quantitative research (Rating)         |
| <b>Round 3:</b> Saturation of opinion           | ▶ Qualitative research (Grounded Theory) |

The unique feature of the Policy Delphi Method is that after the quantitative research the findings are returned to the panel. The entire research thus unfolded as follows:



## 4.5 Conclusions

This chapter started with a presentation of the different epistemologies. Particularly relevant for this study is pragmatism since it is the foundation of Action Research and because pragmatism can capture religious experiences since it does not try to generalize, but rather to capture the particular.

Kuhn's idea of the paradigm shift, and its adaptation to the history of mission by Bosch, further lays the foundation for the general premise of this study, namely, that we need to continue to develop theologies which rearticulate the Christian faith for the current framework. This means that we will explore new aspects and encounter new questions with each paradigm shift.

It was also proposed that an intra-disciplinary approach be used for the integration of empirical research into theology in order to allow the theologian to have control and knowledge of the entire research process, including the *context of discovery*. Picking up on the critique of Immink, empirical theology requires induction and also needs to engage with confessional propositions (deduction). Furthermore, as McGrath has argued, the interplay between these different kinds of knowledge (e.g. experiences and propositions) also needs to be explored by the theologian: The *ought* (deduction/proposition) meets the *is* (induction/experience).

The ETP cycle was briefly introduced and is used as the overall methodology of this study. This is because it includes the context of discovery and structures the research progress while creating transparency and, thus, accountability throughout the entire research process.

Action Research, though also classified as an epistemology, complements the ETP cycle because it is concerned with offering a justification of a participatory and action-orientated research.

Lastly, a combination of the Policy Delphi Method and Grounded Theory was proposed as a method fitting the explorative nature of this research.

In the next and final section of this chapter, a summary of the first three phases of the ETP cycle will be presented. The ETP cycle has guided the entire research, but this section will make this explicit through offering a summary of the phases 1-3.

## 4.6 Interim summary: ETP cycle (Phase 1-3)

The following section outlines the research according to the first three phases of the ETP cycle, summarizing the steps done. Chapters five and onwards follow the remaining phases of the ETP cycle.

## **4.6.1 Phase 1: Research plan**

### **4.6.1.1 Constitution of the research**

At the beginning of any research endeavour stands a research idea (Faix 2007a:133). Something comes to the attention of the researcher that he or she wants to further explore and/or understand. In the case of this researcher, it involved an encounter with a student who used the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (WoW) as a place to evangelize. At the same time, the book *SimChurch* (Estes 2009) reinforced this research idea. In this book, Estes argued for an online church which takes the digital culture seriously and, more importantly, positively – as opportunity and not as a threat for the church. Furthermore, as previously discussed (see 1.1), claims have been made that there is a unique or at least different culture created through technology. Some have called this *cyber culture*, but more recently the term *digital culture* is preferred. The concept of a virtual reality seemed central the understanding of the uniqueness of digital culture for it allows the creation of a virtual place and identity through which one can interact with others (see 2.4). After engaging with the literature, it became evident that some research has been done on the changes created by technology, and that there is some research on the ways in which the church can respond to these changes. However, little research exists on evangelization in this context and, in particular, what it means to take the digital culture seriously. Thus, not only was a research question formulated, but a research field was found.

### **4.6.1.2 Methodology and procedure**

The nature of the question made it clear that an empirical approach was necessary and that the ETP cycle in particular was considered suitable because the intra-methodological approach of the ETP cycle ensures that empirical research is done from a missiological perspective. Most of the previous research comes from a sociological or psychological perspective, but very little from a theological one. This means that they accumulate and interpret data from a different perspective, thus asking different questions, making different assumptions (e.g. God is a social construct) and drawing different conclusions than would be the case from a theological perspective.

Furthermore, the *Policy Delphi Method* was chosen for data collection and used with Grounded Theory for the purposes of data analysis. This allowed a participatory approach to the research by allowing the panel experts to add their own questions and to engage in dialogue with the other experts.

## 4.6.2 Phase 2: Field of practice

This phase has been documented in 1.1. The main research question proposed was: *How does VR affect evangelization?*

The research question itself is divided into six sub-questions. (See 1.1 for details on each sub-question).

1. Does an avatar affect the evangelistic process?
2. How does VR impact evangelization?
3. How is evangelization modified for VR?
4. How are authority and credibility established?
5. Which ethical considerations need to be made?
6. How can one evangelize in and through a game?

During the initial part of the study, the main research question and particularly the thesis were modified several times. The most significant alteration was the inclusion of contextualization. This limited the research question, which was in danger of being too broad. It also reveals the missiological nature of the study, since contextualization is a very rich and relevant aspect for evangelization, which will help missiological reflection and evaluation of the data in phase six.

Furthermore, as this research is explorative in nature and little research has been done on online evangelization, the researcher also desired to determine which other issues need to be addressed in future research.

## 4.6.3 Phase 3: Conceptualization

### 4.6.3.1 Missiological development of the problem and the aim

This phase has been addressed in detail under 1.2 and 1.3. and the general aim of this research is in exploring (1) the influencing aspects of VR on evangelization, (2) how those evangelizing respond to these changes, and (3) which larger theological and missiological questions arise.

Thus, this research is based on the rationale that technology and culture not only interact in a complex way, but that this complexity carries implications for religion, and consequently evangelization. VR does not simply add something to religion, and evangelization in particular, it changes it.<sup>103</sup> This complexity needs to be acknowledged and investigated in order to inform

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<sup>103</sup> This does not mean that the changes create a completely different form of communication. As has been witnessed with most technological developments, the impact of technology is often far less fundamental than first anticipated.

practice. Furthermore, VR seems to create a new way of acquiring information, forming opinions and, consequently, religious identities.

The intention of this research is thus first of all to understand the current practice of evangelization online in order to understand and reflect critically upon it, and in order to propose suggestions for better practice or further academic research.

#### **4.6.3.2 Specification and clarification of the terms**

Three terms were defined at the beginning of this research: *contextualization*, *evangelization* and *virtual reality*.

The term *contextualization* was discussed in the context of its related terms *contextual theology* and *intercultural theology*, as they are foundational for this study which operates on the assumption that VR needs its own contextual theology. Although the intention of this study is not to develop a theology of virtual reality, but rather to offer a contribution to such an endeavour, these concepts are important since they express the notion that theology is always created within a particular context from which it cannot be isolated. Thus, these three terms were dealt with together at the beginning of the research.

*Contextualization* was defined as any attempt to adapt content or form of evangelization for VR.

*Evangelization* was defined as *any attempt* to engage in an interaction with people of other or no faith, with the intention of informing them of the reality, nature or workings of God and with the intention and hope that people would respond positively and believe in what was shared. Further, the term *virtual reality* was used to describe computer-mediated experiences in which users can inhabit a space, through the use of an avatar, and where they can interact with others, engage in various activities, and alter or hide their identity through the avatar without bearing any physical consequences for their actions.

Chapter 3, the literature review, introduced further themes and research relevant to this thesis.

#### **4.6.4 Outline of phases 4-6**

Phase 4 (data collection) and phase 5 (data analysis), were executed in a dynamic process as guided by the Policy Delphi Method. Thus, chapters 5-7, which describe the three rounds of the Policy Delphi Method, together represent phase 4 and 5 of the ETP cycle. Chapters 8-10 constitute phase 6 of the ETP cycle (research report), which includes both a missiological interpretation, as well as a methodological reflection.

## 5. Round 1: Initial measurement of opinions

As explained in chapter 4, the data is collected and analysed through the Policy Delphi Method (PDM), and thus integrate phase 4 and 5 of the ETP cycle (see diagram under 4.4.6 and 4.6 for a general overview).

In this chapter we also enter the *context of justification* and the *data analysis* through the PDM. PDM is not only a method for data collection, but also a method of analysis. However, as discussed earlier (see 4.4.4), it is complemented by Grounded Theory (GT). The first round (based on expert-interviews) particularly gained structure and transparency through the coding process.

This chapter begins with the selection and introduction of the experts and the presentation of the interview questions, followed by the data analysis which consists of open-coding.

### 5.1 Data collection

A crucial factor in gathering good data lies in the selection of the experts. The selection of the interview partners follows the method *theoretical sampling* according to Kelle & Kluge (2010), which has been incorporated into the Policy Delphi Method.

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that, although the presentation of the data collection here precedes the data analyses, the linear format of the written thesis does not reflect the actual process which required a back and forth between the two.

#### 5.1.1 Selection and introduction of the expert panel

The panel was formed following *theoretical sampling* according to Kelle and Kluge (2010) (see 4.4.3.4). Following this method, the participants were selected based on previously defined criteria in order to cover a diversity range of perspectives. As Charmaz (2014:197) points out, the first sampling (*initial sampling*) is intended to get the research started and the *theoretical sampling* guides the further research. The first question is thus: what kind of experts are needed for this study?

The literature on qualitative research does not clearly define what an expert is (Bogner & Menz 2009:39–40)<sup>104</sup>. However, Bogner and Menz (2009:46) list three areas of expertise: technical, process and interpretative. Technical and process knowledge overlap somewhat referring, in our case, to the praxis of evangelization online. The interpretative experts are, in this case, mostly scholars who have reflected on the praxis based on their area of expertise. However, many experts have expertise in many areas although with varying emphasis.

This division is helpful for the identification of experts for the purposes of this research, even though they may have some overlapping knowledge. Since Action Research seeks the actual integration of many types of experts, the panel for the Policy Delphi Method can and should consist of complementary experts.

From the beginning of this study, the intent was to research practitioners, i.e. those actually doing online evangelization, and yet they may or may not have reflected on the subject. Others have researched evangelization in general and have given some thought to VR as a potential place for it, but themselves lack *experience-nearness*. When more generally researching the issue of religion and VR, a good number of social scientists have taught and published on the issue (as can be seen from the literature review). These people could be classified as experts. They can be seen as sitting either extremes of a spectrum; from practitioners to academics (or insiders to outsiders), advantages and disadvantages – among others. This is valuable because – for example – practitioners are less likely to have reflected on their actions, for their actions are often habitual. However, the possibility exists to discover something new that is hidden in unreflected, habitual, possibly meaningful actions. Panel members with a strong academic background might not be able to share much or any experience related to evangelization in VR, yet have some may offer interpretive knowledge.

It should be kept in mind that this empirical exploration is looking at online evangelization from the perspective of those evangelizing, and those researching online religion, and not from the perspective of those *using* online evangelistic offers. Thus, for example, results regarding motivation for using evangelistic online offers, reflect assumptions that are being made, and do not necessarily reflect the actual situation (see 12.3).

Thus, for the intentions of the research and the initial sampling the following criteria were defined:

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<sup>104</sup> “In der Debatte um die methodologische Grundlage des Experteninterviews lassen sich drei Zugänge zur Bestimmung des Experten identifizieren, die sich unterschiedlichen analytischen und normativen Perspektiven verdanken” (Bogner & Menz 2009:39).

The first area of contrast was achieved by inviting practitioners of online evangelization, as well as those researching religious practice online. Secondly, those from the academic realm come from a variety of different disciplines (e.g. religious studies, theology, social sciences and media studies). Thirdly, participants from different countries were invited to participate in the survey. However, people mostly from the Western World agreed to participate. (Practitioners from other countries were also invited, but were unable to commit within the time allocated).

In order to find these participants, various researchers discovered through the literature review and leaders and managers of Christian organization that evangelize online were contacted via e-mail. Some of those who were not able to participate in the study suggested other potential candidates. Likewise, the participating experts often introduced the researcher to other potential participants. Furthermore, several recommendations were made after the presentation of parts of this study on different occasions. It was encouraging to see that some of the participants were recommended by several others, thus supporting the selection process.

Originally about 30 people were invited to participate in the research process. However, mostly because of time restraints, only twelve initially agreed to participate in the first round which consisted of extensive verbal and written interviews. They did reflect the diversity described above.<sup>105</sup>

| Name                             | Area of Expertise  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Douglas Estes</b>             | Dr Estes is director of the DMin Program at South University-Columbia, and Assistant Professor of New Testament & Practical Theology. He has written several books including one on virtual Christian communities, called SimChurch (2009). For more information see: <a href="http://www.douglasestes.com/">http://www.douglasestes.com/</a>  |
| <b>Thomas Gerlach</b>            | Mr Gerlach is co-founder and responsible for the evangelistic webpage <a href="http://www.GottinBerlin.de">www.GottinBerlin.de</a> which is rather unique in trying to have a strong local connection.   |
| <b>John Dyer</b>                 | Mr Dyer is a web developer, building tools for companies like Apple and Microsoft, Harley-Davidson, Anheuser Busch, and the Department of Defence. He currently serves as the Executive Director of Communications and Educational Technology for Dallas Theological Seminary from where he also holds a Master degree. He has published and blogged on the issues of technology and faith. In 2011 he wrote a book entitled: <i>From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology</i> . For more information see: <a href="http://j.hn/">http://j.hn/</a> |
| <b>Anonymous<sup>106</sup> K</b> | This person is responsible for a very large Christian organization which offers different evangelistic websites and tools.   |

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<sup>105</sup> This format of adding further participants to maximize the differences between opinions follows the approach from Kelle & Kluge (2010). “While theoretical sampling focuses on the specification of theory, contrastive sampling serves to validate and generalize the results by complementing and cross-checking the case analysis with intentionally different cases” (Ruckdäschel 2014:74–75).

<sup>106</sup> Experts were given the option to participate anonymously. They are here referred to with the moniker “Anonymous” and one of their initials.

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| <b>Dave Bourgeois</b>   | Dr Bourgeois completed his PhD in Information Systems and Technology in 2006 at Claremont Graduate University and in 2012 he was appointed “Director of Innovation” for the Biola University Crowell School of Business. He is also the director of the biola.digital conference. His research interests are in the areas of faith, education, and technology, and how these can be combined effectively. He blogs frequently on issues relating to faith and technology (particularly social media) and has published a book called <i>Ministry in the Digital Age</i> (2013).  |
| <b>Anonymous S</b>      | This participant has researched various evangelistic websites in the USA in order to explore how authority is established.   |
| <b>Simone Heidbrink</b> | At the time of the interview Ms Heidbrink was a junior researcher at the University of Heidelberg. Currently she works part-time for the university while now also working on a project for the Lutheran Church in Baden for developing new forms of participation through digital media. Her own research focuses on new religious ritual. Virtual environments are one of the areas in which she studies the emergence of new rituals. She is currently perusing a doctorate entitled: “Ritualtransfer und Ritualinnovation der 'Emerging Church' – 'Alternative Worship'-Bewegung” <sup>107</sup> . Furthermore, she is secretary of the editorial board of the <i>Online - Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet</i> . She would also describe herself as a gamer. |
| <b>Joachim Bär</b>      | Mr Bär studied theology at Freie Theologische Hochschule in Gießen and now works at the Christian organization <i>ERF online</i> as its project leader. They offer various evangelistic and discipleship-orientated web sites.   |
| <b>Karsten Kopjar</b>   | Dr Kopjar has thought, published and worked on the use of social media for our faith. His doctoral thesis was entitled “Kommunikation des Evangeliums für die Web 2.0 Generation – Virtuelle Realität als Reale Virtualität” <sup>108</sup> . Presently he works as the social-media-coordinator for the Lutheran Church in Middle-Germany.  |
| <b>Rolf Krüger</b>      | Mr Krüger is a journalist who was one of the first people in Germany to use the internet for providing religious information and discussions. He founded the popular website <a href="http://www.jesus.de">www.jesus.de</a> in 1997. More recently they started a prayer site called <a href="http://amen.de">amen.de</a> .  |
| <b>Mikee Bridges</b>    | Mr Bridges is Executive Director of Epic Ministries in Ventura, CA and initiator of <a href="http://GamesChurch.com">GamesChurch.com</a> , an organization that tries to evangelize gamers. He self-described himself as a deep-water evangelist who seeks new and creative ways to evangelize.  |
| <b>Kevin Schut</b>      | Prof Schut holds a PhD in communication studies from the University of Iowa and is associate professor and chair of the department of media and communication at Trinity Western University in Langley, CA. His interest is on the intersection of communication, culture, media, technology and faith and particularly video games. He has recently published the book <i>Of Games and God: A Christian Exploration of Video Games</i> .  |
| <b>Krish Kandiah</b>    | Dr Kandiah is currently president of London School of Theology. He has research and taught extensively on evangelization and comments frequently on the use of technological and its importance for faith. For more information, see: <a href="http://www.krishk.com/bio/">http://www.krishk.com/bio/</a> .  |

Table 6: *Participants of the first round*

<sup>107</sup> “Ritual transfer and ritual innovation of the 'Emerging Church' – 'Alternative worship'-movement” [translation mine].

<sup>108</sup> “Communicating the gospel for the web 2.0 generation – Virtual Reality as Real Virtuality” [translation mine].

### 5.1.2 Ethics of data collection

All participants were informed about the purpose of the interviews and the nature of the research. Participants were only included in the research if they signed the consent form. This consent form gave the participant the option to participate anonymously in the study. Three participants chose to remain anonymous. Participants were also allowed to change their status at any point, and one person did so.

The application for research ethics clearance was approved by the *Research Ethics Review Committee* at UNISA on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2014. The certificate and the consent form can be found in the appendix.

### 5.1.3 Questions for the first round

The questions for the first round of Delphi originated from the literature review and were intended as open-ended questions. Based on the results of the first round the researcher could develop questions in order to achieve greater depth or to clarify an issue. Additionally, the final question allowed the panel suggest other questions. Thus, the panel dealt with two kinds of questions: the *initial questions* and the *emerged questions*.

The interview questions were derived from the research question and its sub-questions. The research question was: “*How does contextualization, with regards to evangelization, take place for VR*” (the sub-questions can be found in 1.1).

Thirty-three questions were developed and grouped into three categories: “Identity,” “Contextualization and Evangelization” and “Relationship between VR and FR.” All questions are listed below.

Interviews were conducted half-standardized, allowing each participant to expand beyond the topics addressed and to allow them to engage more extensively on those topics and questions of which they had most knowledge and/or experience. A few participants opted for written responses.

Also, after the first interviews, the questions were slightly modified in order to be clearer and to include the issue of ethics which was suggested by the group of respondents.

The final questions were as follows:

## General

(1) What is your professional or personal experience with the Internet, Social Media and Virtual World<sup>109</sup>?

(2) Have they changed the way you live out your faith?

## Identity

(3) Do you reveal things about yourself online that you wouldn't reveal in First Reality<sup>110</sup> (FR)?

*It is very common that we show different parts of ourselves in different contexts. For example, our family might know a different side of us than our co-workers.*

(5) Keeping this in mind, what do people (generally speaking) reveal about themselves in VR?

(6) Are you more outspoken about your faith in VR or FR?

(7) Do you think it is important that one's online persona (avatar<sup>111</sup>) reflects who one is in FR?

(8): How would you react if someone's online persona would differ significantly from whom he or she is in FR?

(9) To what extent should someone evangelizing online reveal their identity?

(10) Are you concerned about the actual gender, age or ethnicity of the person you are talking to online?

(11) What is the motivation for developing an online persona that is different from who a person otherwise is?

(12) Do people use Avatars to reveal themselves or to hide?

(13) Would you encourage someone to use an avatar to "try out" religion (e.g. creating a Christian avatar who attends Christian activities online)?

(14) How would you describe the relationship between a person and his or her avatar?

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<sup>109</sup> Virtual Reality is here understood as computer mediated experiences in which users can inhabit a space, through the use of an avatar, and where they can interact with others, engage in various activities and even alter or hide their identity through the avatar without the threat of their actions bearing any physical consequences. With regards to this research, the following criterions need to be met in order to be applicable for the empirical research: (1) The possibility to hide and alter one's FR identity or to create a new identity; (2) the possibility to communicate with others and (3) the possibility to engage in activities or relationships which do not have to (but can) have direct effect on First Reality. Examples for this could be multiplayer online-games, forums, chat rooms, and *Second Life*, but it can also apply to social media such as Twitter or Facebook.

<sup>110</sup> First Reality refers to the culture the person grew up in and was part of before entering VR or whenever a person leaves VR. I chose to use the terms first culture and first reality to avoid the phrase "real world culture" which would imply that VR is less, or not truly real.

<sup>111</sup> "The existence of an avatar means someone has used some of cyberspace's resources in ways that result in other avatars recognising a stable online personality. [...] More than one avatar can be created and the relationship between the identities and someone's offline life is complicated" (Jordan 1999:59).

### **Contextualization and evangelization**

(15) Has VR changed the way people inquire about religion and establish their own religious identity?

A: If so, what could this mean for evangelization?

(16) Given that so many different religions are represented on the Internet, how can credibility be given to the Christian witness?

(17) Have you evangelized online?

A: Was it intentional?

B: Are you different when evangelizing in VR?

(18) What would you suggest for ethical guidelines for those evangelizing online?

(19) Is it appropriate to use Online-Games such as *World of Warcraft* to evangelize?

(20) Is there such a thing as a *cyber culture* (i.e. a culture unique to VR)?

A: If so, what characterises it?

(21) How could evangelization differ in VR?

(22) *When a missionary goes to a foreign culture he or she often tries to contextualize the Gospel message for the particular culture. Would this apply to VR too?*

A: If so, how would the method and/or message need to change?

(23) What good news (gospel) does the Christian faith have for those in VR?

(24) Can technology (including VR) be a form of religion?

A: If so, what characterises it and how would it affect evangelization?

(25) Why would people use *prayer apps* on their cell phones instead of “just” praying?

(26) McLuhan has argued that *the medium is the message*. Does VR as a medium affect the gospel message?

A: If so, in which ways could the medium VR affect the evangelistic message?

(27) Does VR raise new questions for theology?

### **Relationship between VR and FR**

(28) What difference does it make if a person attends a virtual or a local church?

(29) Is there something that cannot be communicated between two people in VR (particularly with regards to faith and religion)?

(30) In the context of an evangelistic conversation, is it desirable to move the conversation into FR?

(31) *Social media platforms like Facebook could be classified as Augmented Reality (AR) because they do not allow a strict disconnect between FR and VR. Such platforms are presently*

*very popular, whereas platforms like Second Life, which allow a clear disconnect, have faded in popularity.* Why are people interested in keeping FR and VR connected?

(32) Would people be more willing to enquire about faith and religion in AR than VR?

(33) What other questions should be discussed in this panel with regards to evangelization in VR?

## 5.2 Data analysis

### 5.2.1 Initial open-coding (inductive)

The first initial coding was done primarily inductively. No prior categories were applied and, where helpful, the codes reflect the terminology of those interviewed.

Here the researcher goes through all the data and creates codes for the phenomena he or she discovers. When naming the codes, the researcher tries to use the language of the data by deriving the names from the data (i.e. interviews) itself, these codes are called in-vitro codes.

This resulted in 1484 codes. However, many of them were similar.

### 5.2.2 Further open-coding (deductive)

The second round of coding was done to confirm, group and categorize the 1484 codes from the first round. Here sub-categories were created which helped to show the relationship between different codes.

The main categories were orientated towards the research questions, but were then extended and supplemented. They are as follows:

*Relationships*: This category summarizes the attitudes people have towards relationships formed online and, to a lesser degree, how they use VR to build relationships (see 3.3.1). Initially, this category was labelled *community*.

*Credibility*: This term was inspired by the literature review (see 3.2.2). Here the different methods of creating credibility online were summarized. The methods discovered were presented in the second round of the PDM (see 6.2.1.3).

*Usage of avatars*: This category was used to refer to the codes which describe the different ways people relate to and use their avatar. This issue was introduced at the beginning of the study (see 3.2.3) and is further developed in the *missiology interpretation* (see 8.1.2).

*Anonymity*: This category describes codes which define the various ways the evangelists respond to the challenge of interacting with people who remain (partly) anonymous.

*Continuity (between VR and FR)*: This category contains codes which describe the ways people connect experiences and relationships developed in VR to FR. Again, this category emerged from the literature review (see 3.2.5).

Some of the early interview partners also expressed ethical concerns over evangelizing online and therefore appropriate questions were added for the next expert-interviews. The findings were grouped in the main category *ethics*.

Additionally, the research question and thesis created the need for the categories *evangelization* and *contextualization*. These terms were defined at length in chapter 2.

Out of the initial coding process further categories were created inductively with regards to the *impact* or effect of the medium (VR) on evangelization. The category *impact* describes the way VR impacts the process of evangelization.

Furthermore, since contextualization inherently contains questions about what the new context looks like, the category *cyber culture*<sup>112</sup> was formed in order to group information related to that together.

Thus, in addition to the first six categories gained deductively, the following five were added inductively. However, the inductive and deductive development of the categories happened in dialogue with each other, as the illustration below exemplifies.

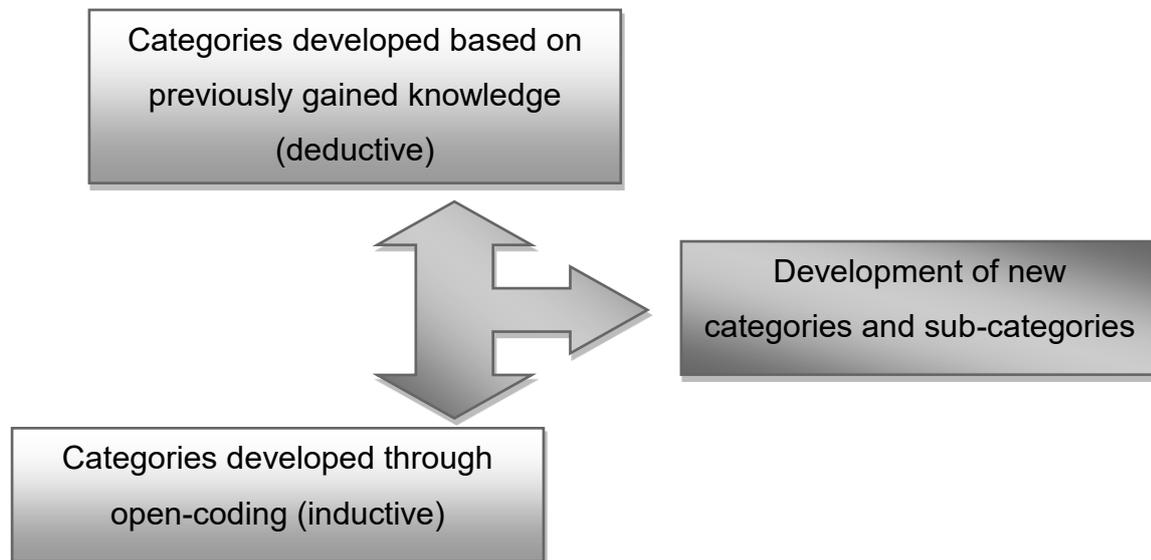


Illustration 9: *Categories developed with MaxQDA*

In addition, the answers were also coded to the matching questions from the interview. This allowed for quick review of the questions and answers.

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<sup>112</sup> Other suitable names could have been virtual culture or digital culture. However, virtual culture is not commonly used and digital culture has a wider meaning, by also addressing the influence of digitalization in FR and VR.

| Question ID | Question Text  | Count |
|-------------|--|-------|
| 0           | IV Questions   | 0     |
| 1           | Professional experience                                      | 18    |
| 2           | Have they changed the way you live out your faith?           | 12    |
| 3           | Do you reveal things about yourself online ...               | 7     |
| 5           | what do people reveal about themselves                       | 18    |
| 6           | Are you more outspoken about your faith in VR or FR?         | 6     |
| 7           | it is important that one's online persona (avatar) reflects  | 13    |
| 8           | How would you react if someone's online persona would dif    | 12    |
| 9           | To what extent should someone evangelizing reveal their      | 10    |
| 10          | Are you concerned about the actual gender, age or ethnicity  | 7     |
| 11          | What is the motivation for developing an online persona tha  | 8     |
| 12          | Do people use Avatars to reveal themselves or to hide?       | 10    |
| 13          | Would you encourage someone to use an avatar to "try out" r  | 6     |
| 14          | How would you describe the relationship between a person an  | 7     |
| 15          | Has VR changed the way people inquire about religion and es  | 26    |
| A           | If so, what could this mean for evangelization?              | 10    |
| 16          | Given that so many different religions are represented on t  | 36    |
| 19          | Is it appropriate to use Online-Games such as World of Warc  | 16    |
| 17          | Have you evangelized online?                                 | 7     |
| B           | Are you different when evangelizing in VR?                   | 7     |
| A           | Was it intentional?  | 3     |
| 18          | What would you suggest for ethical guidelines for those eva  | 14    |
| 20          | Is there such a thing as a cyberculture                      | 14    |
| A           | If so, what characterises it?                                | 6     |
| 21          | How could evangelization differ in VR?                       | 24    |
| 22          | Would this apply to VR too? (ie contextualization)           | 14    |
| A           | how would the method and/or message need to change?          | 11    |
| 24          | Can technology (including VR) be a form of religion?         | 6     |
| A           | If so, what characterises it and how would it affect evangel | 2     |
| 23          | What good news (Gospel) does the Christian faith have for t  | 14    |
| 25          | Why would people use prayer apps on their cell phones inste  | 8     |
| 26          | McLuhan has argued that the medium is the message. Does VR   | 9     |
| A           | If so, in which ways could the medium VR affect the evangeli | 8     |
| 27          | Does VR raise new questions for theology?                    | 7     |
| 28          | What difference does it make if a person attends a virtual   | 11    |
| 29          | Is there something that cannot be communicated between two   | 11    |
| 30          | In the context of an evangelistic conversation, is it desir  | 7     |
| 31          | Why are people interested in keeping FR and VR connected?    | 32    |
| 32          | Would people be more willing to enquire about faith and re   | 5     |
| 33          | What other questions should be discussed in this panel with  | 38    |
| 34 (New)    | Do you find that on-line mirrors off-line                    | 4     |
| 35 (new)    | What is success in online Evangelisatio                      | 4     |

Illustration 10: Interview questions (MaxQDA)

Through this process of coding, the general categories were created, revealing the various themes of online evangelization. In order to demonstrate how codes were developed from the comments made in the interviews, an example of the category *protecting* is displayed below. This category was developed inductively, as a sub-category of *identity*.

| Document                   | Code  | Begin | End | Segment   |
|----------------------------|---|-------|-----|---|
| 02 IV<br>Thomas<br>Gerlach | Identity\protecting<br>(hiding)\assume that<br>we are lied too<br>(Identity, name ...)  | 90    | 90  | Und da ist das. Niederschwellig, wir selber sollten niederschwellig sein und sollten eigentlich damit rechnen, dass wir erst mal angelogen werden.  |
| 02 IV<br>Thomas<br>Gerlach | Identity\protecting<br>(hiding)\assume that<br>we are lied too<br>(Identity, name ...)ok<br>b/c they don't know us                            | 94    | 94  | Wie auch, ja. Es ist deren Schutz, es ist deren Angst, es ist deren, überhaupt vielleicht manchmal der Antrieb, uns zu schreiben, indem sie sich selber erst mal zurücksetzen, weil sie ja nicht wissen, wer sind wir denn. Dass wir die guten sind, dass muss sich hinterher immer erst mal rausstellen und das überlassen wir dann auch Gott.   |
| 02 IV<br>Thomas<br>Gerlach | Identity\protecting<br>(hiding)\assume that<br>we are lied too<br>(Identity,<br>name ...)\doesn't<br>question the sincerity<br>of the request | 97    | 98  | Steffen: Ja. Aber Du würdest deshalb nicht anzweifeln, dass ihre Anfrage oder so was nicht echt sein, weil sie jetzt sich nicht...<br><br>Thomas: Absolut nicht. Erst mal hundert Prozent ja, Du bist okay, ich bin okay. So, nun lass uns weitermachen.  |
| 14 IV<br>Kevin<br>Schut    | Identity\protecting<br>(hiding)\ok to hide, no<br>need share<br>everything<br>parti[cularly] bad stuff  | 46    | 46  | Say I have a past of sexual abuse that I grew up with an abusive father or something like that, and I didn't, just so that we're all clear. Hypothetically speaking, I'm that kind of person. I don't need to share that with everyone all the time   |
| 14 IV<br>Kevin<br>Schut    | Identity\protecting<br>(hiding)\ok to hide, no<br>need share<br>everything<br>parti[cularly] bad stuff  | 48    | 48  | Concealing parts of myself from someone that it's not really their business and it's not relevant to our relationship, yeah, I don't see a problem with that  |
| 01 IV<br>Anno K            | Identity\protecting<br>(hiding)\trying to<br>protect the identity of<br>their coaches   | 69    | 69  | Yes, is that in some cases, coach is really developing a deeper friendship. They are taught to break the relationship after finishing the course. Why? Because it's extremely demanding. Some of it is emotionally demanding. Some people are difficult and they would like to have somebody always to encourage them and to pull more life and ask you about ... But this is very demanding on people's psyche.  |
| 01 IV<br>Anno K            | Identity\protecting<br>(hiding)\seeing it as<br>no big deal that<br>people hide their<br>identify   | 75    | 75  | Yes, absolutely but that's not a big deal because we are all dealing with a building of a relationship, is just a matter of 2, 3, 4 e-Mails that you know everything and people usually hide their real identity. We are not even asking them for the real identity. That's why we really like to work with couples as coaches because if this is a man who is writing as a man and it comes out after 2 mails that it's a women using the man's nickname, then simply a husband passes it to his wife and that's that. |
| 01 IV<br>Anno K            | Identity\protecting<br>(hiding)\seeing wrong<br>identities as people<br>right and necessary<br>for safety                                     | 77    | 77  | No. People have rights. They are scared more and more because there is so much scam and misuse of identities that people are protecting. We tell them.  |

|                       |   |    |    |  |
|-----------------------|---|----|----|--|
| 01 IV<br>Anno K       | Identity\protecting (hiding)\asking for too much information scares people away   | 78 | 78 | Also there is always a balance between how much information we are requiring. Of course, we would like to have a lot of information but the number of people filling up forms depends directly on number of fields you ask them to fill.   |
| 01 IV<br>Anno K       | Identity\protecting (hiding)\asking for too much information scares people away\the more you ask the less people sign up  | 79 | 79 | If you are asking them many questions, of course you have good reasons for it. For example, you want to match them with the right coach but the more questions you give, the less people sign.   |
| 01 IV<br>Anno K       | Identity\protecting (hiding)\asking for too much information scares people away\the more you ask the less people sign up\asking for only three things               | 80 | 80 | Now, we are even experimenting with system that is just asking for an email and name and age because those are the 3 things that will help us better mine as a starting point but there's also an open field when they can write their question. This question helps us also a little bit.   |
| 01 IV<br>Anno K       | Identity\protecting (hiding)\asking for too much information scares people away\the more you ask the less people sign up\asking for only three things               | 81 | 81 | After sending it, we had very nice big forms with asking a lot of other things. Simply the more questions that I ask people so it's your choice. If they build up confidence with time, they will fill out the fields.   |
| 01 IV<br>Anno K       | Identity\protecting (hiding)\asking for too much information scares people away\the more you ask the less people sign up\asking a lot of questions of the e-coaches | 82 | 82 | If there is a discipleship course and not even mentioning if we are talking about a share course, then our list of questions is long, the form. Also, if somebody is training to be an e-coach, the form is 3 pages. We really want to know everything, not the church affiliation, the experience, the names of reference people, the life experience, what difficulties they came through, what was their salvation story, how involved are they in church. All those important questions. How they evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. Why they want to do what to, why they apply. Why? Because that's what we must know for assigning them then to the people but after seeing if, if you would start with this kind of questions in the very end, in the beginning. Nobody would fill it out. |
| 12 IV Rolf<br>Krueger | Identity\protecting (hiding)\amen.de -no email  | 49 | 49 | Ich glaube Vertrauen muss man erst mal erarbeiten. Also bei Jesus.de, bei Amen.de versuchen wir es damit, dass wir erstens niederschwellig sind, das heißt, wir verlangen zum Beispiel keine Email Adresse oder irgendwelche Daten von denen, die ein Anliegen eingeben wollen, also wir wollen jetzt nicht den Eindruck, oder wir versuchen alles zu vermeiden, was den Eindruck erwecken könnte, wir sind nur hinter Dir als Werbekunden her, als Werbegucker her, solche Sachen.  |

|                      |  |    |    |  |
|----------------------|--|----|----|--|
| 12 IV Rolf Krueger   | Identity\protecting (hiding)\first name optional at amen.de                                | 57 | 57 | Wenn man möchte, also wir schreiben hin, wenn Du ein Anliegen eingibst, mit Deinem Vornamen und da steht aber drunter, wenn Du nicht möchtest, dass Dein echter Name hier steht, dann gebe einfach einen falschen Namen an, Gott weiß schon, wer Du bist, aber es ist einfacher für den Manfred oder von mir aus auch für Schneeflocke17 zu beten als für den Typen, der da folgendes Problem hat.       |
| 08 IV John Dyer      | Identity\protecting (hiding)\hurt as reason to access faith via avatar                     | 36 | 36 | Had hurtful experience with religion in the past and felt insecure   |
| 08 IV John Dyer      | Identity\protecting (hiding)\physical distance less threatening                            | 57 | 57 | physical distance  |
| 07 IV Douglas Estes  | Identity\protecting (hiding)\opposite reaction? reveals less online b/c of safety concerns | 18 | 18 | No, but this is mostly because my background and experiences make me hyper-aware of this issue and concern. In fact, I probably reveal less about myself online, and what I reveal online is extremely 'polished,' or packaged in such a way that 20 years from now the content will still fit the online image I want to project. However, I recognize that I am a small minority with this view point. |
| 07 IV Douglas Estes  | Identity\protecting (hiding)\false avatar is common  | 26 | 26 | I wouldn't [be] much [surprised]. I have experienced this before. I wouldn't describe it as highly unusual.  |
| 05 IV Dave Bourgeois | Identity\protecting (hiding)\not concerned with fake ID                                    | 27 | 27 | I would most likely be amused by it.   |

### 5.3 Summary and results of the coding process

This section presents the results of the coding process. The various categories that evolved will be described along with a summary of their content. Since this research is intentionally explorative in nature, it remained open to all kinds of topics relevant to online evangelization, while still pursuing the research questions. For a briefer overview, the conclusion (5.5) provides a list of the main categories and sub-categories, and the appendix contains the entirety data collected.

#### 5.3.1 Identity (Usage of avatars)

The term identity has been used to describe the codes which describe the different ways people relate to and use their avatar. This issue was introduced at the beginning of the study (see 3.2.3) and is further developed in the *missiological interpretation* (see 8.1.2).

Four different applications of an avatar were discovered: protecting (formerly: hiding), revealing, discovering and creating (formerly presenting). Other results related to the possibility of exploring religion through an avatar and concerns regarding the (mis)use of an avatar. The following diagram shows the distribution of the codes among the categories. This provides a sense of which categories were more dominant.

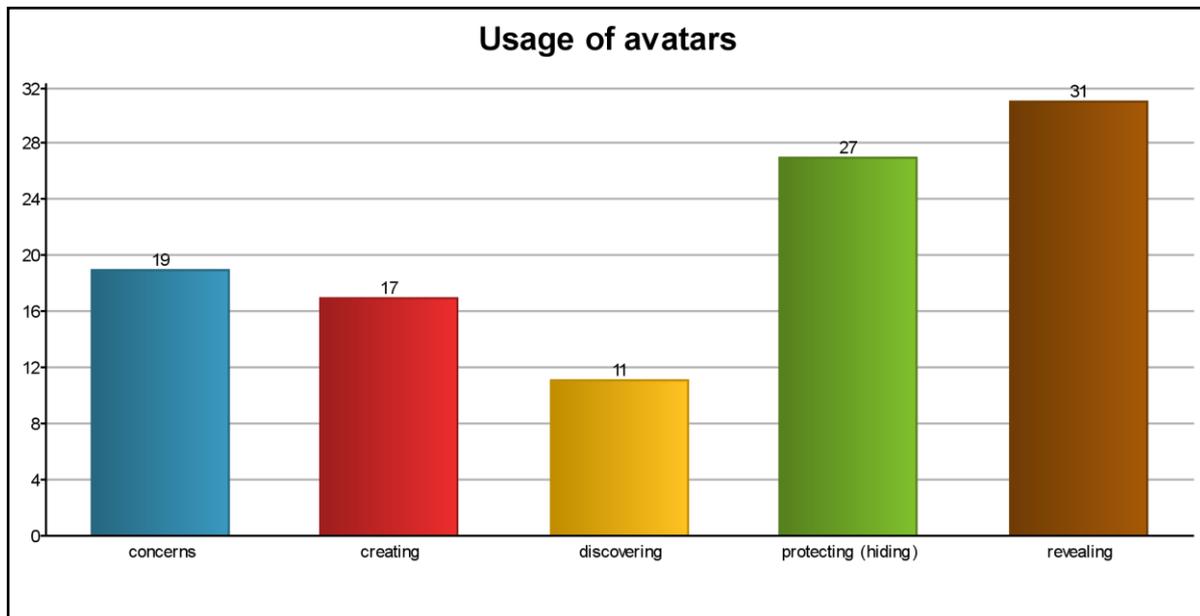


Illustration 11: Statistics of sub-code "Usage of avatars"

The *concerns* mentioned were diverse. One person, for example, suggested that avatars could be used to engage in destructive purposes, whereas most comments centred around the inability to truly know if others are misled or not. Connected to this was the assumption that such a fake-identity would make one hesitant to move the conversation into FR.

*Creating* refers to the attempt to create an avatar that is different from how one actually sees oneself. The respondents frequently cast this in a positive light.

*Discovering* describes the avatar as a means to gain self-knowledge through new experiences. This category is related to revealing, however this implies that a person becomes aware of something he or she did not know about before.

*Revealing* means that people use an avatar as an expression of themselves or to present an aspect of themselves which they otherwise do not reveal. The rationale being that the anonymity of VR provides the necessary safety.

*Protecting* describes how an avatar is used as a shield to hide the self or aspects of it from others. This category was first labelled hiding. However, this holds negative connotations and the intention of hiding was to protect aspects in order to feel safe to reveal hidden aspects of oneself. There seemed to be a strong link between the category *hiding* and *revealing*.

It is important to remember that the results are not based on interviews with the actual avatar user, but on the experience and knowledge of the interviewed experts. Particularly the online-evangelists commented on how they perceived the use of avatars and how they responded to it.

### 5.3.2 Evangelization

The category evangelization (see 2.2 for definition) focuses on the praxis of evangelization online, whereas the following category, *contextualization*, focuses more on the content. Yet, there is an inherent overlap between the two. The sub-categories arose inductively through an ongoing process of reviewing the codes.

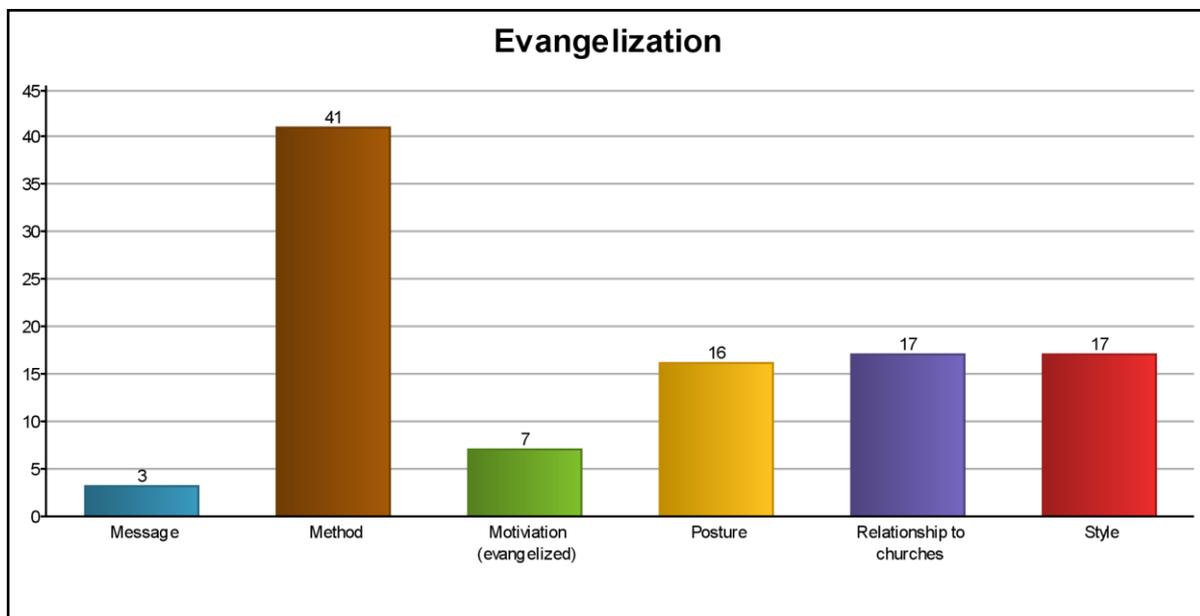


Illustration 12: Statistics of sub-code "Evangelization"

As the diagram clearly indicates, most codes relate to the *method*. Perhaps it is surprising that the category *message* only received 2.9%. This is because most of the codes relevant to the message are dealt with under contextualization, but only few people interviewed explicitly articulated what they understood the gospel message to be. The following sub-categories were developed.

*Posture (before attitude)*: This category describes the posture taken by the one evangelizing. Not many commented on this category but those who did, stressed how important it is to take a humble stance. The answer from Anonymous K shall serve here as an example of an attempt to combine humility with conviction.

I think the gospel is much bigger than we [can] comprehend. I'm not saying we should go towards liberalism. It [is] just [the] opposite. What I am trying to say is that Jesus, and God, is so much bigger than us that our way of comprehending his work is very limited. Of course, what we do, we try to

base on the scripture as a final authority but after saying it, we must be very relaxed as far as our own wisdom.

(Anonymous K R1:127)

*Message:* Those who commented on the content of the gospel suggested the centre is found in the conviction that God loves us.

*Method:* The answers with regards to *method* were sufficient to create a further level of sub-categories.

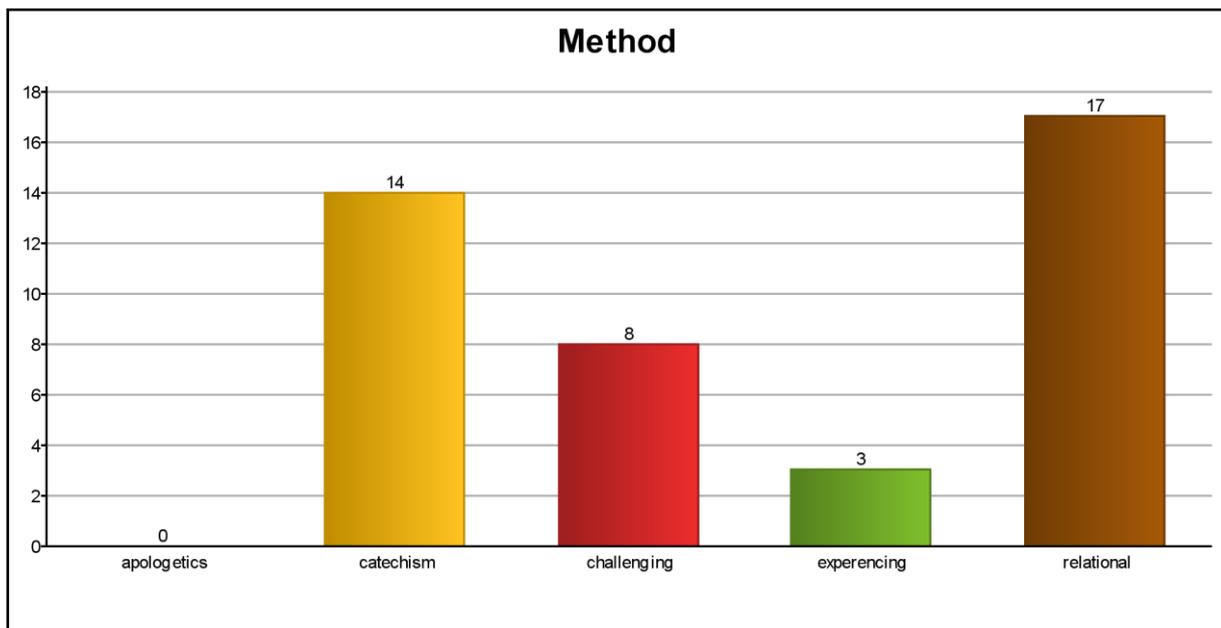


Illustration 13: Sub-category Evangelization\Method

The sub-category *apologetics* does not contain any entries. This category was created deductively because it is a common approach to evangelization and well documented in literature. The fact that no code was added to this category was seen as a surprise and was determined to be worthy of documenting. During the second round respondents did acknowledge this form of evangelization.

*Liturgical* reflected those responses which indicated that people need to experience something from the gospel. Only one person provided examples fitting to this category. Krüger wrote the following about their website *amen.de* which allows people to post prayer requests:

Der Gedanke ist einfach, dass ein Baustein, Gott, also der lernt offensichtlich dann hoffentlich Gott als jemanden kennen, der auch eingreift, der auch Macht hat und der auf meiner Seite steht, aber dann können andere kommen und daran anknüpfen sozusagen, aber es ist nicht unsere Aufgabe, da jetzt ihm noch die Evangelisationskeule, ich sage es jetzt mal so abschätzig, ich meine es nicht so, aber über zu braten und zu sagen, ist schön, dass Gott Dein Gebet erhört hat, jetzt musst Du aber

auch dann Christ werden oder was auch immer man da machen könnte, das machen wir bewusst nicht, einfach weil wir wollen, dass das wirklich dieser Ausschnitt ist.<sup>113</sup>

(R1:154)

Thus, the idea is to allow people to experience God so that others can build on this.

The sub-category *relational* refers to the form of evangelization where a relationship is established before introducing one's faith. This one received the most codes.

A late discovery was the sub-category *catechism*. One could say it is almost too obvious to be noted, but most evangelistic sites of those interviewed used elaborate online-learning platforms. In contrast, the work of Stamper and the websites she researched showed that those organizations tended to abbreviate the evangelistic message.

The last sub-category, *challenging*, was formed most indirectly, when respondents asserted that they disliked the kind of evangelistic endeavour in which one challenges the worldview of the other. However, one person also suggested that to be provocative does not mean that one does not respect the other person's position (Gerlach R1:263-268).

*Motivation (evangelized)* grouped the different reasons given for why people investigate faith. Most assumed that people come because they have a need or seek a solution to a problem.

*Style* described the way the evangelistic message is presented. The most common suggestion was that those evangelizing preferred to be reactive in nature. Bridges, for example, said:

Yes, I do want it, but I don't want it forced. I want somebody to be intrigued enough by me, or my life, or what I'm doing, or my game playing, or whatever it is, to ask those questions.

(R1:96)

Others commented similarly about preferring to wait to be approached about their faith.

Under the category *Relationship to church*, various suggestions were collected regarding the relationship between evangelization and the church. Though the particulars of the statements were diverse, most suggested that it is important that people are guided to church community and most believed that this community needed to be in FR.

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<sup>113</sup> "The idea is simply that this is a building block towards God. So hopefully someone encounters God as someone who also intervenes, who also has power and is on my side. Others then may come and build upon that experience, so to speak. But it is not our job to hit the person with evangelism. This may sound bad, I do not mean it that way, but I don't want to come and say: God has heard your prayer, now you also have to become a Christian or whatever it is that we do: We purposely don't do that. We just want to be this building block" [my translation].

### 5.3.3 Contextualization

This category contained the most codes (127), affirming its centrality to this thesis. In a first step the relevant codes were divided into two categories: those which suggested that the message needs to be different when presented in VR and those which believed that it can or needs to remain the same.

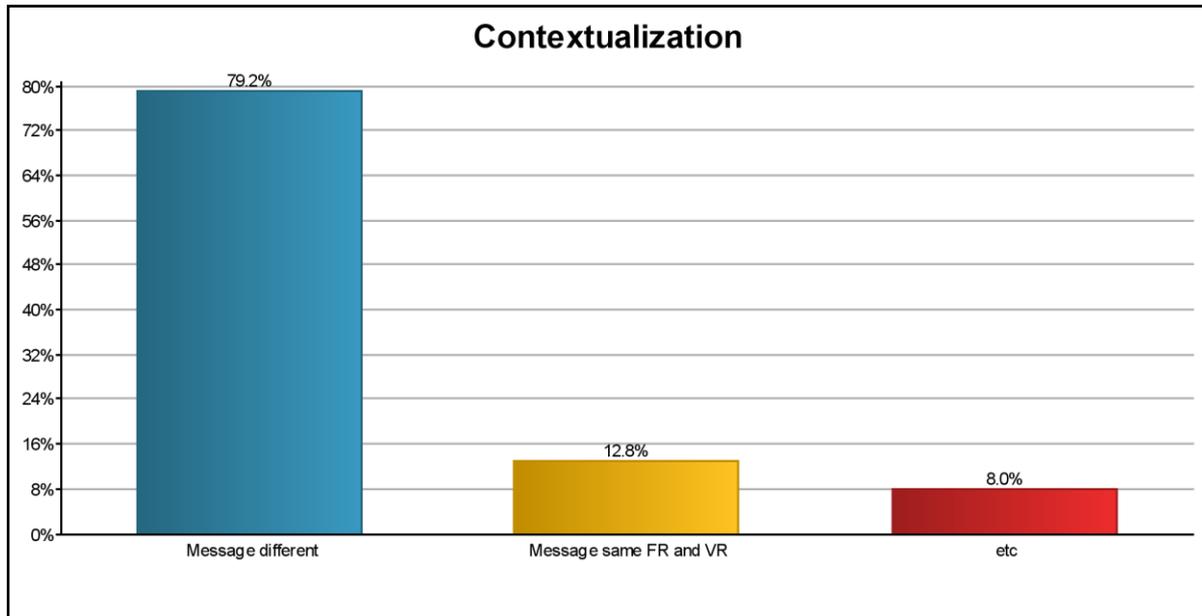


Illustration 14: Statistics of sub-code "Contextualization"

Dyer for example wrote the following, which others have argued similarly:

The message doesn't change. The method always changes. The method can make use of digital resources that won't work in FR evangelization.

(R1:64)

However, the category *message same FR and VR* was rather complicated, because no clear distinction was made between the gospel as a set of theological propositions and the evangelistic message as a presentation thereof. Thus, to avoid drawing the wrong conclusions, this question was addressed again in the second round.

The second category, on the other hand, allowed for further sub-categories dividing the codes according to the reasons for why the message needed to be different.

|                                 |    |
|---------------------------------|----|
| Message different               | 0  |
| Message different b/c of actors | 16 |
| Message different b/c FR        | 10 |
| Message different b/c theology  | 21 |
| Message different b/c of VR     | 59 |

Illustration 15: Sub-category Contextualization\Message different

The sub-category *Message different/Message different b/c of actors* contains codes that suggest that the actors (i.e. people other than the evangelist) influence the message. This suggestion

went in two directions. One dimension was theological, suggesting that people will believe and do what they want and not what theologians tell them. The second line of argumentation was that people change the online platforms they use. Though these are two very different reasons they both suggest the evangelistic process is something that needs to be negotiated. The complexity of the theological dimension is has been discussed under 2.3.2.

The sub-category *Message different/Message different b/c FR* refers to those codes which suggested that FR influences one's usage of VR. Thus, the process of contextualization does not necessarily only involve the FR of the evangelist or the particular digital culture, but also the FR of the one who is being addressed.

Theological issues were also seen as a reason for creating a different message. The sub-category *Message different/Message different b/c of theology* contained the relevant codes. Some participants suggested that the gospel is not a fixed entity (Heidbrink R1:116). Other suggested that VR raises new theological questions and is itself a reason why the message needs to be different due to our exposure to different world views.

Das sind, na ja, nicht direkt Auswirkungen des Internets, aber doch diese Fortentwicklung dessen Kind das Internet auch ist, diese Wissensvergrößerung, das ist das was mir einfällt, also, das jetzt, so richtig neue Fragen, also ich glaube, dadurch, dass wir viel mit, viel mehr über andere Menschen und Kulturen wissen, beschäftigen wir uns auch viel mehr mit den Fragen oder werden wir viel mehr gewahr, dass es einfach auch andere Menschen gibt, die völlig anders ticken, auch eben religiös anders ticken als wir und dadurch stellt sich schon, finde ich nochmal mehr die Frage.

(Krüger R1:169)

Thus, contextualization for VR is needed because of VR. The world is changed through VR in part because it allows us exposure to a much wider range of world views and religions. Our awareness of them automatically challenges our beliefs.

Closely connected is the category *Message different/Message different b/c of VR*, yet here the focus was much more on the changes in response to the technological possibilities and limitations. Many suggestions seemed to have the underlying assumption that a separation from text and context (i.e. medium and message) is not possible, contrary to earlier statements discussed on contextualization and the impact of the medium on the message.

### **5.3.4 Credibility**

The issue of credibility and authority was briefly introduced under 3.2.2. Codes in this category describe different ways credibility is established online. Two concerns (or challenges) were named that made online evangelization problematic. The first one was the observation that anybody could call themselves an “expert” online, and the second that there are “crazy Christians” online who discredit the Christian faith through their contributions.

Several ways were suggested for gaining credibility online. The categories with the most codes were: by being connected to something known in FR and by being transparent and authentic.

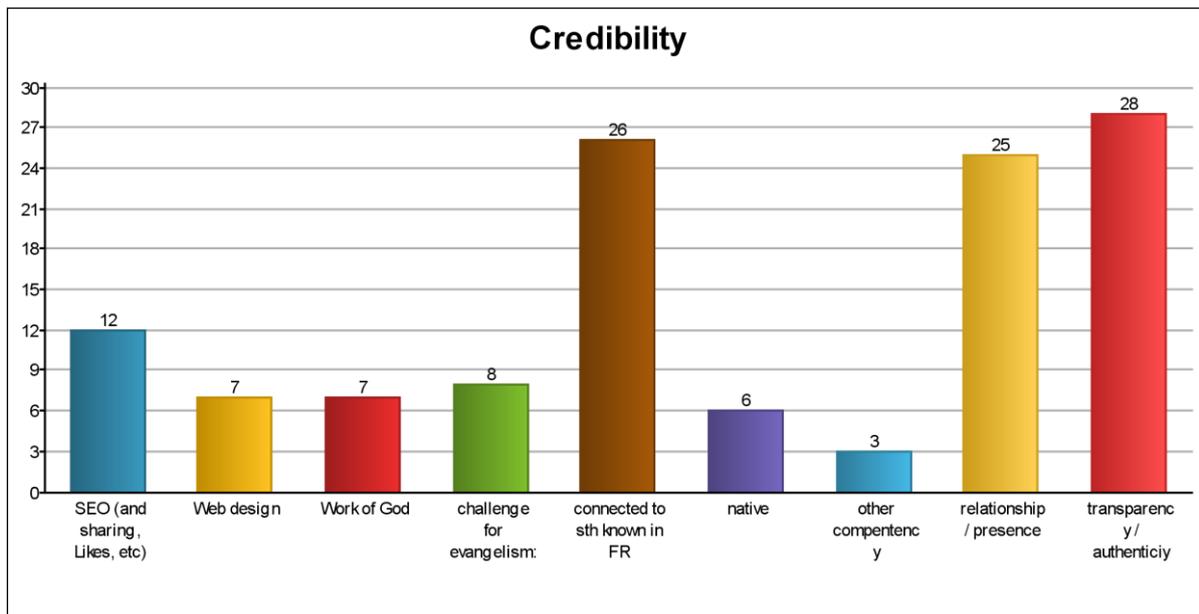


Illustration 16: Statistics of sub-code "Credibility"

*SEO* (search engine optimization) means that information provided online is optimized in such a way that search engines list it as one of their first results. Particularly those who work for online-ministries saw this as a crucial way to gain credibility. The assumption seemed to be that people equate a high-rating on Google with trustworthy information.

The *web design* also needed to reflect professionalism in order to be considered trustworthy. However, it was also pointed out that something could look unprofessional and thereby give the impression of being authentic, which in turn creates trustworthiness.

Some participants believed that credibility is a *work of God*. Since it is God's gospel, it is he who gives the message credibility. Some suggested a *both/and* approach.

The category *connected to sth known in FR* refers to those codes which suggested that one needs to either link back to an established authority or provide something known.

Some suggested that competency in one area can be transferred into another. Dyer for example wrote:

My hope is that people value what I do professionally so that when I do intentionally talk about faith within the work sphere (in person or on twitter), I have the credibility to do so.

(R1:24)

Thus, *other competency* besides theology can give one credibility to talk about the Christian faith.

Related to this category was *native*. Here it was suggested that one has to belong to the particular VR before having the right to speak into it. Warnings were also given against trying too hard to become an insider.

*Transparency/authenticity* summarized all the codes that suggested that credibility is established through being transparent and authentic about oneself. Yet, many also warned against the risks involved in being (too) transparent. Bourgeois, for example, wrote:

If it [i.e. being transparent] would put them in danger, then they do not need to do it. However, to build an authentic relationship, it is important to be transparent.

(R1:29)

It was further suggested that the level of transparency depends on the expectations of the particular VR one is involved in. The issue of having the agenda to evangelize was also discussed particularly by those evangelizing in online games.

### 5.3.5 Cyber culture

The comments relating to cyber culture strongly suggest that there is not one cyber culture, but many cultures (plural). Unifying and diversifying aspects were suggested. Participants made sufficient reference to *Facebook* and *Second Life* to give them their own category. The final category focuses on VR as a religion.

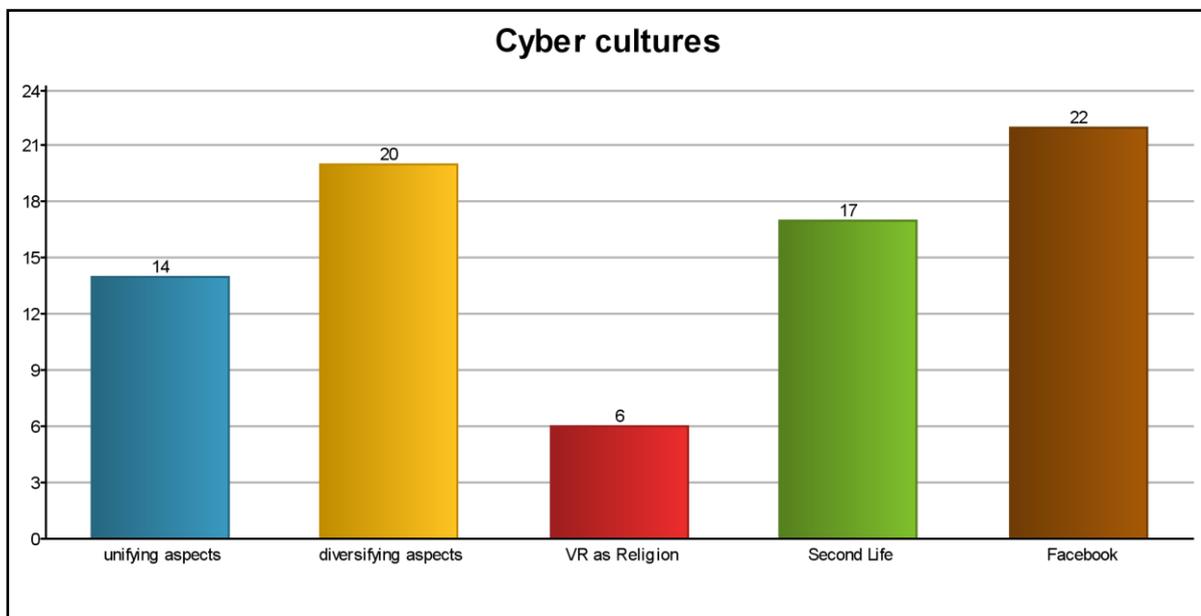


Illustration 17: Statistics of sub-code "Cyber culture"

*Unifying aspects* includes factors which are common among all cyber cultures and suggest there are things that unify all virtual cultures. Some examples are that we are always online, communication is quicker and people tend to be more open. It was also suggested that *trolling* is present in all cyber cultures.

Comments pertaining to *diversifying aspects* suggested that the cultures online are like all other sub-cultures. Their individual character is a result of the negotiation between the different actors (e.g. users), their intentions and interests and the possibilities allowed for by the particular platform.

Two particular platforms and their culture were discussed more frequently: *Facebook* and *Second Life*. Much was also said about the gaming culture which is integrated in its own main category.

*Virtual reality as Religion* was added to the category *Cyber culture* since it was too small to stand by itself as a main category. However, religious themes are found in many cyber cultures, explicitly and implicitly. The responses showed that there was no consensus on the question of whether or not VR can be a religion.

*Facebook* was described as a place to create a perfect persona (contra Krüger R1:69) where one has an audience and a place to connect. Most people did not address *Facebook* on a general level but specifically its use for evangelization. Two participants suggested that *Facebook* was not a good place to evangelize because its intention is to provide superficial information and keep people up-to-date on current events in a user's life.

The codes concerning *Second Life* dealt mostly with explanations as to why it lost popularity. Most participants suggested that people prefer an *Augmented Reality* like *Facebook* over VRs which are entirely separated from FR, such as *Second Life*.

### **5.3.6 Online-Games**

A few of those interviewed (particularly Bridges, Schut and Heidbrink) had specialized knowledge with regards to online games. Much of what is found in this category is based on their interviews. The following sub-categories emerged:

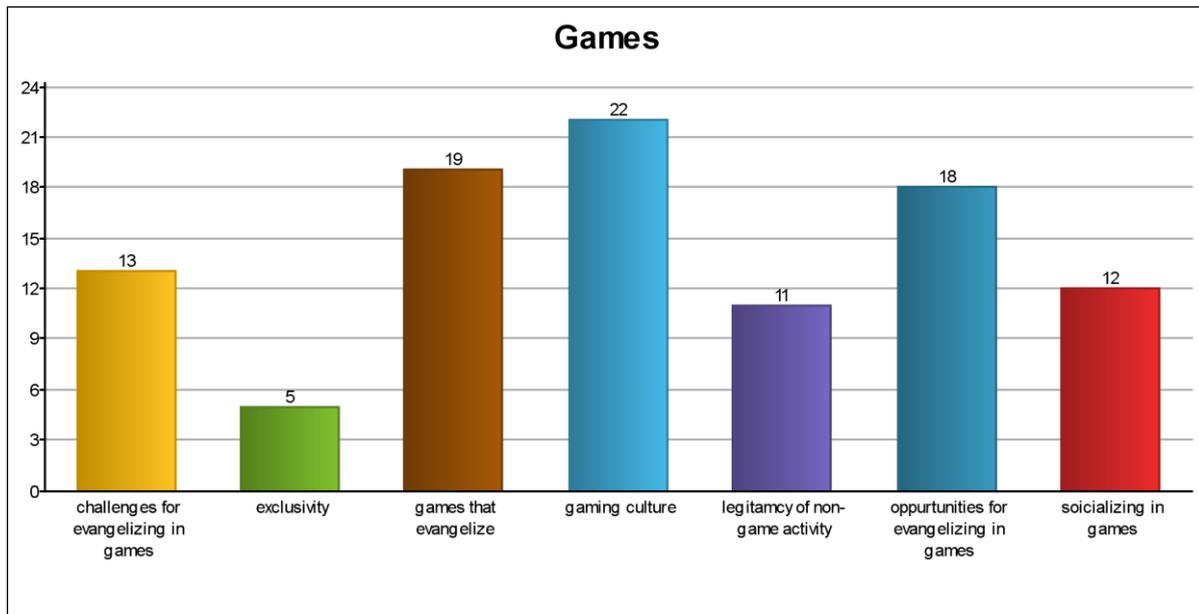


Illustration 18: Statistics of sub-code "Games"

Several *opportunities for evangelizing in games* were mentioned. It was, for example, suggested that people are more open in games and that particularly shy or introverted people find it easier to talk in a game setting.

*Challenges for evangelizing in games* were all articulated by Schut and centred on the idea that gamers are more sensitive to critique, having rules imposed on them or providing challenge. He saw this to be a challenge since he considers the gospel to have an inherent critique (Shut R1:63-64).

*Exclusivity* was developed as a category based on comments that games are not accessible to everyone. For instance, MMORPGs require a great investment of time, whereas first-person shooter games require good reflexes. Thus, not every person can participate in these cultures.

The category *games that evangelize* represents a surprise discovery, namely that games are not only a place to evangelize, but that a game itself could evangelize. Several challenges to this idea were made. The linear nature of the biblical story was seen to be particularly problematic since games usually allow for a high level of influence on how the game narrative unfolds.

It was suggested that *gaming culture* itself is not heterogenic, but differs, for example, based on the game genre. Though gaming culture is hard to define it was suggested that it is marked by creativity, a desire for play and playfulness.

The question of *legitimacy of non-game activity* was much discussed. Active gamers affirmed that it is okay that people go against the mechanics of the games in order to evangelize.

Socializing is a common feature of games (see next category). However, it also suggested that it is unethical to play in order to evangelize.

*Socializing in games* was described as a common feature of online-games. Furthermore, it was suggested that people were open to talk about religion and personal issues.

### 5.3.7 Relationships

This category contains codes that describe the attitudes people have towards relationships formed online and how (if at all) they move into FR.

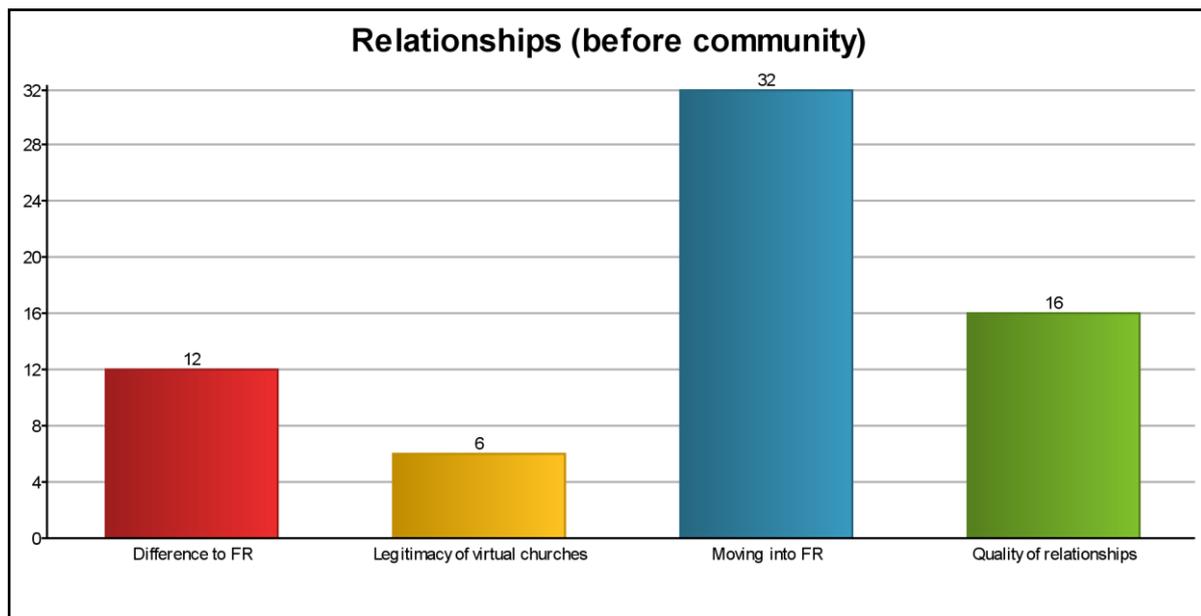


Illustration 19: Statistics of sub-code "Relationship"

The category *difference to FR* describes how relationships in VR are different. Here it was suggested that relationships could be just as meaningful, but one could miss the full-sensory experience (e.g. smell and touch).

Due to their lack of physical presence, the *legitimacy of virtual churches* was questioned by most who commented on this issue. But others disagreed. Estes for example commented:

I've said it before and I will say it again: there are unhealthy VR churches and healthy FR churches, and there are healthy VR churches and unhealthy FR churches. The 'place' of their meeting doesn't matter. What matters is the Spirit and the people.

(R1:81)

It was also suggested that the sacraments posed a great challenge for the virtual church.

Most of those interviewed seemed to prefer to see relationships *moving into FR*. However, it was pointed out that this depends on the nature of the relationship. People, for example, who use a forum to find technical support are very unlikely to want to meet those people in FR, whereas dating sites are usually designed to eventually connect people in FR. With regards to evangelization it was suggest that most desire to move the relationship into FR.

The comments made with regards to the *quality of relationships* in VR mirrored those on the *legitimacy of virtual churches*. However, it was often suggested that individuals might experience the quality of their online-relationships as equal to as, or perhaps even, better than those in FR.

### 5.3.8 Ethics

The discussion on ethics took different aspects as the diagram below shows.

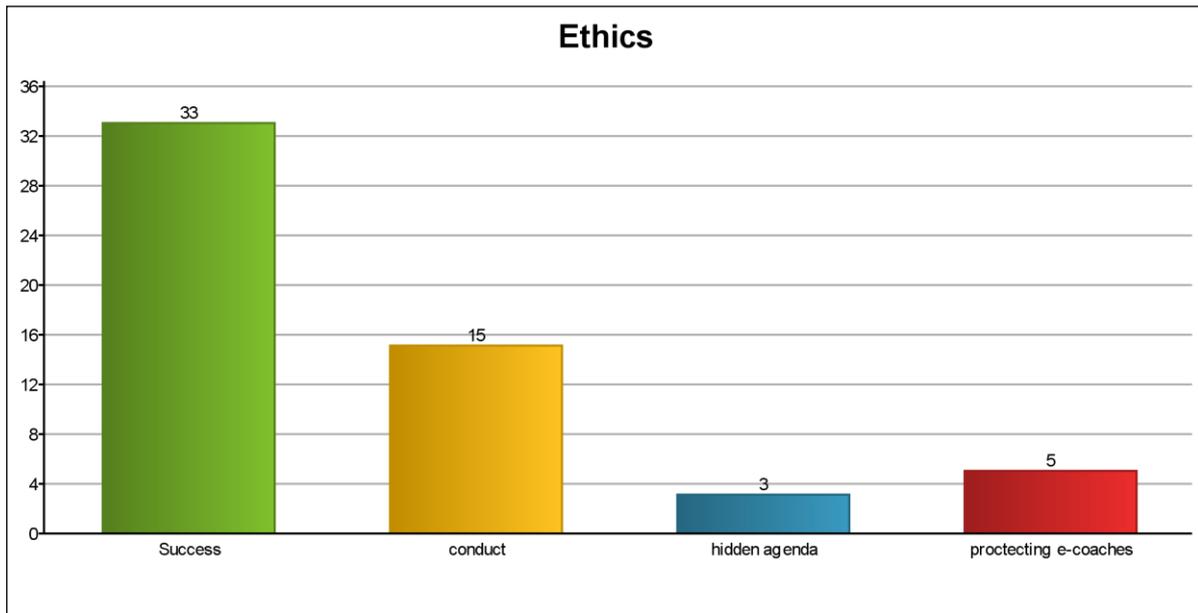


Illustration 20: Statistics of sub-code "Ethics"

Bridges, for example, was concerned about Christians having a *hidden agenda*. He said:

From my experience in being a Christian as long as I have, the agenda that I see on the other side is one that has to be forced in order to get somebody to do what you want. It's a controlling agenda. I don't want anything from you, I don't need anything from you. I have a message for you if you want it. You don't even have to listen to it. You don't have to approach me.

(R1:114)

This is particularly relevant in a context that is not clearly marked as a place for people to inquire about the Christian faith.

The suggestions regarding proper *conduct* for those evangelizing online were wide ranging. One person suggested that there should be specific guidelines outlining the use of an avatar, whereas others felt that there was no need for specific guidelines for VR. The category *posture* under *evangelization* contained most of what could also be placed in this category.

Most codes had to do with the issue of defining *success* and how (if at all) one can count conversions. This practice was challenged on two grounds. First of all, the accuracy was questioned: What constitutes a conversion and how can it be counted? Secondly, the intentions

were challenged: What are these statistics used for? Anonymous K, in particular, challenged the notion of using these statistics in order to find donors.

Specifically, with regards to the use of an avatar by e-coaches, it was suggested that they do not need to be fully transparent, but what is revealed should be accurate. Protecting the e-coaches was very important to most who operated with volunteers that engage on a one-to-one basis with people inquiring about faith. However, the specifics differed.

### 5.3.9 Adaptation

Adaption refers to the more general practice of how one responds to technology.<sup>114</sup>

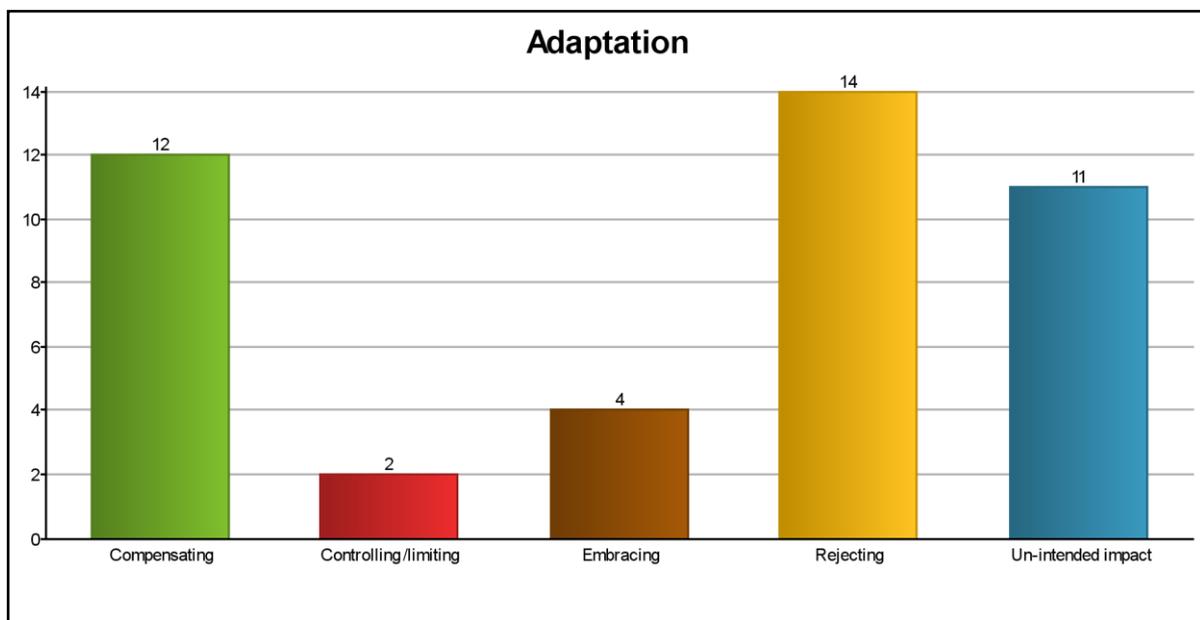


Illustration 21: *Statistics of sub-code "Adaptation"*

Four different responses to technology were discovered:

*Compensating* refers to the use of technology to compensate for a short-coming in another technology. For example, emoticons are used to compensate for the lack of mimic and gesture in most computer-mediated forms of communication.

*Controlling/Limiting* describes the decision to limit the influence of a particular technology or at least control its influence. Participants, for example, mentioned intentionally not using *Facebook* for evangelization.

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<sup>114</sup> The category of adaptation was added later in the process, as it emerged more clearly during the second round. For this reason, it is also not explicitly listed in the second round. Prior the codes here were integrated into the category contextualization. However, it soon become evident that it needs to stand as a category by itself.

*Embracing* describes a more opportunistic approach to the use of technology which assumes that the unintended consequences of technology do not compare to the advantages it brings.

*Rejecting* is the opposite reaction, where technology is rejected based on the belief that its negative consequences exceed its benefits.

A fifth category summarized comments about the *unintended impact* of technology. Several participants allude to the fact that every technology introduces un-intended consequences along with its benefits. One participant, for example, said that because of his smart phone he finds it challenging to be present to those who are around him. The four categories above describe ways to deal with these consequences.

## **5.4 Summary of contributions by experts**

The following are summaries of the interviews conducted during the first round. This provides a general idea of their contributions. Though brief, they introduce the basic beliefs and most significant contributions of each participant. A contribution was considered significant if the position presented was either unique (e.g. revealing a viewpoint others did not comment on) or because their opinion differed from the majority.

The summary bases itself on the process of coding described above. The categories developed allowed for a systematic summarizing of the individual participants while also allowing for comparability. In turn this process also highlights the areas where opinions, experiences, praxis or understandings differ significantly.

On another level, this summary also allows the reader to appreciate the individual contributions from the various experts for this research and the quality of their thoughts and engagements.

### **5.4.1 Douglas Estes**

Estes sees the impact of VR on evangelization as subtle yet fundamental. The medium does not change the message itself, but changes its context (Estes R1:74). However, the gospel itself remains unaffected, namely that “while we were yet broken, miserable people, that Christ died for us!” (R1:66). He views the message as something separate from the method of communication. “The message doesn’t change. The method always changes” (R1:64).

Virtual cultures are essentially like all sub-cultures, yet what characterizes them are the “identities gained and developed online” (R1:57). In his experience people do not reveal more

about themselves online, but rather different things about themselves. Avatars serve as a way to escape reality (although this is not necessarily unhealthy) (R1:32). Personally, he describes the things he reveals about himself as “extremely polished” (R1:18), because transparency and self-disclosure needs to be negotiated, considering the risks encountered online (R1:28). However, people still want their identities to be connected to FR (R1:88).

Estes did not see any need for particular ethical guidelines yet he suggested that Christians should be respectful and follow the *terms of service* when in a game (R1:53).

Virtual (Christian) communities are, to him, of equal value to FR churches. “There are unhealthy VR churches and healthy FR churches, and there are healthy VR churches and unhealthy FR churches. The ‘place’ of their meeting doesn’t matter. What matters is the Spirit and the people” (R1:81).

Together with Anonymous S (R1:44), Estes sees credibility for the gospel achieved by “pointing to the person and work of Christ as a starting point” (R1:45).

#### **5.4.2 Thomas Gerlach**

Gerlach (R1:153) found that short videos which address felt-needs (e.g. rejection) and relevant topics (e.g. sexuality) were helpful tools for starting conversation about faith online. His organization also uses other means, such as *the four steps*, which is a brief explanation of the gospel after which a person can make a decision whether or not to believe. However, they do not consider this the crucial point in the evangelistic encounter (R1:67). Just as with the videos, the four steps are seen as a possible starting point. The goal is to connect a person with an e-coach of a partner church, with whom he or she can build a relationship. The role of the e-coach is to help the person discover God. While this also means to challenge a person, every conversation is done under the premise: “You are okay. I am okay. Now let’s talk” (R1:269).

Their organization has a rather unique way of seeking credibility by being locally embedded. The people video-recorded are from Berlin and the recordings themselves take place in Berlin. Thus, credibility is gained through people recognising a place or a person. Their webpages are also written in the Berlin slang. Like most other organizations, they also rely on search-engine optimization to establish good ratings on search engines.

As an organization, they have stopped counting the number of people prayed the sinner’s prayer in response to the *four steps*, because they do not consider it a helpful form of evaluation (R1:189-196). The goal is to connect people with a local church community.

He also assumes that people use fake identities when they first contact them in order to protect themselves (R1:98), while some use the anonymity to be offensive. Even when people

express their anger towards religion they try to keep the conversation going (contra Baer) and that has proven to be fruitful at times.

To protect the e-coaches' privacy and safety, only their first names are revealed and meetings in FR are discouraged. However, the board of the organization itself is fully transparent in order to give credibility to the site.

### 5.4.3 John Dyer

Dyer's view of the impact of technology on the message is different from that of most other participants, because he seems to reject any sense of strong technological determinism. "For example, while much of evangelical television programming has fallen into the medium's bias toward showmanship and spectacle, Catholic television remains relatively informative and in that sense is counter-cultural" (Dyer R1:62). Thus, the medium has its own message (R1:73), but how that impacts the message also depends on the actors.

Dyer sees the gospel as something constant, which is the same in FR as it is in VR, but it speaks into the particular. He writes:

For example, if it seems obvious that someone is inhabiting online spaces more often than offline to an unhealthy extent, one could probe for why that is and how the gospel might speak into that. If a person feels unlovable, then the gospel message of God's forgiving love can speak to that. If a person feels like an online world is more perfect than offline relationships, God's plan to remake the world without suffering might be of hope.

(R1:65)

However, Dyer is also very aware of the unwanted effects of technology, particularly on his life.

I sometimes start thinking about a funny status update that other people will like. In this sense, I think I'm being less present with those around me and more focused [on] getting attention from people online. I also find that when I'm frustrated at the daily difficulties of life (small children, work, etc), I tend to want to pull out my phone and read something online. Here, I think it is the "always on" part of modern digital culture plays a greater role than "VR" specifically.

(R1:14)

Furthermore, technology can take the form of religion. He writes:

Sometimes this [turning technology into a idol] is explicit, such as people like Ray Kurzweil who hope that future technology (a savior) will allow them not to die (salvation) but to live forever (eschatology). But for most people, this is more subtle. Likes on Facebook give me worth and value instead of Christ.

(R1:67)

Thus, a common factor of all virtual cultures is that one is always reachable and connected. Yet, other than that, Dyer (R1:54) also sees an endless number of varying cultures online.

Dyer (R1:57) believes that online evangelization is different, because one has quick access to further information and the anonymity allows people feel freer, and the physical

distance potentially makes them feel more safe. In general, people share more online because it is easier to find a common interest group.

Avatars also help people by “projecting the self they want to be” and to “explore a version of one’s self that one would like to be” (R1:32) or which they think others would like (R1:28). However, fundamentally he sees identity as something given through Christ and not self-created (R1:36).

Credibility is gained online through building personal relationships. He sees a hindrance to building credibility for the gospel in the presence of “crazy people that represent Christianity” (R1:46).

#### **5.4.4 Anonymous K**

The mission organization this person represents stresses the need to look at the entire process of disciple-making, integrating seekers into a local church, and not reducing evangelism to the moment a person makes a decision. They see themselves as only a part of the process of someone's faith journey:

The fact that somebody came to the net does not mean that we are so clever. God was working something. [...] [I]f somebody’s on our web page [...] statistics say [that] on the same day he [or she] was on another 15 to 25 web pages.

(Anonymous K R1:102)

Their primary tool are online courses for which they have developed a sophisticated software solution to evaluate the process people undergo from someone interested in the Christian faith to someone engaged in a local church. This expert also expressed a great dislike for counting conversions based on clicks. They have also been approached by donors who want to know what their dollar-per-soul ratio is, meaning they want to know how many people will be “saved” for every dollar they donate (R1:117-8). They decline such partnerships because they believe in long-term relationships. Asking if this is an ethical issue, he said:

Absolutely. Absolutely because particularly in [the] American Billy Graham model “come forward, give your life to Jesus”. Hallelujah, we have another 20,000. I’m working very close with BGA. The wise people there, they really know it’s less than 1% that really stays. Okay, what are you going to promote? Particularly in America, they want to hear big numbers. That’s how they run the battle, dollar to soul ratio and all those things. When somebody asks me that thing, I say, “Sorry, friends. You are not our kind of partner if you think like dollar to soul.”

(R1:117-8)

Like others, they usually do not start with the gospel itself, but with hope because in their experience people are not looking for a religion, but hope which addressed their real needs (R1:125). He believes that the heart of the gospel is the message that Jesus saves us (R1:128), but at the same time the gospel goes beyond what we can comprehend.

I think the gospel is much bigger than we comprehended. I'm not saying we should go towards liberalism. It [is] just opposite: What I am trying to say is that Jesus and God is so much bigger than us that our way of comprehending his work is very limited. Of course, what we do, we try to base on the scripture as a final authority but after saying it, we must be very relaxed as far as our own wisdom. [...] It's all about Jesus saving us and not our theology being perfect.”

(R1:127-8)

For him, some of the advantages of online-evangelism are that it is reactive (people come to you) (R1:61) and these people can pursue their interest in faith on their own time (R1:60). Furthermore, they are also more open, because they can end the conversation at any point (R1:57). Because of this intentionality their engagement is usually much higher compared to linear media like the radio (R1:101). Interestingly, he sees the lack of physical presence as something positive, because people are not distracted if they dislike or are irritated by the other's appearance (R1:61).

In his experience, people hide their identities out of safety concerns, but usually a few e-mail exchanges with an e-coach are enough for them to know a lot about a person despite their attempt to hide (R1:75).

Credibility is not only gained through offline advertising (e.g. radio), but also through search engine optimization (R1:87, 90) and people are usually impressed when they receive personal email answers to their question rather than auto-responses (R1:61).

Lastly, he suggests that even online-evangelism “must be absolutely locally owned and adjusted” (R1:120). With this he means that the local culture in FR has an impact on the virtual culture (R1:62-4) and therefore it is not simply possible to use an evangelistic platform developed in one country (e.g. USA) in another (e.g. China) by simply translating it into the other language. Evangelistic websites cannot be simply copied for another country.

#### **5.4.5 Dave Bourgeois**

For Bourgeois, VR does not raise new questions for theology, but for evangelization and ministry (Bourgeois R1:77). The gospel itself remains the same as in FR (R1:66), but contextualization needs to be done for the FR context (R1:63).

When online people reveal their true nature, it is often because they believe that it cannot be traced to FR (R1:21) and that they have more control over how they are perceived online, but online-identities are used to try to present a better and perhaps truer version of oneself (R1:35). Yet, ultimately, one can seldom have certainty of the other's identity (e.g. gender, age, etc.) (R1:31).

Credibility is gathered online through transparency and relationship building. Bourgeois believes online relationships cannot adequately replace the Christian Church in FR:

Virtual church, in the end, is not a fully realized version of church. While it may be more participatory and engaging than say, a televised church service, the need for personal interaction is [not] completely met. However, a virtual church is better than no church.

(R1:80)

### 5.4.6 Anonymous S

Anonymous S sees a strong sense of continuity between evangelization in FR and VR. However, online this person learned to ask more questions rather than to preach. The gospel is the same online as offline. “[VR] might impact the way it [i.e. the gospel] is experienced, but the message itself, I do not believe, changes” (Anonymous S R1:14).

A particular challenge online is “that everyone is an expert and everyone’s opinion appears valid given the right context” (R1:14). However, she also observed people to be “much more willing to share fears or concerns as well as to confess acts of which they are ashamed” (R1:20).

“Avatars help us to take on a ‘different perspective’ and they can either be an extension of ourselves or an alternative identity” (R1:38). However, she is concerned with overuse: “I believe for adults who become more committed to their avatars and more bound up in an existence they have [...] ‘control’ [of can be unhealthy]” (R1:32).

Credibility is gained by having “integrity” in the literal sense of being consistent in my actions and expressions both on and off-line” (R1:17), however, ultimately the credibility of the gospel is the work of God himself (R1:44).

### 5.4.7 Simone Heidbrink

Heidbrink provided insight into many different aspects, particularly into online-games, community and identity.

While games usually have a game narrative and mechanics, it is common practice to ignore these. Examples she listed were funerals or Christmas celebrations. Therefore, she believes it is okay to use games for evangelization even though it does not follow the game narrative and might violate the game mechanics (Heidbrink R1:46-57).

She further points out that the topic of religion is always present and it is not just something that evangelists bring.

What I see in my material is people have a certain need. Many people need religion, want religion. [...] There are many reasons [for] that. I wouldn’t point to one but it seems that religion is there. They bring it with them. So whatever environment you are in people are bringing their religion, their ideas about religion, be it atheism, be it Christianity, be it whatever, they bring it with them. So religion is there anyway.

(R1:61)

VR changes religion as every medium in the past has changed religion. According to Heidbrink, the history of the Church and the history of media show a parallelism (R1:78-80) and since every medium has certain characteristics with which one has to work. Yet, Heidbrink is quick to show that people find ways to work around the limitations of online communication (R1:109) and even to use them to their advantage. An example of this is the website *sacredspace.ie*. In her interview of the founder, he suggested that the limitation of a computer-screen helps the person to focus (R1:136-7). Thus, the communication impoverishment is here seen as beneficial as it limits possible distractions.

Differing from most other participants, Heidbrink does not see the gospel as something fixed, but as something that each individual defines for him- or herself (R1:116).

Within her qualitative research, she found that people did not believe online-relationships and communities to be inferior to those in FR. Some preferred them because of various obstacles which can be encountered in a traditional church community (R1:22).

#### **5.4.8 Joachim Bär**

Bär suggests that online people are more willing to be open, the questions or statements are cheekier, and the pace of the conversation is faster (a quick response is expected), but the conversation are also more direct, avoiding small talk (Bär R1:69-73).

Bär also confirmed Stamper's findings that the internet has created a new era of micro-celebrities (R1:114).

He also confirmed what others have suggested, namely that evangelization can be done reactively and conversations usually start with topics related to the needs of the people (R1:16-7), and the best progress is made with a relationship (R1:19).

In his experience, presenting *the four spiritual laws* is not as effective as trying to build a relationship with people and understanding their needs and problems (R1:49-50). The gospel message and core values of the Christian faith do not need to change for an online context, but it does need to be presented less argumentatively and more personally in that context (R1:118-122).

Though he also agreed with others that people are at times ruder online, he encourages the conversations to continue. However, he would consider it a breach of trust, if somebody presented themselves falsely (fake identity) (R1:23), since the online-coaches invest in these relationships and thus it would affect the relationship negatively if they felt misled (R1:21).

As others (cf Bridges) have also suggested, *Facebook* might not be the best place for evangelism (R1:169). Although it does give everybody an audience (R1:153), the content is usually more fun, entertaining and self-centered.

However, he also appreciates *Facebook* because it offers an easy way to connect people that is less intrusive than other forms of media (e.g. a phone).

In his experience, people come to their websites through their advertising and because they rank high in search engines. Credibility is further established through professional appearance (R1:82), by being known offline (R1:86) and if one is authentic (R1:111). However, though they do not practice this, he also believes that credibility is gained through investing time in a particular online-community (R1:88).

Although Bär (R1:79) considers it easier to get in contact with people online, he does not fundamentally believe it is holistic enough to substitute for an offline church community.

#### **5.4.9 Karsten Kopjar**

The faith of a person always expresses itself through the media of his or her time (R1:7) and thus media changes how faith is expressed. Yet, religion online still resembles religion offline because we think “offline” first (Kopjar R1:159-160). Thus, he argues that because FR is the norm, what we create in VR is based on what we know in FR. However, VR, and in particular search engines, like Google, and the online-encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, is changing the way we explore questions, including those relating to faith and religion (R1:57). Be that as it may, people still rely on personal advice.

Kopjar asserts that there is a core to the gospel, however the gospel also needs to be transformed to the particular situation, such as virtual reality. For although God, in his nature and his intentions with humanity, remains unchanging, Kopjar argues, in the way he interacts with us and manifests himself to us he accommodates our particular time and place (R1:93).

Furthermore, the internet changes the way society perceives things. Thus, in order to communicate, even unchanging content must be communicated differently (R1:111). This can include using terminology that expresses the intention of a biblical passage in words familiar to the reader (R1:114) or choosing different emphases out of the various biblical teachings (R1:113).

Kopjar also challenged the utilization of online-games for evangelization (R1:78). In his view, one should play a game in order to play a game, and if in the one playing evangelizes that is okay, but to enter the game with the intention of evangelizing and not to enjoy the game, can have a negative effect (R1:80). However, the guilds in games like World of Warcraft do allow

for meaningful conversations (R1:49) and in his mind, the way someone plays can potentially make others curious and initiate a conversation about faith (R1:79).

People play with their online-identities in order to find out who they really are (R1:25), yet other people still seem to be able to get a good idea of who they are, given enough time in conversation (R1:19). Core characteristics will always reveal themselves over time (R1:19). The persona of a person may change, but not his or her character (R1:20).

However, one only reveals certain aspects of oneself. What is considered appropriate or not is dependent on the context. For example, it would be viewed rather negatively, Kopjar argues, if one misrepresents one's appearance on a dating site, whereas other online-environments assume a certain degree of playfulness (e.g. online-games).

Meaningful conversation can be developed online and can be very deep (R1:63), but people often desire to also meet in FR (R1:62). They desire this because they want to access such things like gestures and mimicking, but also because most people want to complement VR with FR or vice versa (R1:65).

Credibility is gained through authenticity (R1:59), but also by sharing the mundane things of life, like sharing a picture of a dinner meal on Facebook (R1:13).

#### **5.4.10 Rolf Krüger**

Krüger (R1:10-1) draws a close connection between the rise of the internet and emergence of post-modernity (though the relationship is complex). He argues that people have access to a much larger sphere of information and thus are exposed to many different worldviews (R1:12) making the emerging generations more tolerant (R1:27) and open to changing their theological views (R1:22). The internet, therefore, helps to better inform people, but it can also increase their insecurity due to the amount of contradicting information encountered (R1:113). However, he also made note of counter-movements away from tolerance, like ISIS, which also utilize modern media.

Krüger argued that evangelization online has to change and become more dialogic (R1:125). Evangelists should no longer present ourselves as having all the answers (R1:115). If evangelists expect their conversation partner to second-guess his or her faith and worldview, then they must be willing to do likewise (R1:117; 145). Thus, for Krüger, evangelization does not mean sharing the truth but rather one's passion (R1:144) since exposure to the vast variety of different religions has challenged the notion that the Christian faith as the only true salvation from eternal condemnation (R1:171).

In games, Krüger believes that although players use dream-identities, their behaviour is still authentic. This is consistent with his view of people in general online – that their behaviour is amplified online – for better or for worse (R1:71). He comments that alter-egos that are completely disconnected from one’s FR identity do not have mass-appeal. This is the reason why *Second Life* was not successful.

Krüger sees credibility as something gained by either being authentic or professional (R1:51).

Although, in Krüger’s experience, people who meet in VR are often interested in connecting in FR (R1:92), he would not say that relationships online are inferior to those offline (R1:104-6).

### 5.4.11 Mikee Bridges

Bridges is the founder of *GameChurch* and therefore the focus of his interview was on evangelization in games.

In his experience, most people are willing to socialize in games (Bridges R1:59) because people generally want to connect about life (R1:55) and it is easy to make contacts during games (R1:40). Furthermore, the screen helps people to talk:

It's kind of like if you drink a little bit, and you get [...] social. [...] I honestly think that there's something to being behind your computer where it's a little bit easier for you to talk to people because you're not face to face with them, or you're not in a group.

(R1:42)

He also found that people are usually happy to reveal more about themselves (R1:47) and do not consider talking about personal issues an interruption to the game (R1:61).

Yet, there is great variation among gamers. The age span Bridges encounters is between 14 and 50 years (R1:22) and the home-culture creates differences that carry-over into the gaming culture (R1:20, 22). However, he does suggest there is a common culture shared by gamers, which he places within the “nerd culture” and describes as “loving, accepting, non-judgmental and willing to pat somebody else on the back for whatever.” (R1:79). However, he also noticed that trolling<sup>115</sup> happens too, but he believes this occurs rarely (R1:81). On the other hand, he finds that, at least in his cultural context (USA), people have a negative view of gamers as loners (R1:63). For this reason, he also believes that Christians feel like they have to justify their gaming through evangelization (R1:102-3).

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<sup>115</sup> Trolling is a term used to describe people (trolls) who try to upset other people by posting inflammatory comments in an online community.

When it comes to evangelization itself, Bridges never brings up the topic of faith (R1:69, 71). He explains who he is and what he does and leaves it up to his conversation partner to ask questions regarding his faith. For him it is important that people do not feel like one has an agenda.

He also criticizes the Church for fostering a come-culture where they try to lure people into church instead of encouraging a go-culture (R1:76) where they go out to the people (e.g. online-games).

As many others have suggested, he believes that credibility is gained through being authentic and gamers particularly are sensitive to Christians “trying too hard” to adapt the gospel (R1:85, 87). Bridges argues that potential evangelists need to belong to a culture in order to be accepted: “If you're legitimate, you're legitimate, you don't need to try” (R1:87). Within a gaming culture this means that they have to be able to play reasonably well (R1:65, 70).

In his experience, particularly with young people, all are seeking family (R1:88-9) – a close community of affirmation (R1:90-1). The gospel he perceives among many Christians is one of fear and shame (R1:96) whereas he wants to establish relationships without an agenda and show people that God loves them. In response to a woman who accused him of not sharing the full gospel he replied:

My friend Jimmy [fictional name] doesn't give a shit about God, doesn't give a shit about Jesus or your gospel, or your sin, or whatever. He doesn't care. All he cares about is that he has a relationship with me now and we get to talk. I'm the only Jesus this guy is going to see, or talk about, or be intrigued by. I'm it.

(R1:96)

Bridges doesn't deny sin or the need to repent (R1:101), but in his experience, people do not need to feel guilt, but acceptance first.

For me, the gospel message is grace over sacrifice, acceptance. It is Christ dying on a cross for each one of us, for our sins. There's no way that I can be good enough, there's no way I could jump on one foot long enough, or take a shower and be clean enough. It is a story of God himself sending his son to earth so that he can have his kids back. It's just a Dad who wants his kids back, that's all he's wanted.

(R1:101)

In his experience, *Facebook* is less fitting for evangelization (R1:110), because it is like the online-equivalent of standing at a street-corner preaching to a passing, anonymous crowd (R1:112). On *Facebook* he tries to keep it “light” (R1:121) and ensures that posts are also understandable by non-Christians (R1:120). In games he also discourages “banner evangelism,” such as choosing a user name that is overtly evangelistic (R1:103-5).

## 5.4.12 Kevin Schut

Due to Kevin Schut's own research and personal experience, his interview also focused on evangelization in games.

Among many things, he drew attention to the fact that there is great variation among games, and that some are more supportive of social interactions than others (Schut R1:42). Some people use games solely for social purposes (R1:43) and some games are especially designed to foster social interactions (R1:72). Games make it easier for some people to talk and to overcome their shyness (R1:35). However, if one wants to present the gospel in a game it has to be done thoughtfully. Not every gospel presentation works (R1:60) or just because something works does not mean it is good, since God can use anything.

Since games are designed for interactivity, Schut suggests that the gospel presentation should also be interactive (R1:62). However, here he also sees a great challenge, for this interactivity can make the gospel offensive:

There's this whole notion that somehow we're going wrong, and what exactly that wrong is, is to be debated, but we are flawed people and we need Jesus. That message is difficult in an environment of people who believe in interactivity and the power of interactivity. [...] [H]ardcore gamer culture, is inherently defensive as well. That's for any number of reasons, but it has the natural defensiveness of a geek subculture.

(R1:65)

It his view, there is an inherent critique in the gospel which in general appears problematic in a culture of tolerance, affirmation and building up (R1:67). Yet, he found that people show interest if you care about what they care about (i.e. games).

To enter into a game and build relationships requires certain skills, depending on the game, and it is wrong to assume that they will be open to everybody.

[Looking for always increasing challenges] makes games very inaccessible for people who have a, say, physical disability or simply just don't have reflexes or whatever. It is hard to get into the conversation of the culture, if you can't actually play the games. I say to parents, play with your kids even if they're going to kill you because it shows that you care. If we're talking about a complete stranger, they're not going to respect you. I mean, why? You obviously suck at the game, so why am I going to have a conversation with you. [...] That is a bias to the medium. This is not a medium for non-experts. It's like if you were getting into ham radio. If your skill set is basically, I can push a button on a walkie-talkie, you're not going to get into that conversation because these people know their electrics.

(R1:99)

Schut further discussed the possibility of using the game to evangelize. Drawing on the work of C.S. Lewis and *The Chronicles of Narnia* and T.R.R. Tolkien *Lord of the Rings*, he entertains the idea that a game itself could communicate the gospel. The greatest challenge is that a game is interactive, meaning that the storyline cannot be too fixed, since the player wants a sense of influence on how the story unfolds. However, there are games which have a strict narrative. Yet, in general, it is easier to try to communicate principles rather than the gospel narrative. For

example, he believes that the concept of *sacrifice* could be communicated within a game, yet to communicate *grace* would be rather complicated, although he is working on this idea.

### 5.4.13 Krish Kandiah

Kandiah was explicitly encouraging and positive of the use of technologies. He suggests that most hesitations for embracing social media are rooted in the lack of familiarity with it.

The people that see social media and the internet as the biggest enemy to human existence - just another part of consumerism and postmodernity - I've got very little time for that. I think they misunderstood the reality of social media.

(Kandiah R1:140)

Technologies, such as social media, are helpful tools.

Yet, despite this attitude of embracing new technologies, he remained suspicious about virtual churches since they lack a physical dimension.

While we [as humans] have capacity for physical movement, I think we were supposed to be embodied face to face. I think we were supposed to offer people the right hand of fellowship as a physical act. I think we're supposed to be baptized in water as a corporate act. I think we were supposed to share bread and wine to physically eat that as a way of rehearsing and remembering the sacrifice of what Christ has done to us as a body. I think we were supposed to look out for the practical and physical needs of one another.

(R1:127)

His solution is a both/and approach.

I'm sceptical of people that would talk about a virtual church experience because I think church is supposed to be holistic. I think it's supposed to be face to face as well as on-line and those two complementing each other, but not on-line at the expense of face to face.

(R1:117)

Most of those interviewed dealt with the question of a virtual church as an alternative and not as a complement to a church in FR.

With regards to contextualization, Kandiah believes that God's influence plays an important role in protecting the gospel as it moves from one medium to another.

Jesus preached the gospel. Well, what's the gospel He preached? Good, we've got the gospel account that tells us that. Was something lost in translation? We would say no, thanks to the grace of God and the superintendence by the Holy Spirit and the inspiration of scripture, the message that Jesus spoke was effectively translated into a new medium.

(R1:97-98)

At the same time, he suggested that different aspects of the gospel fit to certain media:

Well, the Proverbs fit really neatly into Tweets. Does that mean the Proverbs is a dumbed down version of God's revelation? No, it's just a genre that has affective form by being pithy and short. Yeah? You're just trying to match the right mode of communication with the right element of your gospel communication and that's part of the wisdom you develop through practice I think.

(R1:103)

He also cautioned against unintended consequences of technology, such as amplifying pre-existing problems (R1:157).

## 5.5 Conclusions

After the first round of the coding, the different codes were organized into different categories. This process was done inductively and deductively. This means at times the category exists prior to the engagement with the data (deductively) through other research or the general literature on evangelization. This was particularly the case with the main categories. Other times the codes emerged from the data (inductively).

The findings of the first round were divided into nine main categories and revealed that evangelization online is a complex topic since it covers many disciplines (ethics, social sciences, theology, cultural studies, media studies, etc.).

The findings were briefly summarized topologically and according to the various authors. The list below offers a summary of the categories and their sub-categories. A complete list containing all further subdivisions of the sub-categories can be found in the appendix.

### **Identity**

- misc.
- concerns
- discovering*
- creating*
- protecting (hiding)*
- revealing*
- possibility to explore religion

### **Contextualization**

- message same FR and VR
- message different

### **Evangelization**

- message
- posture
- style
- motivation (evangelized)
- method
- relationship to churches

## **Adaptation**

un-intended impact  
*rejecting*  
*controlling/Limiting*  
*compensating*  
*embracing*

## **Relationships (before community)**

moving into FR  
legitimacy of virtual churches  
difference to FR  
quality of relationships

## **Games**

opportunities for evangelizing in games  
challenges for evangelizing in games  
socializing in games  
exclusivity  
games that evangelize  
legitimacy of non-game activity  
gaming culture

## **Cyber cultures**

Second Life  
Facebook  
diversifying aspects  
unifying aspects

## **Credibility**

native  
work of God  
other competency  
web design  
relationship / presence  
connected to sth known in FR  
transparency / authenticity  
SEO (Search Engine Optimization)  
challenge for evangelism

## **Ethics**

- hidden agenda
- conduct
- protecting e-coaches
- success

This being the first round, the types that emerged from the coding were not very saturated. Traditionally Grounded Theory would now call for a process of maximization or minimization in order to further test the categories and develop types. Yet, as this is Grounded Delphi Method, the process here differs as shown in the next chapter.

In concluding the first round, so far the following answer can be given to the research questions formulated under 1.1:

*Identity: Does an avatar affect the evangelistic process?* It became clear that the avatar affects the evangelistic process, and thus the more precise question is *how*. The panel suggested different ways in which people used their avatar, such as hiding and revealing certain aspects of themselves.<sup>116</sup> Yet, what is unique about an avatar is the ease with which we can control our persona (i.e. the way we display ourselves to others). However, the use of avatars also created suspicion among some of the panel members, regarding what is to be considered real in an encounter via avatars.

*Cyber Culture: How does VR impact evangelization?* A single clear impact of VR on the evangelistic message was not discernible, yet it was suggested by some that an attitude of humility was needed. Humility could be expressed through a sincere interest in the faith and worldview of the other, as well as a willingness to be challenged and to reflect critically upon one's own faith. This corresponds somewhat with the concept of dialogue developed within missiological studies (cf Bosch 2004:483-489). Furthermore, this call for humility in missions can also be found in some codes of conduct which deal with witness and evangelism.

*Evangelization: How is evangelization modified for VR?* VR does affect the evangelistic message but not in a particular way, rather it was suggested that the different people involved should negotiate the evangelistic encounter together. It is, or ought to be, a process which is not pre-determined by the evangelist but emerges naturally through the encounter. Furthermore, rather than identifying one particular response to evangelization, different ways were identified

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<sup>116</sup> As seen in 8.1., this reflects the ways we use our persona in FR, too.

and summarized under the category of *adaptation*. This will be further developed later as it suggested that the impact of technology is too complex to be engaged within a single way.

*Credibility: How are authority and credibility established?* In broad terms, the panel mentioned ways already known from FR for establishing credibility and authority (i.e. referral to known authority structures), as well as new ways applicable specifically to VR (i.e. top ranking in search engines). However, some panel members also suggested that *authenticity* would be of importance. In general, one can conclude from the answers provided that authority and credibility can be established by ways already known from FR but also through new ways.

*Ethics: Which ethical considerations need to be made?* It became evident that there is a need for the clear articulation of a *proper code of conduct* for those evangelizing. Furthermore, there should be regulation for defining what *success* means in evangelization and how results should be reported to donors.

*Games: How can one evangelize in and through games?* In order to evangelize in a game, it was suggested that one should have an actual interest in the game and a general desire for gaming. Active gamers suggested that it is okay that people go against the mechanics of the games in order to evangelize, since socializing and discussing non-game related issues is a common practice in games.

The conclusions drawn here originated from a diverse group of experts, and do not represent saturated empirical findings. Rather, they offer possible answers and insights into a new and emerging area of research for which presently little research can be found. However, the second round allows the panel members to interact with these findings and the suggestions from others. Thus, they engage with the *bold hypotheses* of one another.

## 6. Round 2: Statistical group feedback

In following the Policy Delphi Method, the second round gave the panel an opportunity to engage with the results from the first round. The findings from the first round were presented through thesis statements and the participants were asked to interact with them through a rating process and to make comments. This is in accordance with Rayens and Hahn:

Statistical group feedback—information about the beliefs of other participants during the first-stage interview—is used in the second-stage interview to facilitate consensus on policy beliefs.  
(Rayen & Hahn 2000:309)

Thus, the second round allows participants to interact with the experiences and opinions of the others. This allows for participatory research which makes use of the interpretative expertise of the panel.

In order to allow for convenient interaction with the findings, thesis statements were formulated which summarized the data of the first round. Since the transcribed interviews were 200 pages in length, it was unlikely any of the participants would be willing to read them.

The second round also introduced some questions that emerged in the first round.

### 6.1 Data collection

The results from the interviews were summarized into 55 theses. This still created a large amount of information for the participants to engage with and as such did not encourage further participation. However, it was seen as necessary in order to give as full a picture as possible of the findings from the first round and avoid guiding the research in a particular direction.

In order to facilitate the responses to the opinions of the others, and to discern areas of consensus and disagreement, a scaling grid was applied in the second round which allowed for a quick assessment of the different statements proposed.<sup>117</sup> This scale is frequently used in Delphi research (Turoff 1970). The different categories were:

*Reliability:* Here the participant is asked to rate how reliable he or she finds the proposed thesis.

*Desirability:* This category describes how desirable one considers the proposed thesis. For example, it is proposed that communication online is fast-paced. One may think this thesis

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<sup>117</sup> To those unfamiliar with the PDM, this may seem like a break from traditional qualitative research but it is not a fall-back to quantitative research. It is a tool to facilitate the discussion. After each question participants also had the option to comment, of which they made frequent use.

is reliable, but not consider it a desirable development or aspect that should be encouraged for online evangelization.

*Feasibility:* Is it feasible to positively respond to the thesis in order to improve evangelization online? Thus, one might agree with a thesis, and even consider it very desirable, but not think its application is feasible.

*Relevance:* Is the thesis relevant with regards to evangelization online? Thus, one might strongly agree with the thesis, but not see any relevance with regards to online evangelization.

The first three categories are suggested by Turoff, the fourth one was added for this particular research since the “relevance” of a particular thesis should not be assumed. Since the initial round looked at numerous aspects of evangelization online, not all of them can be assumed to have equal relevance.

**6.1.1 Example of the scaling grid**

**Thesis:** Technology (such as VR) provides new concepts and terms to understand and communicate faith.

**Explanation:** For example, people talk about faith 2.0 using the concept of web 2.0 to describe current changes relating to faith.

|  | very much                        | somewhat              | very little           | not at all            | don't know            |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| How reliable is this thesis?                                       | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| How desirable is this for online evangelization?                   | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| How feasible (achievable) is the pursuit of the thesis?            | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| How relevant is this thesis with regards to online evangelization? | <input type="radio"/>            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Table 7: Example of the rating grid

**6.1.2 Questions of the second round**

The thesis statements which were developed through the coding process with MaxQDA and represented the various opinions which emerged from the first round can be found in the appendix. Often the thesis statements included an explanatory text which is also included in the appendix.

### 6.1.3 Expansion of the panel

As addressed earlier, a common challenge with Delphi research is the drop-out rate which increases with every round. This was particularly true in this study as most people in the panel expressed they had limited time available. However, their collective input compensated for the drop-out rate. Nine from the original twelve remained for the second round.

Fortunately, participant drop-out does not endanger the research process because Delphi does not require a fixed group of experts. Rather it is encouraged that new people be included as the research unfolds.

[As] the data collection process is asynchronous, there are no reasons for not involving new experts even after the first brainstorming results have been carried out and preliminarily analyzed. Also, the use of so-called snowball sampling, where the experts may suggest new panel members according to their level of expertise, expands the size of the panels throughout the data collection.

(Päivärinta *et al* 2011:6)

The panel was supplemented with three new participants for the second round.

Baab was added as another theologian with expertise in the area of online relationship-building, and Anonymous H was added as another expert on online Christian communities. Both of these areas emerged as important aspects of this research. Anonymous S was also added as another person using online-games for evangelization.

| Name        | Area of Expertise   |
|-------------|---|
| Lynne Baab  | Dr Baab is a Presbyterian minister who completed a Ph.D. in communication at the University of Washington in 2007. She lives in Dunedin, New Zealand, where she is a lecturer in pastoral theology at the University of Otago and adjunct tutor at the Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership. Among other books she has also written one book on online relationships entitled <i>Friending: Real Relationships in a Virtual World</i> (2011). For further information see: <a href="http://www.lynnebaab.com/bio-interviews">http://www.lynnebaab.com/bio-interviews</a> |
| Anonymous H | This person is a researcher with a particular focus on online Christian communities.  |
| Anonymous S | This person has experience evangelizing in online-games in Europe.  |

Table 8: Participants added for the second round

## 6.2 Data analysis and findings

The second round of the Policy Delphi Method not only generated primarily statistical data, but it also allowed for commenting and included answers to the open questions that had emerged from the first round. Approximately 250 comments were made.

Round two of the Policy Delphi Method was done through an online-questionnaire designed with the help of *Google Forms*. All the answers from the second round can be found in the appendix.

## 6.2.1 Summary

In general, it was observed that the ratings of the different theses seldom showed a considerable discrepancy between the various participants. The Policy Delphi Method focuses on significant difference as areas which need further discussion.

This section (6.3.1) offers a summary of the statistical findings, briefly addressing all the theses presented to the panel. The interpretation and explanation of the data is presented in the next section (6.3.2) and focuses on the more controversial aspects and surprising findings. Unless noted otherwise, the illustrations below pertain to the reliability of the thesis since this is the most crucial category.

Unfortunately, the participants did not make much use of the different categories offered (desirable, feasible and relevant). The reason for this is unknown. Perhaps, the participants used them as synonyms or the participants did not perceive them as relevant. Comments were made where statistical differences were noticeable between the different categories. Otherwise, it can be assumed that the results show no significant variation.

### 6.2.1.1 Evangelization and contextualization

Consensus was reached on the issue that evangelization online can be done reactively while some pointed out that this should not be the only way. One participant noted that the counter to reactive “does not have to be aggressive, just intentional” (R2:1).

However, there was greater discrepancy with regards to the question of the intrusiveness of online communication. Rating the reliability of the thesis “online-communication in general offers a form of communication that is less intrusive” generated the following results:

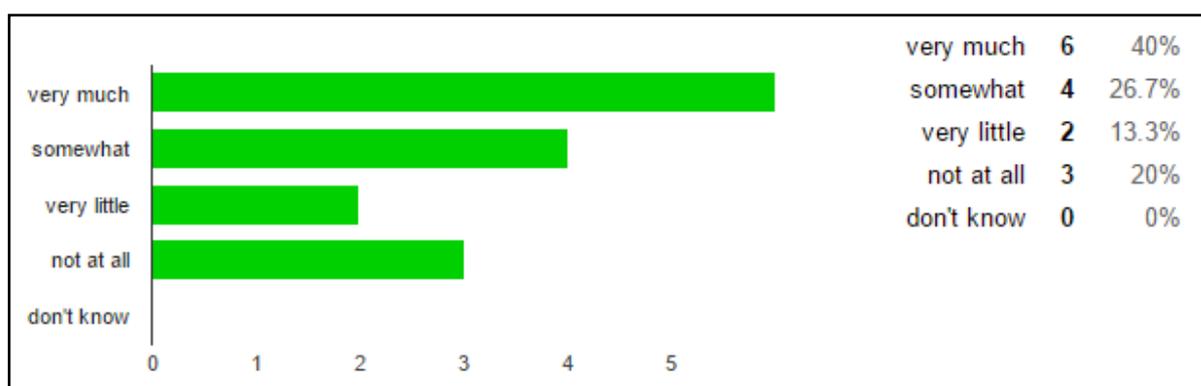


Illustration 22: (2) Sub-Thesis: Online-communication in general offers a form of ...

Thus, three people disagreed, and two rated the reliability of the thesis with “very little.” In the comments section one person gave two reasons for this:

Online communication is sometimes less intrusive than face-to-face communication, but it can still be extremely annoying! We've probably all had the experience of being irritated by a Facebook status or tweet that we consider inappropriate. Email or SMS spam is also particularly intrusive. Also, in

face-to-face communication we have the chance to judge the right moment to start a conversation on a difficult topic; online, that is hard to do. We can try not to be intrusive online, but it's not easy.  
 [Anonymous H R2:2]

Thus, communication online can feel intrusive and on some platforms it might be harder to discern if it is an appropriate time to engage in a conversation.

Consensus again was found in that showing love and acceptance is of particular importance in an online context and relevant for online-evangelism (seven participants selected “very much” and six “somewhat”) (R2:3). One participant found it crucial because there is “no/few [sic] body language.” Another, however, did not see any reason this should be truer of evangelization online compared to offline.

Six participants did not comment on the thesis “showing love and acceptance is more important for a gaming culture.” One comment revealed a possible underlying assumption:

The thesis seems fair enough - love and acceptance are usually good - but the explanation is very problematic. Gamers would probably not agree that they are a subculture of nerd culture. Gaming is arguably much more mainstream, as a hobby, than reading comic books or TV fandom or any other aspect of nerd culture. The games industry has been more profitable than the movie industry for many years. This thesis seems to be stuck in a very old-fashioned stereotype of gaming, in which the gamer-nerd is a lonely outsider. Not true! This kind of misunderstanding of online culture is perhaps the most serious challenge to Christian attempts at evangelism.

(Anonymous H R2:4)

Thus, gamers are much more mainstream than often assumed, and one should be careful of assuming certain stereotypes. Yet, this thesis arose from the interview with Bridges from GameChurch and his personal experience. A possible explanation for his experience could be that he connected with a particular group of people who are in greater need of affirmation. What this might suggest is that one needs to consider a variety of factors for understanding the various groups, and that even within the gaming culture the only commonality might be the interest in playing games.

Discrepancies were also noticeable with regards to the thesis that “sermonizing doesn’t work.”

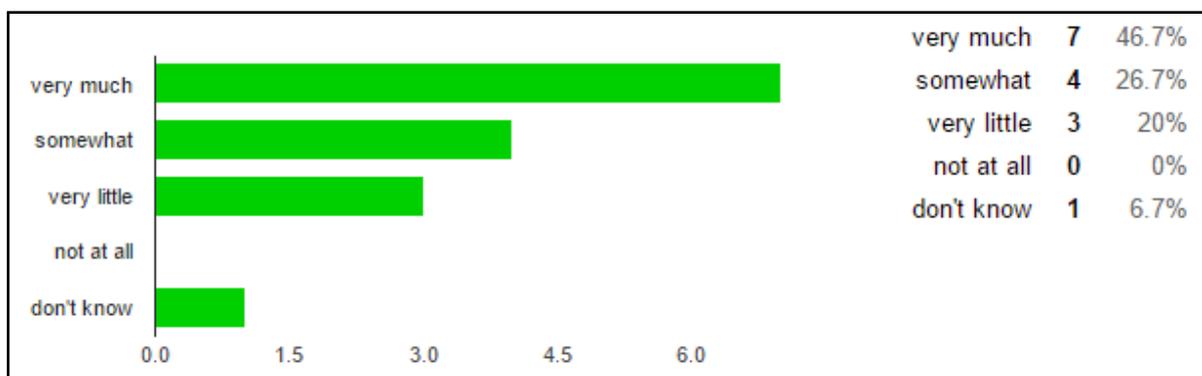


Illustration 23: (5) Thesis: “Sermonizing doesn’t work”

Though most still agreed that the thesis is reliable and desirable, in the comment section some pointed out that there are several exceptions to this and that “sermonizing” has its place and can work if room for dialogue is provided afterwards.

Quite the opposite, sometimes people like to engage long monologues which open up space for a lot of follow-up conversation. You need some content to talk about.

(Kopjar R2:5)

Hence, it would be wrong to assume too quickly that people are not interested in longer monologues and that the disinterest in sermons could be based on other factors, like content or style, rather than the length.

When asked to comment on the thesis that “Communication online has to be cover-magazine like with big titles and pictures and minimal text” (R2:6), the rating varied more.

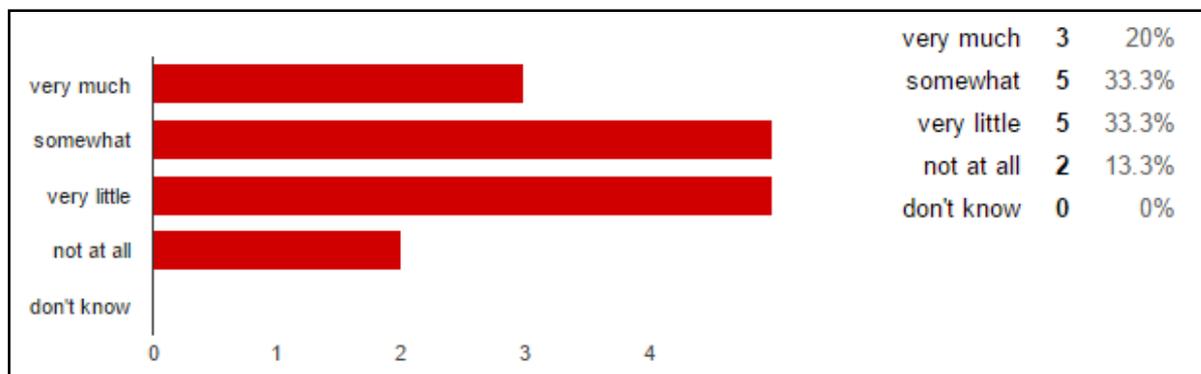


Illustration 24: (6) Thesis: Communication online has to be cover-magazine like with ...

Similar to the previous thesis, some participants felt that it depends on the person on the receiving end, the platform used, as well as the state of the discussion. “Big titles and pictures” or so-called memes might be helpful to trigger interest. Two also warned of the danger of oversimplification.

11 out of the 12 participants considered relational evangelization the most suitable form for online evangelization. Participants were able to make multiple selections.

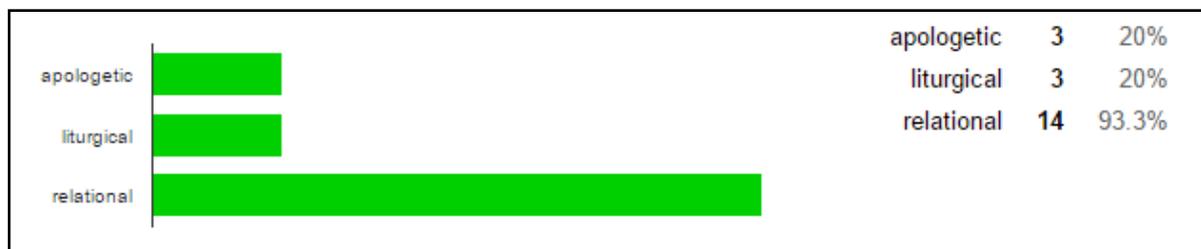


Illustration 25: (8) Question: Which form of evangelization is most suitable for an ...

Confirming this, 53.3% suggested that online evangelization works best when people engage with each other.

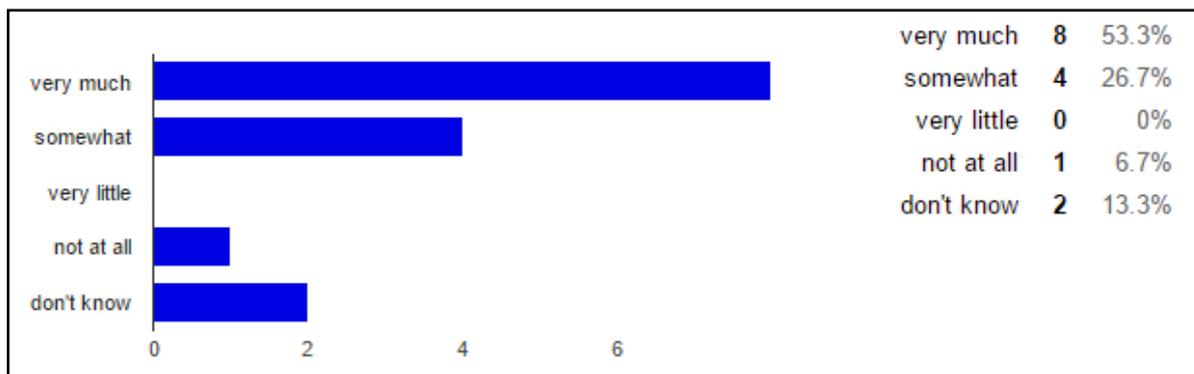


Illustration 26: (7) Thesis: Online evangelization works best when people engage ...

This was also reflected in the answers to the question “Is there any particular online-environment (e.g. particular social media, forums, webpages, games, etc.) which you would consider more or most suited for evangelization?” Though the answers included all kinds of platforms, most suggested that platforms that are seen as more private, like blogs or messengers, would be better.

When asked to comment on the thesis that “technology (such as VR) provides new concepts and terms to understand and communicate faith,” seven participants found the thesis somewhat reliable but four people rated the desirability and relevance with “very little” (R2:Q11).

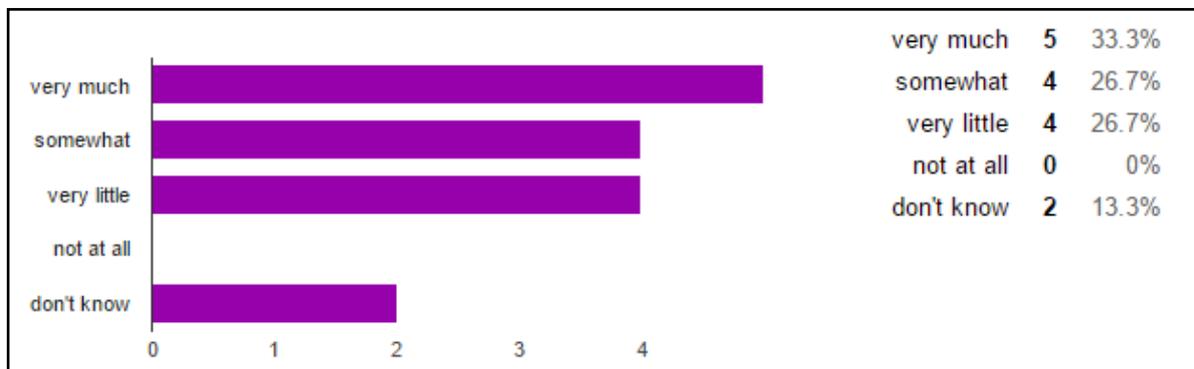


Illustration 27: (11) Thesis: Technology provides new concepts and terms to understand ...

In the comments, people suggested that one might need new terms and concepts, but it would require further research to identify which these would be. Schut saw a need for new terminology but also cautioned against fads:

Yes, and no again. It is true to say that each cultural context provides new ways to understand faith and God and evangelization. But there is an enduring Being at the heart of the Christian faith, and to the degree that faddish thinking and communication styles obstruct that Being, they are potentially foolish.

(R2:11)

The question of whether or not online evangelization should mirror offline-evangelization revealed uncertainty. Reflecting on her current research, Heidbrink, for example, commented:

The search for continuity and the recognition value is one perspective and research show [sic], that it is indeed true. On the other hand: I'm currently working on a similar problem concerning religious

practice online. Is online practice supposed to imitate the offline practice? Or rather not? I have no answer yet, but I guess the imitation does not work on the long run. Better make use of the specifications of the media. The same might be true for evangelisation. It might be a good idea to think of new strategies, that are designed and adapted for the media environment AND communicate some kind of continuity ... (No idea how.)

(R2:12)

Thus, comparable to the statement “technology provides new concepts and terms” (R2:11), the thesis regarding continuity (R2:12) was somewhat confirmed, but it remained unclear how evangelization online should differ from offline.

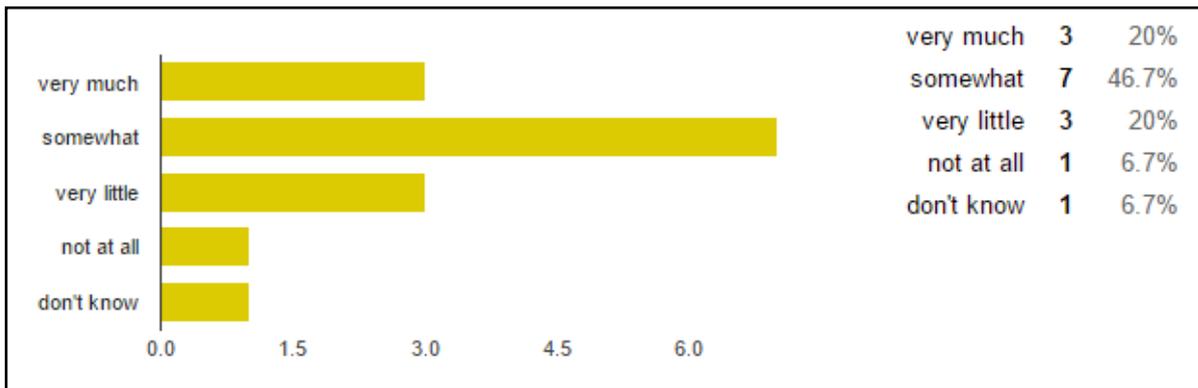


Illustration 28: (12) Thesis: Evangelization online should try to look like ...

According to the praxis of many evangelistic websites, along with some suggestions of respondents, a good starting point for an evangelistic conversation is not necessarily God or faith, but hope in light of life’s problems.

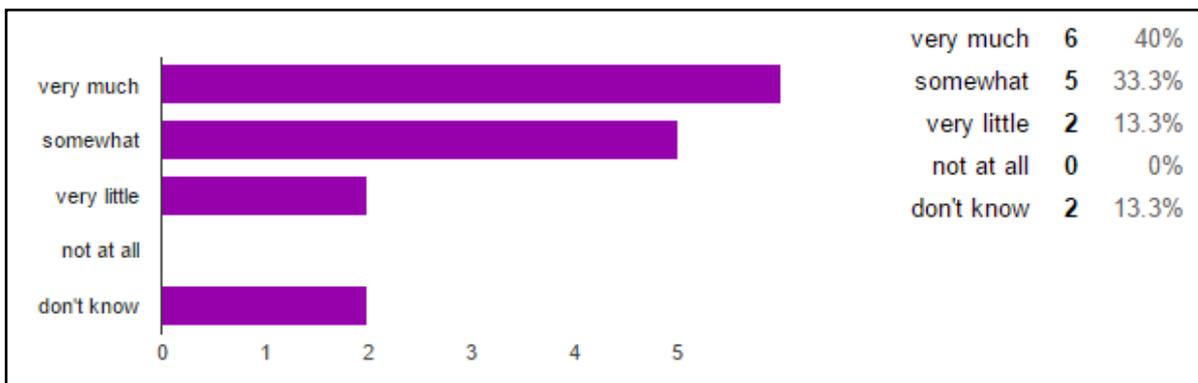


Illustration 29: (14) Thesis: A successful starting point for an evangelistic ...

The panel was asked to comment on this. Again most agreed, but the comments warned against “moralistic therapeutic deism” and presenting a gospel that is only relevant to those who are desperate.

This sounds like a pretty good idea, and it's what groups like I Am Second are doing. But this isn't the only way to do evangelism online - we need people talking about faith and doctrine, and people showing that there can be joy in faith, and people working to change the world, not just help for the desperate.

(Anonymous H R2:16)

It was generally affirmed that “the gospel is a fixed entity, yet it reveals itself in the particularities of people’s lives.”

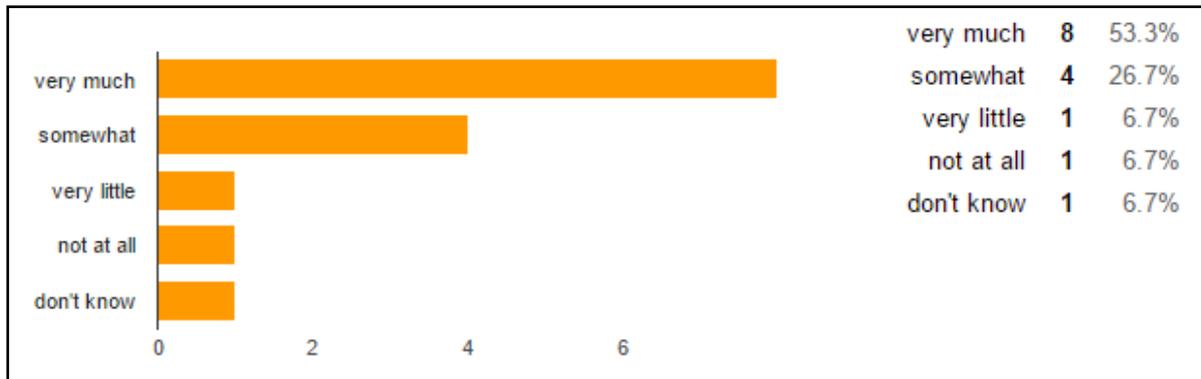


Illustration 30: (13) Thesis: The gospel is a fixed entity, yet it reveals itself in the ...

Lastly, taking a more provocative approach to evangelization online in order to gain attention was seen with caution (R2:15).

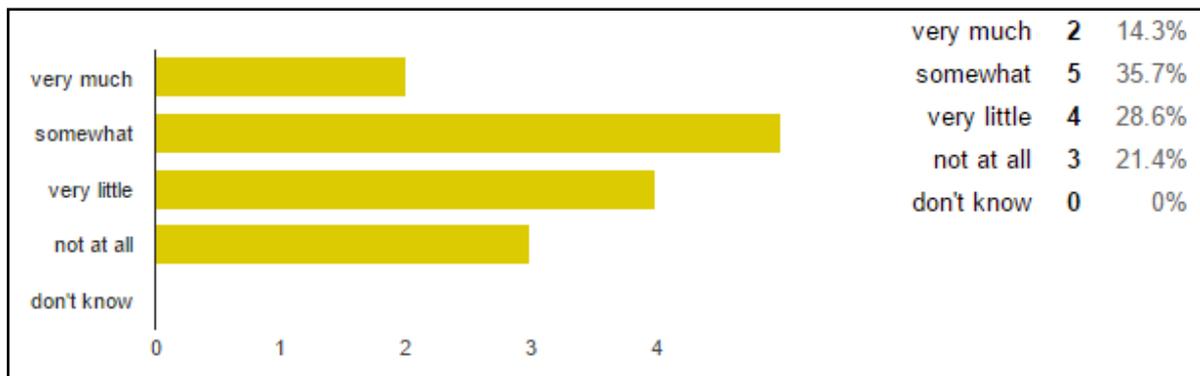


Illustration 31: (15) Thesis: In order to engage people in a conversation, one has to be ...

In explaining his hesitation Schut wrote:

This is only sometimes true, and it is very dangerous. It depends on what you mean by provoke, but provocative evangelical communication can easily cause more harm than good. It's very easy to hurt people even when not intending to, and provocation by its very nature can hurt.

(R2:15)

This indicates what is later fully developed (see 10), namely that the process of engaging in evangelization online needs to be a thoughtful process in which the dangers and possible negative consequences are weighed against opportunities.

### 6.2.1.2 Identity

Based on the interviews of the first round, many seemed to find the term identity itself vague and undefinable. It raised questions such as: do we have a true identity? Is the identity we play with through an avatar also an expression of our identity? Likewise, some were concerned about people presenting enhanced versions of their personal attributes through posting clever status updates, etc. However, others thought it natural to hide one’s weaknesses and other less

attractive traits. After reviewing the different answers, it seemed helpful to connect the concept of an avatar with our persona, the persona being the way we want others to see us in contrast to our personality.<sup>118</sup>

The results from the second round on this were not very strong. Whereas in the first section of the questionnaire on evangelization and contextualization only a few people used the “don’t know” option, the percentage increased in the section on identity. This is in itself noteworthy, because it suggests that people have not reflected much on the issue of online identity.

The use of the concept of a persona in describing the function of an avatar was mostly seen as helpful (R2:17).

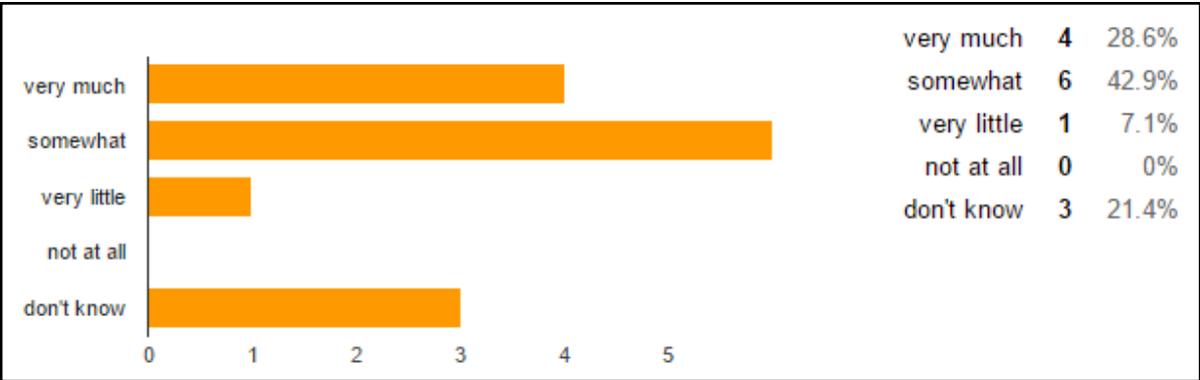


Illustration 32: (17) Thesis: It is more helpful to think of our avatar in relation to our...

It was also generally affirmed that it is important to be honest, and that people tend to reveal their identities over time.

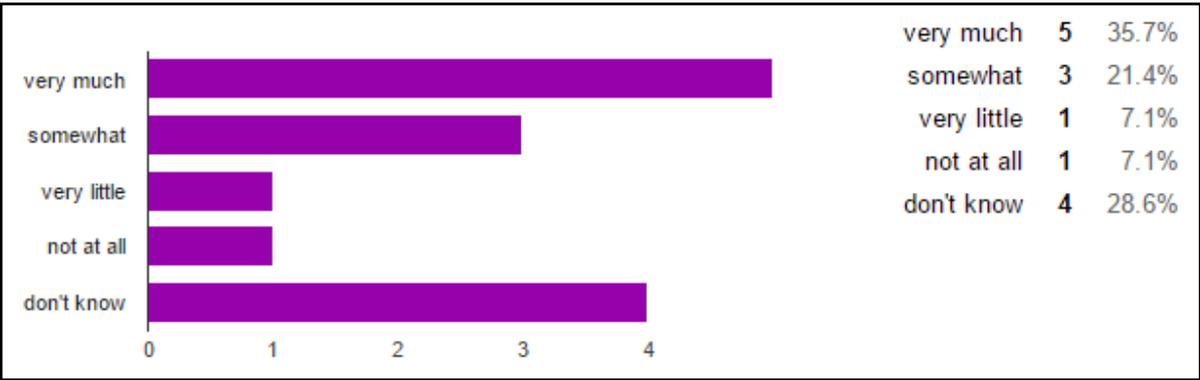


Illustration 33: (18) Thesis: Over time, personalities reveal themselves.

Yet, Heidbrink challenged this process of revealing. She wrote:

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<sup>118</sup> Thus, for example, my personality might be such that I tend to overindulge, yet I try to hide this from others, so that I appear (persona) more self-controlled. In that sense, the avatar could be an extension of our persona. McLuhan suggested that every technology is an extension of a human ability. So, for example, the train is an extension of the foot. Likewise, the avatar could be an extension of our persona for it helps us to better control the way others perceive us.

Contemporary identity research agree[s] upon the fact, that there is nothing like a "core identity."  
 From this perspective the question does not really make sense.

(R2:18)

Heidbrink's statement assumes that identity is synonymous with persona. Thus, people are not hiding anything for there is no core identity which one could hide. However, this contradicts the way at least some of the participants have described their own self-understanding. It also raises the question of what the biblical view of identity and persona is, and indicates that identity is one of the categories requiring further research. However, the general conclusion in the social sciences is that the role of identity online is not as significant as first anticipated as demonstrated below.

### 6.2.1.3 Credibility

There was a clear consensus on the thesis that credibility is gained through good rating in search-engines.

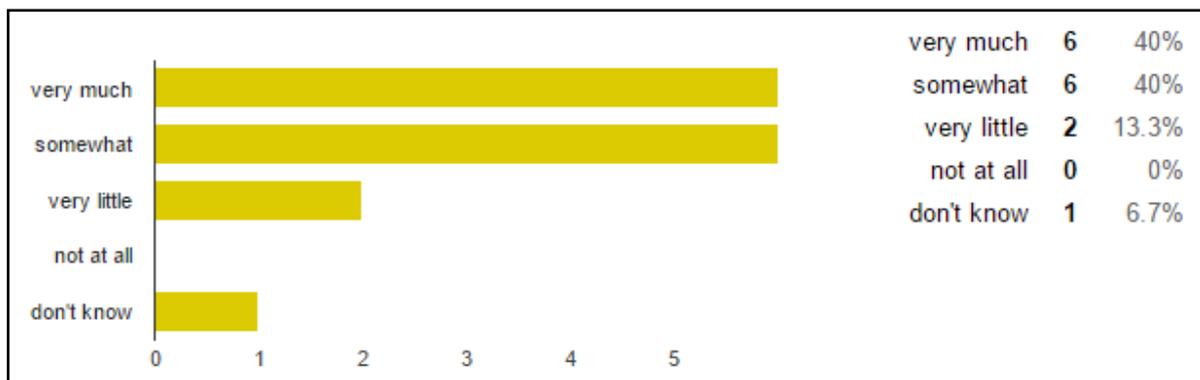


Illustration 34: (19) Thesis: Credibility is gained through good rankings in search-engines

Even more strongly, it was affirmed that web design is crucial for creating credibility.

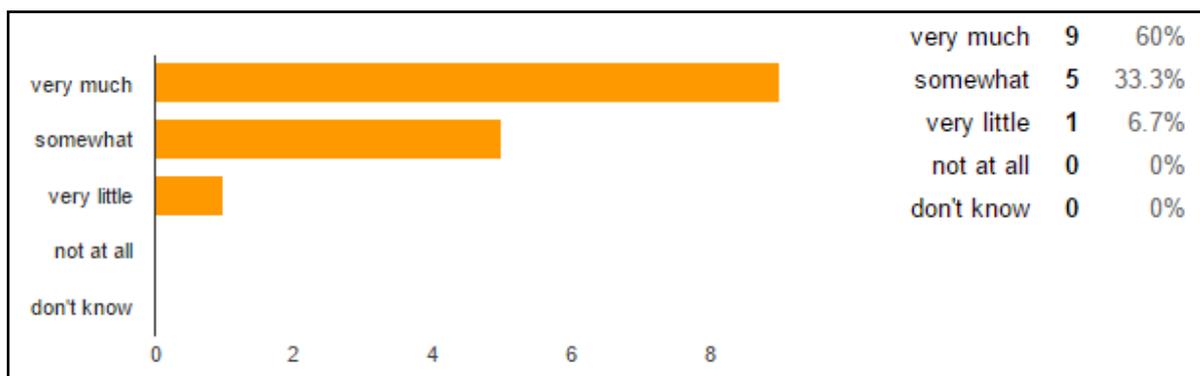


Illustration 35: (20) Thesis: Professional web design makes the information seem more ...

However, the fact that credibility could be gained through professional web design was also lamented. Schut commented:

Nothing says "stop reading me" faster than a mustard-yellow webpage with dark blue Times New Roman font laid out in dense, poorly aligned paragraphs. It *shouldn't* make any difference to our perception, but it *does*.

(R2:20)

Baab further points out that this is part of a larger societal development:

This is one of the sad aspects of the impact of our consumer society on our perception of truth. The way things look really do[es] communicate trustworthiness.

(R2:20)

During the first round it was discussed that a website that is too professional can appear “polished” and inauthentic. The rating for the thesis “an unprofessional appearance can also create credibility if it appears authentic,” neither strongly confirmed nor denied the thesis.

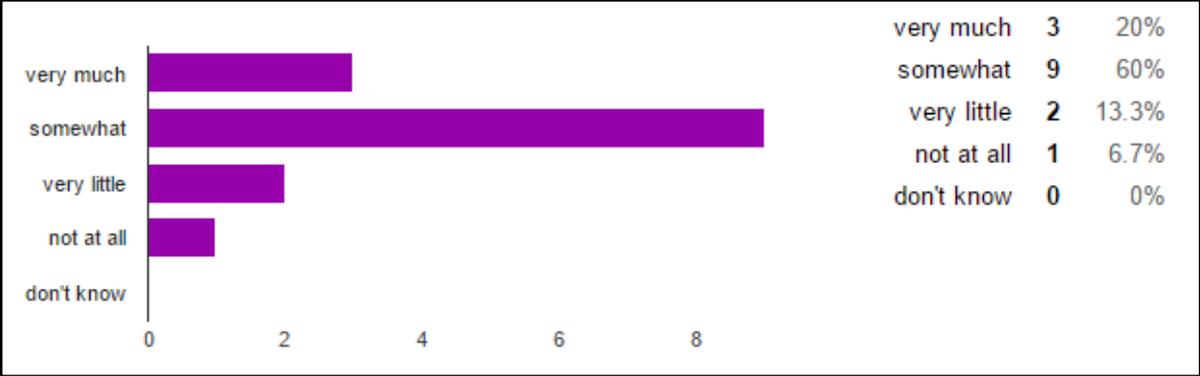


Illustration 36: (21) Thesis: However, an unprofessional appearance can also create ...

The highest affirmation among the various options presented for building credibility was seen through long-time commitment to a particular community.

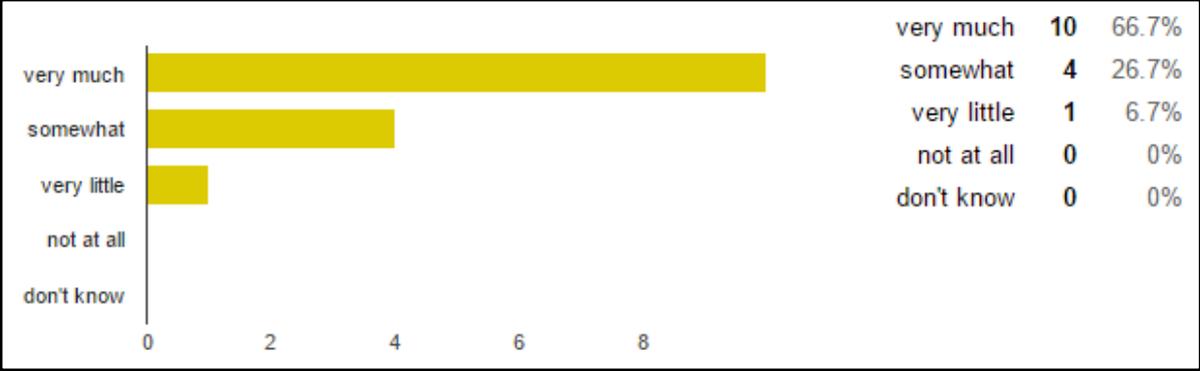


Illustration 37: (22) Thesis: Long time commitment in a particular community gives ...

However, it was pointed out that one has to have a sincere interest in the community for the community’s sake.

Further exploring how relationships become trustworthy, the thesis “being vulnerable creates trustworthiness” was introduced and affirmed almost as strongly as the previous one.

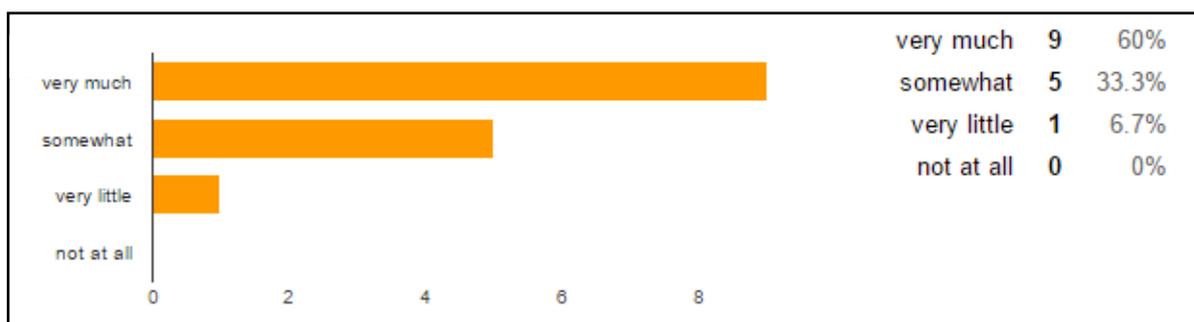


Illustration 38: (23) Thesis: Being vulnerable creates trustworthiness

Nine people saw it as very much reliable. However, the comments warned against overuse that could diminish one's privacy too much or become counter-productive. Some participants commented that it could become “self-indulgent, unprofessional and infuriating” (Anonymous H R2:23).

Gaining credibility through “linking back to established offline authorities” showed mixed results. However, no one ruled it out.

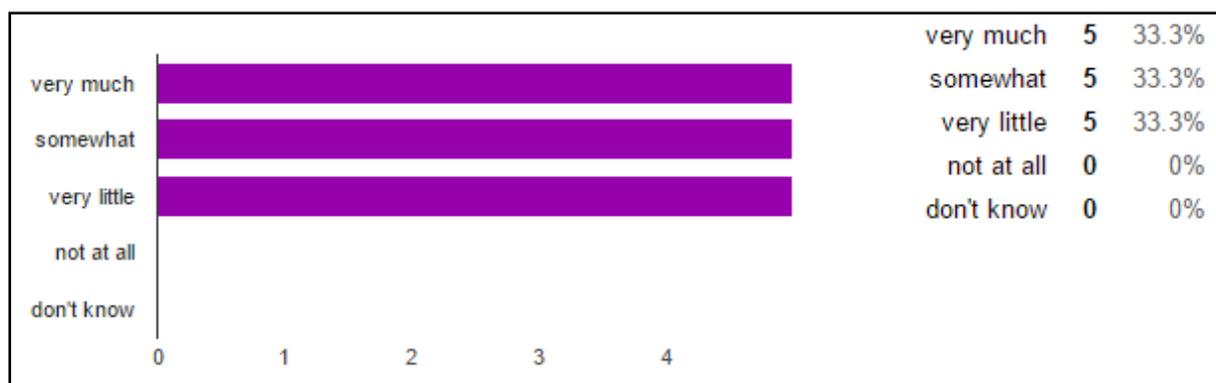


Illustration 39: (24) Thesis: Credibility is created through linking back to established ...

During the first round, a participant suggested that it is challenging to build credibility because so many “crazy” Christians are out there posting content that alienates people from the Christian faith (Q25). This was also seen as a reliable thesis.

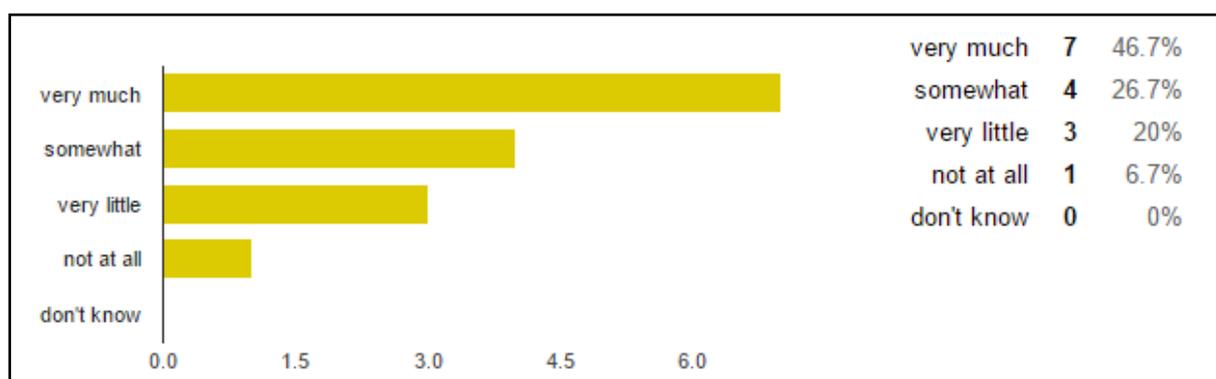


Illustration 40: (25) Thesis: It is hard to gain credibility online because so many ...

The next thesis related to the posture one should hold while evangelizing. Participants were asked to comment on the thesis that “only if one is willing to reconsider one’s faith and worldview, can one expect the other to listen and to let him or herself be challenged.” (R2:26) The results were mixed though most agreed.

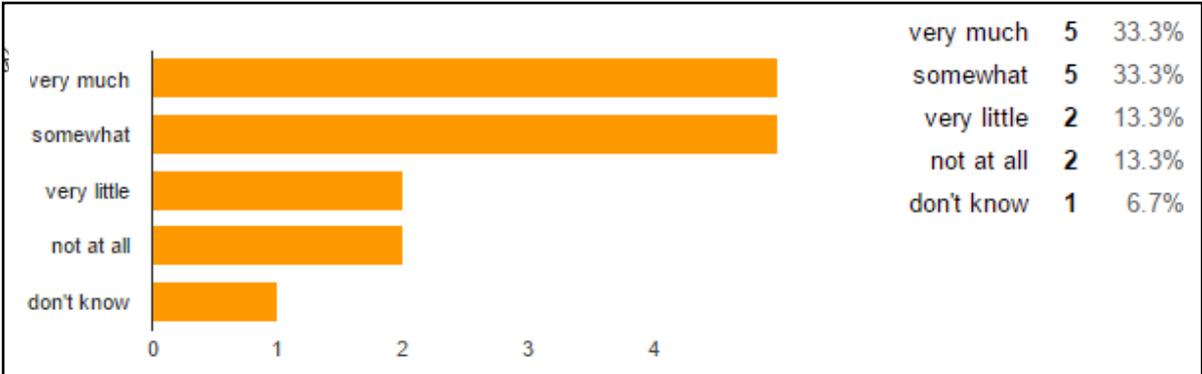


Illustration 41: (26) Thesis: Only if one is willing to reconsidering one’s own faith ...

The feasibility of such a position was questioned in the comments. Could an evangelist truly be open to becoming an atheist? Estes sought to find a middle ground:

This is true, but only up to a point. On the one hand, there is the person who reads from a script and has all the answers. That won't work. On the other hand is the one who can't take a position, or worse, fakes not taking a position. Being open-minded doesn't mean not having a view, it just means willingness to consider and listen to others. Evangelization is the same way; it needs people who are both open-minded and strong in their convictions. Those two do go together quite fine.

(R2:26)

Reflections on doing apologetics’ such as those found in *Humble Apologetics* by Stackhouse Jr. (2002), might offer a theological framework for assuming a humble posture while evangelizing.

**6.2.1.4 Cyber Cultures**

The thesis “there is no cyber culture (singular) but cultures (plural)” was strongly affirmed.

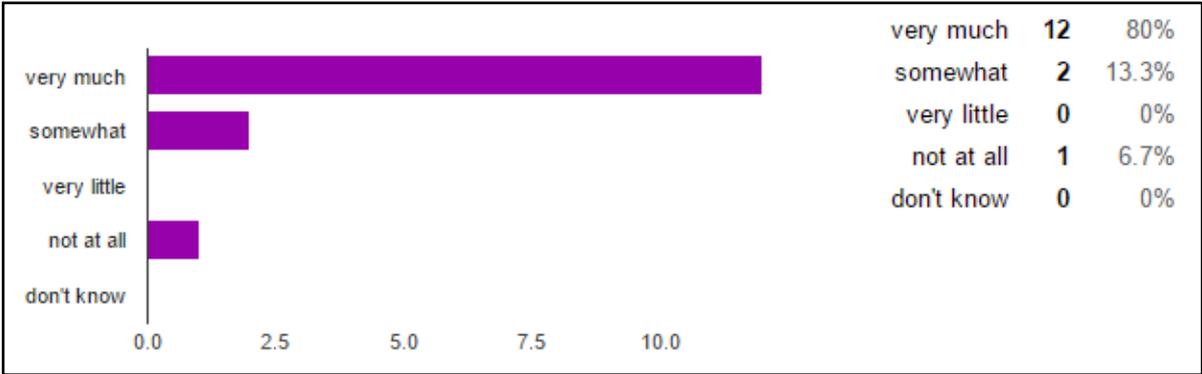


Illustration 42: (27) Thesis: There is no cyber culture (singular) but cultures (plural)

In the first round many suggested that one commonality among all cyber cultures is their fast-paced communication (R2:28). The second round made evident that not even this can clearly be identified as a commonality.

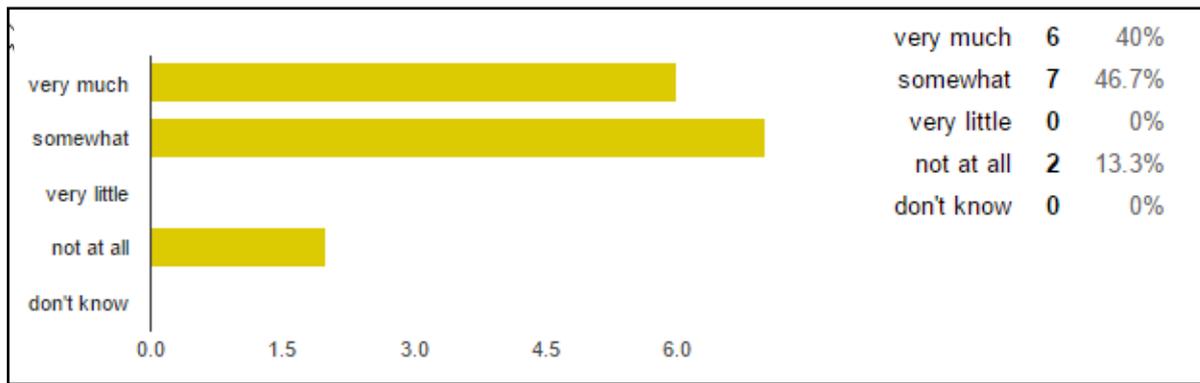


Illustration 43: (28) Thesis: All cyber cultures are characterized by a fast-paced ...

Though the confirmation of the thesis is relatively high, it is not strong enough to suggest that increased speed in communication is an overarching characteristic of cyber cultures. As Estes sums it up: “This is a big ‘it depends.’ Some people are [fast-paced], some people are not. Same with platforms” (Estes R2:28).

The second thesis proposed to discern a commonality among the different cyber cultures was stated as: “another mark of cyber culture is that we (feel) like we have absolute control about what we control”<sup>119</sup> (R2:29).

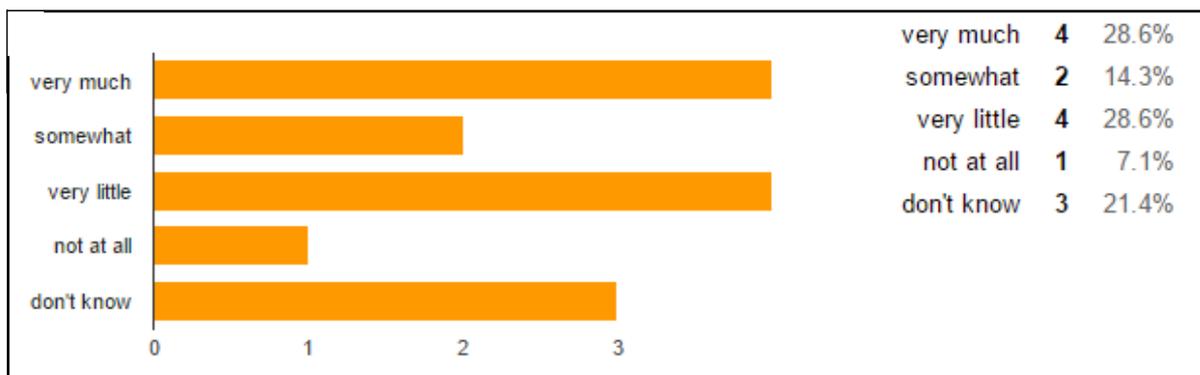


Illustration 44: (29) Thesis: Another mark of cyber culture is that we feel like we have ...

The thesis reflected earlier research on behavior online where anonymity was seen as a central aspect of VR yet, as Schut’s comment suggested, this could be changing:

I think many people *do* feel like they have great control, but the reality isn't that simple, and I think most people realize this if they really think it through (e.g. others can comment on you, tag you in pics, etc.).

(R2:29)

It was also mostly affirmed that online-communication requires work-a-rounds (R2:30), because online environments are communication-impooverished since they usually cannot

<sup>119</sup> In hindsight, the thesis was poorly formulated, but the comments suggest that it was understood correctly.

communicate posture, body language or gesture. However, it was also mostly affirmed that the communication-limitations can be used advantageously (R2:31).<sup>120</sup>

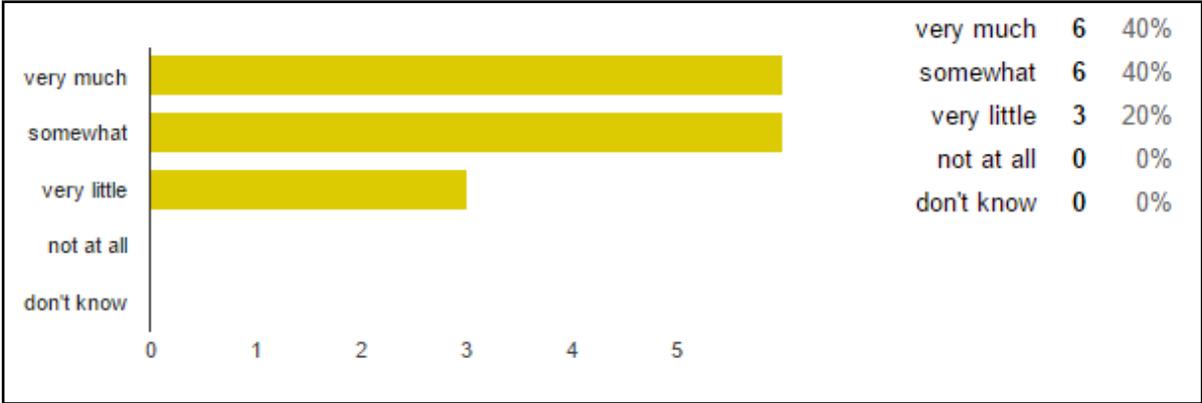


Illustration 45: (31) Thesis: The limitations (or impoverishment) of online-communication ...

Thesis 32 stated that “many online-environments are hard for all people to access.” For example, online games are exclusive and not accessible or welcoming to anyone, but those who can invest enough time and/or have the necessary skills (e.g. reflexes to play a game well). This thesis was strongly confirmed.

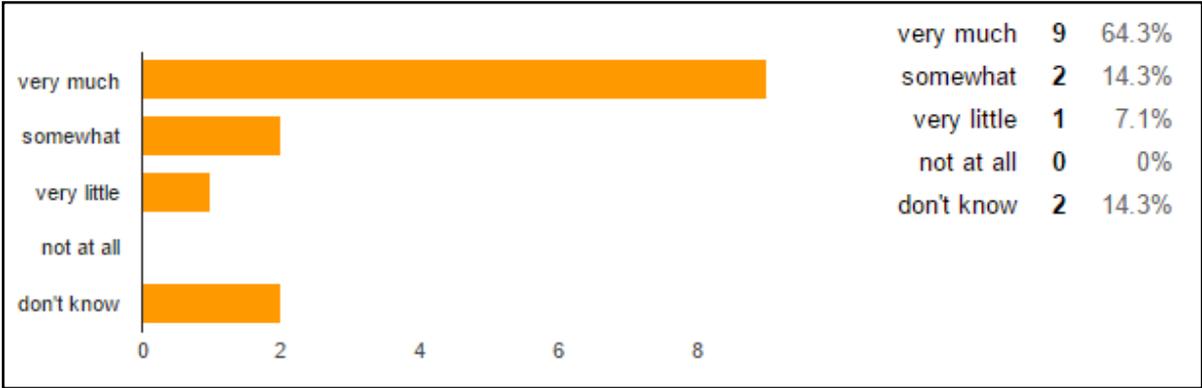


Illustration 46: (32) Thesis: Many online-environments are hard for all people to access

These results at least suggest that one should not consider online-environments necessarily easier to access than places offline.

Further, it was postulated that “VR magnifies characteristics commonly associated with postmodernism” (R2:33) (or fluid modernity), such as the fluid concept of identity, relational truth, pluralism, etc. Most considered this thesis to be “somewhat” reliable.

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<sup>120</sup> An example was the website *sacredspace.ie* where the initiator argued that the confines of the screen help to focus the site’s visitors’ attention. Rather than trying to create more sensory input, the website uses this limitation to help the listener focus as he or she reflects on the readings. Similarly, some have argued that not seeing another human being also means I am not distracted or put off if I dislike something about his or her appearance, mannerisms, etc.

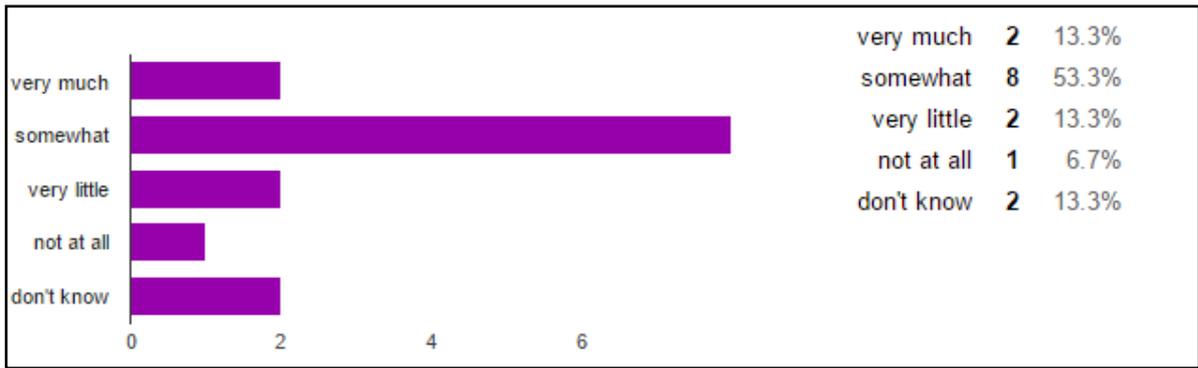


Illustration 47: (33) Thesis: VR magnifies characteristics commonly associated ...

These results regarding the relationship between VR and Postmodernism confirmed what current research has also suggested (see 8.1.1) and Schut articulated this well:

I think the changes associated with VR are not as radical as the popular narrative would have it sometimes. There are more cultural continuities than differences.

(R2:33)

The next thesis built upon this theme by asking the panel to comment on the continuity between FR and VR. The sub-thesis proposed was that “this also suggests that while FR and VR are different in degree, there are no fundamental differences.” Results were not strong, as most participants did not comment.

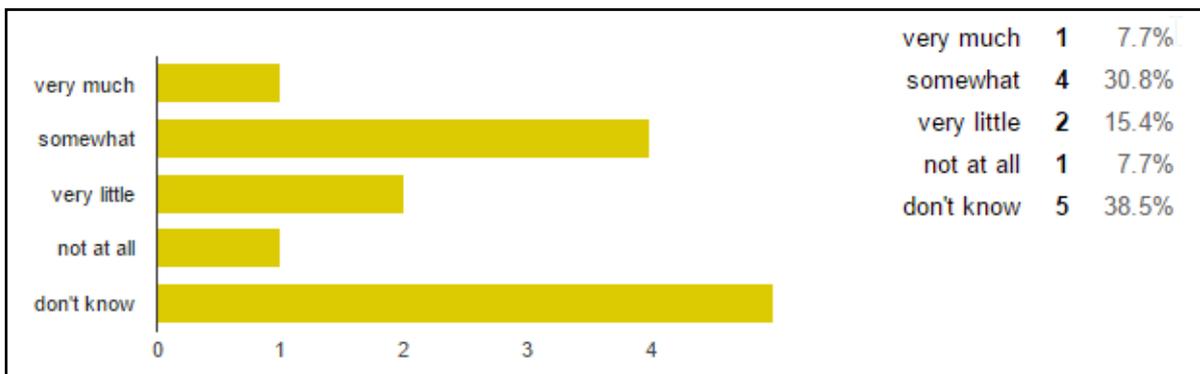


Illustration 48: (34) Thesis: While FR and VR are different in degree, there ...

This uncertainty and ambivalence corresponds with the previous wave of research on religion online (see 3.1).

When asked to comment on the thesis that “particularly shy people are more likely to engage in conversations online,” most confirmed the thesis to be reliable.

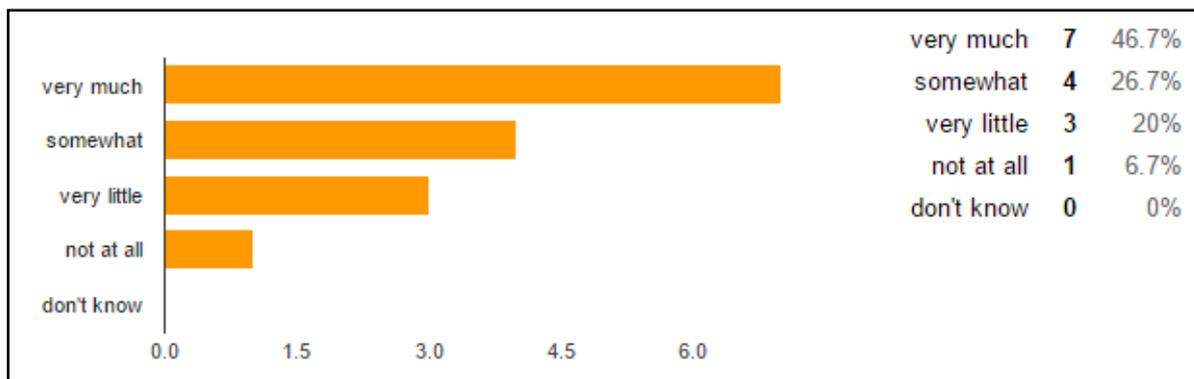


Illustration 49: (35) Thesis: *Particularly shy people are more likely to engage in ...*

However, Heidbrink pointed out that “[r]esearch shows that the degree of personal involvement and social contacts online corresponds to the offline realm. So I am not sure if your thesis is valid” (Heidbrink R2:35). Similarly, Baab commented:

The research I've seen indicates that the most gregarious people in person are also the most gregarious people online. It's true that the online setting gives shy people time to think about their response, but it's also true that social skill offline transfers into social skill online.

(R2:35)

Thus, at least based on those asked on the panel, this question needed further research in order to either enhance the thesis or to clearly disprove it.

For online evangelization, these results suggest that it is not necessarily better at reaching people who feel too shy to ask questions about their faith. It might also suggest that a false stereotype of a “shy loner” continues to dominate our impression of those online.

It was further confirmed that “one can find many small sub-cultures online” (R2:36), which supported the following thesis derived from Stamper’s research, namely, that the internet allows for the rise of micro-celebrities, which was also strongly confirmed. The connection assumed is that small sub-cultures develop their own micro-celebrities.

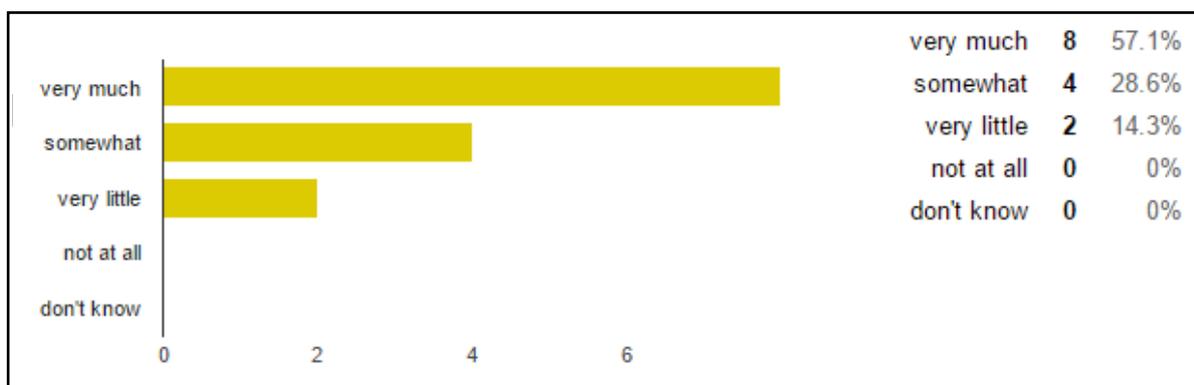


Illustration 50: (37) Thesis: *The Internet allows for the rise of micro-celebrities*

It is also important to note that this development was viewed positively. The ratings for desirability showed a somewhat welcoming attitude to this development.

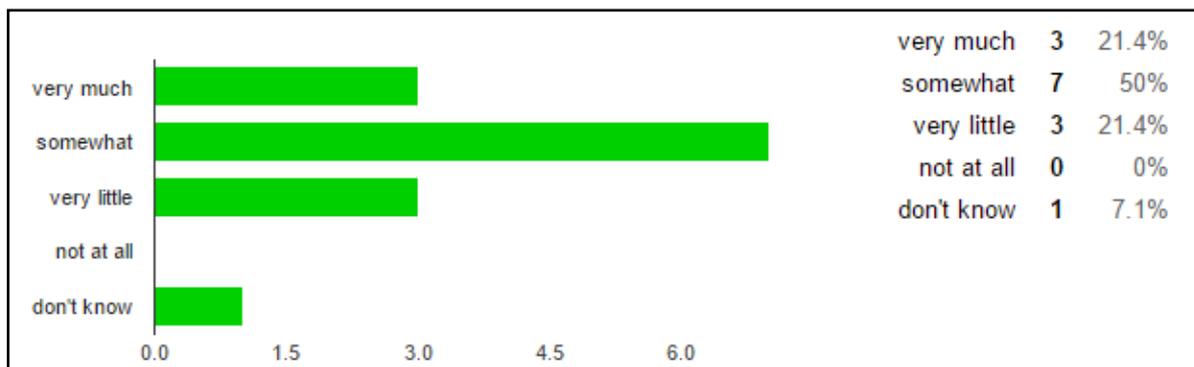


Illustration 51: (37) Thesis: *The Internet allows for the rise of ... [Desirability]*

One has to be careful not to over-interpret the data, but this, at least, suggests that the rise of micro-celebrities is a welcomed though not necessarily intended effect of the medium.

### 6.2.1.5 Online-Games

Arising from the first round of interviews, the thesis was postulated that “evangelization in a game is acceptable because people share personal issues in games” (R2:38). This was affirmed, although one person thought that the thesis was “not at all” reliable.

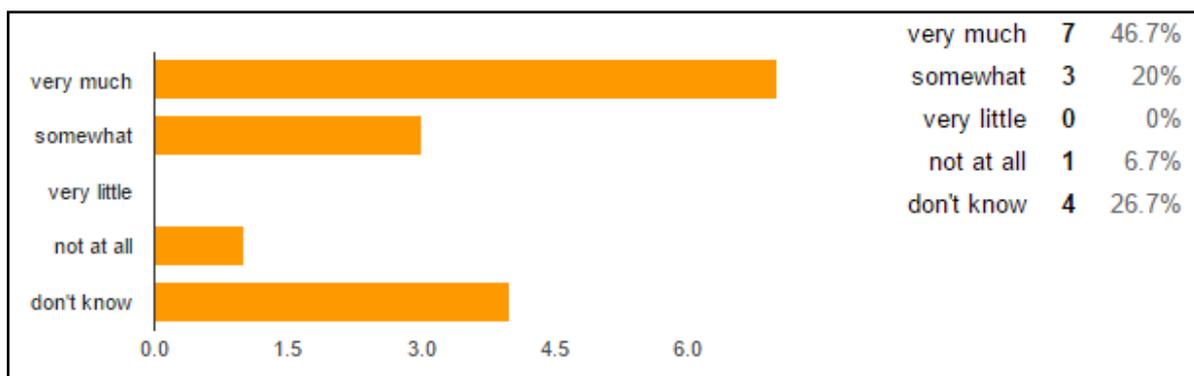


Illustration 52: (38) Thesis: *Evangelizing in a game is acceptable because people ...*

Moreover, it was also considered desirable, feasible and relevant (again with only one person disagreeing) for online evangelization.

Within the first round this positive attitude towards using online-games for evangelization was a surprise discovery. The panel, however, expressed hesitation in using social media, particularly *Facebook*, for evangelism. This led to the sub-thesis “by contrast some participants felt that *Facebook* wasn’t a good place to evangelize.” This statement resulted in considerable disagreement.

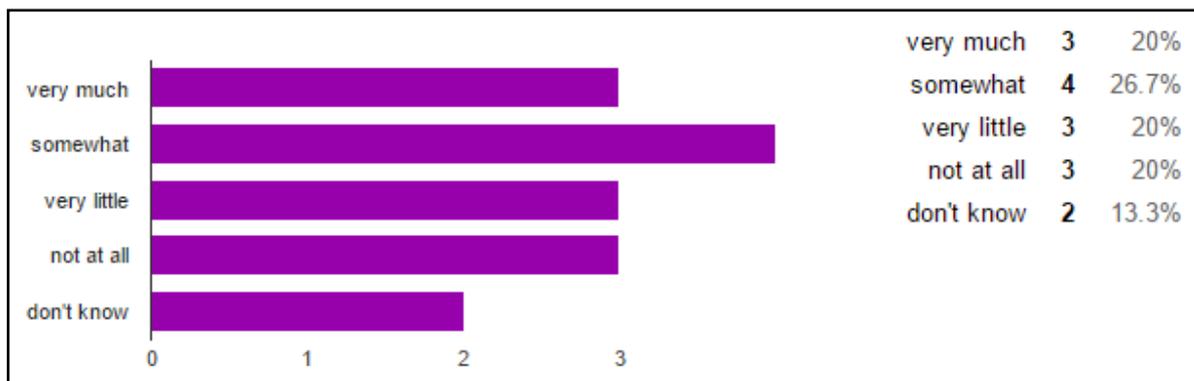


Illustration 53: (39) Sub-Thesis: By contrast some participants felt that Facebook ...

Kevin Schut disagreed strongly. He commented:

Wow. I disagree with that. There's a germ of truth there in that it's true for \*some\* people, but Facebook is so big and varied that even if that was true of a majority (which I highly doubt), there would still be millions for whom it wasn't true.

(R2:39)

Anticipating this to be a more controversial question, the panel was further asked to comment on the thesis that “not all online-environments are equally suited for evangelization” (R2:40), and this thesis was also affirmed.

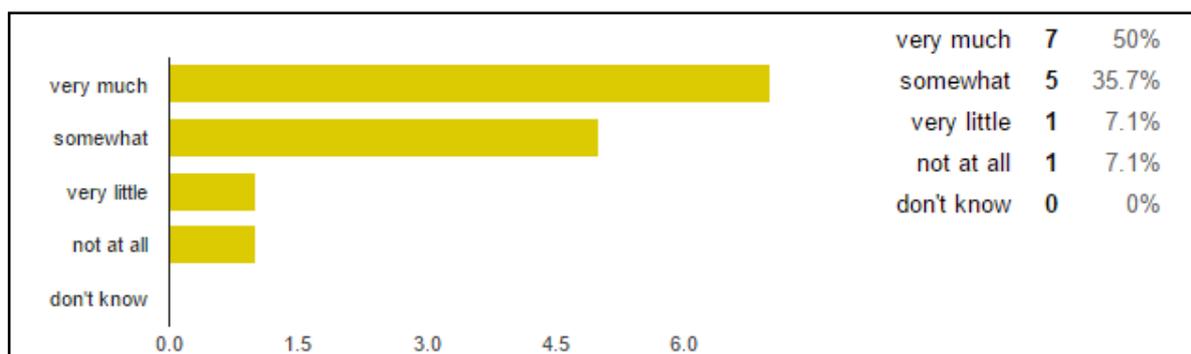


Illustration 54: (40) Sub-Thesis: Not all online-environments are equally suited ...

Looking more closely at online-games, the panel was asked to comment on the thesis that the “game itself can evangelize” (R2:41). Like *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis, so games could introduce the gamer to the Christian narrative in an allegorical way. It was interesting here to note that although the thesis was seen as reliable and desirable, the feasibility (achievability) was lower.

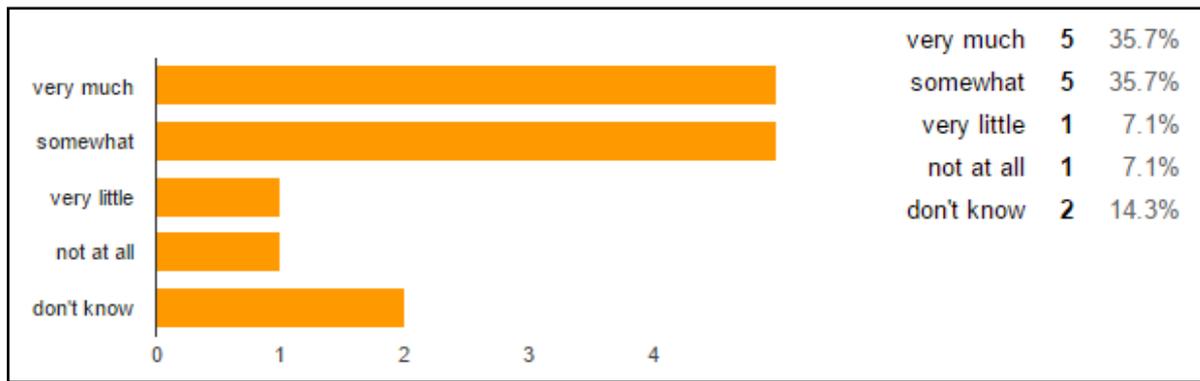


Illustration 55: (41) Thesis: The game itself can evangelize

In the comments, two reasons were given for the concern of achievability. One was the high costs associated with developing a game (Anonymous R2:41) and the other was with regards to how games would actually draw the connection between the gospel and the game narrative. Heidbrink commented:

There are games out there with strong connections to religion / Christianity [...] however, in order for the players to recognize the connections, they need to be acquainted to the gospel to a certain degree at least. But many players DO actively get involved with the underlying narratives as can be seen in many online forums etc.

(R2:41)

In the first round interview with Schut, he argued that games can easily communicate the concept of sacrifice, but the concept of grace seems far more challenging to convey. However, grace is inherent to the gospel and would likely prove very powerful if it could be communicated through a game.

Though the panel mostly affirmed the reliability of the thesis that a “game could communicate the concept of grace” (R2:42), the results were less strong with regards to the feasibility (achievability). Unless the game was explicitly Christian, it was questioned if a person would be able to connect the game narrative with the Christian story.

Another reason given for the low feasibility is the high cost associated with game-development, particularly when it comes to games which communicate a complex narrative, as the Christian story does.

Thus, although it is very popular to use other media like books and films to communicate the gospel directly or as an allegory (e.g. *The Chronicles of Narnia*), the idea of using the medium game does not seem so desirable.

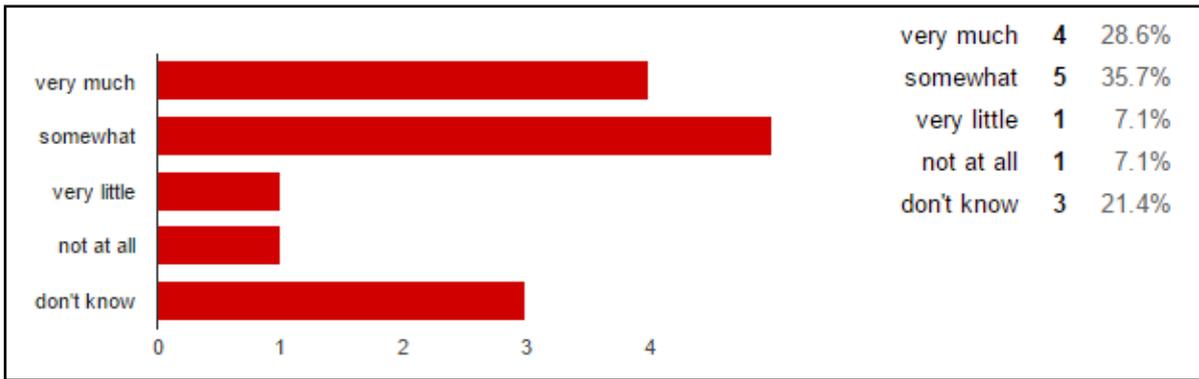


Illustration 56: (41) Thesis: The game itself can evangelize [desirability]

This hesitancy was further confirmed as the relevance of the thesis received even less affirmation.

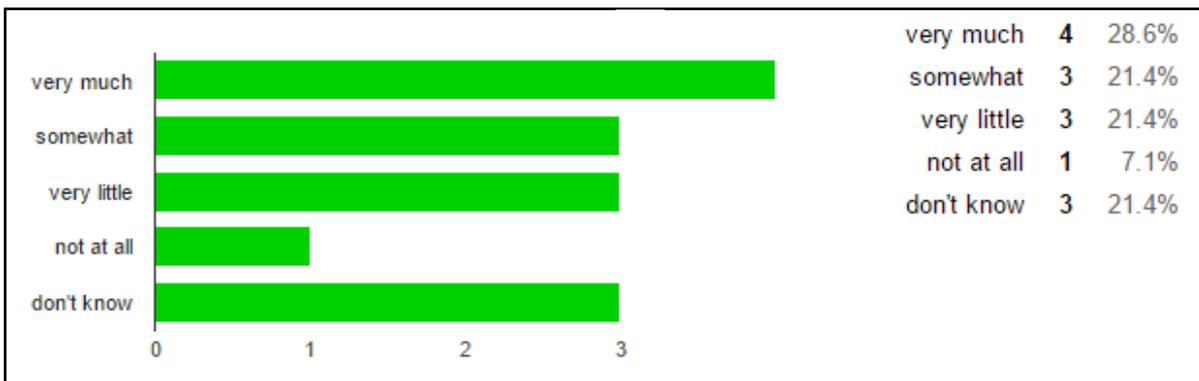


Illustration 57: (41) Thesis: The game itself can evangelize [relevance]

Games (as opposed to other online-platforms) have not been used much as a means to evangelize and so it is understandable that there is some resistance against the idea.

### 6.2.1.6 Community / Relationships

This section deals with the question of online-community. Though the questions addressed here are often discussed with regards to virtual churches, they are included here because evangelization is considered a task of the church, where the aim of evangelization is to integrate people into a church community.

The first thesis in this category stated that “only in a physical context can the Christian community be fully expressed and experienced” (R2:44). It generated some controversy.

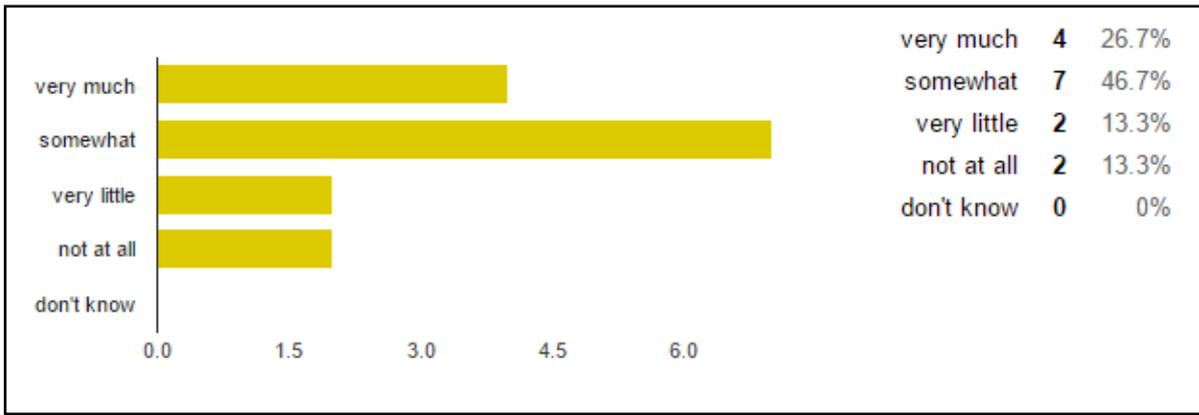


Illustration 58: (44) Thesis: Only in a physical context can the Christian community ...

Most participants agreed with the thesis that “evangelization online needs to lead seekers into an offline community (church)” (R2:45).

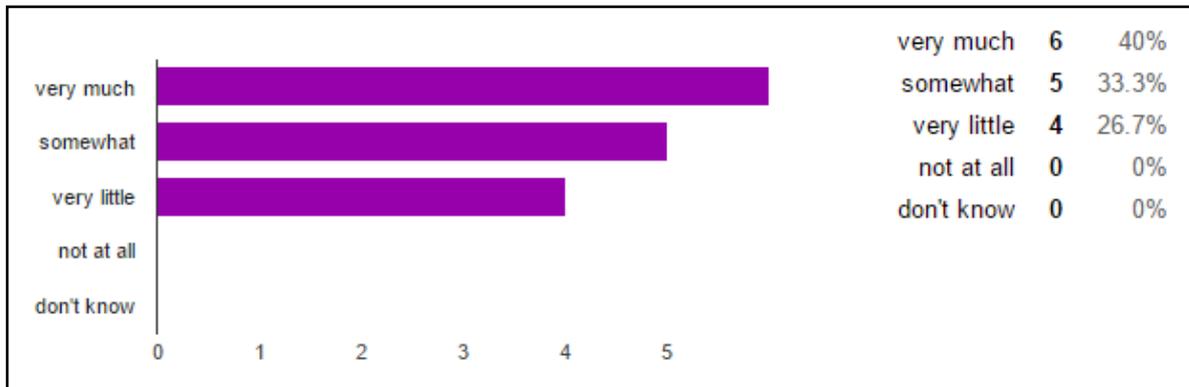


Illustration 59: (45) Thesis: Evangelization online needs to lead seekers into an ...

These results were interesting since two people disagreed with the previous thesis (R2:43). Estes offered an explanation for this:

While I don't agree that only "physical context" churches are "real" churches, I *do* agree that physical context churches are for the most part much more well-rounded and equipped to do this (they have a lot more experience!) So I do point people to offline churches only because I know that I can cover more bases that way. It is pragmatic, that is all.

(R2:43)

Despite the controversy, most participants affirmed that “the important thing is that people are in community, not where (online or offline) this community meets” (R2:46).

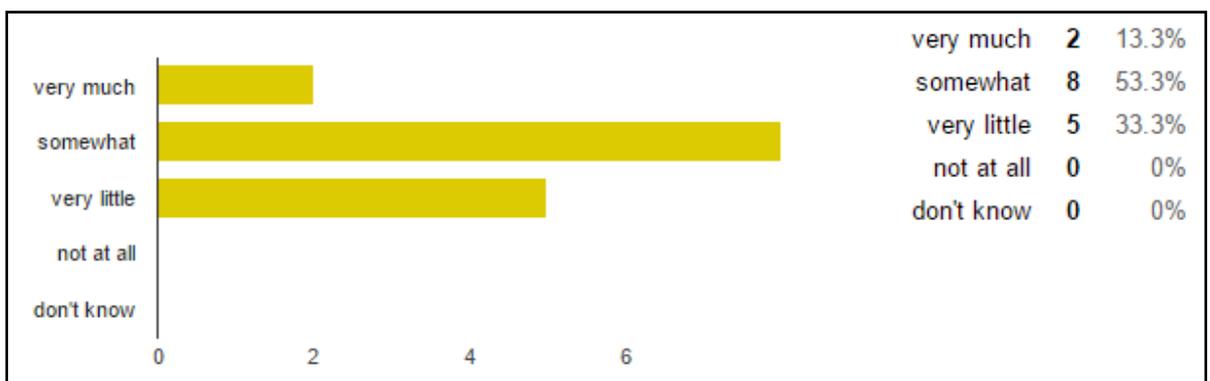


Illustration 60: (46) Thesis: The important thing is that people are in community ...

None of the participants disagreed with the thesis that “people’s experiences of online-communities can be equal to, or even better than, offline experiences.”

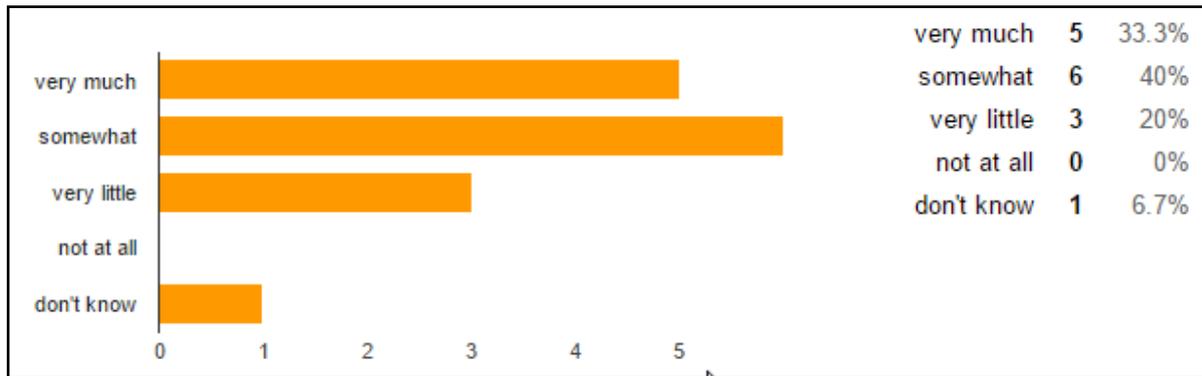


Illustration 61: (47) Sub-Thesis: People’s experiences of online-communities can ...

Anonymous H, who researched online-communities, however, stated: “Oh, definitely. All the online community research backs this up” (R2:47).

The next proposed thesis tried to highlight the theological dimension: “Since we are created as physical beings, any virtual interaction cannot do justice to our personhood” (R2:48). Five participants rated the thesis as “not at all” reliable.

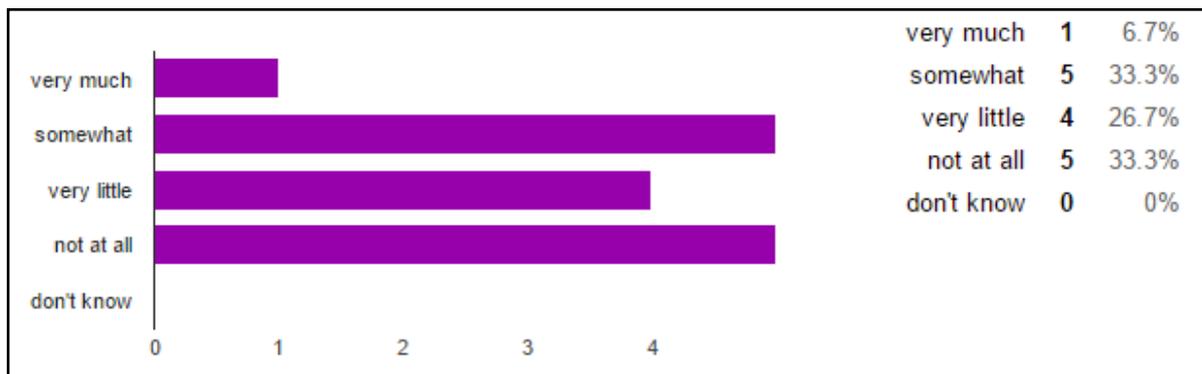


Illustration 62: (48) Thesis: Since we are created as physical beings, any virtual ...

The comments also reflect this rejection of the thesis, and although the thesis perhaps could have been better formulated as some suggested, the critique was mostly with the underlying assumption, namely that virtual interaction is not also a physical one.

This is a false analogy: It presumes that virtual interaction is in some way not physical. Virtual interaction is no less physical than going to a face-to-face church, it is just a different type of physical. Also, there is a second false analogy: Biblically, we are not created as physical beings; we are created as spiritual beings with physical form, made in the image of God. But that Image of God is *not* a physical image, it is a spiritual image. The problem with this discussion is that many of those championing one position or another often do not understand the metaphysical issues below the bumper stickers (I am sorry to say).

(Estes R2:48)

The thesis that “in order for a virtual church to be accepted, the praxis of the sacraments needs to be addressed” was strongly affirmed.

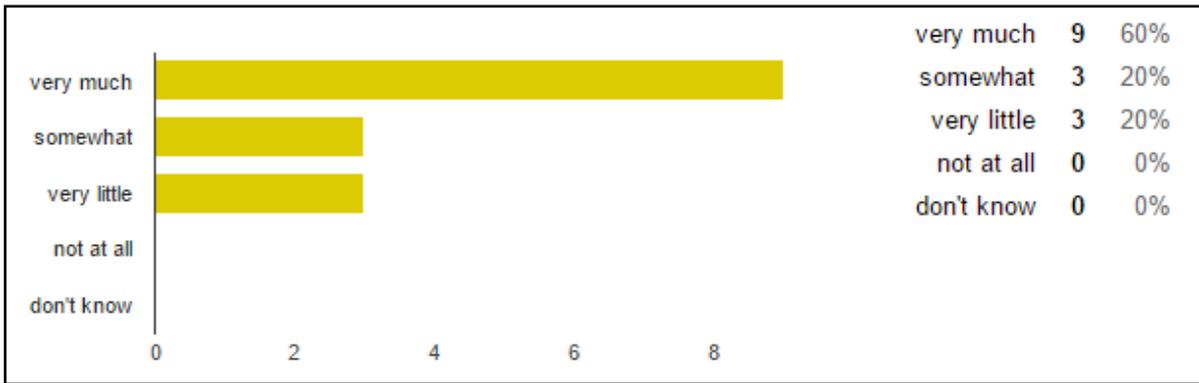


Illustration 63: (49) Thesis: In order for a virtual church to be accepted, the praxis ...

However, the relevance for evangelization is not seen by all.

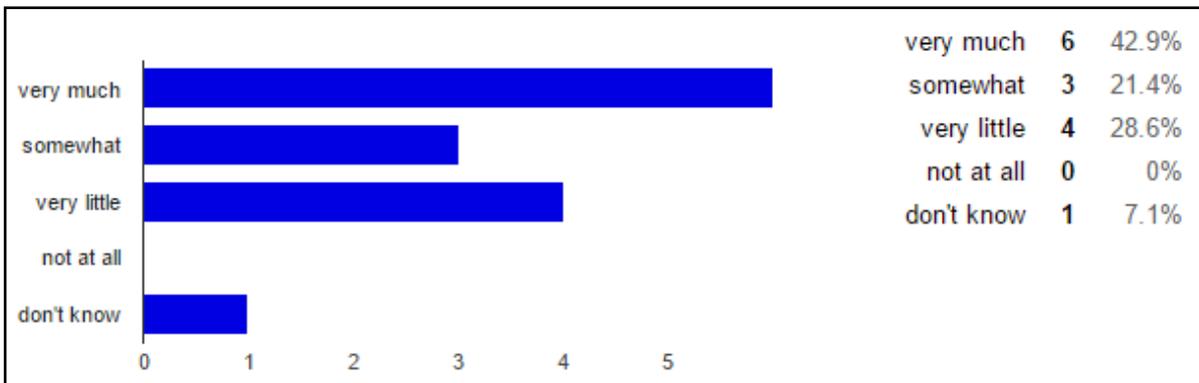


Illustration 64: (49) Thesis: In order for a virtual church to be accepted ... [relevance]

The panel mostly agreed with the thesis that “the church needs to come to terms with the fact that people experience virtual faith communities as significant, real, authentic, meaningful and deep(er)” (R2:50).

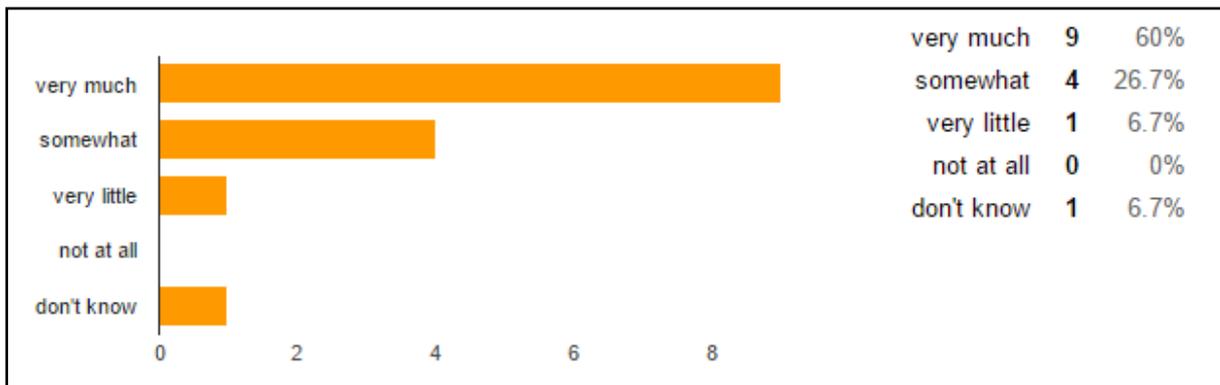


Illustration 65: (50) Thesis: The church needs to come to term with the fact that people ...

In order to investigate the transference between a VR and FR church, the panel was asked to rate and comment on the following thesis: “offering a virtual Christian community first makes it more likely that people will eventually go to one offline” (R2:51).

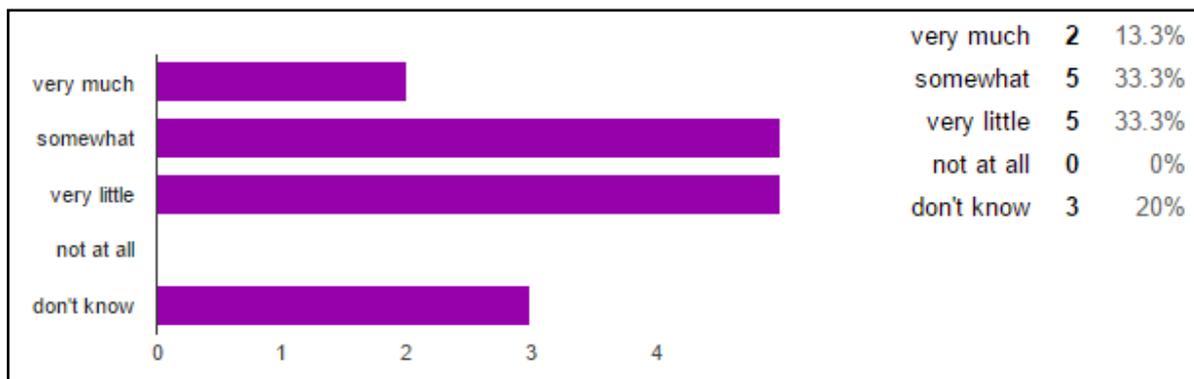


Illustration 66: (51) Thesis: Offering a virtual Christian community first makes it more ...

In the comments, two people expressed the sentiment that they wished the thesis would be true, perhaps indicating a desire that people find their way to a church in FR.

### 6.2.1.7 Ethics

The first thesis, “success in online evangelization cannot be evaluated based on how many initial contacts one has made” was strongly affirmed.

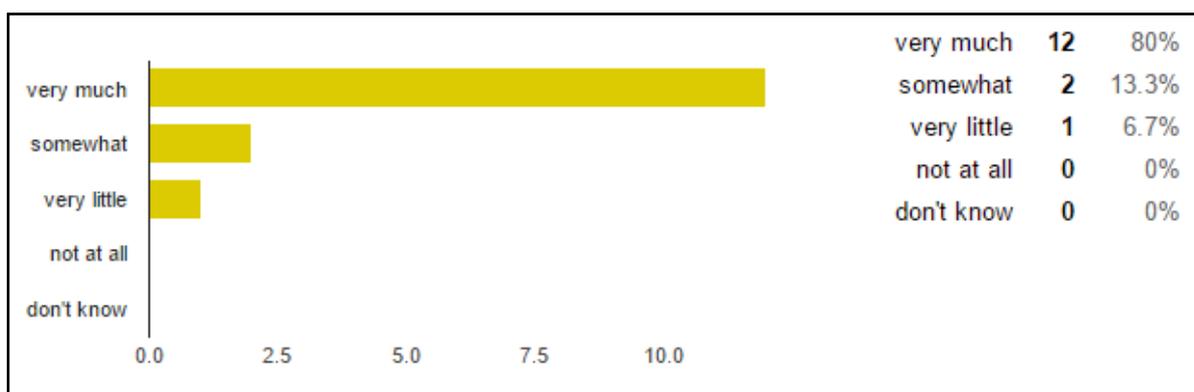


Illustration 67: (52) Thesis: Success in online evangelization cannot be evaluated ...

The answer to this question may seem obvious but practice online indicates the opposite. As one anonymous participant commented:

True, of course, although the initial statistics have some value too. But keeping statistics on successful long-term life change is very difficult. Also, to be honest, the statistics on successful long-term evangelism are going to be very low (particularly in secularized countries).

(Anonymous H R2:52)

Thus, not only are initial contacts unhelpful indicators, evaluating progress in online evangelization is complicated.

One person on the panel mentioned that his online-habits, at times, took him away from the people around him. Since this is a general concern of many other people who have commented on this research, the panel was presented with the thesis: “Being present online is often at the expense of being present with those to whom one is physically near”(R2:53).

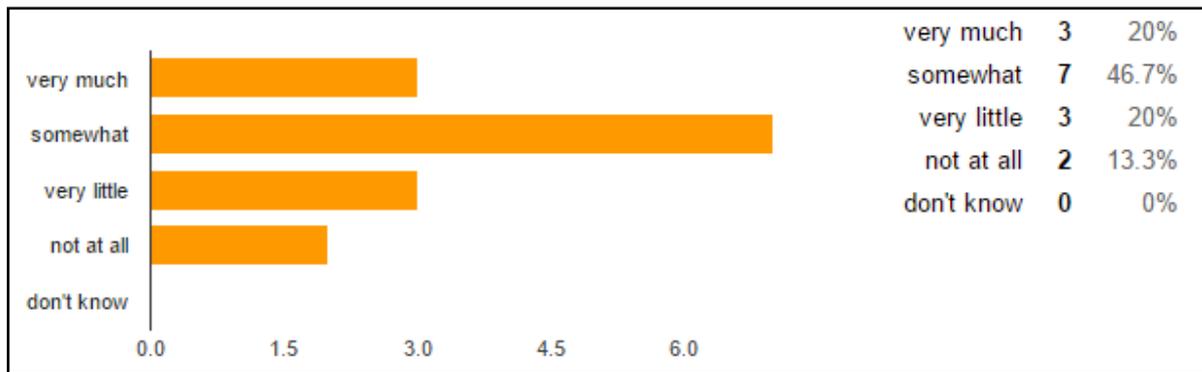


Illustration 68: (53) Thesis: Being present online is often at the expense of being ...

In the comment section, it was highlighted that technology also brings people together.

Occasionally true, usually not. And nowadays families are often online together anyway - I talk to my fiancée about what we read online, and lots of families play games together.

(Anonymous H R2:53)

The thesis that “it would be helpful if there was a policy outlining how an avatar ought to be used” (R2:54) was considered very unreliable.

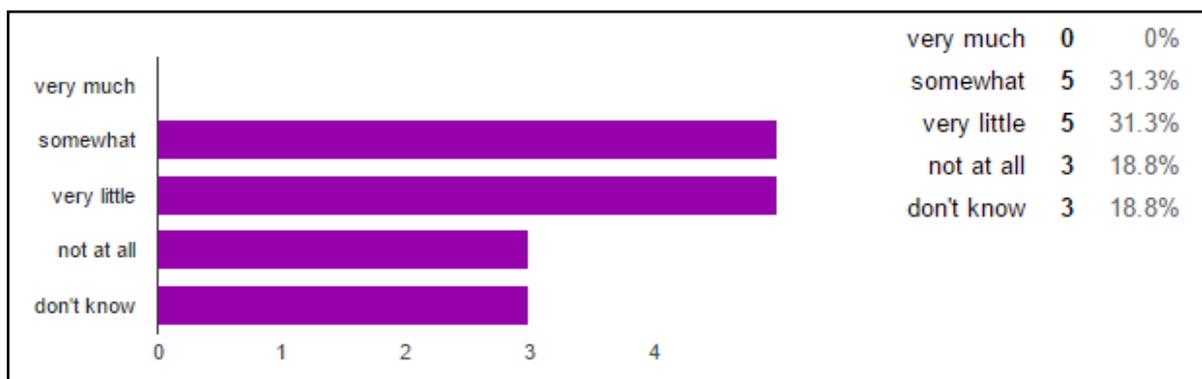


Illustration 69: (54) Thesis: It would be helpful if there was a policy outlining how ...

It was also strongly confirmed that “ethics for online-evangelism don’t need to be different from offline” (R2:55).

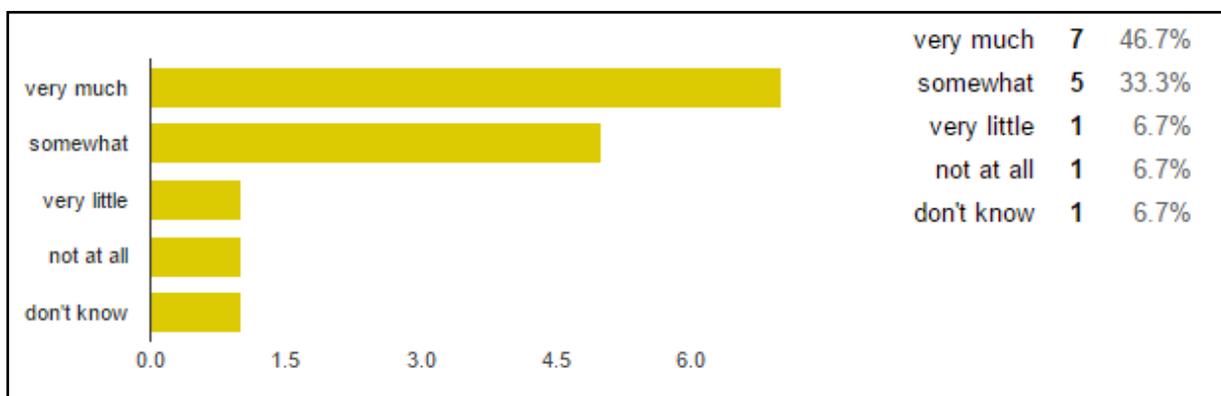


Illustration 70: (55) Thesis: Ethics for online-evangelism don't need to be different ...

Perhaps the thesis should have been formulated positively, as two comments, in particular, suggested that a different ethics might not be necessary, but still helpful.

Most also agreed on the thesis that “people should be made aware that they are not as anonymous as they assume while online.”

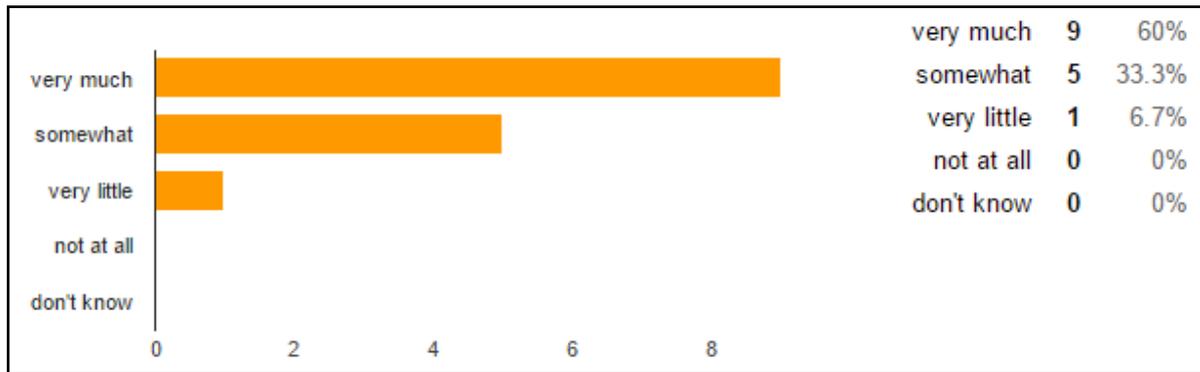


Illustration 71: (56) Thesis: People should be made aware that they are not as anonymous ...

Such a warning could be part of a particular ethical guideline or best-practice approach for online evangelization.

## 6.2.2 Findings

As shown above, the second round again produced a significant amount of data which provides insight into the complexity of evangelization online.

The contributions in this section will be organized thematically, in correlation with the themes of the research questions. The findings here are also a result of cross-connecting data from different theses of the second round and the previous round. The focus will be on those theses which created surprising, controversial or contradictory results.

### 6.2.2.1 A preference for personal evangelization and private platforms

No particular style or platform was considered more suitable for evangelization online than another, yet, in general, a relational approach<sup>121</sup> to evangelization was preferred, as the following diagram illustrates.

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<sup>121</sup> One can differentiate between three different kinds of evangelization: apologetic, liturgical and relational (respectively: commending, including, witnessing). Apologetic evangelization commends the faith to others through logical arguments. Liturgical evangelization tries to include seekers into the worship of God, allowing the community of faith to witness as a whole. Relational evangelization uses the bond of an established relationship to share what one has experienced and what marks one’s own faith in a winsome way.

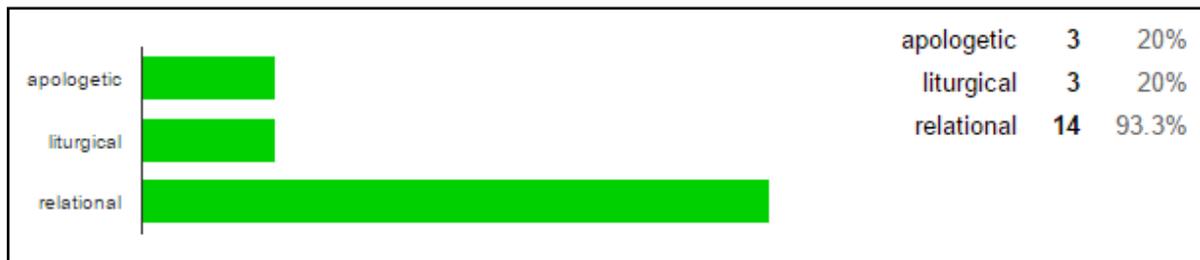


Illustration 72: (8) Question: Which form of evangelization is most suitable for an ...

As Bär phrased it: “We have learned: the more we invest online personally in people the more will happen spiritually” (R2:8).

This preference corresponds with the inclination towards using platforms that allow for a more private and direct approach to evangelization, as two participants suggested in the comments.

I think likely the "best" evangelization (i.e., the most fruitful) is taking place in less public online forums (Facebook messenger, for example) though in my own research I saw several conversions take place as the result of extended public conversation on online forums.

(Anonymous S R2:10)

Yet, in comparison to social media platforms forums, such as those on *Instagram* or *Facebook*, are usually frequented by a small group of people and thus they would be more private. Albeit not as private as a messenger.

The opinion of two people in itself is not strong enough to form even a bold hypothesis, but it did correspond with the practice of those practitioners that agreed to join the first round of the panel.<sup>122</sup> Anonymous K and the organization he works for use e-learning platforms, as does ERFonline. All these organizations use e-coaches that correspond directly, usually via email, with those interested.

However, different platforms, like *Facebook*, were considered helpful for initiating contact.

### 6.2.2.2 Ambiguity regarding characteristics of VR

Likewise, no agreement was found on what characterizes a cyber culture<sup>123</sup> with which evangelists could familiarize themselves. Even within the gaming culture, no other commonality besides the love of games can be assumed. And, as seen earlier, the FR culture remains influential online on how a platform is used.

<sup>122</sup> This should not lead to the conclusion that this is the general practice, because those organizations which did not respond to my requests for participation could and partly would have represented different approaches.

<sup>123</sup> Presently the term cyber culture is not used much and has been replaced by the term digital culture. However, this new term often focuses on the way our lifestyles are becoming more digitalized. This study focused on the idea expressed through the term cyber culture, namely the distinctions which are part of the platforms one frequents online.

Thus, it is proposed that the culture we encounter online is, at the very least, a combination of the following three aspects: *host culture*, the *platform* and the *other's culture*.

The host culture, meaning one's own FR culture (e.g. Germany), carries over online. However, the platform or the software used (e.g. *World of Warcraft* or *Facebook*) has embedded values and certain means for communication, which are also influential. Likewise, the FR culture of the other person also has an influence.

This is by no means a thorough analysis, but simply an illustration to indicate why it is so challenging to find overarching characteristics and how further research focusing on particular online cultures would be very profitable.

### 6.2.2.3 The validity of online-communities

The second round of the panel, as well as the research of the social sciences, clearly expressed that some people embrace online-communities and encounter them as equal to, and perhaps even better than, those offline. Of course this is not true of all users, but of some. Since these statements are based on qualitative research they reflect individual opinions. Dyer, for example, stated:

The thesis says, "[only in a physical context can the Christian community be] fully expressed" which I would agree with, but the explanation says, "Christian community necessitates physical" which I would disagree with.

(R2:43)

Heidbrink nuanced the thesis by pointing out that one has to differentiate between what theologically constitutes a Christian community and how people perceive it.

There ARE more than enough statements of internet users saying that their online church (e.g. the Anglican church in Second Life) is their "real" church and the group meeting there [are] their "real" community.

(R2:43)

Estes critiqued the thesis itself. He commented:

I cannot agree that "only in a physical context." What does that even mean? Better, how am I not in a "physical context" when I worship at an online church? The only difference is distance; in one I am 8 feet away from the nearest parishioner, in the other, 800 miles. This is just one example.

(R2:43)

Though at first glance the response from Estes suggests that more precise formulation is needed, when we compare his statement to the following one from Boers (a theologian who did not participate in this research), it becomes clear that the differences go beyond semantics.

Some churches practice "virtual baptism" – pastors Skyping to a candidate who dunks him or herself in a bathtub. It's hard to think of anything lonelier and more disconnected.

(Boers 2012:39)

For Boers, the distance creates a disconnect. Thus, it seems we are dealing with a more fundamental question: what does it mean to be present with others, and what constitutes a community?

Likewise, it is interesting to note that the relevance of addressing the issue of the sacraments for online evangelization was mostly affirmed, suggesting that online evangelization would benefit if these ecclesiastical questions were answered.

The rationale for the relevance of the sacraments for online evangelization is not evident from the answers.

It might be for theological reasons, since evangelization can be seen as an activity of the Church or perhaps people would feel that online evangelization would have a better standing if virtual churches were more accepted and endorsed, which hinges, at least partly, on the questions of the sacraments.

The question regarding the legitimacy of a Christian community online remains open, though perhaps the debate can now move towards theological implications. For some people, a virtual baptism might be a lonely experience, but what if it is not? Is there an inherent theological problem with it?

#### **6.2.2.4 A gospel beyond hope for the desperate**

Of those interviewed who engage in evangelization online, the starting point for the gospel was usually hope in a desperate situation. Particularly those who develop content for online-evangelizing argued that addressing the problems, concerns and worries of people leads to their exploration of faith as they seek answers to their problems and questions, even if they are not interested in faith at first.

One participant, although agreeing, encouraged diversity in the entry points to faith.

This sounds like a pretty good idea, and it's what groups like I Am Second are doing. But this isn't the only way to do evangelism online - we need people talking about faith and doctrine, and people showing that there can be joy in faith, and people working to change the world, not just help for the desperate. If your life really isn't that bad, does God still have something to offer you? Of course!

(Anonymous H R2:14)

As will be discussed later, the impact of technology for automating and improving efficiency means that the entry-points into the Christian faith become increasingly limited.

#### **6.2.2.5 The de-moralization of the gospel**

With regards to the thesis that addressing problems, concerns, and worries of people, rather than faith directly, is a good starting point for evangelization, Schut comments:

I believe this sub-thesis is accurate and helpful, but that it also raises challenging questions about what the Christian faith looks like in a consumeristic society. Christian Smith's research that resulted

in his description of "moralistic therapeutic deism" is a good warning that at some point Christian discipleship must move beyond viewing God as the solution to my problems.

(R2:14)

Of course, such a process of de-moralization is not necessarily limited to online evangelization, but, as Schut pointed out during the first round, he saw a stronger need for affirmation within the gaming community. This need for affirmation could provide a challenge for the Christian gospel message which can also include a critique of one's current actions and has moral implications.

[Gamers] don't like to be told rules. Conditional rules in this is how you play the game, fine, but don't say to me, "Okay, so this is the one true way, and if you don't believe it, there's no other option." As soon as you start in with an approach like that, most hardcore gamers are like, "Yeah, screw off." [...] The gospel message of repent and believe has an implicit criticism built into it. There's something to repent of. [...] That message is difficult in an environment of people who believe in interactivity and the power of interactivity.

(Schut R1:63-64)

Based on this statement one could expect evangelization among "hardcore-gamers" to be more strongly rejected.

During the first round, a participant pointed out that there are other Christians online, posting content that alienates people from the Christian faith. This assertion was confirmed as a reliable thesis by the panel. Yet, Anonymous H saw a larger problem:

This is true, in a way. But actually, a bigger concern may be the number of high-profile mainstream Christians who post arguments against gay marriage (and other popular social issues). Those aren't weird or crazy Christians - they are our pastors and bishops! How can an evangelist make the faith seem attractive, when our own leaders are busy making the faith seem as reactionary and restrictive as possible?

(R2:25)

The concern of this study is not with gay marriage, which is highly debated, but what could be of relevance is the underlying assumption that Christian doctrines should be changed to make "the faith seem attractive." This is an inherent tension in evangelization, since the one evangelizing stands in the tension between remaining true to what he/she believes (cf Schnabel 2002:58-64; Beyerhaus 1996:272-273) while being regarded as relevant and attractive to the audience (cf Theis 2002:181-182). Yet some have cautioned against making the gospel too audience-focused. At the point when the audience determines the meaning of the gospel it becomes "degraded to a consumer product" (Bosch 2006:153).

Thus, it might be worth further exploring if such a tendency is noticeable. Since Anonymous H suggests an ethical issue [i.e. homosexuality] and other data from this research could support this, there might be a process of de-moralization present. This process is likely not limited to evangelization online, but could be a general trend in evangelization, yet the finding was discovered in the context of online evangelization.

Perhaps just as Bultmann believed that his contemporaries, influenced by modern science, could no longer be expected to believe in miracles as supernaturally caused events, some evangelists now seem to find it hard to expect their contemporaries to accept the moral values held by the Christian tradition.

### 6.2.2.6 We are the same offline and online

The greatest controversy was caused by thesis Q48: “Since we are created as physical beings, any virtual interaction cannot do justice to our personhood.”

The results were fairly spread out over the spectrum:

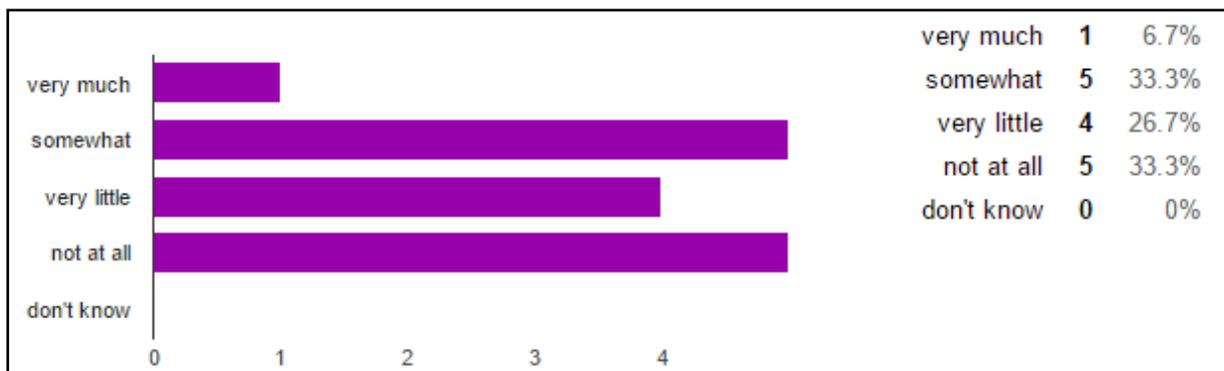


Illustration 73: (48) Thesis: Since we are created as physical beings, any virtual ...

The comments were helpful in clarifying why some disagreed with the thesis. It suffices here to give but one example:

We interact virtually all the time (e.g. radio, phone, etc.) Why problematize it especially with regard to digital media?

(Heidbrink R2:48)

The controversy made it necessary to carry this issue forward into the third round in order to gain a better understanding of the various opinions held here.

## 6.3 Conclusions

The second round allowed the panel to comment on the findings of the first round, which were presented in the form of thesis statements which could be rated according to pre-formulated categories, as well as freely commented on. Based on the second round, the following can be concluded regarding the research questions:

*Evangelization: How is evangelization modified for VR?* With regards to evangelization and contextualization, it was originally asserted that evangelization online is less intrusive because people have taken the initiative themselves to visit a particular evangelistic offering. However, as shown later, this assumption needs to be reconsidered or nuanced in light of what is called the *filter bubble*. This means that search engines customize the search results based on

one's browsing history for example. However, people also actively create their own bubble by befriending like-minded people or search information and opinions that only affirm their current beliefs.

Thus, while it *may* be true that some people actively seek evangelistic sites to engage with a new or differing faith or worldview, it cannot be assumed. Rather, it can be postulated that people who visit Christian evangelistic sites already have some familiarity with the Christian faith.

It was further mostly affirmed that sermonizing should be avoided. This further suggests that evangelistic processes need to be dynamic and dialogical since relationships develop through dialog and interaction. Similarly, it was suggested that evangelistic messages should not focus only on addressing people who are in need since the gospel is more than a solution for personal problems (see 6.2.2.4).

All this is further supported by the panel's clear preference for relational evangelization so that the development of personal relationship is a key factor. Furthermore, it was mostly affirmed that it was of particular importance to show love and acceptance, even more so than in FR. This has led me to suggest that a "de-moralization of the gospel" (see 6.2.2.5) is taking place in evangelization online.

The need for showing love and acceptance correlates with the findings on *digital identity formation*, which suggests that in order for someone to develop social presence, intimacy is needed. Focusing on social network services (i.e. Facebook), Bozkurt and Tu make the following observation:

The digital climate that social networks provide is suitable for intimacy and immediacy as they allow individuals to use various kinds of media to communicate and interact many of which have an emotional value. For instance, Facebook supports many colorful symbols, smileys, emoticons, and feeling update status. Many other features such as like or share also support intimacy as these actions indicate the value users perceived. In addition to these features fostering social presence, as discussed earlier, SNSs such as Facebook allow individuals to identity formation which may foster the degree of intimacy and immediacy.

(Bozkurt & Tu 2016:161)

Thus, evangelization should be modified for VR by approaching evangelization in a dialogical way where the building of relationships is encouraged. This means that the evangelistic endeavour should unfold in a flexible and interactive way. This general suggestion may not be applicable to all forms of evangelization online but, according to the panel, it is the most ideal.

*Identity: Does an avatar affect the evangelistic process?* Most found it somewhat better to think of an avatar as a persona (meaning the way we want other people to see us) rather than

a direct reflection of our identity or a created identity.<sup>124</sup> It was also affirmed that people, intentionally or not, reveal over time aspects of their identity which they initially hide. This supports the recommendation that evangelistic encounters should be a long-term commitment.

It was further suggested that the avatar can help an encounter since prejudice based on appearances (i.e. size, colour, accent, gender, etc) can be avoided.

*Credibility: How are authority and credibility established?* Credibility is gained through ranking high on search-engines which can be accomplished through search-engine optimization. Yet, as the above-mentioned filter bubbles (Erden 2016:3) indicate, the efficiency of search engines for researching perspectives that differ from one's own has been called into question.

However, credibility is also gained through a long-time commitment to a particular online-community or platform, as well as showing vulnerability. This coincides with the preference for relational evangelization.

Further, it was considered important to remain open to changing one's own beliefs and worldview when expecting the same of others. As already suggested after the first round (see 5.5), this calls for a dialogical approach, where evangelism is not a one-way road but where the evangelists also listen to the other person. This can of course also be said about evangelization in FR, however, dialogue is a dominant feature of *social networking sites* (sns), as well as forums and chats. Thus, while this suggestion is not exclusive to VR it is perhaps more necessary and appropriate in VR.

*Cyber Culture: How does VR impact evangelization?* It was affirmed that there is no single cyber culture, but a plurality of them. Thus, one also has to think of a plurality of ways in which evangelization can take shape in VR. Some thought that all these cultures are marked by fast-paced communication. This may seem like a negative trait but as the research by Bozkurt and Tu has shown, immediacy is important for developing a social presence.

[The] Facebook wall system allows real-time flow of the events that are happening in your network. You are instantly informed by notification services about anything related to you, anything you are interested in, or anything you subscribed. The social network system allows to be fully immediate. The only factor that affects immediacy is users being online or offline. As long as the users are online, the notification services serve well and keep the users always on and always ready for the immediacy.

(Bozkurt & Tu 2016:161)

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<sup>124</sup> The perception of an avatar as a persona is helpful but still does not seem to capture the complexity of one's identity formation online. Other research needs to be taken into consideration in order to gain a better understanding on how people use and understand their avatar. This is done under 8.1.

It was not affirmed that people feel like they have control online or that VR magnifies aspects that are associated with postmodernism.

The finding by Stamper that online-environments encourage the rise of micro-celebrities for the individual cyber cultures was affirmed. This again would support the need to embrace a diversity of ways to evangelize.

There was dissent on the question of whether or not social networking sites are suitable platforms for online evangelization, but it was affirmed that not all VRs are equally suitable for evangelization. However, the research presented by Bozkurt and Tu makes a strong case for the usefulness of social networking sites as a place for informal online learning.

Even though designed primarily for social networking and commercial interest, Facebook and similar SNSs are innovative online learning environments supporting and facilitating [sic] sense of presence. It is also interesting that initially designed for social needs such as meeting new people, flirting or getting in touch with friends turned out to be a global phenomenon. Probably, one of the main reasons behind this result is social network's meeting basic human need: communication and self-expression through multiple channels. ... [D]igital identity formation makes learners visible to other learners and increases [sic] sense of social presence; in other words, it makes networked learning experiences more humanly which is essential to increase interaction in social learning. Social presence further leads to transparent, comfortable, and safe learning environments as a result of learner's sense of being there.

(Bozkurt & Tu 2016:163-164)

Since online-classes are also used by online-evangelists, and evangelization is arguably a learning context, Bozkurt and Tu findings could correlate to online-evangelization.

With regards to the issue of online-communities and particularly virtual churches, the findings were not as clear, particularly with regards to the qualitative difference between offline and online Christian communities. However, there was consensus that one should try to lead people into a FR church. Yet, it was not confirmed that people would be more likely to join a church in FR if they attended one before in VR.

Thus, regarding the impact of VR on evangelization we can conclude that VR creates a plethora of opportunities for evangelization, yet most of them seem to require the adaptation of new ways to develop social presence and community.

*Games: How can one evangelize in and through games?* With regards to evangelizing in online-games, it was affirmed that this is an acceptable practice. It was mostly affirmed that a game itself could evangelize, but the implementation of the idea was considered challenging.

*Ethics: Which ethical considerations need to be made?* With regards to ethical considerations, the panel did not clearly affirm the need for different ethics in VR than in FR.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> This assumption is challenged later by the 2014 version of the APA code of conduct which added a new section on Distance Counselling, Technology, and Social Media.

However, it was affirmed that people should be made aware that they are often not as anonymous as they assume to be. The panel also strongly affirmed that it is not helpful to assess successful evangelization based on the counting of “clicks” as an indication of conversion.

Based on these findings the third and final round was designed.

## **7. Round 3: Saturation of opinions**

While the second round of the Policy Delphi Method produced statistical data that helped to discern relevant issues with regards to online evangelization, the primary intention of the third round was to further understand the rationale and arguments underlying areas of dissent.

### **7.1 Data collection**

In order to include as many of the previous participants as possible, and also to gain new ones, it was not possible to cover all areas of dissent in the third round. The desire to gather as much information as possible had to be balanced with the concern that too many participants would discontinue their participation if the third round was too time consuming. The time factor was named as the main reason for drop-out during the second round. Thus, the third round focused on only six questions. Perhaps future research can address some of the areas of dissent which were not investigated further by this study.

However, there is another reason why the third round was shorter. The Policy Delphi Method only carries forward issues on which people showed dissent and where the underlying assumptions need to be explored. As Turoff (1970:83) writes, the goal for the third round is to explore and obtain reasons for disagreements: “What underlying assumptions, views, or facts are being used by the individuals to support their respective positions?”

After reviewing the results from the second round, the themes listed below were chosen for the third round and appropriate questions were formulated.

#### **7.1.1 The shape of evangelization online**

How technology affects Christian practice, and in particular the effect of VR on evangelization, is a central question of this research. The results on thesis 11 and 12 suggested that there is no consensus on the general premise that evangelization ought to take a different shape online nor on the form it could take.

The reliability of the thesis “Technology (such as VR) provides new concepts and terms to understand and communicate faith” created the following results:

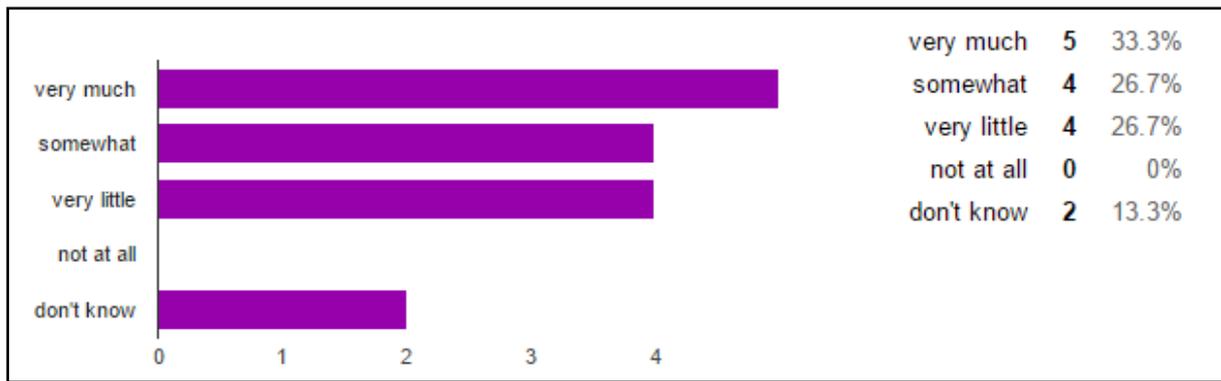


Illustration 74: (11) Thesis: Technology provides new concepts and terms to ...

Thus, a third of those participating considered the thesis to be correct. This alone does not suggest dissension among the panel. However, in comparison, the responses to the following thesis (12) “Evangelization online should try to look like evangelization offline” indicate that not all believe that evangelization needs to differ offline.

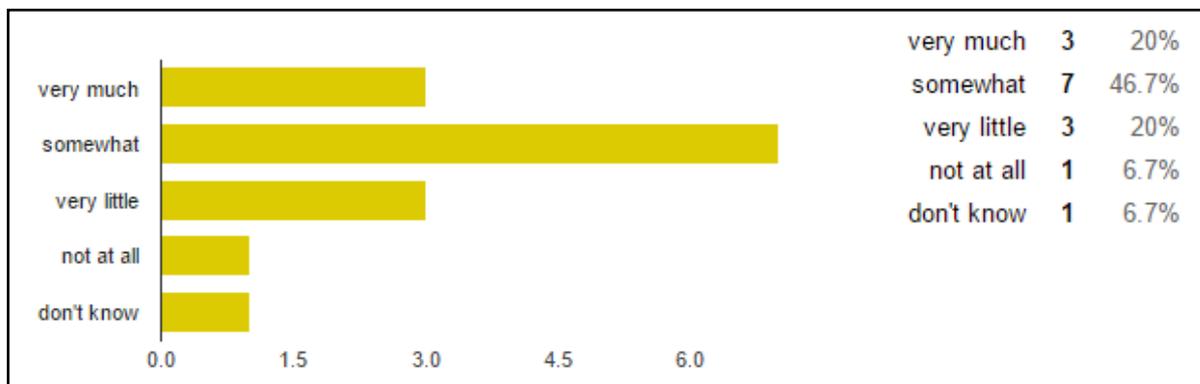


Illustration 75: (12) Thesis: Evangelization online should try to look like ...

Thus, in order to achieve a better understanding, the panel members were asked to further comment on this issue, particularly because it is so central to the research question.

Although some had offered further explanations in the comment section of the second round, the third round encouraged *all* participants to weigh in on the issue.

### 7.1.2 The search for the best platforms for evangelization online

Consensus was found on the thesis that there is a plurality of cyber cultures. This was expected since platforms like *Facebook* or e-learning environments have their own style of communication.

However, with regards to online evangelization, no consensus was found that all of them are suitable for online evangelization. There was consensus that not all platforms were equally suitable, but no consensus on what platforms were suitable. *Facebook*, for example, was considered by some to be very suitable and by others not at all. The statement that “some participants felt that Facebook wasn’t a good place to evangelize” created a mixed result.

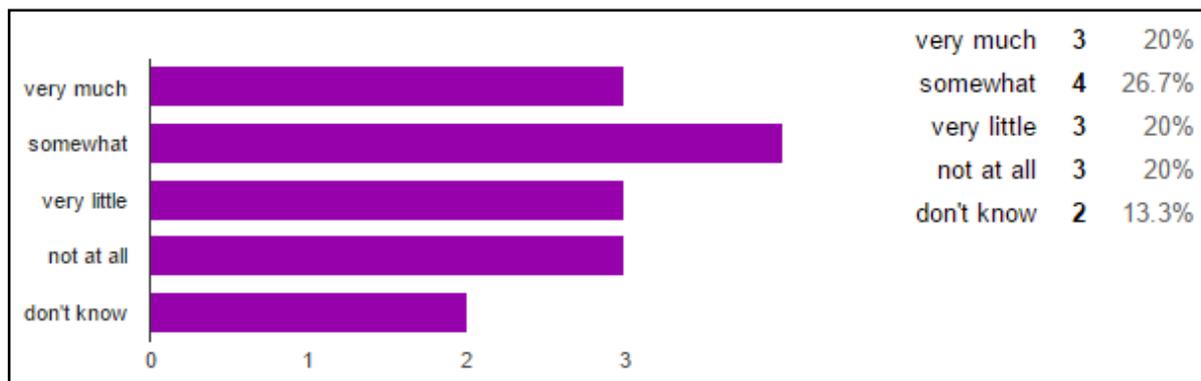


Illustration 76: (39) Thesis: By contrast some participants felt that Facebook wasn't ...

During the second round participants were also asked to name the platforms they considered most suitable for online evangelizing. The open-question asked was: “Is there any particular online-environment (e.g. particular social media, forums, webpages, games etc.) which you would consider more or most suited for evangelization?” The answers were as follows:

- Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Vimeo, WhatsApp.
- I don't think so. All of these forms have various strengths and weaknesses, though, so the evangelist should be wise to that.
- Social media.
- Yes, social media! For me it's the most convinced [sic] online-environment. There are a lot of ways to become [sic] input. You can choose between the information you are given for.
- [Those w]hich include more private forms of communication would be best.
- No, but each one needs a specific strategy.
- I am not familiar with online gaming, so I can't comment there. I view social media, blogs, for[u]ms, websites as appropriate places for evangelism.
- No, in my research, each has strengths and weaknesses, same with any other platform/public square.
- For us: e-learning platform.
- You can evangelize anywhere, but I would expect blogs and webpages to be most effective. In a game, you are likely to annoy other players if you distract the[m] from the game to talk about Jesus. In social media, your updates are read by everyone, so it would be very difficult to evangelize without building a brand as a public evangelist and driving away your non-Christian friends (and while lots of people do argue about faith on Twitter, I haven't seen those arguments be very productive). Blogs and webpages are more reactive, giving people the chance to choose for themselves when they want to find out more.
- I would imagine it depends more on the individuals on both ends.
- Games are on the rise it seems ... (GameChurch, etc.).
- I think likely the "best" evangelization (i.e. the most fruitful) is taking place in less public online forums (Facebook messenger, for example) though in my own research I saw several conversions take place as the result of extended public conversation on online forums.

The diversity of answers in the second round indicated the need to further the discussion in the third. However, in order to focus the discussion, the question for this round focused on the use of social media for online evangelization.

In answering this question, participants were also challenged to reveal their rationale for stating their choice of platform and their underlying assumptions.

### **7.1.3 Characteristics of people open to evangelization online**

The responses to thesis 35 from the second round revealed that almost 50% agreed with the statement that “particularly shy people are more likely to engage in conversations online.” However, as indicated above, some participants made reference to other research which seems to disprove this. This issue thus needed be explored further in order seek an explanation for the discrepancy.

Further reflection on the thesis revealed an underlying assumption, namely that a particular kind of person is more receptive to evangelization online. Thus, the third round also posed the open question if those who practice evangelization online have noticed commonalities among those evangelized.

### **7.1.4 The role of virtual Christian communities for evangelization online**

As shown above (6.2.1.6), questions regarding the role and legitimacy of virtual Christian communities created strong reactions. There seemed to be stronger agreement on the fact that people experience virtual churches as equal to FR churches, but the question remains if there is an inherent theological problem with participating exclusively in a virtual church.

### **7.1.5 The influence of VR on evangelization**

As Stamper has pointed out, the use of new media technologies is often embraced with enthusiasm by evangelicals when it comes to evangelization. It seems that most participants hold a fairly positive view on the use of technology.<sup>126</sup>

Engagement with thesis 53 showed disagreement on a particular unintended impact of technology, namely that *being present online is often at the expense of being present with those to whom one is physically near.*

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<sup>126</sup> In order to introduce balance, some literature is later introduced which represents those who are more critical of technology and encourage the avoidance of technology or at least its limitation.

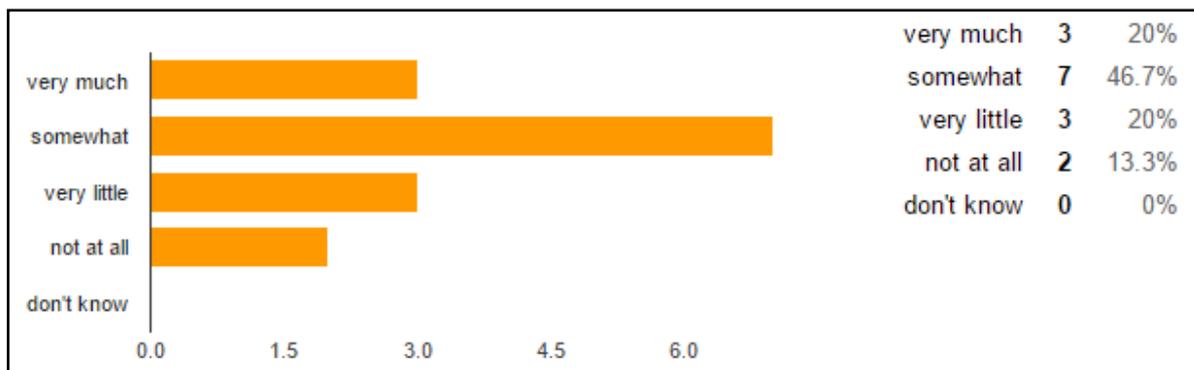


Illustration 77: (53) Thesis: *Being present online is often at the expense of being present ...*

The reasoning for the dissent could be related to the particular example. Thus, in the third round participants were asked to comment generally on limitations or dangers of technology poses for online evangelization.

### 7.1.6 Evangelizing through a game

The idea that a game itself could evangelize was a surprise discovery from the first round, originating particularly with Schut. However, the feasibility of this idea was questioned by the panel during the second round.

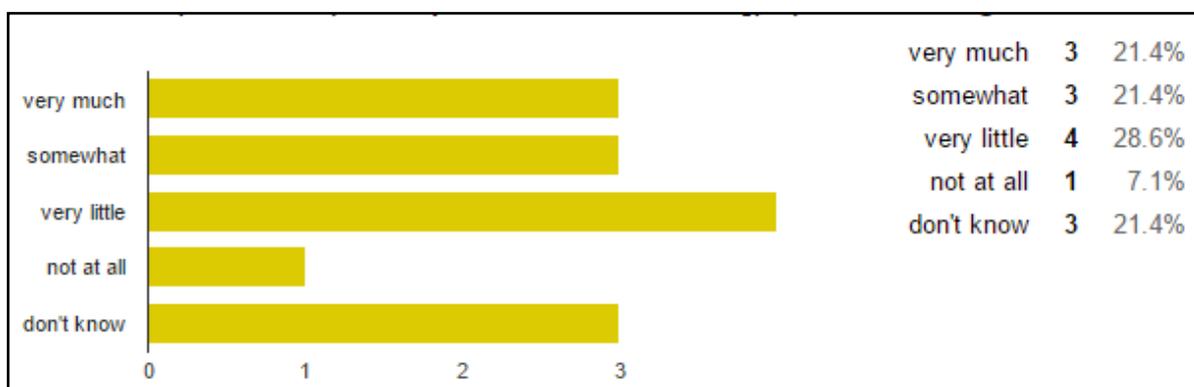


Illustration 78: (41) Thesis: *The game itself can evangelize [Feasibility]*

The third round offered an opportunity to reveal the reasoning for the stances of respondents regarding the communication of the gospel in a video game.

### 7.1.7 Final questions for the third round

The formulation of the questions was rather challenging since some people had already included their reasoning in the comments section of the second round and, as experienced by others who used the Delphi Method, participants disengaged more with each subsequent round.

Furthermore, the more detailed or specific the questions become, the smaller the knowledgeable (able to answer) group became. Further questions relating to ethics and

credibility were, for example, not included. The following six questions below were derived for the third round.

The questions are listed here along with any additional explanations which were offered to the participants of the third round.

**Question 1:** *Why does evangelization need to stay the same and/or change online? And secondly, could you suggest what kind of content and style changes you see needed?*

**Question 2:** *Why would you consider social media (particularly Facebook) suitable or unsuitable for online evangelization?*

**Question 3:** The majority suggested that “particularly shy people are more likely to engage in conversations online.” However, some have pointed out that this has been disproven through other research (e.g. “the research I’ve seen indicates that the most gregarious people in person are also the most gregarious people online.”) I would appreciate hearing from both sides further support (3a) but I would also like to ask a more foundational question, namely, *is a particular kind of person more open to evangelistic efforts online* (3b)?

**Question 4:** Since I understand evangelization to be the responsibility of the church with the intention of leading people to church, I believe it remains important to look at the place of a virtual church in the context of evangelization online. The comments with regards to place of online churches revealed that most accepted a virtual church as a legitimate new form, yet preference still remained for a brick-and-mortar church. The reasons given seemed to reflect personal preferences rather than theological reasoning. Now I would like to pose the explicit question: *Is there an inherent theological problem in having only a virtual church community?*

**Question 5:** While most interviewed held a positive view of technology and its use for evangelization, I would ask you to now reflect on possible negative implications. *What possible limitations or dangers do you see for evangelization online?*

**Question 6:** The achievability of communicating the gospel through a game generated mixed reviews. Most people considered the feasibility very low. *What are your reasons for believing that it is likely or unlikely that a game could be designed which communicated the gospel?*

### 7.1.8 Expansion of the panel

After further searching, two more participants were added which made a total of seven participants for the third round.

| Name           | Area of Expertise   |
|----------------|---|
| Chris Gwaltney | Gwaltney is 29 years old and has been in full-time ministry for about a decade. Before working at GameChurch, he helped plant a church and was the associate pastor for worship. He and his wife live communally in an old farmhouse which functions as a ministry for the weary and heavy-laden who need to find rest and safety.  |
| Dan Beerens    | Beerens is an educational consultant, author, international speaker, and educational leader. His areas of expertise include teacher evaluation and professional growth, curriculum design, school improvement, technology integration, faith integrated learning, and student faith development at regional, national and international conferences. For more information see <a href="http://www.danbeerens.com/about/">http://www.danbeerens.com/about/</a> . |

Table 9: Participants added for the third round

## 7.2 Data analysis and findings

The data collection was done online. Participants were sent a link to a form where they could answer the questions directly. The answers were gathered again with the help of *Google form*. All answers can be found in the appendix.

The data analysis was done with MaxQDA. The first step involved generating codes from each logical segment sorted according to the questions. The second step involved forming categories to group the codes together.

| Code System                                      | Count |
|--|-------|
| Q1 Social media- for evangelism                  | 0     |
| + Disadvantages                                  | 14    |
| + Advantages                                     | 11    |
| Q2 Are particular people more open online?       | 3     |
| yes - shy people                                 | 3     |
| no- people remain the same                       | 2     |
| no - but easier for all                          | 1     |
| Q3 Motives for inquiring about faith online      | 1     |
| people in a bad situation / life-crisis          | 2     |
| prior interest                                   | 2     |
| not discernable                                  | 1     |
| Q4 Reasons for difference in evangelizing online | 3     |
| experimental                                     | 4     |
| posture  | 3     |
| Q5 Theological reasons against a virtual church  | 28    |
| Q6 Games that evangelize                         | 0     |
| games as non-propositional evangelization        | 3     |
| adapt existing games                             | 1     |
| hard to evaluate success                         | 1     |
| problem fixed story-line                         | 2     |
| problem high cost                                | 3     |
| games for catechism                              | 3     |

Illustration 79: Initial coding of round 3

## 7.2.1 Summary

The coding was then used to help structure the summary of the data collected in round three. These results were not given to the panel, but are further reflected upon in this doctoral thesis (see chapter 8-10).

### 7.2.1.1 The use of social media for evangelization

The question for this category gave participants the opportunity to weigh the opportunities and challenges of using a social media platform for evangelizing. They were also asked to reveal the rationale behind their opinions since there was no consensus on this issue in round two (see 6.2.2). The statistics below show how many codes belonged to each category.

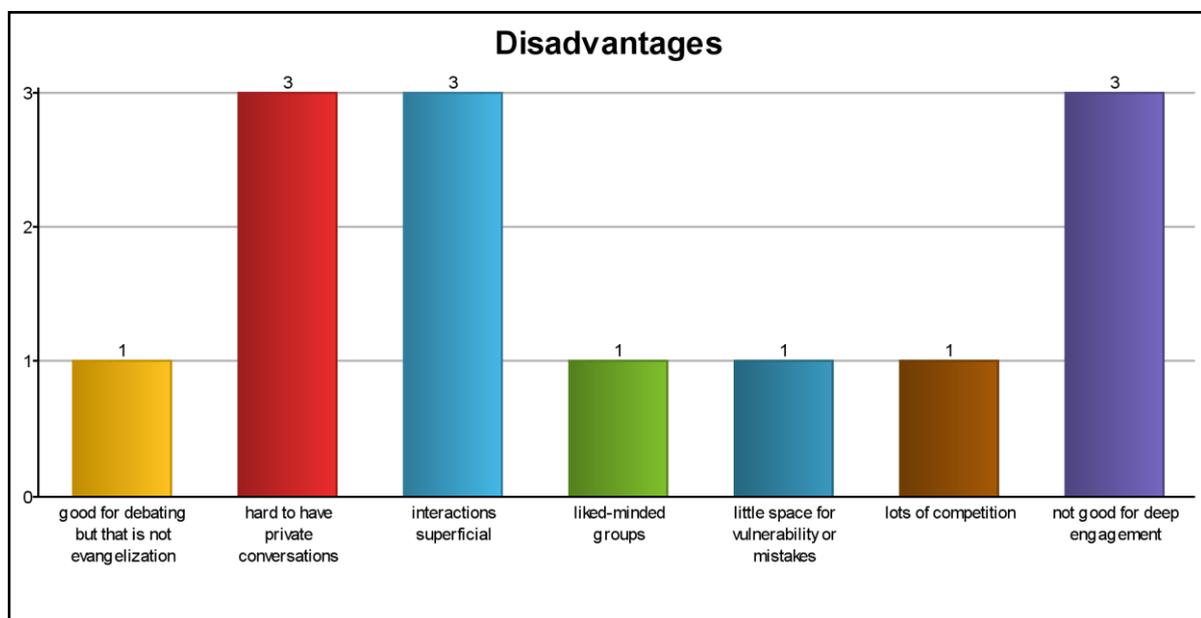


Illustration 80: Statistics of sub-code "Disadvantages - Social Media for evangelization"

The three main disadvantages were all similar since they all dealt with the quality of the relationships formed. The participants argued that conversations in social media platforms tend to be superficial, public and not fitting for engaging in lengthy and reflective conversations.

Work-arounds such as using *Facebook Messenger* were suggested, as well as using *Facebook* only for initial contact and then attempting to move the conversation to a different platform.

A further rationale for the unsuitability of social media platforms for evangelization was that only like-minded people tend to be in contact there. Hence, Christians would predominantly only reach other Christians. Anonymous H wrote:

In general, people tend to connect on social media with other people like them. It is very easy to get lots of Christians talking about Jesus to other Christians, but it is much harder to reach audiences outside the church.

(R3:11)

He also suggested that social media platforms have “very little space for vulnerability or mistakes” (R3:9) since people use these platforms to build up their reputation. The underlying assumption is likely that vulnerability is important for evangelization.

With regards to the advantages of evangelizing on social media platforms, most suggested the ease with which information can be distributed and received, as well as the ease of connecting with other people.

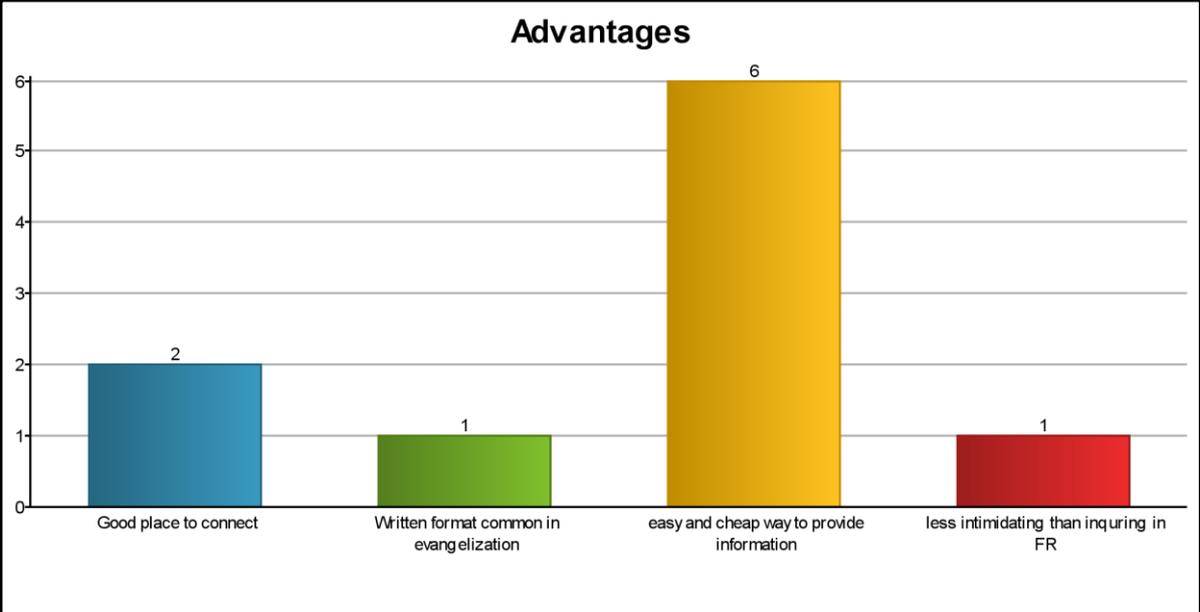


Illustration 81: "Advantages - Social Media for evangelization"

The answers reveal that a process of discernment took place. This was of course initiated by the question, but it is perceivable that people weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a particular platform. Some proposed using social media only for initiating contact (thereby limiting its usage) as an attempt to avoid some of the previously mentioned disadvantages.

**7.2.1.2 The question of increased openness online**

The final round confirmed that most people continue to find shy people to be more open online.

However, the data does not strongly support this, as shown in the following diagram.

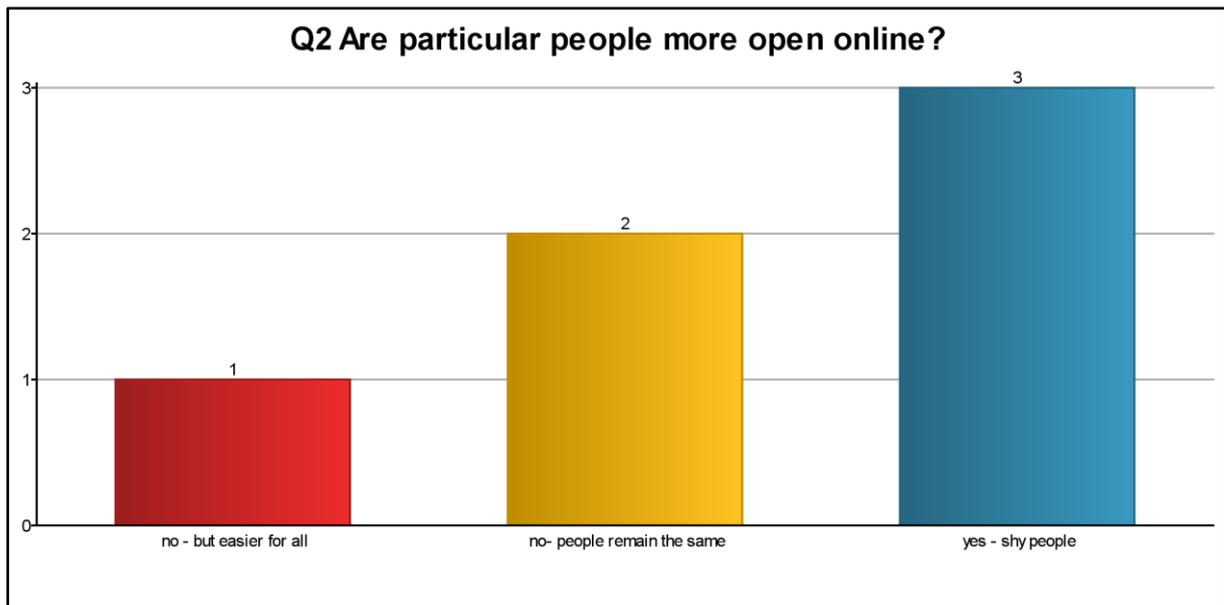


Illustration 82: *Statistics of sub-code "Are particular people more open online?"*

However, each participant suggested a slightly different rationale. Heidbrink pointed out that even though people are generally not more open online, they may feel safer inquiring about the particular issue of faith online than offline:

And it makes sense [that people stay the same online], if you think about it. However, for initial contact, the internet might still be an easy gateway: In the "flesh": You do not simply [sic] enter a church or a parish office and ask "Hello! What kind of people (Christians) are you?" (Or only really outspoken people would do [so].) Online, it is easier: Less obligations, more anonymity, etc.

(R3:3)

Thus, it is possible that the openness one may encounter online is a result of the anonymity provided and the privacy of the topic, and not a general expression of being more open online.

Anonymous H suggested a particular group of people who suffer from "anxiety, illness, isolation or disability often find that they can make new friends online" (R3:13).

### 7.2.1.3 Motives for inquiring about faith online

Two main reasons were named to explain why people inquire about faith online. One reason is that people already have an interest in faith now pursue that interest online. The other reason occurs when people have a life crisis, which then raises questions of faith for them.

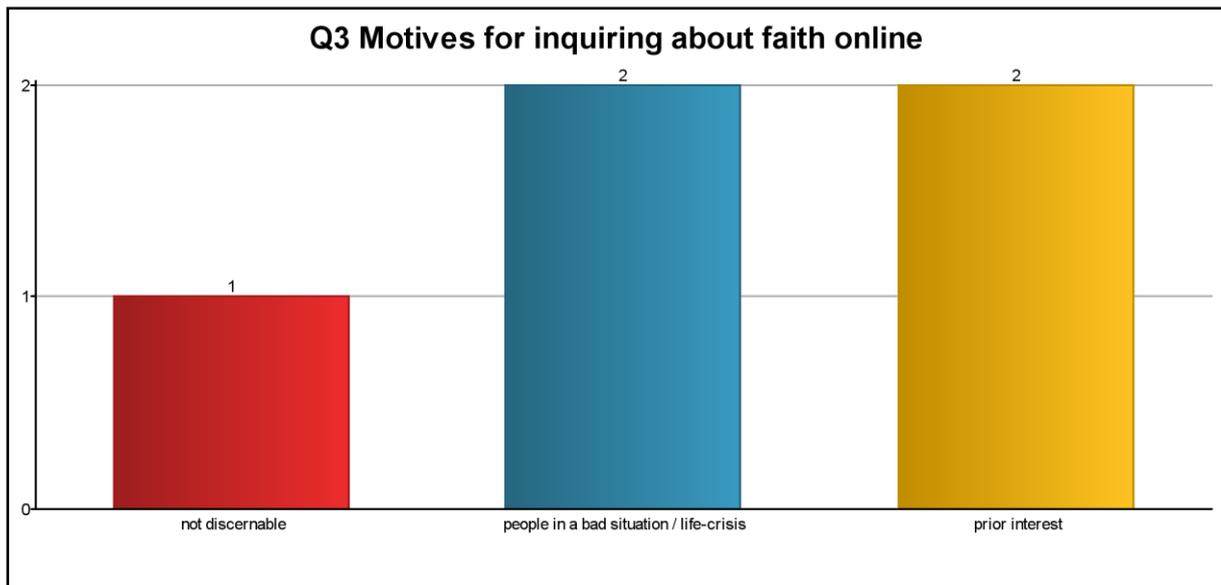


Illustration 83: *Statistics of sub-code "Motives for inquiring about faith online"*

Reflecting on the fact that people come to his web sites because of a life crisis, Anonymous K. wrote:

More shy persons are open, when they get desperate, rejected, needy, facing depression, talking about suicide [...] we have a lot of such people coming. They expect God to help them and believe "in miracles." He is the last chance. Most successful people do not look to religion as their need. Much more practical approach is needed - showing pragmatic "gains" of living with [a] community of great Christians, a real family (when it is available), avoiding boredom, lack of "idea" for life [...]  
(R3:3)

This further strengthens the conclusion drawn from the second round, namely that Christian faith needs be presented as more than a solution for a life crisis (see 6.2.2.4). Having those interested in faith actually participate in a Christian community might be a better way to evangelize to them.

#### **7.2.1.4 Reasons for difference in evangelizing online**

The question for this section was: "Why does evangelization need to stay the same and/or change online? And secondly, could you suggest what kind of content and style changes you see needed?" The answers to this question were not expected. Instead of dealing with specifics, the participants tended to discuss the need for experimentation, as well as the need for an evangelist to take a humble posture.

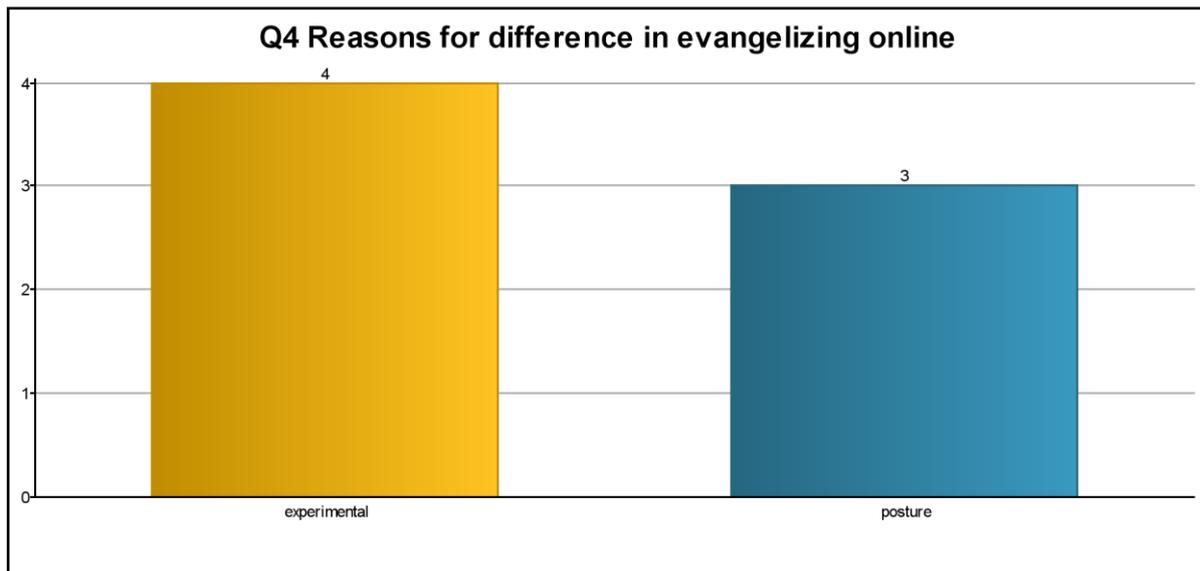


Illustration 84: *Statistics of sub-code "Reason for difference in evangelizing online"*

People felt that there are too many variables and that they change too frequently in order to make concrete suggestions. Rather, it was suggested that one undergoes a process of constant reflection and adaptation.

There exists a wide range of media options that just weren't there even five years ago, so it is pretty amazing. The process of ferreting out what works and doesn't work is accelerated through the kind of feedback available - page views, clicks, etc. so any corrections needed happen very quickly. If you are paying attention and adjust on the fly, you should do fine on whatever target you seek.

(Beerens R3:4)

Three different participants made suggestions regarding the posture one needs to take when evangelizing online, and in each case it was to the end of not being agenda driven, but to be responsive to the needs and desires of the one inquiring. Gwaltney, for example, wrote:

The model always needs to be Jesus. Meet people where they are. Come in an act of unmistakable love. Leave them with truth. I just think oftentimes, whether online or not, we skip the first two and just want to pound folks over the head with truth.

(R3:4)

These kinds of findings were not expected, but they strengthen the conclusion drawn earlier under 5.3.8 regarding ethics and 5.3.9 regarding adaptation.

#### **7.2.1.5 Theological reasons against a virtual church**

The question posed was: "Is there an inherent theological problem in having only a virtual church community?" Most participants did not consider a virtual church community equal to one in FR, and the majority of arguments brought forth argued, that because the encounter is not of physical nature, it is inherently insufficient.

The other most common argument was that of the sacraments.

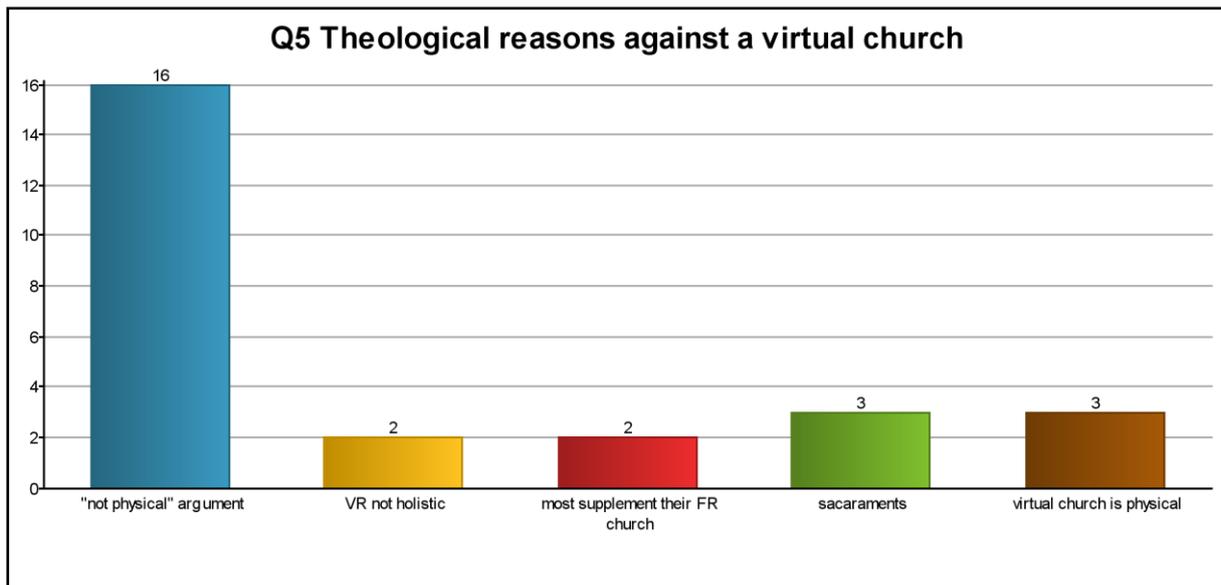


Illustration 85: Statistics of sub-code "Theological reasons against a virtual church"

It was, however, suggested that most people do supplement their FR church experience through a virtual one.

Anonymous H also suggested that it is important to remember that one does not cease to be a physical being once one enters into a VR.

#### 7.2.1.6 The possibility of games for evangelization

The last question asked was "What are your reasons for believing that it is likely or unlikely that a game could be designed which communicated the gospel?"

Anonymous H pointed out that there are Christian games available, but that they target children (and their Christian parents) and their intention is often catechism rather than evangelization.

As the diagram below shows, the high costs of developing a good game remain a challenge.

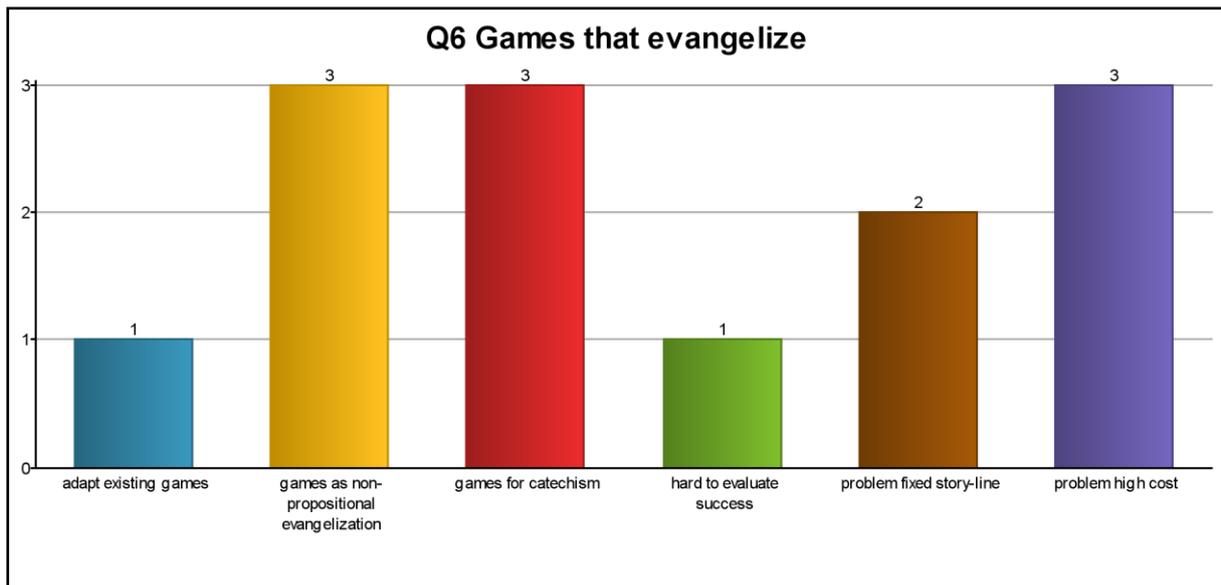


Illustration 86: Statistics of sub-code "Games that evangelize"

Heidbrink suggested that one could use existing games to engage with people about the gospel.

Why not rather using [sic] existing games (Dragon Age Inquisition, to quote only one example where the religious content is striking and fits well to addressing Christian themes) and (re-) shaping the questions that arise there for talking about the gospel? It is already being done, see for example the "GameChurch".

(R3:7)

The challenge of having a fixed storyline in a game was also addressed, but it was also suggested that games could communicate an experience.

It would be quite the undertaking! Video games do something that no other art medium can: they allow the player to experience and experiment. If I went up to someone's painting in a gallery and starting marking it up because I want to experiment, I'd be in trouble. But video games allows [sic] us to do that. I daresay there isn't a medium BETTER suited to communicate the Gospel.

(Gwaltney R3:7)

The responses affirmed that games *can* be used for evangelization so the discussion moved on to the question of *how* they could be used for evangelization.

## 7.2.2 Findings

As shown above, the third round of engagement with experts via the Policy Delphi Method revealed the rationales underlying some of the arguments.

The contributions in this section will be organized according to the six questions asked.

### 7.2.2.1 Social media: Wide but shallow

Inquiring further about the use of social media for evangelization revealed that the rationale against it mostly related to the quality of the relationships developed. Some participants still encouraged the use of social media, but suggested workarounds. The reason for still trying to

use social media is their popularity, which makes them a convenient way to address many people.

### **7.2.2.2 Openness: Not related to particular people but particular questions**

The results from the third round suggest a more nuanced perspective on the openness that is perceived online, since it is not correct to assume that people are generally more open in this setting. However, the data did not suffice for a strong conclusion. What can be affirmed through the third round is that the stereotype of a “lonely nerd” hiding behind a computer screen should not be assumed.

Furthermore, it can be suggested that people are in general more open to ask private questions in VR, and for many, religion is a private matter.

### **7.2.2.3 Relationships: No risk, no reality**

The arguments around virtual churches focused on the lack of physical presence. Although a theological argument was asked for, most arguments remained of a technological nature. For example, Beerens argued the following:

I believe God puts us in specific spaces to impact, to bless, to worship - for example I worship through beautiful sunsets at Lake Michigan and hiking trails by myself and others - how could I do this virtually? Do we instead select beautiful spots virtually together online? Even if we did, it would feel inauthentic because I cannot smell the fresh breeze, or feel what it is like to hold pure, finely grained beach sand in my hand, or wade in the chilly water.

(R3:6)

While agreeing with the critique, it is still a technological reason and not a theological one. If computer-mediated communication developed to the point of communicating to all our senses, the problem referred to would not exist. We might know it is “inauthentic”, but not feel it. It is thus proposed here that technological developments will force Christians to think much more clearly about what it means to be a physical being and what constitutes a real experience. Arguments based on communication impoverishment might cease to exist in the future.

Furthermore, it could be argued that generations growing up with modern communication devices will perceive them as their normal way of communication, and not experience their interactions through them as inauthentic.

Gwaltney raised another very interesting point while reflecting on possible limitations or dangers for evangelization online:

[Evangelization online can lack] true community and the full experience of relationship. Online relationships often don't involve as much risk, sacrifice, or time. Frankly, they are much easier to do.

(R3:5)

Thus, the ease of online-relationships might be its limiting factor. It may be that the lack of risk which characterizes many online-relationships, can in fact be a real challenge for developing meaningful relationships. If a disagreement can simply be ended with a click of a mouse, the need for reconciliation, or perhaps forgiveness, quickly vanishes.

#### **7.2.2.4 Evangelization: The only constant is change**

It was already suggested that the responses to the question of how evangelization should differ online were unexpected. Heidbrink describes a process of trial and error. It is interesting that the intended purpose of a medium is not necessarily a limiting factor:

So we have to adapt the "message" to the "media." From my own experience: We are using Twitter (@twittagsgebet) for inspirational insights on workdays around noon. It works, even though it shouldn't (as Twitter is fast and information based which usually contradicts contemplation). However, Twitter is flexible enough to even allow the adaption of the Catholic Complet - see @twomplet every night at 9 pm. On the other hand, worship services on Facebook seem not to work. Why is it so? My guess, it is because peoples' habitus / expectations / behaviour towards FB is leisure and spare time. It's their own private "Wohnzimmer" where they (re-)construct themselves and "like" what they like. The general usage is browsing about, not following a longer procedure without "clicking away." So FB might not be suitable for this form, resp. FB and/or its users have so far proven not flexible enough to install certain contemplative offerings. So, even though your general message (the gospel, etc.) might not change over the time, you still should consider that each (electronic) media forms is bound to reaching / addressing a certain audience (1) and the audience varies by the choice of media (2). Additionally, it is necessary to shape the mediation of the message according to the media (3).

(R3:4)

The success of *Twitter* for contemplation shows that users can go against the intended or common use of a medium. Thus, theological considerations, the users and the chosen medium, are three interrelated factors that affect the evangelization endeavour.

#### **7.2.2.5 Games: Experiencing the gospel**

As the quote above from Gwaltney (R3:5) shows, games can communicate the gospel, but they do it in a very unique way. A similar comment was made by Schut:

If you're thinking of the gospel as the presence of Jesus, then games can do that just fine, as we see in the recently released *That Dragon, Cancer*. The idea of grace and forgiveness and peace and more can all appear in games. They just won't be easily articulated in theological propositions.

(Schut R3:8)

Games could thus provide means of experiencing parts of the gospel. However, practical challenges remain, including the high cost of quality game production, as well as the challenge of connecting the experience with the biblical narrative.

## 7.3 Conclusions

Two particular environments were discussed in this third and final round: social media and online-games. Social media were seen as having the advantage of reaching a large number of people but the relationships were not considered very deep.

The first and second round had reported on the use of games to evangelize. The specific question brought to the third round was whether or not a game itself could evangelize. Based on the responses of the third round, it can be suggested that games are not very suitable for communicating propositions about the faith, but perhaps suitable for experiencing and experimenting with elements that belong to the gospel, such as grace or forgiveness.

Furthermore, the final round did not produce any clear suggestions on how evangelization should differ online, but many participants suggested the need for experimentation and reflection. Thus, returning to the research questions, the following can be concluded:

*Identity: Does an avatar affect the evangelistic process?* Based on the third round most participants suggested that shy people are more open online because of the protection or control that an avatar provides. Furthermore, it was suggested that people who suffer anxiety, agoraphobia, illness or disabilities, would also find communication through an avatar easier for relationship building.

*Cyber Culture: How does VR impact evangelization?* Fundamentally, VR offers another new way for people who are interested in the Christian faith to inform themselves and to talk to somebody about it.

On a more specific note, some participants were concerned with the quality of the relationships built in social networking sites. As far as it was discernible, this conclusion was based on the fact that the panel participants consider such relationships to be less authentic. As will be shown under 8.1., the general research does not support this conclusion. It appears that people attempt to manipulate how they are perceived regardless of whether they are in a FR or VR context. It is possible that the degree to which this is done is heightened in VR compared to FR and it is postulated here that people reveal, hide and alter aspects of themselves in FR just as much as they do in VR.

Lastly, it was suggested that social networking sites do not encourage vulnerability or the making of mistakes, which is an important element in intimate relationships. Perhaps, as suggested already, people are as vulnerable on social networking sites as elsewhere, yet where and how vulnerability is shown might differ. People might reveal different aspects of

themselves online compared to offline, and the way they communicate this information might also be different.

*Evangelization: How is evangelization modified for VR?* The answers given by the panel revealed a process of discernment in which the opportunities of a particular platform were weighed. It was suggested that people need to engage in a process of experimenting and constant evaluation.

*Credibility: How are authority and credibility established?* The panel of the third round again highlighted the need for a posture of open dialogue and humility in order to be heard and accepted.

*Ethics: Which ethical considerations need to be made?* No particular contribution was made with regards to ethical considerations, although the theme of posture mentioned above carries connotations for ethical behaviour.

*Games: How can one evangelize in and through games?* Games are already being used for catechism but it was also suggested that existing games that were not designed for evangelization or catechism can be likewise used since they often deal with religious themes, or raise spiritual or ethical questions. The advantage of games might lie in the fact that gamers can personally gain a particular experience through the game itself.

An accumulative summary and engagement of the findings of all three rounds is presented in the final conclusion (12.1).

## 8. Identity, avatars and cyber culture

The explorative empirical research drew attention to several different themes relevant to evangelizing online. Thus, during the next three chapters, the findings of the explorative empirical research will be brought into conversation with other related research in order to enable further reflection and the drawing of a few conclusions.

This chapter is the beginning of the missiological reflection based on the data analysis. It represents phase 6 of the ETP cycle – the research report. The missiological interpretation is structured around the themes introduced through the research questions presented in the first chapter. This chapter addresses the first two research questions. They were:

- Identity: *Does an avatar affect the evangelistic process?*
- Cyber Culture: *How does VR impact evangelization?*

### 8.1 Identity and the role of an avatar

The possibility and use of an avatar has played an important role in the development of this thesis. It is a crucial feature of VR (see 2.4.2), and it has a significant role in one's identity online. This chapter presents some of the current research on (religious) identity and its formation and brings it into dialog with the empirical results from this thesis.

#### 8.1.1 Current research on (religious) identity formation online

Looking at the development of identity<sup>127</sup> online, Lövheim (following Turkle) offers the following definitions of identity and self:

On a general level, 'identity' refers to the process by which an individual develops the capacity to grasp the meaning of situations in everyday life and their own position in relationship to them (Hewitt 2000:79). In the process, the individual forms a personal identity or a self. The 'self' refers to the individual's experience of herself as a separate, unique person and a subject capable of acting in a situation. [...] Each situation of social interaction presents certain possibilities for individuals to announce what position they intend to assume in order to act in the situation (cf Hall 1996). Whether or not the individual can enact this intention is conditioned by the response of other people, which confirm or question the individuals' position. [...] In everyday face-to-face interactions our bodies, voice and gestures provide markers by which we represent a self.

(Lövheim 2013:43)

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<sup>127</sup> In general, (offline or online), what creates an identity is a disputed topic. Many theories are proposed yet much of the debate can be centred on two tensions. First: is the formation of a person's identity achieved through discovering or creating? Second: what creates identity – the individual, family upbringing, society, political and cultural forces? For an overview of the different approaches and how they relate to new media, see Buckingham (2008:1ff.)

Identity has many sources, such as gender, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, religion and social class. Unlike in FR where our voice, body and gestures present markers, in VR it is an avatar through which we represent ourselves. Yet, with an avatar all markers are freely chosen and created.

Technically, an avatar allows users to alter or hide, and thereby play with their identity. This fits well with the post-modern mind-set where concepts such as *liquid identity*, as it is developed by Bauman (2005), who suggests that people are constantly reshaping who they are.

However, empirical studies on online-identity show that such behaviour is actually rather rare. Although people have not used the ability to play with their identity online to the degree possible, they do edit their appearance online, especially through the use of social media (Lövheim 2013:44–45). In other words, avatars are not typically used to create new or completely different versions of oneself, but to present an edited version of oneself.

The possibilities for and implications of using the Internet for self-presentation, social sharing, entertainment and play have also raised new issues, such as changes in understanding of authentic identity. New media genres enable individuals to present texts and images of private moments and reflections in a public setting, which enhances expectations of openness and intimacy. At the same time, they enhance users' ability to monitor and edit self-representation, which gives them a perception of having greater control over the representation of identity. Thus, the 'authentic self' represented through digital media becomes simultaneously more 'real' and more 'edited' than in a face-to-face setting (Lüders 2007).

(Lövheim 2013:44–45)

A helpful contribution might be found in looking at three different perspectives of identity by using terminology and insight from the social sciences and psychology, and distinguishing between three different terms: self-identity, social-identity and edited-identity (*persona*).

*Self-identity* (self-concept) is the way people understand themselves to be, with properties which make them unique and separate from others. Religious identity is one part of self-identity “that contains relevant content and goals, such as what to do, what to value, and how to behave” (Oyserman, Elmore & Smith 2011:73). In the context of VR, one might explore the self by engaging in religious activities that one would not otherwise engage with in FR.

*Social-identity* describes the way people are shaped by the particular context they are in.

[S]ocial identity theorists (Abrams, 1999; Onorato & Turner, 2002; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 2004) focus on cross-situational malleability. In its strongest formulation, social identity theories predict that in each interaction, people take on a different identity.

(Oyserman *et al.* 2011:79)

In this sense, people certainly take on new identities when they interact online because our identity is also dependent on the social context we find ourselves in.

The term *edited-identity* is proposed here as a new term and describes what is often referred to as one's *persona*, the view of self that one *wants* to communicate to others. This can

stand in harmony with one's understanding of self but does not necessarily have to. Goffman argues that people try to create impressions.

Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself [sic] in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain. Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case.

(1956:3)

Goffman's research clearly precedes the rise of digital media and VR. This confirms that the practice of editing one's identity is not new, as those using avatars are sometimes accused of. What is new is the ease and depth with which it can be done online.

Thus, all these views on identity apply offline just as well as online, but because VR is also a *magic circle*, it allows people to explore areas of interest that are not explored in FR due to social confinements. People might be more willing to engage in religious issues since these are sometimes seen as private issues which ought not to be discussed with others.

Additionally, VR offers the technical possibility of allowing one to change or alter certain aspects of oneself that is not easily done in FR. Thus, following Buckingham, we can summarize as follows:

The issue of performance is ... very relevant to the ways in which young people construct identities, for example via the use of avatars, e-mail signatures, IM nicknames, and (in a more elaborate way) in personal homepages and blogs.

(Buckingham 2008:7)

Thus, we can summarize by saying that VR lends itself to performance and the development of an edited self.

Another central question within identity research is whether or not a person has a stable core identity. As Heidbrink has pointed out, recent research on identity questions the notion of a core-identity. If there is no core, then one is not hiding anything, nor is one discovering oneself. One is simply constantly re-creating oneself, as sociologists like Bauman (2005) suggest. Yet, the research still seems to be inconclusive:

Most comprehensive social science theories of the self articulate both stability and fluidity as aspects of the self. Thus, identity and social identity theories describe the self as including both a stable set of evaluative standards and a fluid, everchanging description in the moment (Turner, 1956). In some formulations, both stability and changeability have been viewed as part of maintaining a stable and positive sense of self-esteem [...] or a stable sense of self more generally [...] Since maintaining a self-image requires doing "face work" to convince others of one's self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), proponents of some sociological perspectives have argued for stability of the self over time as a result of stability of social interactions (Serpe, 1987; Stryker, 1980). There is some support for this interpretation.

(Oyserman *et al* 2011:79)

What is more important and supported by this research is that most respondents saw themselves and others as having a stable core. Otherwise, the notion of hiding, altering, etc. would not make any sense.

This sense of a stable core is also confirmed by other research:

People assume that people, themselves included, have a stable essence or core that predicts their behavior, that who they are matters for what they do, and that what they do reflects who they are [...] The assumption that deeper essences constrain surface features or psychological essentialism is a basic cognitive organizing schema that is at the core of categorization.

(Oyserman *et al* 2011:79)

The questions of identity is also a question that needs to be viewed theologically, since Christians are, for example, promised to become Christ-like.

However, it is important to bear in mind that not only the individual may have a desire to construct an identity but it is also a social endeavour. Various agencies (commercial, cultural, political, religious etc) can have an interest in guiding or manipulating a person's identity formation.

It has been argued (e.g. Giddens 1991) that people are presently much more free to construct their identity than in the past. "Modern consumer culture has offered individuals multiple possibilities to construct and fashion their identities, and they are now able to do this in increasingly creative and diverse ways" (Buckingham 2008:11). However, others (e.g. Foucault 1990) challenge such an optimistic view.

Foucault asserts that there has been a shift in the ways in which power is exercised in the modern world, which is apparent in a whole range of social domains. Rather than being held (and indeed displayed) by sovereign authorities, power is now diffused through social relationships; rather than being regulated by external agencies (the government or the church), individuals are now encouraged to regulate themselves and to ensure that their own behavior falls within acceptable norms. What Giddens describes as self-reflexivity is seen by Foucault in much more sinister terms, as a process of self-monitoring and self-surveillance. Giddens' "project of the self" is recast here as a matter of individuals policing themselves, and the forms of self-help and therapy that Giddens seems to regard in quite positive terms are redefined as modern forms of confession, in which individuals are constantly required to account for themselves and "speak the truth" about their identities.

(Buckingham 2008:11)

This creates a great deal of pressure on the individual as he or she is pressed to make decisions about identity and life. Yet, perhaps even more concerning than Foucault's conclusion is that of Rose. He argues that while we appear to act with individual freedom, we are actually governed through therapeutic and institutional expertise.

The modern liberal self is 'obligated to be free', to construct all aspects of its life as the outcome of choices made amongst a number of options. Each attribute of the person is to be realized through decisions, and justified in terms of motives, needs and aspirations of the self. The technologies of psychology gain their social power in liberal democracies because they share this ethic of competent autonomous selfhood, and because they promise to sustain, respect and restore selfhood to citizens of such polities, They [sic] constitute technologies of individuality for the production and regulation of the individual who is 'free to choose'.

(Rose 1991:98)

Regardless if one agrees fully with Rose's argument, two things emerge. First of all, the freedom to choose one's identity and religion is also a burden. The *heretical imperative* (Berger

1980) forces a decision upon a person, sometimes welcomed, sometimes not. Thus, for some, the evangelist is yet another person pressuring them to make a decision. Hence, as we reflect upon evangelization within this context where people might be overwhelmed with the decisions they have to make, the one evangelizing ought to proceed with compassion and patience, offering his or her services as a guide rather than another force demanding a decision.

Secondly, as we have seen and which is now further confirmed, there are always external forces which guide or manipulate one's identity formation. Again, some might be seen as welcomed guidance, sometimes it might be experienced as confining or manipulating.

Jenkins, coming from a sociological and social-psychological perspective, draws additional attention to the influence society exercises upon one's identity formation, and how identity is also a result of interaction and negotiation with others. In the process of creating our identity we seek identification with others, and thus we not only establish our identity through that which makes us unique but also through that which makes us similar to others.

[T]he human world as we know it would be an impossible creation without a sophisticated and extensive ability to know and communicate who's who and what's what; identification and identity are thus nothing new; and individual and collective concerns about identity and identification aren't definitively modern either: the increased volume of discourse about these aspects of what it is to be human are at least in part a reflection of increased global noise in general. Throughout [this] ... book, there is a further consistent thread of argumentation to the effect that: [1] individual and collective identity are as much an interactional product of 'external' identification by others, as they are of 'internal' selfidentification; and [2] identity is produced and reproduced both in discourse – narrative, rhetoric and representation.

(Jenkins 2004:176-177)

Thus, the motivation for the edited self is not only self-expression or realization but also identification with others and thus community. This would suggest that a communal approach to evangelization would be appropriate because the person evangelized could experience that he or she is not alone.

However, social identity theories also point towards the use and misuse of social power. Forces outside of ourselves can seek to guide a person to a certain identity. These forces can be social, political, economic, etc but also religious. In a way, evangelists too, use their social power to influence a person towards a Christian religious identity.<sup>128</sup>

Here it could be argued that the internet can create an equal playing field since all kinds of different denominations and religions can present themselves, thereby creating a plethora of options. Yet, this is not always the case.

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<sup>128</sup> This does raise some ethical concerns which have been addressed at different places within this research. At this point it might be sufficient to state that the ethical concern of unwanted manipulation can be set aside if those evangelizing are transparent with regards to their motives.

It is true that it is often assumed that the variety of different ways of life which are presented through the internet would encourage people to explore new and different ways of being, but the reverse is also possible and noticeable. As Jenkins has argued, people seek community. Thus, a person might search for information and narratives online that confirm his or her current set of beliefs rather than those which call it into question. In this case, the person is seeking identification rather than an identity that separates him or her from others.

Recent studies suggest that most young people's everyday uses of the Internet are characterized not by spectacular forms of innovation and creativity, but by relatively mundane forms of communication and information retrieval. The technologically empowered "cyberkids" of the popular imagination may indeed exist, but even if they do, they are in a minority and they are untypical of young people as a whole. For example, there is little evidence that most young people are using the Internet to develop global connections; in most cases, it appears to be used primarily as a means of reinforcing local networks among peers. Young people may be "empowered" as consumers, at least in the sense of being able to access a much wider range of goods and services much more easily. But as yet there is little sense in which they are being empowered as citizens; only a minority are using the technology to engage in civic participation, to communicate their views to a wider audience, or to get involved in political activity.

(Buckingham 2008:16)

Although Buckingham is not directly talking about religion, I believe his conclusions are applicable. Thus, while one could assume that the exposure to a variety of different religions online would encourage people to question their own religious understanding, the opposite is also possible. The diversity found within the Internet allows anyone to find others who affirm what they already currently believe.

At times this is not even a conscious choice of the individual but the result of filters and algorithms which try to select the information which a particular person might find interesting (Dachwitz 2016).

An example of this are the auto-complete algorithm and personalization of search results from search engines like Google.

Even though many sophisticated users might suspect that the lists of returns for their search queries are biased, for any number of possible reasons—e.g., paid advertising, unfair influence by large corporations, editorial control, and so forth—many search engine users still tend to assume, perhaps naïvely, that when any two users enter the exact same search query in a major search engine such as Google, they would receive identical lists of responses. In other words, even if the formula used is skewed, or biased in a way that favors some sites over others, the search algorithm would nonetheless return results based on a formula that is internally consistent, and thus standard or "objective" in some sense. But, this is no longer the case in an era where formulas based on "personalization" generate search results tailored to a user's profile.

(Tavani 2012)

Such external influences on the formation of a person's identity, if they are intentional, are labelled *identity politics*. Identity politics describes external endeavours to discourage people from breaking out of their current identity or forcing them into a particular framework.

The term 'identity politics' refers primarily to activist social movements that have explicitly sought to challenge this process: they have struggled to resist oppressive accounts to their identities

constructed by others who hold power over them, and claimed the right to self-determination. The most obvious aspects of this relate to 'race', ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability; although the term identity politics is also often used in relation to forms of indigenous nationalism, religious groupings (and indeed forms of 'fundamentalism'), and so on. ... Identity politics ... entails a call for the recognition of aspects of identity that have previously been denied, marginalized or stigmatized.

(Buckingham 2008:8)

A good example of this was mentioned earlier, where a Muslim woman visited a synagogue in *Second Life* because the identity politics in her cultural context forbade such a behavior (see Wagner 2012:110).

This leads to the suggestion that in order to promote evangelization online, the need for religious freedom and the free access to information needs to be promoted and ensured in order to counter identity politics which inhibit a person from really developing their religious identity.

This is as much a political challenge, where people are called to encourage the religious freedom of all people without fear of negative consequences, as it is also a technological challenge, where means need to be developed to allow people to anonymously and thus safely explore other religions even if they live in a context where they have limited or no religious freedom.<sup>129</sup>

Finally, the general research suggests that religious identity, as an aspect of one's self-identity, follows the general trend that its formation in VR is not much different from FR. Summarizing the recent findings on religious identity formation, Lövheim concludes as follows:

In sum, religious identities online show us that religious identity online is not that different from religious identity in everyday life. Religious identities in contemporary society are performed and mediated; in a different way from previous societies, they call for constant revision and continuous performance in known and unknown social settings, of which some are digital and others are physically located. Religious identities online also show us how contemporary religious identities are formed around the individual autobiography rather than geographical place or a particular religious affiliation. The Internet enhances the possibility of individually practiced religion, but digital media also make visible and provide a new form of social infrastructure for the individual religion: a network of local communities, technological devices and software applications and geographically close or remote friends and family members. This shows that religious identity in modern society is still a social thing, deeply anchored in the social situations and relations individuals want and need to stay connected to in order to find meaning and act in everyday life.

(Lövheim 2013:52)

This coincides with the general understanding of how identity is formed, namely "as produced between persons and within social relations" (Lawler 2014:8).<sup>130</sup> These relationships can be in VR or FR. Participants, like Bär, confirmed the importance of relationships in evangelizing online.

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<sup>129</sup> So called *Virtual Private Networks* (VPN) are one technological solution which allows people anonymously to access information which might be blocked through their political government.

<sup>130</sup> As a Christian, I would add that the relationship to God is an essential factor in the formation of one's identity (Romans 8:14; Rabens 2013:124ff). The implications of this, however, require further research (see 8.2).

Also, eine Grunderfahrung von uns ist eigentlich, dass die Leute am ehesten geistlich weiterkommen im Internet, wenn da eine wirkliche Begegnung auch letztlich zwischen zwei Menschen stattfinden kann.<sup>131</sup>

(Bär R1:18)

Thus, Lövhein's conclusion that religious identity "is still a social thing" is supported through the findings of the first round, particularly from the interviews with those using a relational approach to evangelization online, as well as the results from the second round which indicated a preference for relational evangelization and more private online-platforms (see 6.2.2.1).

Lastly, this review reveals how complex identity formation and that there are multiple reasons why people have or create a different identity online. Reimann expressed this well:

When it comes to the internet, we also speak of the online person. It is often said that we are different online from how we are in real life, and therefore that the online persona is "fake." In my judgment, however, this does not do justice to the complex process through which someone develops their online identity. Of course it is about staging, but that which is staged is no less real. The key question, therefore, is how I present myself on the stage. I also reveal myself as a person on the internet, even if this persona is one over which I have only limited control.

(Riemann 2017:75)

#### External and internal influences

After this general introduction on identity we can turn to some of the ways this study suggests that avatars can be used and the implications this usage and understanding holds for evangelization online.

### 8.1.2 Results from the empirical research

One focus which emerged during the research was on the way evangelists experienced the impact of an avatar and how they responded to the different ways an avatar was used.

The results of the empirical research suggested four primary usages of an avatar.

#### 8.1.2.1 Protecting: The avatar as a shield to hide from others

Most agreed that people hide personal information and disguise key features of themselves. Usually this is not done out of malicious reasons but to protect oneself.

No. People have rights. They are scared more and more because there is so much scam and misuse of identities that people are protecting.

(Anonymous K R1:77; also Gerlach R1:90,94)

Therefore, the organization represented by Anonymous K does not initially ask for much information because they assume they will be misled, and they found that it scares people away.

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<sup>131</sup> "It is our general experience that people are most likely to make spiritual progress when there is an actual encounter between two human beings" [my translation].

Also, there is always a balance between how much information we are requiring. Of course, we would like to have a lot of information but the number of people filling up [sic] forms depends directly on [the] number of fields you ask them to fill [out].

(Anonymous K R1:78)

In this case, the use of an avatar would not present an edited-self in order to be perceived in a particular way, but out of security concerns. However, other participants of the panel had more concerns, particularly if it is an on-going relationship:

Und wenn hier irgendwas reinkommt, das dieses Vertrauen zerstört, dann ist das glaube ich eher kontraproduktiv. Und dazu würde gehören, dass ich nicht Joachim heiße, sondern Peter, oder dass ich statt einer Frau ein Mann bin und so was. Klar, es ist die Frage was kriegt der andere davon mit. Das würde man nicht erfahren. Aber ich glaube, es ist wichtig, es macht einen Unterschied.<sup>132</sup>

(Bär R1:21)

Most agreed that the level of transparency is dependent on the situation. Dyer, for example, wrote:

Again, I think it depends on what I'm doing. If I want to play a quick game with a random stranger (which I don't actually do at this stage in my life), then I don't really think about their age or gender. If I am buying something from a store, I don't think about the seller's identity, but I do care about his or her reputation. If I'm in an online discussion, I do care if the person hides behind anonymity or gives his or her identity.

(Dyer R1:30)

Some on the panel were confident that a misrepresenting avatar can be recognized over time (Kopjar:34-35). Based on Anonymous K's experience with e-coaches, they only need a few e-mail exchanges to have a full picture.

[W]e are all dealing with a building of a relationship, is just a matter of 2, 3, 4 mails that you know everything and people usually hide their real identity. We are not even asking them for the real identity. That's why we really like to work with couples as coaches because if this is a man who is writing as a man and it comes out after 2 mails that it's [a] woman using the man's nickname, then simply a husband passes it to his wife and that's that.

(Anonymous K R1:75)

One could still ask if it is not the social-identity which the e-coaches discover. Yet, reflecting on his own experience online, Kopjar acknowledges that people can recognize certain characteristics about himself even if he tries to hide them:

Auf der anderen Seite werden die meisten Leute, wenn sie intensiv mit mir Online kommunizieren, meinen Charakter relativ gut erfassen können. Das heißt, wenn ich irgendwo in der Art wie ich auftrete, Schwächen habe, kommen die wahrscheinlich genauso zum Tragen, ohne dass ich mich da verstellen kann.<sup>133</sup>

(R1:19)

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<sup>132</sup> "And if something comes in here that destroys this trust, I tend to believe it would be rather counter-productive. And that includes saying that my name is not Joachim, but Peter, or that I am a woman instead of man. Clearly it always depends on what I find out. But I believe it is important and that it makes a difference" [my translation].

<sup>133</sup> "On the other hand, if people communicate frequently with me online they will get a good grasp of my character. This means that my weaknesses will become evident through the way I behave, and I cannot prevent that" [my translation].

Some have suggested that our behaviour cannot be hidden. Even in games our behaviour eventually comes through (Krüger:83).

Nonetheless, in the end one cannot know for sure if a person is representing him- or herself truthfully. Yet, as Heidbrink also points out, a certain amount of ambiguity is also part of FR:

So now going online we have, for example, the discussion about gender. What if I am in Second Life, where people do not only have a nick name but have a body? They can shape their body as they like and how do I know if they are telling me the truth? How do I know if they are male or female? How do I know? But if I am sitting opposite a person do I really know? Can I know? So I would say identity is a problem in general. For sure, it is easier to take on a different identity, to shape the identity online, but in general I would say we have the same problem online and offline.  
(R1:13)

However, it was also pointed out that because one does not see the other and does not know his or her physical appearance, this might actually be helpful.

In [an] offline situation they [i.e. people potentially interested in faith] may not like your face or they might not like your behaviour, your dress, whatever.

(Anonymous K R1:60)

Anonymous K's insight is supported by social psychology. Research from Willis and Todorov, for example, suggests that people make judgments within milliseconds:

We investigated the minimal conditions under which people make such inferences. In five experiments, each focusing on a specific trait judgment, we manipulated the exposure time of unfamiliar faces. Judgments made after a 100-ms exposure correlated highly with judgments made in the absence of time constraints, suggesting that this exposure time was sufficient for participants to form an impression. In fact, for all judgments--attractiveness, likeability, trustworthiness, competence, and aggressiveness--increased exposure time did not significantly increase the correlations.

( Willis & Todorov 2006:592)

People use physical appearance to draw conclusions about someone's personality. Online environments often hide aspects of one's physical appearance, simply because it is technically too complicated. For example, one's physical appearance is only available if a photo is presented, and even a photo represents our edited-identity since we usually only select good ones. Gestures are usually not available online, unless one uses work-arounds like emoticons or video streaming.

Shifting the perspective to the evangelist's use of an avatar, most found that they should try to represent themselves as accurately as possible while not putting themselves at risk by exposing too much personal information.

A few addressed the need to protect those evangelizing online, particularly e-coaches who regularly interact with interested people.

[I]n some cases, [the e-]coach has really develop[ed] a deeper friendship. They are taught to break the relationship after finishing the course. Why? Because it's extremely demanding. Some of it is emotionally demanding. Some people are difficult and they would like to have somebody always to

encourage them and to pull [the] life [out of you]... But this is very demanding on people's psyche. The ideal thing is, you do your thing and you pass the person to the next course. You may be the coach in the next course if you are qualified but it does have to be a rule.

(Anonymous K R1:69-70)

However, such a functional usages of relationships has been critiqued. Herbst summarized the critique of relational-evangelization brought forth by the Emerging Church. They suggest that friendship-evangelization has the danger of building relationships for tactical reasons (Herbst 2008:71). But such a critique is not necessarily applicable to evangelistic websites (which use e-coaches) since the intentions and time commitment are clear from the beginning. However, one can still understand that someone might feel surprised if a developed relationship abruptly ended. Such risks need to be weighed against the needs of the e-coaches. Since the relationship is of a professional nature, perhaps it is better compared to a counselling situation, rather than a friendship. Nonetheless, such programmatic passing on does seem to hinder the natural ways relationships develop.

It is interesting to notice that on both sides, safety concerns are a motive for hiding parts of one's identity. This shows that both the evangelist and the evangelized can and do use their avatar to protect themselves. How much is revealed needs to be discerned by weighing the possibilities and dangers that transparency creates (see 10). As Estes comments:

I think it is relative to the realm that they are in, and the type of evangelizing they are involved in. Transparency can be really helpful, but not in every situation. I think the individual must create a plan for their evangelization, where they will evangelize, and in what manner, and then decide on how much information to reveal at that point.

(R1:28)

In summary, avatars are used to hide certain aspects of our identities. One of the reasons for doing so is concern for security. Those evangelizing should accept this and require as little information as possible in order to protect those to whom they are evangelizing and in order to keep the barrier low. How much evangelists reveal about themselves needs to be discerned by weighing, for example, personal safety and privacy concerns with the potential of creating trustworthiness (see 6.2.1.3).

### **8.1.2.2 Creating: The avatar as our edited self**

As shown at the beginning of this section, current research suggests that people present themselves online as an edited version rather than as totally different (Lövheim 2013). The research here confirmed this kind of use.

[S]obald man im Internet irgendwie aktiv ist, baut man sich da eine Online Person auf, die aber irgendwie kunstvoll modelliert und [...] irgendwie [anders] ist als ich.<sup>134</sup>

(Krüger R1:84)

Similarly, Dyer responded to the question of why people might use an avatar with the following:

It might simply be to explore a version of one's self that one would like to be more often. In other cases, such as only putting attractive images on Facebook or funny status updates on Twitter (as opposed to ugly images or sad updates), it could be a deeper issue of someone projecting the self they want to be, or it could simply be adhering to social etiquette.

(R1:32)

Dyer indicates in his answer that the reasons for creating an edited (i.e. improved) self might be numerous.

Bourgeois suggested that people use their avatar to present a truer self. This would mean that the avatar presents something about that person which is hidden in FR.

People want to create a version of themselves to present to the world. In many ways, they are revealing a truer self.

(Bourgeois R1:35)

Similarly, Heidbrink suggested that even a freely created avatar reveals something about oneself:

I would say that due to the fact that I want to create this aspect [...] it is part of my identity. It's a big problem I think, and I am really not sure how to go about it. I think the only way is to know the constraints and the problems. To talk about them. To write about them. To make them obvious. To disclose them in a research but I think it is not more we can do.

(R1:17)

In general, many perceived that it is a common practice online as well as offline to present oneself favourably. The matter becomes somewhat more complicated when, as Lövheim (2013:45) pointed out, "the 'authentic self' represented through digital media becomes simultaneously more 'real' and more 'edited' than in a face-to-face setting".

In my observation of *YouTube* channels in Germany, those who are very successful are considered to be *real*. What matters is that one appears to be real, although the lives presented in *vlogs* are clearly edited. Perhaps further research can more closely examine if and how this is relevant for evangelization online. A potential challenge for evangelization online could be the need to present an authentic picture of the Christian life. As Stamper's research has shown, some of the analysed websites starkly contrasted life quality before and after conversion, the latter depicted in a strongly positive light (e.g. crisis solved).

What these testimonies have in common is that, like the testimonies in the videos on the Peace with God website, they depict salvation as a solution to major life problems; they indicate that their post-

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<sup>134</sup> "As soon as I become somehow active in the internet I start to create an online persona, which is artistically crafted and somehow different than me" [my translation].

conversion lives are uncomplicated; and they employ language that suggests an intimate and personal connection with God.

(Stamper 2013:140)

This too could be considered an edited self and create problems later when people encounter post-conversion problems. Perhaps conversational stories that present more struggle and ambiguity would be considered more “real” and invoke more trust.

Bridges, for example, pointed out that in his experience gamers are very sensitive to people who are trying too hard and are not being authentic.

I think that gamers are a little savvier about authenticity. If you are going to say you're a Christian, or start opening that kind of thing up, I think that they're looking for somebody authentic. I think before you get into any kind of talk about religion, they want to know that you're authentic to what you're doing.

(Bridges R1:54)

Thus, though it seems that a certain degree of editing is accepted, different communities (e.g. online-games or *YouTube*) have certain standards of what is appropriate and considered real.

Yet, as said, it is common practice to present oneself favourably, both on- and offline. However, social psychologists also warn against too strong a desire to present a favourably edited self.

We sacrifice physical health to maintain a public identity defined by composure and aplomb. For example, between 30 and 65 percent of respondents reported embarrassment when buying condoms (Hanna, 1989). [...] In other instances, we engage in risky behaviour to enhance our public image and identity. Concerns about others' impressions and our own physical appearance are good predictors of excessive sunbathing, which increases the likelihood of skin cancer. [...] And the same need for an enhanced public image motivates many cosmetic surgeries, which carry with them a variety of health risks.

(Gilovich, Keltner & Nisbett 2011:104)

All the examples listed in the quote are not applicable to VR. One's physical appearance can easily be altered in VR without health risks. Yet, it is still questionable if this notion of needing to edit who one is, is not in itself problematic, regardless of whether it has health risks. More so, could not the biblical message that one is valuable and wonderfully made (e.g. Ps 139:14) have a liberating effect on those who feel the need to present themselves in an edited way?

Thus, though this may be the most common use of an avatar, it might also be the one to which evangelists can speak good news if a person is suffering under the need to edit their persona for positive affirmation.

### **8.1.2.3 Revealing: The avatar as an expression of our self**

Several participants commented that people reveal aspects about themselves online that they would otherwise not reveal. This could mean that some are willing to share their desperation as well as conversing about important issues more openly, as experienced by Anonymous K:

Of course, there are some people who are telling you they want to commit suicide. Even last night we had a case like that in England but it's some people are really telling us, "You are the first person ever with whom I can discuss such important issues."

(R1:59)

And it is precisely the anonymity which enables people to share personal issues. It seems that hiding and revealing happens simultaneously.

Furthermore, Estes suggests that people reveal different aspects of themselves online:

It seems to me that people reveal a part of their personality in VR that is somewhat known and somewhat hidden in FR. That is, they do not reveal everything in VR, and they do reveal more in VR than FR, but the content revealed is of a certain type that is tangential to what they already reveal in FR.

(R1:20)

When asked if he reveals personal things about himself online, Estes commented:

No, but this is mostly because my background and experiences make me hyper-aware of this issue and concern. In fact, I probably reveal less about myself online, and what I reveal online is extremely 'polished,' or packaged in such a way that 20 years from now the content will still fit the online image I want to project. However, I recognize that I am a small minority with this view point.

(R1:18)

For revealing to be possible, the person has to have faith in their anonymity. This could suggest that it would be helpful if online evangelists help to ensure that people can properly protect those aspects of their identity which they do not wish to reveal. As Bourgeois suggested and was confirmed by others, people forget or are unaware that they are not always as anonymous as they think they are:

Many people often forget that VR can usually be traced back to FR, so they do/say things assuming they are anonymous. This generally shows their true nature.

(R1:21)

Kopjar points out that hiding aspects of oneself, or even creating a "fake" avatar, does not mean that the relationship was not meaningful or helpful:

[I]ch würde behaupten, dass ich Fakes mittlerweile relativ gut erkenne und dass ich gleichzeitig aber in dem Gespräch auch so gute Inhalte hatte, also selbst, wenn wir beide in dem Sinne Fakes waren, haben wir uns glaube ich gut getan in dem Gespräch. Weil wir konnten Sachen sagen, ich habe natürlich Sachen preisgegeben, die in meiner Realität stimmen, die vielleicht nicht hundert Prozent meinem Kontext entsprechen, aber wo Gefühle richtig waren, wo Emotionen dabei waren, die echt waren.<sup>135</sup>

(R1:36)

Thus, one can conclude that people do reveal more personal issues about themselves through avatars and these personal issues are often more important for an evangelistic conversation than questions about a person's gender, ethnicity, social status, etc.

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<sup>135</sup> "Meanwhile I would say I am pretty good at recognizing a fake. Yet, the conversation could have been so good, that even if we both were fakes, I still think we were good for each other. We were able to say things to each other which were true but did not 100% fit to my context, but the feelings and emotions were real" [my translation].

Thus, perhaps rather than simply accepting the anonymity, it should be embraced and enhanced for evangelization online. This could mean encouraging people not to reveal too much personal information. Using de-coding software might further help people feel safe, particularly if they are concerned about a third party finding out about their interests in (another) faith.

#### **8.1.2.4 Discovering: The avatar as a means to gain self-knowledge**

A further use of an avatar is to gain self-knowledge. Self-knowledge “can take the form of beliefs, images, memories, and stories we tell about our lives” (Gilovich *et al* 2011:197).

Participants commented people might use an avatar to explore who they are. Dyer for example wrote:

For young people whose identity is still in formation, they are continually trying on identities in FR all the time (sports, games, goth, church, woodshop, clothes, etc.). Some of these identities happen at school or near the home and others can only be created online, and still others are both. [...] Generally, I think people use identities to gain something socially and they do this both online and offline.

(R1:38)

When asked to comment on why they believed people create an avatar with characteristics different from who they are in FR, most suggested that the avatar is used to explore oneself.

[Menschen verwenden Avatars, weil sie rausfinden] wollen [...] wer sie eigentlich sind. Also es ist ähnlich, wie wenn ich mich verkleide als irgendetwas, dann versuche ich ja auch raus zu finden, wie viel oder was macht meine Identität aus, wie viel Mann bin ich, kann ich rausfinden, wenn ich auch mal Frauenkleidung anziehe und merke, geht, geht nicht, passt, passt nicht. [...] Identitäten auszuprobieren ist gerade für Jugendliche und junge Erwachsene sehr wichtig, wenn ich dann irgendwann gemerkt habe, mit einer Identität fühle ich mich wohl, das ist so mein Kern, das macht mich aus, hört man auf, ganz so viel zu experimentieren.<sup>136</sup>

(Kopjar R1:25)

A similar observation was made by Anonymous S but this participant also cautions that playful use with one’s identity can become unhealthy:

I think it is often for exploration, to test out what life might be like from a different perspective. The way children play dress-up, though with more serious implications I believe for adults who become more committed to their avatars and more bound up in an existence they have “control” of than is perhaps healthy.

(R1:32)

The avatar does allow for escapism. One is no longer limited by social confinements, but Estes is probably right that for most people this is a healthy form of escapism (Estes R1:32). As has already been argued in this thesis, escapism does not have to be something negative.

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<sup>136</sup> “[People use avatars] because they want to find out who they really are. This is similar to playing dress up in order to find out what it does to my identity. How much of a man I am I can discover by trying on women’s clothes and realizing that they do not fit. ... To try out identities is particularly important for teenagers and young adults. Once I find an identity which I am comfortable with, that captures my core, the experimenting stops” [my translation].

Schut suggested that in order for people to use their avatar well, there needs to be a separation between oneself and the avatar:

Some people when they come to an avatar, they're actually literally experimenting with themselves. You know this is an alter-ego for me, except for people who are suffering from mental illness or a mental capacity in some way, shape or form. Even in that situation people are still able to keep separate on some level this is [an] avatar, this is me.

(R1:48)

The use of an avatar to explore oneself raised the question of whether or not an avatar could also help in the development of a religious identity by exploring religions online. In the interviews, participants were asked if they would encourage someone to use an avatar to “try out” religion. Of those who responded most considered an avatar helpful in this way. Anonymous S for example wrote:

I had never considered this, but yes. I believe even in FR people often “try on” religion by attending services, listening to Christian music, etc. before making a decision.

(R1:36)

Kopjar was also in favour of trying out religion, because he believes that people have different ways of exploring faith and the use of an avatar is a good method in his opinion. He finds such a use advantageous as it allows one to gather personal experience as well as to hear the experiences of others and gain first-hand knowledge.

Momentan habe ich zu wenig Zeit, um das wirklich zu tun, aber ich weiß früher, habe ich teilweise Erfahrungen wirklich auch in der virtuellen Welt gemacht. Da habe ich jetzt keine Religionen ausprobiert, weil ich in meiner Religion relativ schnell gefestigt war, aber ich habe verschiedene Weltbilder ausprobiert, ich habe verschiedene Erfahrungen gemacht, die ich dann auf meine physische Welt übertragen habe und das ist sehr gut auf Religion übertragbar.<sup>137</sup>

(Kopjar R1:49)

Kopjar's experience also confirms that the experiences gained in VR can be transferred and therefore impact FR.

These comments suggest to the researcher that a liturgical approach to evangelization, where a person is invited into a community of believers and allowed to participate in it, is helpful. Allowing a community to be the evangelist means that the workload is borne by many shoulders. As seen earlier, Anonymous K felt the need to protect the e-coaches from being overburdened by some of the people who used their eLearning platforms to inquire about the Christian faith (Anonymous K R1:69-70).

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<sup>137</sup> “At the moment I don't have time for it but I used to spend more time in the virtual world. I did not try out different religions because my religion had established itself pretty quickly but I did try out different world views. Some of those experiences were transferred into my physical world and this is also possible with religion” [my translation].

Earlier, it was argued (6.2.2.4) that most evangelistic offerings have limited entry points to the Christian faith. Websites, videos etc. usually focus on the issues they believe most people can relate to. However, as Anonymous H suggests, there are more reasons to believe in Christ besides having a life crisis. A community would naturally contain various stories of how and why someone became a Christian and thus, it is much more likely for the inquirer to find a narrative they can relate to.

Plus, an inquiring person would even have the choice of entering a Christian community with a Christian avatar, thereby not needing to reveal their explorative intentions.<sup>138</sup>

The benefits of a liturgical approach to evangelism are further discussed in 9.1.1.

### 8.1.3 Conclusions

The empirical research here did not produce any data which would suggest that people understand their identity as totally formable (i.e. without some kind of core). As far as it was made evident through this empirical research, people operate under the assumption that one has a core identity which can be hidden, explored, revealed or edited. The avatar is used to form an understanding of oneself by editing and experimenting with it. It also serves as a mask to hide behind, yet this is done in order to reveal other aspects of oneself. Thus, an avatar can be used in various ways and for different purposes. It was generally acknowledged throughout the study that people are more open when they can hide certain aspects of their identity.

Consequently, rather than seeing the alteration of the self in an avatar as something negative, evangelists should encourage anonymous participation and perhaps even assist people to be as hidden as they wish to be. Furthermore, it is important to be careful with identifying a particular online-identity as fake.

Furthermore, evangelists should support religious freedom as it is the base for a person to engage in exploring a new religious identity. In order to do so, identity politics need to be addressed and perhaps worked around in order to ensure the safety of those evangelized.

Lastly, it was suggested that the ability of an avatar to explore one's identity could be very helpful for a liturgical approach to evangelization where a person is invited into the worshipping community. As was suggested through the research of Lövheim, the formation of one's religious identity is still a social matter.

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<sup>138</sup> This could perhaps give them an insider perspective. Something similar has been done in FR by Kevin Roose who pretended to be a Christian while attending Liberty University. He published his experience in the book *The Unlikely Disciple: A Sinner's Semester at America's Holiest University* (2009).

## 8.2 Cyber culture and its impact on evangelization

In order to understand the particular impact of VR, it is helpful to understand the general impact of technology<sup>139</sup> on individual lives and society and the unintended consequences that come with it. It is too simple to say that technology is neutral, and it all depends on what a person does with it. Technology impacts society and individuals on more levels than is often apparent at first sight.

The empirical research confirmed that there is a plurality of cultures present in VR, many, but not all of which, are marked by fast-paced communication. Thus, one cannot speak of a particular culture, for every medium has its own values which impact the communication process and relationship formed through it.

McLuhan is well-known for his phrase “the medium is the message” that draws attention to the fact that media-technologies, in particular, communicate their own message. Although this phrase is often taken to mean that the message one intends to communicate is corrupted by the medium used, this is not the full argument of McLuhan. As Dyer has pointed out, this is only one aspect:

In the phrase “the medium is the message,” McLuhan isn’t saying merely that “the medium affects the message” such as tone of voice and body language affect how a receiver interprets a message. He is saying literally the medium is the message. So I think McLuhan’s question would not be how does VR affect the Gospel, but what is the message of VR itself and how does that contrast with the Gospel?

(R1:73)

The term *message* might itself be misleading, for technology does not send a message in the sense of providing information, but rather in the form of implementing values, providing new options and confronting us with new decisions.

Boers uses the example of central-heating to illustrate how technology can have far-reaching consequences. The introduction of central heating affected family dynamics because family members no longer needed to gather around a fireplace on cold days which created a natural atmosphere for socializing (Boers 2012).

At times, even the mere existence of some technologies forces us to make a choice that we would otherwise not (also see 1.2.3). We now have to decide which technology to use. Will

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<sup>139</sup> “Technology [...] is the means by which we transform the world as it is into the world that we desire” (Dyer 2011:35). This admittedly general definition from Dyer is nonetheless helpful because it focuses on the function of technology. In his book, Dyer uses the example of a shovel to show how a very basic tool is just as much a form of technology as a modern tablet device. A shovel, for example, allows us to be more efficient than we would be with just our hands.

we purchase food, for example, that has been genetically modified? Or are we willing to use a medical treatment that relies on stem-cell research?

Furthermore, once a technology is present, even if it is rejected, that does not mean that it will not have an impact on one's life or society. To avoid social media, for example, can exclude one from social events when they are only communicated through these methods.

Lastly, it needs to be pointed out that we adapt to the technologies we use. In particular, the human brain adjusts to deal with these new technologies. Research has shown that the human brain does not seem to adopt new skills; rather it trades them. Dyer illustrates this by referring to different forms of physical exercises:

It is important to recognize that the more we master these two tools – the treadmill and the leg press – the further they take us in one direction, but not the other. Marathon runners usually cannot lift six hundred pounds with their legs, and those that can perform such a feat usually cannot run marathons. One tool transforms us in one area, while a different tool changes us into something else. [...] Those who have developed the ability to consume complex arguments in books tend to feel overwhelmed by the rush of data online, while those who do most of their reading online and on small mobile screens tend to lose concentration when they attempt to focus on a single idea for long periods of time.

(Dyer 2011:37-8)

Thus, the question addressed in this next section is: what kind of impact could VR have on evangelization?

## **8.2.1 The impact of technology on online evangelization**

A common value embedded into most technology is that of *efficiency*. Much of technology is designed to make a process more efficient. Four possibilities are presented here of how this message of efficiency could affect online evangelization.

### **8.2.1.1 Changes in the dynamics of an evangelistic conversation**

During the empirical research, it was highlighted that a significant advantage of evangelization online is the fact that one no longer needs to find people with whom to share the gospel. The process is shortened and now more efficient through the websites and various videos that are used to attract interested people. Only those who are interested are put in contact with an e-coach. This also makes the process more convenient:

Another good thing of internet, of course, is people [...] come [on] their own time. If you're trying to, let's say, evangelize with tracts on the streets, is very unlikely that you will find somebody who has just plenty of time and is looking for a conversation. At the same time, if somebody finds you over internet, that's what he wants to do right now. That is another very big advantage of internet. Then another thing is that people filter themselves. If they are not interested, they don't come. In offline situation, when you see a crowd, you don't know who is interested.

(Anonymous K R1:60-61)

However, the nature of evangelization is altered due to the elimination of the initial finding process. Some things could be lost. Sometimes evangelization starts when a Christian becomes aware of someone in particular with whom they would like to share the gospel. This can be accompanied by a process of praying for that person and waiting to see if God might create an opportunity in which to share one's faith. Prayer for those who are not seeking may be missing in reactive online evangelization.

Websites like Jesus2020 go further by automating the entire process by not providing any point of contact with another person before the visitor of the website has made a decision. The result is an evangelistic process that does not need any human personnel. This is attractive for some because organizations working with e-coaches are constantly in need of more volunteers.

Furthermore, those who wish to evangelize often need to overcome their shyness and perhaps their concerns about how the other person would respond or how such a conversation might impact the relationship long-term. This means that one enters into the conversation weak and humble, which is not necessarily a bad posture. That posture might be lost when evangelization is done reactively. Now people come to the evangelist, wanting something from him or her.

Of course, these issues are not true of all evangelistic endeavours online, but rather those done reactively. It does, however, provide an example of how technology can affect the evangelistic endeavour.

#### **8.2.1.2 Fewer entry points to faith**

Furthermore, to automate the first contact through short videos, etc. also means that one has a limited amount of thematic entry points to the Christian faith. These videos often focus on the hope that Christian faith can bring into a crisis, but what if a person is content with his or her life situation? As one person commented in the second round, the Christian faith has more to offer than just help for those in desperate situations (Anonymous H R2:14). In a personal encounter, on the other hand, one can listen to the person to see how the Christian faith might speak into his or her life.

Thus, the efficiency gained through doing evangelization reactively is done at the cost of fewer connecting points to the faith.

#### **8.2.1.3 Focus on numerical success**

The extent of the impact a high value of efficiency has can be found in the idea of the "dollar-per-soul ratio" which one person spoke about. Here donors ask for an estimate of how many

people will be saved through their donations. This thinking is ethically, theologically and ontologically questionable.

It is theologically questionable because conversion is the work of the Spirit of God and not the evangelist.<sup>140</sup> It is also questionable because it encourages decision-making and not discipleship, and it could encourage mission organizations to focus on short-term projects and “success” rather than long-term approaches and impact.

This leads, at least in the opinion of some members of the panel and this researcher, to a further problem. Organizations that use a more complex matrix of indicators to analyze progress cannot present such large numbers and are therefore put at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to finding donors.

Of course, counting conversions is not new to evangelization online. This is made much easier through the software. Additionally, the threshold for indicating a decision is much lower. In the past, people were perhaps asked to raise their hands after an evangelistic sermon or to step forward. In that context, a threshold was created by the public atmosphere. This helped make a decision memorable and communal, although perhaps more difficult. Now, in online evangelization, this process has been reduced to a click.

#### **8.2.1.4 A shortened gospel presentation**

The effect of efficiency also shows itself in the way the gospel presentation is shortened. An example of this is the fact that, as Stamper’s (2013:125) research shows, some organizations have shortened the *four spiritual laws* for the internet. In an offline situation, not only are the original *laws* longer, but they were often used as a framework in which a Christian could explain his or her faith while expanding upon them. Thus, in the end, the information provided was more than that which was printed in a booklet.

This shortening of the gospel presentation makes it more suitable for communication online. During the second round of the Policy Delphi Method, when asked to comment if “communication online has to be cover-magazine like with big titles and pictures and minimal text,” 20% agreed with very much and 33.3% agreed somewhat. So not everyone saw this as a good approach. Here we encounter a circular problem. Since the internet provides such a large amount of information, users have trained themselves to scan, rather than to read in-depth (Dyer 2011:38). Thus, information is presented accordingly, reinforcing scanning rather than reading.

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<sup>140</sup> Packer defines evangelism as “going out in love, as Christ’s agent in the world, to teach sinners the truth of the gospel with a view to converting and saving them” (Packer 1961: 53). Thus, it is the communication of a message and not the conversion that constitutes evangelization.

As the pace of life increases, Americans [and by extension much of the Western world] are becoming more likely to avoid activities that require patience, learning, discipline, and total commitment. Instead, they choose activities [...] that lend themselves to their hurried lives and the endless parade of new technology. People are content to learn to play the stereo, not the piano.

(Boers 2012:26)

On the receiving side, a streamlined presentation of the gospel might not prepare one adequately for the patience, discipline and commitment necessary for engaging the spiritual disciplines that nourish faith.

## **8.2.2 Conclusions**

Technology does something to us and it does something to evangelization. This is inevitable. Even if one decides not to use new technologies to evangelize, that decision too has consequences. Predicting the impact of a particular medium is complex, because it also depends on how people decide to use a particular medium. One significant effect of technology is efficiency. This section offers a few suggestions of how technology might be affecting the evangelistic process by the promotion of efficiency. Of course these effects depend on the particular technologies used and the way they are used. Thus, they cannot be applied universally to online evangelization.

First, it was suggested that technology can change the dynamics of an evangelistic conversation by making it a reactive encounter since the person wanting to inquire about faith comes to the evangelist rather than the evangelist initiating without knowing if someone is interested or willing to listen.

Secondly, it can reduce the number of entry points to faith because organizations use a limited number of themes they consider relevant on their websites, videos, etc.

Thirdly – though this was strongly opposed by those participating in the research – technology can encourage a focus on numerical success because statistical data is easily acquired online and exaggerated. However, this only becomes a problem when data is poorly interpreted.

Lastly, an effect of the medium is its tendency to encourage quick and superficial reading, which in turn can lead to a shortened gospel presentation in comparison to one in FR.

## **8.3 Summary**

The first section of this chapter dealt with the theme of the first research question which was identity. With regards to identity, two more specific questions were asked: firstly, how does an avatar relate to our identity? Here, it was proposed that an avatar should not be seen as a

representation of our core-identity, but rather as either an expression of our self (the way we see ourselves) or our persona (the way we want others to see us). This then leads to the second question: for what purposes are avatars used? Based on the answers from the panel, along with insights from social psychology, it was proposed that there are essentially four different uses of an avatar:

- Creating: the avatar as our edited self
- Revealing: the avatar as an expression of our self
- Protecting: the avatar as a shield to hide the self from others
- Discovering: the avatar as a means to gain self-knowledge

The second section of this chapter dealt with the theme of the second research question which was cyber culture. More specifically it addressed the challenges that culture and medium offer for evangelization. This section thus addressed the impact VR as a medium and a culture has on evangelization, and how those evangelizing take them into consideration. The section began with a theoretical and general discussion of the effect of technology on individuals and society. The goal was to integrate the findings and analysis of this research within the larger discussion on the use of technology both in the social sciences and in theology. The section concluded by presenting examples to illustrate how VR can impact the evangelistic process, the message, and partly the way success is measured.

## 9. Credibility, ethics and relationships online

This chapter addresses the research questions regarding credibility and ethics online. Additionally, it addresses the theme of relationship which is not directly related to one research question but pertains to several of the themes relating to the research questions. For the purpose of clarity, it has been given its own separate section. On the same note, the research theme *games* is not given its own independent section, instead the findings and reflections regarding the use of games for evangelization were integrated into the other categories (e.g. 9.1.2) in order to avoid redundancies. The research questions explicitly addressed here are:

- Credibility: *How is authority and credibility established?*
- Ethics: *Which ethical considerations need to be made?*
- Evangelisation: *How is evangelisation modified for VR?*

### 9.1 Credibility through the community and the story

The empirical research revealed that a certain degree of credibility (and thus authority) can be gained through ranking high in search-engines or good web design. However, credibility is also gained through a long-time commitment to a particular online-community or platform, as well as by being vulnerable and remaining open to changing one's own beliefs and worldview. This correlates with the general research on trust and how it is developed.

Trust involves vulnerability. Trust is only needed, and actually flourishes, in an environment that is uncertain and risky. Trustors must be willing to make themselves vulnerable for trust to be operational by taking the risk of losing something important to them and relying on the trustees not to exploit the vulnerability.

(Wang 2005:111)

Thus, credibility helps people to develop trust. Previous research has already shown how relevant the establishment of authority and credibility is. Campbell and Teusner, for example, write:

It [i.e. the influence of the Internet and new media] is transforming our understanding of authority by creating new positions of power, flattening traditional hierarchies, and providing new platforms that give voice to the voiceless. The ability of the Internet to challenge traditional political, social, and even religious authorities has become an accepted assumption. As the diversity and breadth of Internet users has increased, more people have been given access to a global audience for their ideas, creating new sources of authority.

(Campbell & Teusner 2011:59)

Therefore, it is essential for those evangelizing online to be aware of this new challenge. It seems self-evident that an attempt to manipulate commitment and vulnerability in order to create credibility and authority for the Christian faith lacks integrity. But if evangelization, as

it has been suggested, is an expression of one's joy in God, one's integrity is not in question. However, the challenge remains.

The Internet challenges traditional religious authority in several ways. It offers easy access to information, alternative spaces to report on and reinterpret leaders' claims, and opportunities to create new online rituals and social practices.

(Campbell & Teusner 2011:63)

Building on this assumption, Campbell and Teusner (2011:64-65) suggest three ways in which the internet impacts the development of authority:

1. The Internet is changing how we understand Christian community and, therefore, how we gain and maintain religious identity.
2. The words and actions of religious leaders are increasingly susceptible to scrutiny by alternative voices online.
3. Internet culture is challenging traditional Christian structures, especially those that appraise and correct theological knowledge.

Thus, the traditional hierarchy, structure, ideology and text of the Christian faith are being challenged online (Campbell 2007; Cheong 2013:73). With regard to evangelization online, the aim is not to gain authority in order to control others, but to "regain the legitimacy and trust necessary to operate in the religious sphere" (Cheong 2013:73).

However, as Cheong has noticed, there is also a different development noticeable, namely that of *continuity and complementarity*. Thus, the VR allows for the development and need for new and contextualized approaches to authority, this rise has not lead to the deconstruction of the authority structures prevailed offline.

The mutual flourishing of social media and religious authority is observed when leaders and their institutions' evolving practices restructure the legitimacy of their symbols and work contexts, amidst creative and countervailing (re)presentations (Cheong & Ess 2012).

(Cheong 2014:4)

The deconstructing of traditional authority structures allows for what is currently labeled "fake news". It seems that no sufficient new forms of gatekeeping have emerged online. Schultze and Bytwerk researched the way incorrectly-referenced quotations spread online.

We suggest ... that the online distribution of unchecked quotations is sloppy. Even though this practice appears to be increasingly the norm in the blogosphere, such misrepresentation seems, relative to printed texts, to be more a matter of degree than kind. ... Effective search technologies do allow a once-buried mème to be re-discovered and given new life... Originals can easily beget more copies of the fabrication no matter what the first author later intends. Books – even academic tomes – can disseminate historical fallacies and commonplace factual errors. We speculate that the rhetoric of online quotation represents a shift from persuasion to semantic reinforcement within communities. Traditional public rhetoric sought to change attitudes to win over adversaries. That required an understanding of the audience, of the rhetorical situation, and at best, knowledge of historical continuities that lend wisdom to seemingly novel situations. That is not to say that rhetors were always patient, rational, and ethical. Surely not. The goal, in theory, however, was to persuade, to reduce the differences between opposing positions so that the audience could move from their

position to that of the rhetor. Electronic use of unchecked quotations seems a different species, aimed more at reinforcing existing attitudes than changing the attitudes of those who disagree.

(Schultze & Bytwerk 2012:227-228)

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the internet is not the only force impacting traditional authority structures.

[I]t is not simply the presence of the Internet as new technology and the unique features it offers that creates challenges for religious community. It is how Christians use these new technologies combined with larger cultural shifts in how religion is practiced in contemporary Western society that challenge traditional religious leaders, institutions, and patterns of religious life. Like newspapers, radio, and television, the Internet is another media platform for the public scrutiny of religious leaders and the exploration and critique of Christian practices and doctrines outside ecclesial control. The Internet also fuels an already shifting pattern of sociability among people for whom connections are fluid, mobile, and transcend space and time.

(Campbell & Teusner 2011:65)

Thus, one is not just dealing with a single change, but rather an ongoing process in which the establishment of authority and the development of credibility is constantly being re-negotiated (Meyrowitz 1985:63).

Through empirical research, several suggestions were made showing how authority and credibility can be gained. Professional design and search-engine optimization were proposed as being helpful for organizations, whereas individuals can often gain credibility through being perceived as being authentic. It was further suggested that individuals could also gain credibility by committing to and investing into a particular online-community. In general, it was also assumed that being transparent, authentic and vulnerable creates credibility.

Taking these findings into consideration, two suggestions will be introduced which might help to communicate the gospel in a way that is understandable and takes the present online challenges into consideration.

### **9.1.1 The community as an evangelist**

It is here postulated that communal evangelization provides a fitting way to create credibility and trustworthiness for online evangelization.

Trust ... can be considered as the reflected trustworthiness of the trustees and their trustworthiness that is subjectively entertained in the judgment of the trustors (Sztompka, 1999, p. 70). The potential partners then have the burden of not only creating trust but also maintaining it and this process involves the duty of presenting themselves as trustworthy persons (Haas & Deseran, 1981). ... In assessing the trustworthiness of interaction partners, people can use a set of criteria to come with a reliable assessment. These criteria or factors of trustworthiness (Mayer et al., 1995) include ability or competence (Barber, 1983; Luhmann, 1979; Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight et al., 1998), benevolence (Luhmann, 1979; Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight et al., 1998), integrity or honesty (Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight et al., 1998).

(Wang & Emurian 2005:859)

Although evangelization is often correctly seen as a task of the church, it is usually fulfilled through individual efforts. If a community does the evangelizing, as suggested, some of the

short-comings of online evangelization, such as limited entry points to the Christian faith and a focus on Christianity as the answer to a life crisis, could be reduced. A community would naturally contain various stories of how and why someone became a Christian and offer a broader range of motives and stories that inquiring people could relate to, including stories of people whose motivation for embracing the Christian faith did not originate from a life crisis.

Witnessing through a community is of course not something new either in FR or VR. VR forums and virtual churches do exactly this. However, this researcher would suggest that it should be done more intentionally. Often forums initiated by Christians are intended for Christians, and more churches could consider starting a virtual church plant or extension particularly for those who, for whatever reason, are hesitant to attend a church in FR.

It is important to understand the possibilities of communal witnessing particularly with regards to the current epistemological shifts happening in the West. Clapp explains this well in his book, *A Peculiar People. The church as culture in a post-Christian society*:

[E]vangelism in a non-Constantinian setting requires that Christians understand witness as corporate and not only or even primarily individual. The words and behavior of one person do not make a culture. Non-Constantinian nonbelievers will attend Christian claims when they catch glimpses of a way of life that somehow challenges the ways of life they already know and find to be lacking in one manner or another. [...] The point is that when we understand evangelistic witness as corporate, as organic, ongoing and flowing naturally from a Christian way of life, then we are prepared to participate in and recognize conversion in its hundreds and thousands of manifestations.<sup>141</sup>

(Clapp 1996:168)

Whereas relational evangelism relies on the trust developed through the relationship and apologetic evangelism relies on the logic of an argument, liturgical evangelism does not *explain* inasmuch as it *demonstrates* how faith, expressed through rituals, can explain and guide our lives. This is important because credibility and trustworthiness are established differently online (see below). It is conceivable that people could experience faith by participating in a community which in turn would lead them to ask questions in order to understand the faith better.

Liturgical evangelism takes seriously the conviction that at the heart of the Christian faith and of the life of the world is the mystery of God's gracious presence, which we believe is uniquely revealed in Jesus' fate and ministry. [...] [R]itual is a crucial way in which human beings, even contemporary human beings, approach and wrestle with the basic mysteries of life: birth, marriage, death, friendship, and, most especially, the mystery of God.

(Keifert 1992:103)

Practicing faith is thus a witness to faith. In this case, the experience and participation in its rituals would precede full understanding. Such a form of evangelization is perhaps much more common if one thinks about the way children growing up in a Christian family come to faith.

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<sup>141</sup> When Clapp speaks of a non-Constantinian setting he means a post-Christendom and postmodern culture.

They participate in prayer, worship, lament, etc. from an early age. We read something similar in Deuteronomy:

In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent signs and wonders—great and terrible—on Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household.

(Deut 6:20-22 NIV)

Here a child observes certain behaviours and hears certain propositions and inquires about them. The answer it receives is the rehearsal of the story of God’s deliverance. Even for those not raised in a Christian context, such an approach might still be helpful.

Currently, a popular slogan “belonging comes before believing” is expressing what Christians are discovering: There is a need to integrate people into the community in order for them to be able to develop a faith. Saayman has suggested that we might (try to) convert people too early (1992:19-27). It is suggested that in order to evangelize in the current paradigm in which we function, not only evangelistic but also ecclesiastic changes are needed.

In the present mainly post-Christendom or postmodern era, more of the church's energy in evangelisation has to be focused on the challenge of adapting to the needs of those who want to belong but do not necessarily want to start out by subscribing to a specific set of dogmatic interpretations in a confession of faith.

(Weyers & Saayman 2013:7)

At least part of this need to belong is due to the fact that we are *liturgical beings*. According to Smith, we do not need to make people religious. We are already liturgical beings for whom faith, as a desire for something ultimate, is an inherent drive:

We are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends. So we are not primarily *homo rationale* or *homo faber* or *homo economicus*; we are not even generically *homo religiosus*. We are more concretely *homo liturgicus*; humans are those animals that are religious animals not because we are primarily believing animals but because we are liturgical animals – embodied, practicing creatures whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate.

(Smith 2009:40)

Thus, evangelization does not only take place when someone explains the Christian faith, but also when it is demonstrated. For example, when the community practices its love for and relationship with God.

Evangelization online has a particular advantage because, through the use of an avatar, a *magic circle*<sup>142</sup> can be created in which people feel free to engage in a Christian community

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<sup>142</sup> The magical circle describes a place where certain cultural expectations and values no longer exist. People often develop a magical circle when they feel anonymous. This can be a vacation to a foreign place where one is unknown. An avatar can also create such a feeling of anonymous safety. Thus, it is for example notable that people reveal private information about themselves online that would otherwise be considered culturally taboo.

without being concerned about being stigmatized (perhaps even persecuted) and have the freedom to disengage at any point if they desire to do so.

Furthermore, such a practice of liturgical evangelization would make the question of how one integrates a convert into a Christian community obsolete since that happens simultaneously.

It is also possible that witnessing as a community could potentially diminish our current emphasis on individualism which functions as a dominant counter-narrative to the grand narrative of the Bible. In a recent interview, J.I. Packer said the following:

Remember that what God plans—what the whole economy of grace is shaped for—is the perfection of a church that will be the bride of Christ and, in a grand sense, the image of Christ. And God is not in the business of individualism. There is a distinction that not all evangelicals pick up between individualism and individuality. Being a Christian ripens and extends your individuality, but individualism is a form of sin and, it seems to me, still a temptation for the Young, Restless, Reformed folk. The vital movements of Reformed Christianity—with their rediscovery of the doctrines of grace and the life of grace—all of that needs to have the individualism squeezed out of it, and as the movement matures that's what's going to happen. The folk involved in these movements need to be very clear all the time that God's purpose is a church that celebrates his glory.  
(Packer & Mesa 2016)

Although Packer is here responding to a particular Christian movement in the US, I believe his concern with regards to individualism can be applied more broadly. Evangelization that does not lead people into a Christian community is in great danger of leading them into a faith that lacks the communal dimension so central to the Christian faith.

Practically this could be achieved through creating open sites, forums, and chat-rooms where people are invited to watch and participate in Christian rituals (e.g. worship service) without having to submit to certain set of beliefs. The website TalkJesus, which was researched by Stamper (2013), exemplifies how the Christian community can witness online.

### **9.1.2 Evangelizing as story-telling**

Stories play a crucial role in the way we make sense of our worldview, and it is through stories that we can communicate a worldview.

The spirit cannot breathe without story. It sinks to a whimper, deflating its [hosts], and condemning them to psychopathology – literally disease of the soul. So it is for the young in the contemporary West teenagers, those in their twenties, the hope and pride of their societies – and with them, swathes of their seemingly more assured elders. A malaise holds them in thrall, struggling to live in a present without vision of any future... They are dying for want of a story.  
(Carroll 2010:6)

As a humanist, Carroll does not believe in the biblical story but he understands its value. Thus, there is a need to return to a less reductionist presentation of the gospel. This includes, as Anonymous H pointed out, evangelistic messages that present God as more than the solution for life's problems. The more important issue is to communicate the biblical grand narrative.

Various Christian theologians have shown over the past decades how important the grand narrative is for understanding our own life (Wright 2006; Wright 2009; Bartholomew & Goheen 2014). Choung (2008), for example, developed a presentation of the gospel based on four circles, corresponding to, but offering a much wider scope than, the four spiritual laws. The four spiritual laws focus on the atonement of Christ, but Choung's four circles can offer a more complete gospel. This is not to suggest that the four spiritual laws are an inadequate way to present the gospel, but the context has changed and its message is no longer as coherent as it used to be. Choung articulates his motivation for writing a new gospel presentation as follows:

In one of the simplest – and therefore most popular – articulations of the gospel today, ours sins have separated us from God and make us deserving of eternal punishment. But Jesus takes on the punishment himself so that our relationship with God can be restored. We enjoy eternal life, which we assume to be paradise after death, and have an individual relationship with God while on earth. [...] This summary is easy to remember, and I've used it countless times. [...] However, I hit a point where the gospel just didn't feel like good news anymore. [...] My problem? The gospel sounded arbitrary. ... To me our gospel seemed intolerant and exclusive.... All we could say was "It's the truth" [...] [But w]e couldn't prove anything.

(Choung 2008:192-3)

For Choung, the claims inherent to the gospel cannot be proven by any agreed upon epistemological method.

One possible response to this is to tell the whole story. The Christian narrative is more than a set of propositions. It gives a narrative explanation for why our lives and this world is the way it is. It offers an interpretation of our lives.

The Bible tells a story that is *the* story, the story of which our human life is a part. It is not that stories are part of human life, but that human life is part of a story. It is not that there are stories that illustrate "how things are"; it is that we do not begin to understand how things are unless we understand how they were and how they will be.

(Newbigin 1995:82–83)

Of course the grand narrative cannot be proven either, but it is lived out by the community (see 9.1.1) which thereby bears witness to it.

It [i.e. believing] is a personal commitment to a faith that cannot be demonstrated on grounds established from the point of view of another commitment.

(Newbigin 1995:16)

The implication is that evangelization is not about convincing someone of a set of propositions, but about sharing the joy that comes from being able to make sense of our own story in light of this grand narrative. Presenting the biblical narrative allows people to better comprehend what the Christian faith is about. The Christian community cannot prove the story, but it can be what it is called to be, a witness to it (Acts 1:8) by demonstrating a communal life that interprets life through a biblical perspective.

A number of the practitioners interviewed engage in what could be called *evangelization through catechism*. This means that although they may use a life crisis to gain people's

attention, their intention is to educate the users fully about the Christian faith through online-classes. By engaging with people over several weeks they are able to communicate a much fuller understanding of the Christian faith. How much their presentation focuses on presenting the biblical grand narrative would need to be explored further (see 12.3).

One idea that was entertained in this research was that a game could be used to communicate the biblical grand narrative. This has already been done (Bainbridge 2013:7–10), but such games are often designed for children, and often focused on certain stories in the Bible. The question is, could people be invited more fully into the grand narrative through a game? Bainbridge, for example, writes that real-time strategy (RTS) games have two connections to religion:

First of all, these are often called *god games* because the player takes the role of a god, existing outside the world and commanding the action from an Olympian height. The player of an RTS is not represented by an avatar and does not see the world from ground level, but directs armies or nations, as a chess player does, but usually in much more complex and often realistic world. [...] Second, religion is often one of the features of the simulated society commanded by the player, although usually a minor one.

(Bainbridge 2013:6–7)

Thus, it would be possible to design a game where the biblical narrative was replayed from creation to consummation, but with many questions remaining. On a practical level, it would have to be decided what kind of options a player could have. Or there may be altogether different approaches where, for example, the gospel is presented allegorically. Regardless of the means, it is proposed here that the communication of the grand narrative of the Bible is a more fitting approach to evangelization.

The connection to credibility might not be as evident as in the first case, but a crucial basis for trust and authority is the text, that is the recognized teaching. It is here proposed that the presentation of the grand narrative of the Bible is more persuasive than the more reductionist evangelistic presentations which often used such as the *four spiritual laws*.

### **9.1.3 Humble evangelization: Credibility through vulnerability**

One of the strongest suggestions from the panel was for an attitude while evangelizing. For some, this was an ethical concern since they saw it as morally wrong to presume one has the epistemological high place in a relationship. Others argued much more pragmatically, asserting that only through a humble posture will it be possible to gain trust and the credibility to be heard.

In his book, *Humble Apologetics* Stackhouse makes a very similar appeal yet offers some further theological reasons for approaching our “neighbour” in a humble posture.

If we are going to defend and commend our faith, we must do it in a new mode: with a different voice and in a different posture. Our apologetics must be humble. It must be humble for several reasons, but chief among these is that God himself comes to us in humility, seeking our love and drawing us to him. The Lord Jesus Christ is our model of humility; the Holy Spirit of God is our humble companion who helps us to follow Christ's example as we proclaim Christ's message. As Lesslie Newbigin reminds us, then, "the means by which the good news of salvation is propagated must be congruous with the nature of salvation itself." Apologetics, therefore, must be humble in at least three respects: it must [be] epistemologically humble, rhetorically humble, and spiritually humble.

(Stackhouse 2002:228)

With regards to *epistemology*, it means that we must understand our subjectivity and the limitations of our understanding. The historic Christian teaching asserts that we are fallen beings, including in our thinking. This does not mean that one is uncertain about one's faith but it means acknowledging that people can have good reasons for not believing, that we might not be able to explain everything we believe, and there are certainly limits to what we can prove epistemologically.

It thus follows that we should be *rhetorically* humble by not using terminology which assumes an epistemological (i.e. I know more than you do) or moral (i.e. I am not blinded by selfish desires, sinfulness etc.) high place.

We are mere messengers of ...[God]: messengers who earnestly mean well, but who forget this bit of the message or never really understood that bit; messengers who never entirely live up to their own good news; messengers who recognize the ambiguities in the world that make the message harder to believe; and therefore messengers who can sympathize with neighbors who aren't ready just yet to believe everything we're telling them.

(Stackhouse 2002:229)

And lastly, we should be *spiritually* humble because of the *missio Dei*. It is God who is the great missionary, and it is only through his grace that we are able to know him.

Thus, the panel's recognition of the need for a humble posture fits very well with overall theological and missiological reflections, as the interaction with Stackhouse shows. It remains uncertain if there are differences of degree or nature noticeable in comparing evangelism in FR with VR but perhaps VR magnifies certain aspects of our current culture thereby making them easier to recognize and stronger in their impact. Regardless, we can assert that evangelizing needs a humble posture. To do so is ethical and effective and – most importantly – it is the model that Christ gave us through the incarnation. Thus, to participate in the *missio Dei* requires us to embrace a different posture.

Moltmann offers further guidance in how we can truly enter into an appropriate posture when he asserts that building relationships in faithful obedience to Christ's example is only possible where we see ourselves *as* the people, and not as *benefactors* to the people.

"But without humbling ourselves in the lowliness of our own life I am convinced that we will not find the humiliated people even if we are in their midst and have contact with them every day. We will end up trying sociology as a substitute, because we do not find the history of the people's life

and suffering in ourselves. We will commend our hope to the people, but not experience the hope of the people. And the people will remain silent.”

(Moltmann 1978: 98)

The point Moltmann is making here, and which I would like to incorporate in the process of becoming a church of the people, is that we have to start seeing eye-to-eye with those in and outside the church. To perceive oneself as a benefactor means to put oneself in the wrong position (cf Matthew 20:26-28) towards the other.

A true encounter is only possible where I am honest about my own place and that of the person I am trying to serve. Moltmann, while asking the question of how to bring a message of hope to hopeless people, writes that we have to go on a biographical search to find a point in our own life where we were “the people” (1978:97). The place and time where we were in need, not just any need, but in a need so great and devastating, that we would have despair in our hearts, “and a curse against God on ... [our] lips” (ibid). For Moltmann, this was his time as a prisoner of war. As a Professor or Pastor, he could not expect to be heard, just as he could not hear those outside the fence when he was imprisoned.

If we acknowledge our own weakness, remember our pain, our struggles, we can communicate a message of hope. Then when we enter into the conversation we might have a chance of being able to listen to these people, to understand them, suffer with them and show them the hope which is given to us through Christ. Since it is my goal to be practical, I would like to elaborate on the implications of what Moltmann is saying, and suggest that this should be understood as a truly mental practice that should be undergone whenever one seeks to preach or teach or counsel any one person, group or congregation, etc. Thus, almost as an actor “goes into a character”, we should go into our time of deepest need as we try to speak to marginalized, hopeless, and desperate people.

It remains open if it is necessary to have such a crisis in our biography in order to communicate our message of hope, but it certainly is a possible path. Perhaps we can expand Moltmann’s suggestion to other needs that would help us identify with the lifeworld of other people. A possible need could be skepticism, i.e. our inability to believe something...

#### **9.1.4 Ethics: Evangelizing with integrity**

To move from the proper attitude in evangelizing to ethics is a rather smooth transition as both are concerned with our behavior towards one another, although ethics can be more concrete and descriptive.

To include ethical consideration in research on evangelization might seem surprising as it is not a common combination. The rather recent work by Thiessen (2014) is a rather rare

scholarly work that deals directly with ethical concerns regarding evangelism. In his introduction he writes:

Clearly a consideration of the ethics of proselytizing is of immense practical importance. Mark Juergensmeyer has documented the rise of global religious violence today (2000:6). For many people, there is a connection between the proselytizing tendency of religions and violence. ... Within religious traditions committed to proselytizing and evangelism, far too little attention is paid to the ethics of proselytizing.

(Thiessen 2014: Chapter 1)

Thus, among those practicing evangelism, as well as among those in the academia, one can notice a slowly growing concern and interest. It also has to be admitted that the subject of ethics was only brought into this research by the panel.

Thus, the first section of this sub-chapter will summarize and engage with some of the findings from the empirical research that address evangelization from an ethical perspective or which have ethical connotations. The second section will provide some principles that could govern (online) evangelization.

However, before engaging in the empirical research, it is important to understand the place of ethics in Christian theology. The upholding of ethics in evangelism is crucial, for it ensures a person's freedom. This is the freedom to choose and act upon his or her conscience free from force and manipulation.

In an article on freedom, Bedford-Strohm shows that it is out of freedom that we evangelize, and we want to evangelize people who enjoy religious freedom and are free from external pressures or incentives. "Nicht äußerer Zwang kann in Glaubensdingen entscheiden, sondern allein das Gewissen" (Bedford-Strohm 2016:15).<sup>143</sup>

His argument is worth briefly summarizing here as it offers a foundation for the ethical reflections which follow. Bedford-Strohm draws on Luther to formulate a Christian understanding of freedom. For this, he explores the tension Luther articulates in his famous treatise *On Christian Freedom* (1520).

A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none;  
a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.

(Luther 1520[2016])

From the first part, Bedford-Strohm derives that humans are free to follow their conscience and their beliefs, and thus he concludes that we cannot enforce convictions but one can commend them to others (2016:16). This is foundational for the understanding of freedom which is part

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<sup>143</sup> "No external compulsion can decide in matters of belief, but only the conscience" [translation mine].

of most cultures, particularly in the West (ibid). However, for Bedford-Strohm, in order for this freedom to be truly Christian, it requires the second aspect.

Weil wir heute in unserem modernen Freiheitsverständnis nun aber dazu neigen, den Schutz des Individuums vor den Ansprüchen Anderer zum alleinigen Zentrum zu machen und den Freiheitsbegriff damit individualistisch zu verengen, deswegen ist die zweite These vom Beginn der Freiheitsschrift so wichtig.<sup>144</sup>

(2016:16)

For true freedom to exist one has to also be in service to one's neighbor. Bedford-Strohm further states that our service to others does not originate out of guilt or a sense of obligation but is a response to the love we received from God.

Die Lust zu Gott ist es, die uns zum Nächsten hin drängt. Die Liebe, die wir von Gott in unser Herz hinein erfahren, ist es, die uns dazu bringt, uns für die Anderen, für die Gemeinschaft zu engagieren.<sup>145</sup>

(2016:18)

Thus, Christians who evangelize do so out of freedom. They are not to be driven by a need to impress God, or by blind obedience.

The reason ethics need to be addressed here is that they regulate our relationships with one another (e.g. between the one evangelizing and the one evangelized) in a way that ensures that both can act out of freedom. This freedom is inherent to evangelization.

Die Freiheit eines Christenmenschen ist Quelle einer Haltung, die leidenschaftlichen Einsatz für die Weitergabe des Evangeliums und den Einsatz für eine Kirche verbindet.<sup>146</sup>

(2016:25)

Thus, Christian ethics, as they aim to regulate human interactions, need to ensure freedom. Likewise, evangelization needs to be done in a way that ensures freedom for all who are participating. This excludes certain actions (e.g. evangelistic methods that are manipulative) or motives for evangelization which do not originate from love for God and neighbor.

### 9.1.5 Results from the empirical research

Ethical concerns were one of the issues that emerged during the empirical research. One comment in particular raised ethical concerns. In the interview with Anonymous K, he addressed the issue of how some organizations count conversions online:

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<sup>144</sup> “But because today, in our modern understanding of freedom, we tend to make the protection of the individual against the claims of others the sole centre, and thus submit the concept of freedom to a reductionistic individualism, that is why the second thesis of the beginning of the liberation is so important” [translation mine].

<sup>145</sup> “It is the eagerness for God that moves us towards our neighbor. The love that we experience from God in our heart is that which makes us serve others and the community” [translation mine].

<sup>146</sup> “The freedom of a Christian person is the source of an attitude that combines passionate commitment to the spread of the gospel and the commitment to the church” [translation mine].

Absolutely because particularly in the American Billy Graham model: Come forward, give your life to Jesus, Hallelujah, we have another 20,000 [conversions]. I'm working very close with BGEA [Billy Graham Evangelistic Association]. The wise people there, they really know it's less than 1% that really stays. Okay, what are you going to promote? Particularly in America, they want to hear big number. That's how they run the battle, dollar-to-soul ratio and all those things.

(R1:117)

His observations raise ethical concerns that have implications for both donors and those evangelized.

For one, the donors receive misleading information. The pressure to report impressive conversion statistics might tempt organizations to choose methods that potentially result in a high number of “conversion” indications, but that do not necessarily lead people into becoming committed followers of the Christian faith.

The concern raised here by Anonymous K is, of course, not limited to evangelization online (Kandiah R1:152). However, moving this practice online could be a case where the medium amplifies a human behaviour (R1:157). For example, it is much easier to gather statistical information online, such as counting clicks. Furthermore, the threshold to press an icon which indicates a decision for conversion is likely lower than going forward in an evangelistic event which can be witnessed by other people. In a technical medium, it is easier and perhaps more tempting to quantify success.

Secondly, those being evangelized are de-personalized when their conversion is given a monetary value. The ethics of the donors themselves are questionable if they base their donations on a dollar-to-soul ratio. Thiessen describes in his book, *The Ethics of Evangelism*, how the practice of calculating a dollar-to-soul ratio violates the integrity of the person:

Billy Sunday introduced the concept of a price for a soul, in which he literally charged a set amount for every person converted at each of his evangelistic rallies. Such calculation of the economic costs of a soul is a terrible violation of the dignity of persons, reducing them to things.

(Thiessen 2014: Chapter 7)<sup>147</sup>

Obtaining statistical information about conversion does not seem to be inherently unethical. The problems arise with the use of this information, as the example from Anonymous K has shown, and the way that it can affect evangelization. A focus on numerical success can take the emphasis away from the individual and his or her individual concerns, and turn this person into a statistic, thereby objectifying the target audience.

There is a danger, when proselytizing, that people are reduced to things – pawns in a proselytizing program, statistics in an evangelistic campaign, and projects in a feigned friendship.

(Thiessen 2014: Chapter 7)

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<sup>147</sup> Chapters are referenced as the e-Book used did not contain any page numbers.

Likewise, Bedford-Strohm draws on Immanuel Kant and warns that freedom also means that a person needs to be protected from being reduced to numbers and statistics since every human being carries within them the *imago Dei* (2016:19).

Furthermore, such a pre-occupation with the numbers of converts does not encourage the recommendations for conduct laid out in the joint declaration<sup>148</sup> *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*. There the following posture is commended:

Ensuring personal discernment. Christians are to acknowledge that changing one's religion is a decisive step that must be accompanied by sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation, through a process ensuring full personal freedom.

(CWMRW 2011)

Sufficient preparation and reflection require a significant time commitment which must be taken into consideration when dealing with a person inquiring about the Christian faith. A focus on numerical success could be motivation to limit the decision-making periods of prospective converts.

Evangelization online, as well as offline, needs to ensure that the methods employed allow for enough time to make a proper decision. Those evangelistic endeavours using e-learning and the contact with an e-coach seem to be better suited, in this regard, than some of the web pages presented in the research by Stamper.

Furthermore, some participants in this study spoke of the danger of a hidden-agenda. Bridges from GameChurch for example said:

I don't think it's [i.e. to operate with a hidden agenda] effective. Again, that means I have an agenda and I want you to do something. Whereas, if you approach me, if I've art graphics, or something in our booth, or the piles of stuff we have on our table have intrigued you to come to me and ask me what I'm doing, then you engaged me. I didn't engage you. So, later down the road, you can't say, "Well those guys were proselytizing, and getting after me, and they made me take this thing." We want it to be something where you come and engage us, you ask me. I don't mind talking to you about where you're from, what do you do, and all that kind of stuff, but I won't engage faith, Jesus, God, Christianity, religion, unless that person does it. I think it makes it safer.

(R1:74)

Bridges' assertion that he himself did not have an agenda when he went online or set up a booth at a comic convention as a representative of GameChurch was challenged by this researcher.

He responded thusly:

Yeah, I agree. You're absolutely right, I do have an agenda. I would suspect most Christians want a number, and the agenda being, I need to win this person over to Christ. Win one. That's not true. Actually the Holy Spirit does that. I don't really even need to be involved in it. If I get to be involved with it, I'm stoked. That is amazing. I would love to be involved in it, but I don't necessarily need to be involved in it. My agenda is, how would I say it, I want to give you a message of hope. I don't

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<sup>148</sup> This declaration was released June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2011 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) of the Roman Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA).

need to win anyone over. I don't need to win a debate, an argument. I don't need to see somebody get saved at our booth. I need to give somebody a message, and let the Holy Spirit do its work. [...] So, yeah, I do have an agenda. From my experience in being a Christian as long as I have, the agenda that I see on the other side is one that has to be forced in order to get somebody to do what you want. It's a controlling agenda. I don't want anything from you, I don't need anything from you. I have a message for you if you want it. You don't even have to listen to it. You don't have to approach me.  
(R1:81)

It seems unreasonable to insist that evangelists should not have an agenda. In fact, having an agenda is not the problem as long as it is transparent.

Proselytizers need to be up-front about any proselytizing agendas. Advertising about evangelistic events needs to be honest.

(Thiessen 2014: Chapter 8)

Thiessen further suggests that one should have a holistic agenda.

Ethical proselytizing that respects and protects the dignity of persons must always be an expression of concern for the whole person and for all of his or her needs – physical, social, economic, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. To care only for the salvation of the souls of persons is unethical. It involves an objectification of a part of the person, and as such violates that person's dignity.

(Thiessen 2014: Chapter 7)

Thus, the primary agenda needs to be the well-being of the other. Of course one could say that God is what is best for the other person, but his or her concerns are to determine the agenda. Responding sincerely should naturally lead to opportunities to witness to the Christian faith. Again the joint declaration mentioned above suggests a helpful posture.

Renouncing false witness. Christians are to speak sincerely and respectfully; they are to listen in order to learn about and understand others' beliefs and practices, and are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them. Any comment or critical approach should be made in a spirit of mutual respect, making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions.

(CWMRW 2011)

Another area of ethical concern is using a persons' life crisis to interest him or her in the Christian faith. Estes commented in the second round on the thesis "A successful starting point for an evangelistic conversation is not the issue of God or faith itself but hope in light of life's problems" with the following:

I'm a pragmatist, so I believe using whatever works to raise the important questions with people. So if someone is struggling with issues in their life, it can be quite useful (of course, \*everyone\* is struggling with issues to some degree).

(Estes R2:14)

Thiessen formulates a helpful warning to prevent the misuse of people's struggles:

Care must be taken to avoid exploiting vulnerability. This becomes especially important when dealing with children, vulnerable individuals or groups, and individuals or groups facing any kind of crisis. Conversions gained by exploiting vulnerability are often superficial and bring no credit to the converts or to the Christian faith in general.

(Thiessen 2014: Chapter 7)

It is not being suggested here that addressing someone’s life-crisis is an exploitation of a person’s vulnerability. Surely one ought to help a struggling person, and if one is aware of a means (e.g. faith) to help a struggling person, it seems legitimate to promote this. But if the crisis is utilized for one’s own agenda, it can become an area of potential danger. Here much would depend on how the encounter continues.

Another area related to this ethical discussion is the general attitude one has while evangelizing. The second round of research introduced the thesis that “Only if one is willing to reconsider one’s own faith and worldview, can one expect the other to listen and to let him or herself be challenged.” The rating revealed dissent on this issue, although the thesis was generally favoured.

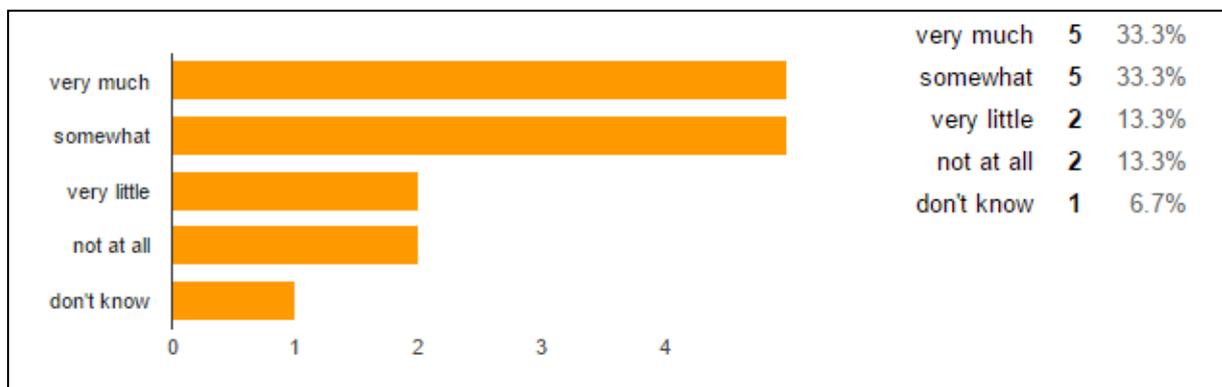


Illustration 87: (26) Thesis: Only if one is willing to reconsider one’s own faith ...

Commenting on the thesis Baab wrote:

I think the key is willingness to learn. I can say, "I'm fascinated by your Buddhist practice. What motivated you to get involved? I'm a Christian, so I'm not likely to change my own beliefs, but I always enjoy learning what motivates another person and what they gain from their own faith practice." The issue I think is not that I have to be open to changing my mind about everything I believe, but I have to be open to learning something from the other person, particularly around their motivations for what they do.

(R2:26)

The posture described by Baab does seem to meet the guidelines articulated by Thiessen, particularly the following:

Ethical proselytizing treats persons holding beliefs differing from those of the proselytizer with love and respect. While this does not preclude fair criticism of other religious or irreligious beliefs, it treats the same with respect, and avoids hostile attitudes or ridicule against other religions and worldviews. Proselytizing becomes unethical when it is accompanied by intolerant attitudes towards other persons, or when it involves hostile attitudes or uses insulting and abusive language when describing other religious or irreligious beliefs.

(Thiessen 2014: Chapter 8)

Lastly, it seems necessary to engage the question: if evangelization is not inherently unethical since it assumes to have the truth for another person, is this not intolerance? On what grounds does one person have the right to challenge another’s religious beliefs? This concern was not

directly addressed through the empirical research, nor can be dealt with here extensively, but a short reflection seems appropriate since it is an often raised concern.

The first important response is to confirm that the propagation of beliefs is a universal right, not one exclusively held by a particular religion.

Ethical proselytizing operates under the assumption that the other has the right to proselytize as well. It is immoral to assume, or to work towards a monopoly of the proselytizing enterprise.

(Thiessen 2014: Appendix 1)

Furthermore, Thiessen points out that evangelization requires tolerance.

[A] relativistic epistemology undermines the very need for tolerance. It is precisely because we believe in truth and have feelings of commitment and ego-attachment to our own positions, and because we realize that others feel the same way about their own convictions that we need to cultivate the virtue of tolerance, also when proselytizing. Tolerance is fundamentally concerned with having a positive attitude of respect for people who hold beliefs with which we differ.

(Thiessen 2014: Chapter 8)

Thus, a humble attitude is important, and proper tolerance reflects one's respect for the other's conviction.

However, the evangelist should enter with a posture of humble conviction, not denying that he or she believes in *the* truth, or that an absolute truth exists, but that one never has a fully comprehensive and untainted understanding of it.

Lesslie Newbigin has more recently described "proper confidence" as a mean between dogmatism and uncertainty (1995). Humility is required precisely because there is all the difference in the world between Absolute Truth and the human understanding and grasp of this truth. Humility should therefore also characterize efforts to convert the other. Religious proselytizers (and secular proselytizers as well) are sharing their understanding and grasp of the truth, and they should recognize that they may ultimately be mistaken. But this recognition need not slide into a relativistic, self-depreciating uncertainty, which refuses to share with others the convictions about truth that are currently held.

(Thiessen 2014: Chapter 8)

Such a call for proper confidence is important when one engages in the public discourse where there is no agreed upon epistemological framework.

Thus, in conclusion, it can be affirmed that ethical considerations are needed online, but that there is not necessarily a need for a particular ethics regarding evangelization online. The work of Thiessen along with the joint declaration *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World* provide helpful guidelines and deal with the same concerns. However, evangelization online heightens particular ethical concerns. Thus, the next section proposes some principles that while applicable to evangelization in general, are considered imperative for evangelization online.

### 9.1.6 Guidelines for ethical online evangelization

Establishing a code of conduct based on the principles presented here not only serves to create some sort of quality control but furthermore it allows the person evangelized a sense of predictability and stability, and ensures that his or her freedom is protected.

Before dealing with the principles, it is necessary to understand the difference between evangelization online and offline.

As has been argued in chapter 8, identity formation is a very important aspect of online interactions. People use avatars in order to (1) learn about themselves, (2) find their role in the community, and (3) develop their identity. Furthermore, the general research, as well as the empirical research here, has shown that people are willing to reveal aspects of themselves which, according to Goffman, traditionally belong on the backstage (i.e. are private). Thus, VR creates a place where people can be more vulnerable because of what they reveal about themselves. Additionally, if we see the process of evangelization as a learning moment, then we can draw upon the research on digital learning, which suggests that intimacy is an important aspect. This vulnerability which goes along with intimacy needs to be protected from intentional or unintentional misuse. Lastly, it should be noted that, in general, younger people are most active online. Since young people are particularly impressable they need to be especially safeguarded against emotional misuse. Taking all these aspects together, we can see why those evangelizing need to be careful, and thus why a code of conduct is called for. This assumption is supported through the additions made to the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics in 2014. They added an entire section entitled *Distance Counseling, Technology, and Social Media*. The introduction to this section states:

Counselors understand that the profession of counseling may no longer be limited to in-person, face-to-face interactions. Counselors actively attempt to understand the evolving nature of the profession with regard to distance counseling, technology, and social media and how such resources may be used to better serve their clients. Counselors strive to become knowledgeable about these resources. Counselors understand the additional concerns related to the use of distance counseling, technology, and social media and make every attempt to protect confidentiality and meet any legal and ethical requirement.

(ACA 2014:17)

The intimate relationship which can develop during online evangelization bears similarities to a counselling situation. Thus, an analogous modification of a code of conduct for evangelisation is considered appropriate and useful. In an interview, one of the editors of the revised ACA explained the need for this section:

[T]echnology has grown exponentially since the 2005 version of the ACA ethics code. Although I think the 2005 version did a good job with where we were at that time, the new Code of Ethics reflects the complicated ethical issues that have arisen with new technologies, particularly in the

area of privacy. The new distance counseling, technology, and social media section provides up-to-date guidance not only to professional counselors but also to state licensing boards.

(Kaplan et al 2017:4)

As with the ACA Code of Ethics, a particular code of conduct for online evangelization can build upon established codes<sup>149</sup> or supplement a pre-existing code by taking the particularities of VR into consideration.

As any code of ethics needs to be developed from among the organization itself in order to create ownership and to be fitting, I am here only suggesting six areas or aspects which need to be addressed.

Schwartz discerned six universal moral values for corporate codes of ethics (2005). Since they are based on business principles, they will be most directly applicable to evangelistic organizations. However, they are fitting to the findings here and provide helpful categories that are widely accepted and thus also recognized outside of a Christian context.

Although not determinative of their normative legitimacy, based on the degree of convergence from the three sources of values [(1) corporate codes of ethics; (2) global codes of ethics; and (3) the business ethics literature], an argument can be raised that the six proposed moral values are universal in nature, in that they can be considered of fundamental importance regardless of time, circumstance, cultural beliefs, or religious convictions.

(Schwartz 2005:39)

Schwartz defines the six terms as follows:

(1) Trustworthiness (including notions of honesty, integrity, transparency, reliability, and loyalty); (2) Respect (including notions of respect for human rights); (3) Responsibility (including notions of accountability, excellence, and self-restraint); (4) Fairness (including notions of process, impartiality, and equity); (5) Caring (including the notion of avoiding unnecessary harm); and (6) Citizenship (including notions of obeying laws and protecting the environment).

(Schwartz 2005:39)

Regarding, *trustworthiness*, the statements from the panel and the interaction with the research by Amber Stamper (see Chapter 3.4) show how easy it is to manipulate someone through the use of web design and site architecture. Furthermore, the one evangelizing should be honest in what he or she reveals in conversation or through his or her avatar. This includes transparency about the intention to evangelize.

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<sup>149</sup> Examples of such codes include *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World* or a code developed by InterVarsity called “A Code of Ethics for Christian Witness”. This latter example was the result of a larger initiative: “In the 1980s, the American Family Foundation--an inter-religious, cult-watching organization--sponsored a group of religious professionals to develop a code of ethics that would be mutually affirmed, ethically viable, and theologically acceptable to diverse constituencies. The task force included Jews, Roman Catholics, denominational chaplains, evangelicals, and agnostics; InterVarsity staff members participated at various stages. Toward the conclusion of the project, each group tailored the general Code to their particular situation. InterVarsity's version of the Code was affirmed by InterVarsity's leadership in 1989” (<https://evangelism.intervarsity.org/resource/code-ethics-christian-witness> [accessed 13.10.2017]).

*Respect* can manifest itself in many ways. It is here suggested that one needs to respect the avatar (or the digital identity) that is used by the other. As the discussion on identity (see 8.1) has shown, it is too simple to label an avatar fake. Furthermore, respect also manifests in not reducing a person to a statistic. This is perhaps more tempting in an online environment because each user creates an abundance of statistical data, which is nowadays commonly processed for commercial purposes.

*Responsibility* needs to be taken to ensure a person's privacy, and to protect them from manipulating forms of evangelization, as well as to give an accurate representation of the evangelist. This is particularly relevant yet also challenging for online environments which use short messages such as Facebook or twitter. Communication here has to be done with great care in order not to mislead through brevity.

*Fairness* means being transparent about an agenda to evangelize, particularly in environments that are designed for different purposes (e.g. an online game). Fairness is further reflected in our attitude. Thiessen suggests that evangelization becomes unethical "when it becomes arrogant, condescending, and dogmatic in the claims being made" (2011:Appendix 1). This excludes the use of template-answers or any form of *chatbots* which simulate a person answering the questions. In general, the ethical codes here reviewed for evangelism suggest a dialogical approach to evangelism (see CECW 1989).

Openness is needed since the evangelist should lead by example, but also because of the way search engines and social networking services exclude opposing views. Search engines take one's browsing history into consideration in order to find more fitting results.

Online relationships mirror analogue engagement in some ways, and can be fleeting, long distance, or entirely non-physical. If we accept that identity is formed dialogically however, we must question the impact of whatever changes there are. Discussion about the so-called filter bubble is one such example. As Pariser explains, the algorithms employed by internet search engines narrow searches according to user history. Thus ensuring you are likely to see more of the same each time you search. Filter bubbles are also self-perpetuating. In our choices of Twitter followers, Facebook friends, Reddit sub-groups, we share and follow those who we perceive to share affinity for our interests, beliefs, and ideas. This is not always true of course, and some may actively seek out antagonistic or opposing parties or opinions, but this is certainly not a given.

(Erden 2016:2)

Rather than exposing us to a wide range of views, some believe the internet actually hinders us from being exposed to opposing views. Thus, the ability to dialog with the intention of truly understanding other viewpoints needs to be intentionally fostered. This is important for our freedom to choose since without proper information our decisions will only reflect our biases and not our conscience.

*Caring* and the avoiding of unnecessary harm addresses the concerns raised in the introduction to this section. Since identity formation is such a sensitive issue and there tends to

be a blurring between the private and the public, special attention is needed here. Caring can be expressed through informing users about the degree of privacy that can be ensured but also by including a caution against revealing too much.

Special care also needs to be taken when people are exploring the Christian faith from a context that does not provide religious freedom. This is particularly relevant to online evangelization because unlike typical offline evangelization, the cultural and political background is not homogenous since people from all over the world can make use of the evangelistic offerings.

*Citizenship* may not seem as particularly relevant for evangelization online, however, one's responsibility as citizen can create an ethical dilemma, since some countries (such as Indonesia) have laws against evangelization. Obeying this law might mean evangelists must withhold information about the Christian faith. Consequently, people in these countries lack the information necessary in order to make an informed decision. This is, of course, an issue that the individual person or organization needs to address and discern for themselves.

However, I would like to modify this category to use it to describe the evangelist's responsibility towards the universal church, including local churches and other ministry organizations. Ethical evangelism needs to take these other "stakeholders" into consideration. Evangelization should, therefore, support and strengthen the church. Consequently, good evangelization, particularly when it operates globally, should partner with local churches. Evangelization which does not intend to guide a person to a (physical or virtual) church is incomplete and does not serve and support the church, nor the individual evangelized.

## **9.2 Relationships: Touching the heart in VR**

Theological reflection on relationships and communities in VR often addresses the issue of physical presence, or more precisely the lack thereof, in VR. Since relationships and communities are in fact built online, the role that physical presence plays in the development of relationships comes into question.

Face-to-face meetings are frequently praised, especially within the church, as being genuine, compared to online encounters that are "only" virtual. Etymologically, however, virtual does not mean sham, but comes from the medieval Latin *virtualis*, meaning strength or virtue. Quite apart from the etymology, disparaging assessments of online encounters fail to take account of how an online identity actually develops.

(Reimann 2017:75-76)

Similarly, when this researcher talked to people about his research, some became quite upset when he explained that there are people who find their (Christian) online communities to be more fulfilling than those in FR. At the same time, many Christians would claim that they have

a relationship with the triune God, yet such a relationship is spiritual and not physical. Of course the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit cannot be compared to computer-mediated communication. Yet, what are the reasons for saying that community necessitates physical presence? The apostle Paul, for example, wrote letters which reflected a deep level of emotional presence and mutual involvement with those communities.

For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

(Col. 2:5 NIV)

Letters were the only communication device he had at hand. Thus, it is here proposed that relationship and communities do not require physical presence. Estes suggested something similar during the second round.

To me, we need to stop dividing up churches into types [FR/VR] and more into healthy/unhealthy.  
(Estes R2:47)

What characterizes a healthy church and can this be implemented online to the same degree as in FR? This question requires much more attention and reflection than can be offered within the context of this thesis. However, some initial reflections are provided here in order to exemplify how the debate could move forward.

One possible category for defining a healthy church could be attentiveness, understood as the ability and willingness to listen to another person. The category of attentiveness is proposed here as it allows me to illustrate how attentiveness relates to physical presence, but can still be accomplished without physical presence.

Spiritual leaders such as Henry Nouwen have suggested that to be attentive to another person is not simply a question of physical nearness (though he likely never considered a situation where this would not be the case), but of being other-focused.

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.

(Nouwen 2004:38)

Of course, Nouwen also talks about touch and sharing meals which require physical presence, but it is the attitude and not the physical interaction which is the essence of being attentive. Henri Nouwen himself speaks of interior spiritual processes which allow us to listen well to others.

Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more

seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you.

(Nouwen 2009:20)

Such listening is not bound to FR, but can be done through all forms of computer mediated communication. On the other hand, without such an attitude of listening, the quality of any community or relationship is diminished.

Such an approach is supported by research around the theory of *social presence*. It describes a

Thus, if one uses attentiveness as a category for determining if a community or relationship is healthy, the context (i.e. FR or VR) becomes secondary to attitude.

This being said, the question remains if attentiveness can be expressed in VR to the same degree as in FR. It can be argued that physical touch cannot be communicated online and that there is a difference between someone typing “feel hugged” and actually being hugged. This is not an intrinsic theological problem, but a technological one. For, at least theoretically, it is conceivable that technology could allow us one day to interact with each other in such a way that we could not distinguish between a virtual hug and the real thing.

Dyer pointed to another unintended effect of technology:

When I’m enjoying something with my family or friends, I sometimes start thinking about a funny status update that other people will like. In this sense, I think I’m being less present with those around me and more focused getting attention from people online. I also find that when I’m frustrated at the daily difficulties of life (small children, work, etc.), I tend to want to pull out my phone and read something online.

(R1:14)

The problem is that of our use of technology and, more precisely, the influence we allow it to have on our lives. VR can block time that we would otherwise use in FR. Since VR is entering into FR (through smartphones and other technical devices) it is more accurate to say we live in an Augmented Reality and this can take us away from those who are physically near. Technologies such as a smartphone can distract and encourage multi-tasking rather than focusing on those around us. This is a serious challenge to the posture Nouwen described above.

Therefore, the situation we have arrived at is complex. Technologies, such as VR, can allow people to be truly present for another, even when they are not physically near. Programs like *Skype*, *WhatsApp*, etc. provide convenient ways to remain in contact. At the same time, these technologies can have the unintended effect of creating distraction. It is not uncommon to see a group of people eating together and everyone simultaneously checking their smartphones. Thus, although VR, avatars and other computer-mediated forms of

communication might not intrinsically oppose community, they may still create an environment that makes it harder to develop the spiritual attitude necessary for true community.<sup>150</sup>

It is here proposed that attentiveness as a characteristic of Christian communities can be expressed online as well as offline and the next step forward might be to define further characteristics which constitute a good Christian community and which could subsequently be used to evaluate Christian communities in VR and FR.

It remains questionable if virtual communities will ever have mass-appeal. It seems that for most people it is still easier to show hospitality and remain attentive to the other if they are physically present. Perhaps new and creative ways are needed for exploring how virtual communities can attend to the physical needs of others, foster presence and good listening, and ensure that important values are not lost. Such efforts are worthwhile since people might come, share or show interest who would not do so in FR for various reasons.

### 9.3 Summary

The first section of this chapter dealt with the issue of credibility. Two suggestions were made for evangelization that might help people to better understand the Christian faith and to see it as trustworthy.

First, it was suggested that evangelization should be seen as a communal responsibility. Inquiring about faith in a community makes it more likely that the inquiring person can find another person to whom she or he can relate. Secondly, the community can act out the faith, thereby demonstrating what it means to live out of the biblical meta-narrative.

Furthermore, it was suggested that instead of shortening the Christian message, it should be expanded in order to communicate the biblical narrative from creation to re-creation.

The next section of this chapter engaged with some of the ethical findings of this research. The findings were brought into dialogue with the work of Elmer Thiessen and the *ecumenical guidelines for Christian witness* discussed between the Vatican, the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance.

The last section moved beyond the themes introduced through the research questions and offered some suggestions for better understanding the legitimacy of a virtual church and

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<sup>150</sup> If a virtual Christian community desires to understand itself as a church the question of sacraments might need to be addressed, depending on their understanding and praxis of it.

assessing the quality of relationships. Here it was suggested that although physical proximity is a beneficial factor for Christian community, it is not a necessity.

## 10. Contextualizing for evangelization online

The final section of the missiological interpretation addresses the overarching question of *how evangelization is modified for VR*. The answers to this question revealed themselves to be so complex that the question cannot be answered in a straight-forward manner, but rather a constant process of discernment and ongoing modification is necessary.

In order to address this question, it is helpful to place it within the wider research and discussion regarding the theological responses to technology before narrowing down to VR as a particular technology, and to evangelization, as a particular aspect of theology. Thus, the chapter begins with a short introduction which reviews the different responses to technology throughout the recent centuries.

The following section describes different ways participants of the empirical research have used to respond to and modify media. Based on the empirical findings and theological reflections, in a final section a *cycle of discernment and modification* is proposed. It maintains that the current technologies, require a more complex process of discernment and a fluid or flexible attitude toward any particular technology.

As we now narrow our focus to virtual reality and evangelization, we will address more specifically the question of how we can respond to technological developments, and draw upon examples from the empirical research.

### 10.1 Discernment in online evangelization

Throughout the empirical research process, it became evident that most practitioners had a more sophisticated approach to their use of technology than first anticipated. It went beyond a simple *embracing* or *rejecting* of different technological means for online evangelization. Other responses which emerged from the data were labeled *compensating* and *controlling/limiting* the use of technological means.

Furthermore, at least in some cases, a process of discernment took place during which the practitioners tried to decide what technology to use and how to use it best.

These four responses should not necessarily be seen as on a continuum, with *embracing* being on one end and *rejecting* on the other and with the other two somewhere in between. Rejecting and embracing are certainly two opposite reactions, but controlling/limiting and compensating are not the middle ground. Rather they are four distinctly different responses to the use of technology.

Building on the insights on the impact of cyber culture on evangelization (8.2), the following sections present the four different responses to the use and influence of technology. It will be further shown that each of them can be connected to a paradigm for understanding the role and influence of technology on the individual and society. These are *technological determinism*, *technological instrumentalism*, *technicism* and *technophobia* (see 8.1.2).

Each of these terms contains a meta-narrative about technology. They will be contrasted with a biblical understanding of the role and influence of technology, in which technology is seen as both a means of destruction and redemption.

Lastly, it will be argued that the insights of the Amish community can provide guidance in the process of discerning the proper use of technology, including online evangelization.

### 10.1.1 The matrix of responses

Discernment is needed to determine what is a fitting and appropriate use of a particular technology in a given situation and to exercise human stewardship over technology. It is here suggested that there are four different and valid responses to technology.

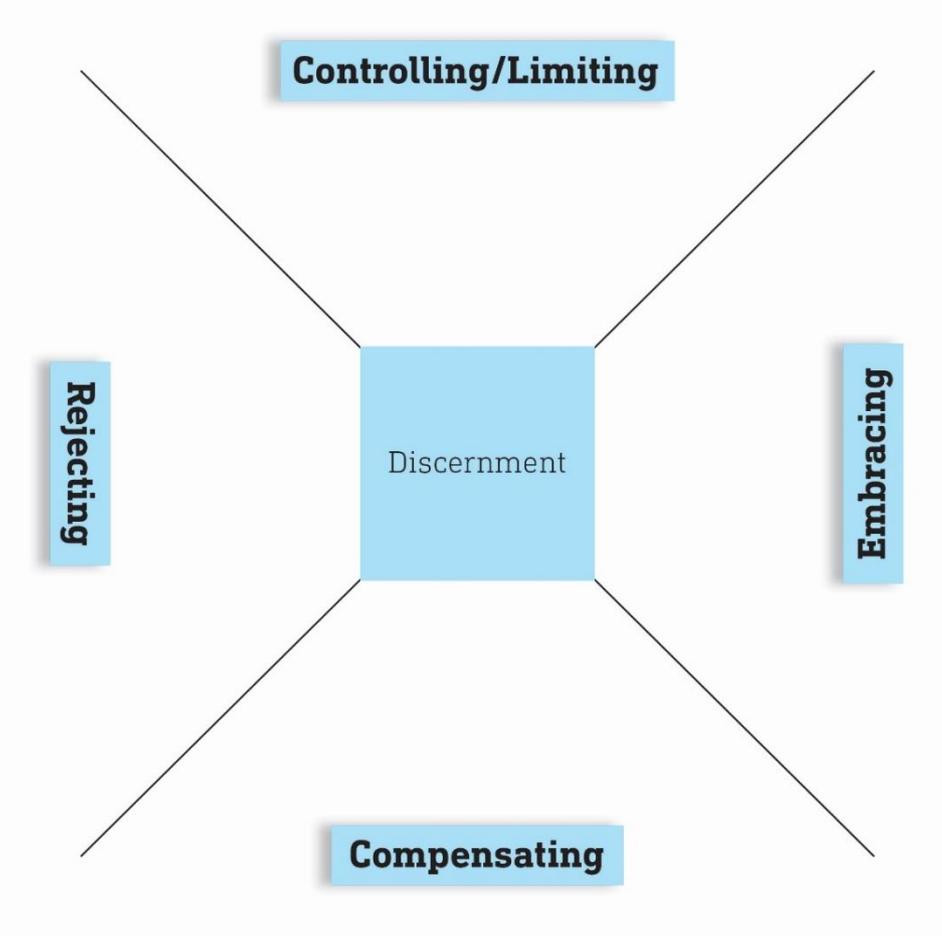


Illustration 88: Matrix of responses 1

### 10.1.1.1 Embracing (Technicism)

Embracing means trying to actively integrate and use technology due to the assumptions that it will improve human life. The fullest expression of this is found in the idea (or perhaps ideology) of *transhumanism*. Transhumanism is essentially the belief that technology will better human life, and can take on religious forms. In the interview during the first round, Dyer wrote:

I think humans are capable of making just about anything into an idol, in the sense that it's more valuable to them than God. Sometimes this is explicit, such as people like Ray Kurzweil who hope that future technology (a saviour) will allow them not to die (salvation) but to live forever (eschatology). But for most people, this is more subtle. Likes on Facebook give me worth and value instead of Christ. A new iPhone will make my life better, etc. Since the time of Cain and his city, I think the fallen human heart can turn God's good gift of creativity (and the ability to create tools) into an idol.

(Dyer R1:67; also Dyer 2011:148)

Thus, at least for some, hope is found in the idea of a post-human state created through technology and the arrival of a technological singularity in which Artificial Intelligence one day reaches the capacity to create ever more sophisticated technology, even beyond that of human capacity. The result as a result of continuous technological advancements and breakthroughs over the course of short periods of time.

Such views are, of course, not common and to many, such a future may seem like a dystopian one, rather than a utopian one. However, these extremes help illustrate the general notion of an optimistic outlook on technology. And as Dyer has illustrated, on a smaller level, many people do express faith in technological devices, such as an iPhone.

### 10.1.1.2 Rejection (Technophobia/Cyberphobia)

The opposite of embracing technology is rejecting it. Some people do not see technology as something helpful for society or the individual. From their perspective, technology's impact and negative consequences are so severe, that the only proper response is to return to a more primitive lifestyle. The fullest expressions thereof can be seen in such movements like Neo-Luddism.<sup>151</sup> Although such extreme responses are not mainstream, it is not unusual for people to decide, for example, against having a television.

Kandiah also pointed to another motive for rejecting new technologies:

I think it's part of the way that we react to cultural change in general that there are going to be often some pessimists. Often the pessimists are those that are already in positions of power and influence because these new technologies are unsettling to them because they disrupt the status quo and they could revolutionize who is in control.

(Kandiah R1:199)

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<sup>151</sup> Neo-Luddism is an, until now, unorganized movement which resists modern technologies and desires to return to a more primitive way of living (see <http://mondediplo.com/1997/02/20luddites> [accessed 15/1/2016]).

### **10.1.1.3 Limiting or controlling (Technological Determinism)**

Limiting or controlling are not to be understood as synonyms, but as two different responses to control the impact of technology. Limiting means to restrain the influence technology has (e.g. limiting the time spent online, or celebrating the Sabbath by fasting from media). Controlling means limiting the means for which one uses technology (e.g. choosing to write letters by hand if they are of a personal rather than professional nature instead of an e-mail).

In both cases, the intention is to predetermine the influence of technology in one's life. To control and limit the use of technology is usually based on the paradigm of technological determinism, which believes that media technology is a deterministic force that shapes the way society and individuals think (McLuhan 2011) and thus, one needs to be active in controlling and limiting technology's influence.

### **10.1.1.4 Compensating (Technological Instrumentalism)**

Compensating means the attempt to correct and improve technology through further technology. In other words, the expectation is that problems which come with technology can be solved by new or improved technology. This can be related to technological instrumentalism, which considers technology neutral in its influence on human society and "entirely subservient to the conscious wishes of their users" (Carr 2011:46). It assumes that humans continue to remain in control over technology and thus can continue to improve it.

Technological instrumentalism argues that technology is essentially a tool, and its moral status is determined by the human using it. For example, it is the same technology that was first used to print the Bible which is now also used to print pornography. Thus it is what people do with technology that makes it moral or unmoral, rather than the technology itself.

Thus, each of the four positions can be connected with a particular view of technology.

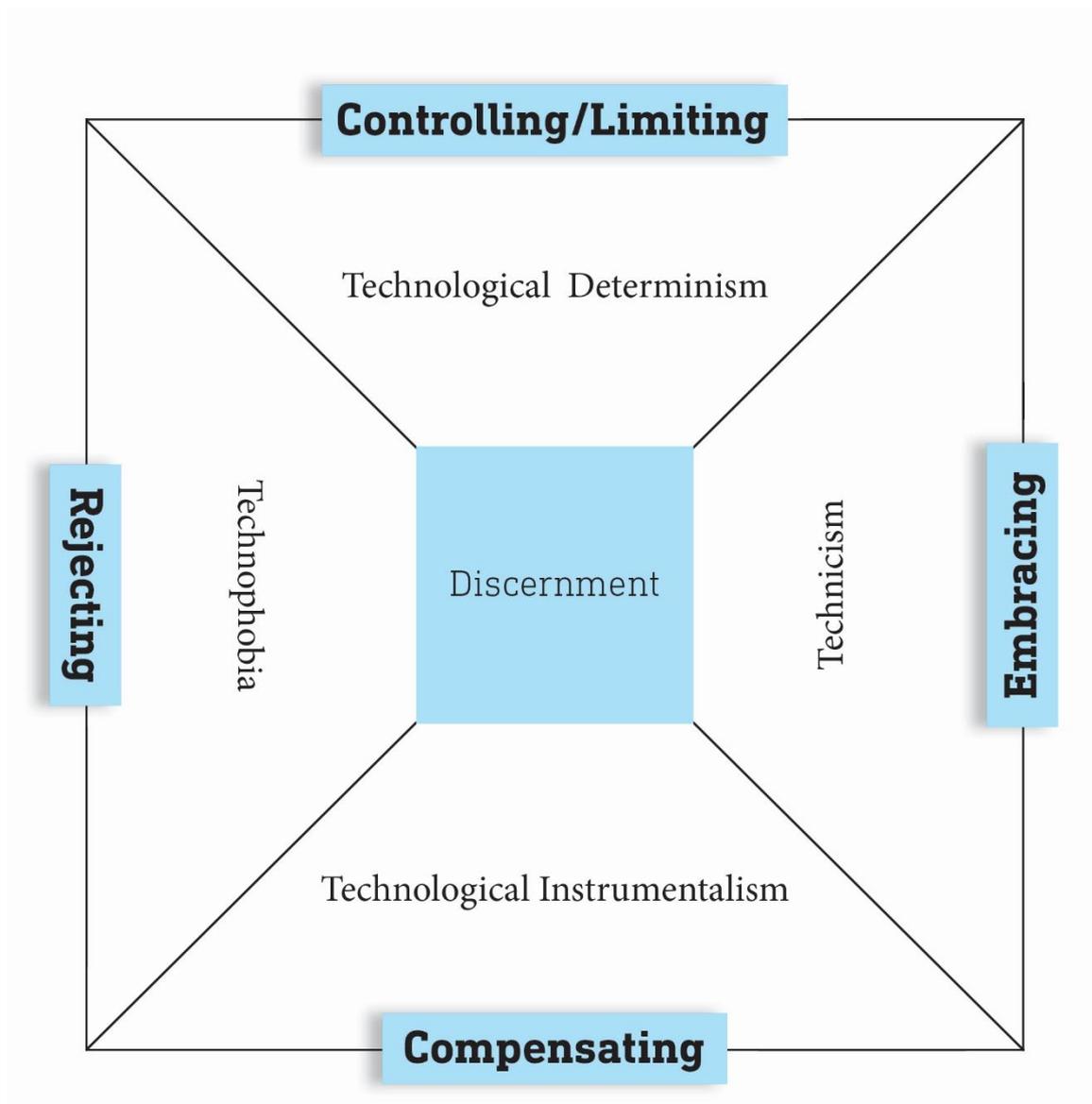


Illustration 89: *Matrix of responses 2*

### 10.1.2 A Christian response

All this shows how important it is to look at the impact of technology as well as the ways we can respond to it. As Turkle puts it:

We have to love technology enough to describe it accurately. And we have to love ourselves enough to confront technology's true effects on us.

(Turkle 2011:243)

Moreover, as Goodman has famously stated, the use of technology is a moral question:

“Whether or not it draws on new scientific research, technology is a branch of moral philosophy, not of science. It aims at prudent goods for the commonwealth and to provide efficient means for these goals.”

(Goodman 1969)

All four responses carry within them some truth. Yet, none of them are the proper response to all technological developments.

It is perhaps most clear that rejection and embracing of technology cannot always be the appropriate response. Who would, for example, want to reject all medical developments of the past century? Likewise, who would not call at least some technological developments into question?

Limiting and controlling are themselves also insufficient because they only present ways to respond to technology. They do not provide a framework for actively using technology.

Likewise, only relying on compensation is also an inadequate response to all technological developments. Houston, in his book *Virtual Morality*, demonstrates this well:

According to Skinner, evils resulting from technique are to be resolved by yet deeper faith in technique. In contrast, Christian ethics as represented by our paradigm is not committed to providing solutions and control mechanisms, which is the language of manipulation. It does not see the seat of evil in the environment – spiritual, physical or computer-generated – but in the inner being of humankind. Yet Christian ethics also recognizes that environmental influences play on that over-centred self, affecting character, attitudes and actions. It explores the good, the right and the ‘ought’; it examines the consequences of action and agency; and it seeks categorical imperatives.

(Houston 1998:28)

The researcher would go further than Houston by suggesting that the environment not only “plays on”, but also encourages and develops certain attitudes and actions. An important element of his critique is that the “seat of evil,” first and foremost, lies within the human, and this problem cannot be solved through more technology.

As we now move forward to look at a Christian perspective, the importance of human agency will become central.

### 10.1.2.1 Technology as a means of destruction

What can be said is that technology, without humans assuming moral agency, can create catastrophic consequences. Guardini, addresses the spiritual dimension of this problem:

Von der Macht des Menschen, die nicht durch sein Gewissen verantwortet wird, ergreifen die Dämonen Besitz. Und mit dem Wort meinen wir kein Requisit der augenblicklichen Journalistik, sondern genau das, was die Offenbarung meint: geistige Wesen, die von Gott gut geschaffen sind, aber von ihm abgefallen; die sich für das Böse entschieden haben und nun entschlossen sind, seine Schöpfung zu verderben.<sup>152</sup>

(Guardini 1986:71)

The quotation's significance for our discussion can only be fully understood once we realize that “Macht,” for Guardini, manifests itself primarily through the power humans gain through technological advancements. In other words, technology (e.g. virtual reality) needs to be

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<sup>152</sup> “From the power people possess which is not guided by their conscience, the demons take possession. And with this word we do not mean a requisite of sensational journalism, but exactly what revelations suggests: spiritual beings who have been created good by God, but rebelled against him; who opted for evil and now are determined to destroy his creation” [my translation].

subdued by morally conscious people, for otherwise it will be controlled by anti-human demonic powers.

Though this may seem radical, it sheds light on the diverse ways in which technology impacts our lives. Nowhere is this more evident than with our inability to handle nuclear power. Hunger for profit, lack of appreciation for creation and other human beings, as well as lack of appreciation for the power of technology, have caused several catastrophes, like the one in Fukushima, Japan.

Certainly it is hard to imagine how technology like VR could have as devastating an effect on humanity as a nuclear disaster would have, but the principle applies nonetheless.

Guardini shows that we need to find ways to control its damaging influence. His writings depict technology as an evil force that needs to be guarded against and held in check like a wild animal. Such a view undermines the redemptive value of technology to which we now turn.

### **10.1.2.2 Technology as a means of redemption**

Where does technology belong in the biblical narrative? More concretely: is the development of technology part of the original creation or a subsequent development of the fall?

Dyer argues for the pre-fall existence of technology. Two aspects of the creation story are highly relevant for him.

The first is the mandate to cultivate the garden. This mandate implies more than just upkeep. “It’s not that there was anything wrong with the garden, it’s just that God didn’t intend for it to stay the way that it was. Instead, God wanted Adam to “cultivate” or “till” or “work” what he found in the garden and make something new out of it” (Dyer 2011:46).

Secondly, the naming of the animals is, in essence, the development of a language, which does qualify as a form of technology. “Language is not only purposed for the transfer of information. Another aspect of language that makes it more tool-like is that we actually use language to accomplish something [e.g. speech-acts]” (Dyer 2011:53).

Thus, Houston and Dyer concluded that technology was God-intended but is now under the influence of the fall.

[We] recognize that the combination of creation and fall as complementary themes means that it is inevitable in biblical perspective that technology must be viewed as both opportunity and threat.  
(Houston 1998:172)

Another way to see the incorporation of technology in God’s intention for humanity is to look at the eschaton. Salvation-history progresses from the garden and ends in the city. A city is also a result of human culture and technology. Thus, the Christian grand narrative requires us to engage with technology, although thoughtfully.

Faith communities, in general, can play an important role in guiding the usage of technology. Campbell has asserted that “a religious community’s historical life practice, interpretative tradition, and the contemporary outworking of their values inform their choices about the adoption and adaptation of technology” (Campbell 2010:41). She calls this *religious-social shaping of technology* and is based on *social shaping of technology* (SST) which focuses on the fact that people adopt and adapt technology to fit their needs and intentions.

When religious communities must make choices about why, how and in what contexts they will engage with new forms of media they undergo a complex process of assessment. For the “people of the book,” their relationship with sacred texts outlines a code of behaviour and beliefs which help orient the life practices of the community and its members.

(Campbell 2010:42)

Yet, the various Christian traditions tend to hold differing opinions on the use of technology. As the introduction to the historical development of the relationship between technology and theology, historical we have moved from technological enthusiasms and embracement to great skepticism and rejection (Charbonnier 2017), without really entering into the more reflected middle ground. It is here suggested that all Christian traditions can benefit by engaging with and learning from the Amish. This might seem to be an unusual source of guidance since Amish communities are usually known for their rejection of technology, but their actual engagement with technology is far more complex.

### **10.1.3 Wise online evangelization: Learning from the Amish**

There is an inherent tendency to accept all technology that we grow up with, and to be suspicious of anything new. This is obviously not a helpful way of evaluating technology. It results in either the unnecessary rejection or unhealthy embracing of particular technological developments. Yet, discernment over the use of old and new technologies is needed if one wants to avoid technological determinism. At present, faith in technology is generally given without much or any discernment. Goodman writes:

In fact, in advanced countries it is science and technology themselves that have gradually and finally triumphantly become the system of mass faith, not disputed by various political ideologies and nationalisms that have also been mass religions.

(Goodman 1969)

Thus, unreflected acceptance as well as rejection are both unhelpful since the first step needs to be consideration. Otherwise, this might lead people with good intentions start to think in terms of dollar-to-soul ratios when it comes to evangelization.

Discernment about possible unintended consequences is needed. Yet such a process of reflection and discernment requires time, as Goodman further concludes:

When I speak of slowing down or cutting back, the issue is not whether research and making working models should be encouraged or not. [...] The point is to resist the temptation to apply every new device without a second thought. But the big corporate organization of research and development makes prudence and modesty very difficult; it is necessary to get big contracts and rush into production in order to pay the salaries of the big team.

(Goodman 1969)

With regards to online evangelization, both the practice of thinking in terms of a dollar-to-soul ratio, as well as the (perhaps) unhealthy sense of urgency when it comes to evangelization, might discourage a “slowing down and cutting back” to reflect on how the technology impacts evangelization short- and long-term.

Furthermore, Christians ought not to respond to technological developments out of fear or by rehearsing unvalidated stereotypes (e.g. online-communities are for the lonely and shy), but neither should they react out of naïve pragmatism that simply uses all possible technologies.

An example of this is the frustration expressed by Bridges over how young people feel the need to justify their gaming by evangelizing online. In his eyes, the problem is not with those who want to play games online, but the surrounding Christian culture which condemns gaming without reflecting more deeply upon it.

The way forward is perhaps found by looking at the Amish who operate with all four responses to technology in order to uphold their values and to achieve their goals. In an interview with an Amish man about religiously motivated restriction of technology (including the internet), Howard Rheingold was advised:

It's not just how we use the technology that concerns us. We're also concerned about what kind of people we become when we use it.

(Rheingold 2002:185)

This is backed up by the research from Zimmerman Umble in  *Holding the Line*  (1996). There she argues that the Amish struggle with the telephone was no mindless reaction against technological change. Rather, it was the thoughtful reflection on the effects this new technology would have on their community and religious and cultural identity. Of course other Christian traditions have developed further paradigms for discernment, but the Amish serve here as an example, and are chosen because of their explicit interest in the discerning use of technology.

The following analysis from the  *Young Center for Anabaptist & Pietist Studies*  in Elizabethtown College provides a helpful summary of the Amish usage of technology:

Many outsiders mistakenly think that the Amish reject technology. It is more accurate to say that they use technology selectively. Televisions, radios, and personal computers are rejected outright, but other types of technology are used selectively or modified to fit Amish purposes. Amish mechanics also build new machines to accommodate their cultural guidelines. Moreover, the Amish readily buy much modern technology, such as gas grills, shop tools, camping equipment, and some farm equipment. The Amish do not consider technology evil in itself but they believe that technology, if left untamed, will undermine worthy traditions and accelerate assimilation into the surrounding society. Mass media technology in particular, they fear, would introduce foreign values into their culture. By bringing greater mobility, cars would pull the community apart, eroding local

ties. Horse-and-buggy transportation keeps the community anchored in its local geographical base.<sup>153</sup>

(2016b)

The Amish exercise all four responses to technology. Even if one shares different values and holds to a more positive view of secular culture, the process of discernment is still crucial and transferable.

Niebuhr's classic, *Christ and Culture* (1956), shows how the various Christian traditions respond to culture, and VR falls within that category. In his categorization, the Amish are classified as "Christ against culture."<sup>154</sup> Niebuhr claims that they think loyalty to Christ and the church require a rejection of culture and society but this conclusion is too strong. The Amish do not in general reject technology as an element of culture but reflect very critically on its effect. Thus, they practice a form of discernment for the acceptance and integration of technology.

How then can other traditions, which hold a higher view of society, learn from the Amish? Here one has to differentiate between *means* and *ends*. The means, using discernment to decide which of the four responses supports one's values and goals, can also be applied if one has the goal to transform culture. The ends are exchangeable.

In the end, one could still decide to fully embrace or wholly reject a particular technology, but such a decision would now be based on thoughtful reflection and discernment rather than fear or naïve optimism.

It is thus suggested that human agency is needed to discern the proper use of technology, understanding its implicit message and values, as well as the consequences it has on society at large, and religion and evangelization in particular.

For online evangelization, this could mean reflecting on the different online-platforms and forms of computer-mediated-communication to discern their proper use.

#### **10.1.4 Examples from the empirical research**

The matrix was not generated independently but slowly emerged from the data of the empirical research. The cyclic nature of the ETP cycle is not transparent in the linear setup of a written thesis which tries to avoid redundancies and to present the data and findings in a logical order.

However, during the first viewing of the data it was evident that the practitioners use their technology very thoughtfully. The four responses in the matrix developed from a combination

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<sup>153</sup> <http://www2.etown.edu/amishstudies/Technology.asp> [accessed 15/1/2016].

<sup>154</sup> Such as Tertullian, Leo Tolstoy, the Mennonites, and various voices from the monastic tradition.

of reflection on the literature and the data. Although it could be said that the development of the matrix was initiated by abduction, it was further supported by a deductive search of the data.

#### 10.1.4.1 Examples of rejecting

Commenting on his use of *Facebook*, Bridges explained why he did not use it for evangelization.

Facebook's fun for me, I have friends all over the world. I'm going to keep up with you now, and watch your life, and when we see each other live, I'm going to go, "How's your wife and how's your kids? I saw that your kid did this." My buddy in Houston, one of my dear friends, ... I'm sharing in their life. I really enjoy seeing what they're doing. I don't spend six months away from them and not know what's going on. I know exactly what's going on. I love meeting up with somebody I haven't seen in a year and they go, "Man, the pictures from England were awesome. I saw you in Germany. Your town is so cool." I like it for that. I don't think it's a good place to evangelize. [...] I think it's disingenuous. That's a place for me to window shop into your life. I get to see you, and see what you're doing. I think people putting it [i.e. evangelistic message] out there on Facebook like [...] the guys on the street corner with the megaphone, shouting out, "Hey, you need Jesus." Personally, I don't do that. I won't do that.

(Bridges R1:110+112)

Although Bridges dismissed *Facebook* as a medium for evangelization, it was not due to technophobia nor a dislike for the platform since he himself is active on it. It involved a process of weighing the advantages and disadvantages (made explicit in the interview) whereby he decided to reject it for evangelistic purposes.

Gerlach also rejected *Facebook*, but for different reasons. He simply found it to be too time-consuming:

[I]ch sage ganz bewusst, ich nehme keine Zeit für so was. Ich bin zwar auch im Facebook, habe einen Facebook Account, ja, ich müsste eigentlich einen Xing Account haben und einen Google Plus Account auch, aber ich nehme nicht die Zeit, weil es mir sonst zu viel wird und ich sage, das sollen die Leute machen, die meinen dort Zeit investieren zu müssen, weil sie es toll finden.<sup>155</sup>

(R1:163)

#### 10.1.4.2 Examples of embracing

At times a technology needs to be embraced. Some argued that initial hesitation is often rooted in the unfamiliarity of new technology and not in an inherent problem. Kandiah commented:

The people that see social media and the internet as the biggest enemy to human existence, just another part of consumerism and postmodernity – I've got very little time for that. I think they misunderstood the reality of social media. It's a useful tool and the church needs to be engaged in it. We need to be early innovators in it, but I'm equally uncomfortable with people that see social media as a separate world from our world and a world unto itself. I don't think that's sufficiently holistic an understanding of ecclesiology, of a doctrine of creation, human person-hood. I'm more than my on-

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<sup>155</sup> "I say quite intentionally that I do not have time for this [Facebook]. I am on Facebook, I have a Facebook account, yeah, I should have a Xing Account and a Google Plus Account, but I do not take the time because it would be too much for me and I say, those people should do it who feel they need to because they think it's great" [my translation].

line presence. I always say I'm a physical presence. I have an actual body and that's not in competition with my on-line life, but I can't substitute one for the other.

(Kandiah R1:140)

It is important to note that the embracing of technology, too, can come out of reflection and theological convictions.

Commenting on the thesis “Since we are created as physical beings, any virtual interaction cannot do justice to our personhood,” one participant made the following comment:

We interact virtually all the time (e.g. radio, phone, etc.) Why problematize it especially with regard to digital media?

(Heidbrink R2:48)

The statement indicates discernment and reflection as it was pointed out that virtual interactions are not a new phenomenon. Thus, embracing technology can also be the result of discernment.

#### **10.1.4.3 Examples of limiting and controlling**

Bridges also used limiting and controlling in the way he uses *Facebook* (see 7.3.5.1). The organization represented by Anonymous K still collects statistical information about the number of clicks on an icon to indicate that they have prayed the *sinner's prayer*; but he does not consider such a click as evidence of something spiritual. In a sense they are limiting the meaning of the data they are collecting.

The output, as we said and as we define it, is the measurable effects like statistics. Now you are talking about statistics. Does it show you something? Yes. Is there any spiritual impact? No. For example, nowhere we are showing the number of people who click a yes button on their sinner's prayer. We have daily between 50 and 100 people doing it. We don't count it a spiritual thing because we don't know. We say, “It's an output.” It shows the scale.

(Anonymous K R1:96)

Thus, reflection resulted in a limitation of the purpose of counting clicks as described in the quote.

#### **10.1.4.4 Examples of compensating**

Building on the previous example from Anonymous K, the organization understands the danger of getting carried away with statistical data, but their response is to compensate through improving their analytical software. He explained in his interview the elaborate process of discerning objectives for the different stages of their overall evangelistic journey. They seemed to be concerned about constantly improving the way they measure success by improving their analytical software.

A general form of compensating is the development of workarounds. Heidbrink, in commenting on the research of a colleague, said:

And a colleague of mine was researching wedding rituals in this context and they found people are able to make up for the constraints or for what they feel missing by emphasizing others. Which was an interesting technique. If you take on this perspective you find it everywhere, also in the physical realm. I mean we as human beings, we are so creative we find ways to make up for, to adapt to the situation or to make up for problems.

(R1:19)

Thus, once people are aware of limitations or dangers created through technology, forms of compensations can be found. Whether or not compensation is the best option depends again on how important one finds the usage of that particular technology.

## **10.2 A cycle of discernment and modification**

Online evangelization needs an acute awareness of the impact of technology on evangelization as well as of the different ways one can respond to that impact. Based on the results of this study, the following *cycle of discernment and modification* is proposed to practitioners of online evangelization. The cycle is based upon Lewin's four steps of Action Research, and the missiological praxis cycle by Karecki (described under 4.3.2.3), as well as Vanhoozer's guidelines for interpreting culture (2007:59-61). They are here expanded to eleven phases and adapted for evangelization online.

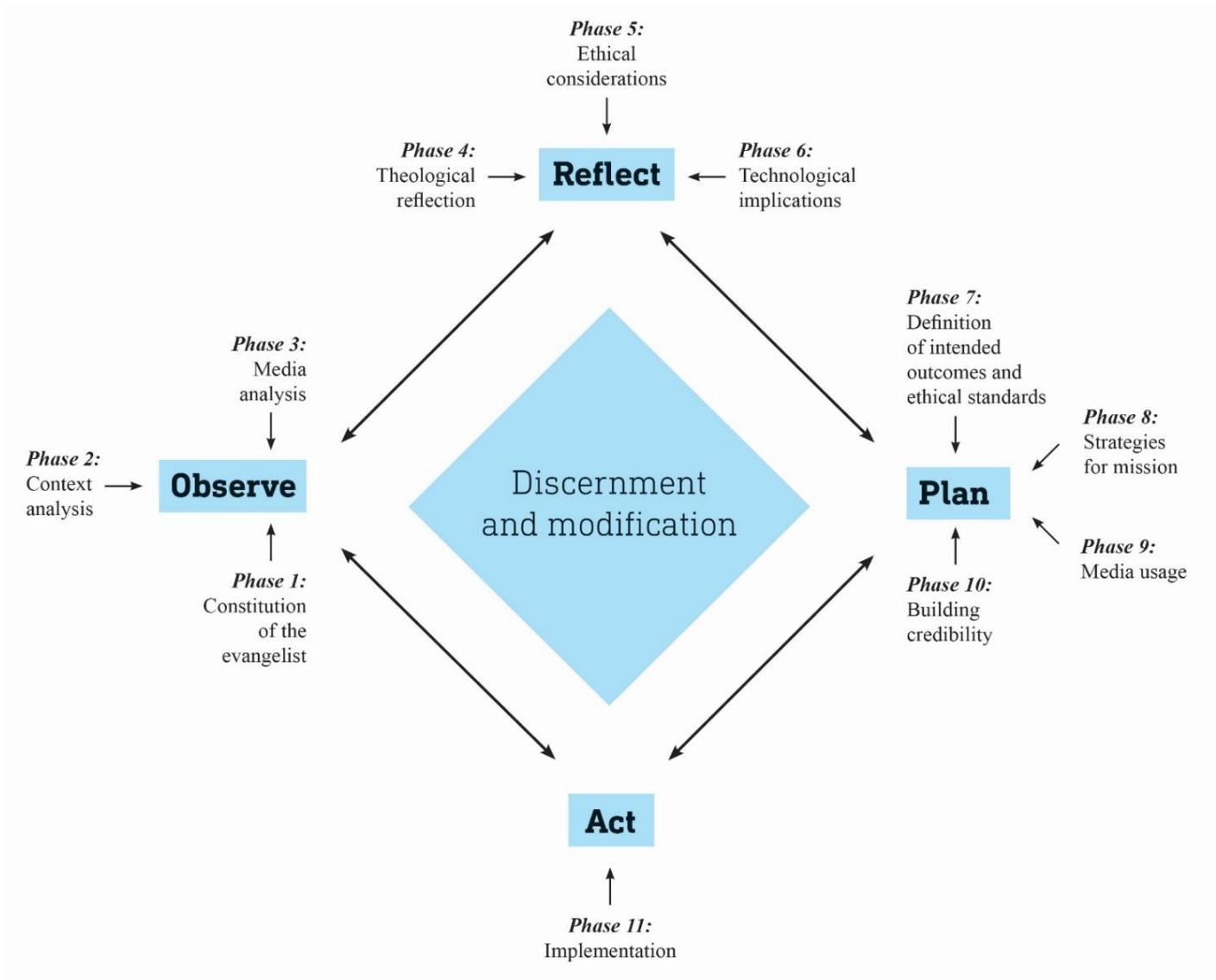


Illustration 90: *Cycle of discernment and adaptation*

### 10.2.1 Phase 1: Observations on the constitution of the evangelist

Here evangelists are asked to observe their own values and intentions. What do they want to accomplish? What are the values that guide their actions? Which beliefs function as an axiom? This is a foundational step as it allows for a proper reflection and discernment of the planning and acting process.

### 10.2.2 Phase 2: Context analysis

Following the praxis cycle of Karecki, a *context analysis* is needed. Here evangelists need to gain understanding of the sociocultural context within which they want to evangelize. Vanhoozer (2007:59) advises that one ought to try to comprehend a cultural text (e.g. a particular VR) on its own terms before its broader significance is explored.

This process is further complicated by online evangelizing, because many media transcend cultural-geographical boundaries. As this study has shown, there is no singular cyber culture which one could analyse, but a multitude of them. Thus, every context needs to be analysed individually. Here it is helpful to ask which particular desires, hopes and fears are prominent in this particular context (Tillich 1959:42).

Bailey concludes, for example, in his analysis of the blogosphere:

The prevalence of online diary communities is an indication that people are longing for fellowship and need a place for honest confession. The more I read adolescent Xanga [a particular blogging platform] sites, the more they strike me as confessionals – not to a pastor or priest, but to whoever will listen. They are a cry to be known.

(Bailey 2007:183-184)

Perhaps similar conclusions could be made when analysing various social media platforms. Observations like these help one understand the particular culture, but such insights are only obtained after a long period of time. Another assumption made by Bailey is that participation has a high value online.

### **10.2.3 Phase 3: Media analysis**

Just as an analysis of the sociocultural context is necessary, an analysis of the particular medium is necessary, allowing the evangelist to gain understanding of the particular advantages and disadvantages of the medium. As it has been demonstrated throughout this research, the medium has a profound impact on the message and values communicated. Thus, it is advisable to reflect further on what the particular medium is doing. Which beliefs does it communicate or what kind of world does it display? The boundaries between phase 2 and 3 are not as clear as with the other phases.

### **10.2.4 Phase 4: Theological reflection**

Evangelists should also undergo a process in which they reflect upon their theological beliefs. One's theological convictions, for example, will determine the modes of contextualization available (see 2.3), as well as one's attitude towards the usage of technology (see 8.3), and even the stance one takes while evangelizing. Such reflections will naturally lead towards ethical considerations.

The following statement by Bednar provides an example of why theological reflection is needed:

With the explosion of easy-to-use “blogware”, we are able to circumvent traditional structures, publish our ideas and unite with others with a common desire. It would be a mistake to simply label

us as disgruntled or individualistic. In fact, we desire to reclaim our spiritual formation from pre-packaged sermon series and small group programs that structurally resist (or suppress) participation in favour of a solitary voice. We are not convinced that pastors know more about following Christ than we do.

(Bednar 2004:39)

Bednar is not simply asking for a different method or technique, what he is requesting is a form of participatory theology, where authority is located among the laity and not with the clergy. Different theologians will obviously come to different conclusions regarding Bednar's thesis, but the importance lies in the fact of theological reflection, most likely one's own theological preconceptions and heritage will determine ones' response.

### **10.2.5 Phase 5: Ethical considerations**

As the research has shown, ethical considerations need to be made. The areas addressed in this study were the exploitation of vulnerability for the purpose of evangelization, reports regarding conversion rates as well as evangelization as a hidden agenda (see 5.3.8, 6.2.1.3 and 8.5). Yet each particular context can raise new questions. The literature presented (8.5) offers some general guidelines which can be applied to a particular context.

In further pursuing the issue of participation, one might want to pay close attention to the creation of hierarchy in online-platforms. Who is allowed to participate? Under which circumstances can some be excluded and who has the right to make these decisions?

More generally one might want to ask "what 'powers' are served by particular cultural texts?" (Vanhoozer 2007:59).

### **10.2.6 Phase 6: Reflections on technological implications**

Lastly within the process of reflection, the medium needs to be taken into consideration. The observations gained through the *media analysis* and the reflection of its *technological implications* can be seen as standing in a dynamic relationship with each other. As demonstrated under 8.2, any medium carries (unintended) implications. An attempt to anticipate these implications is important. During the first round of this cycle the observations remain mostly theoretical. However, after the initial round it is, of course, possible to reflect upon actual experience. This process of reflection stands in a close and dynamic relationship to phase 9, where one determines how to use a particular medium.

For example, one might conclude that the participatory aspect of blogging is not desirable since it undermines authority structures which one finds helpful and valuable and thus, one either chooses to modify the blogging platform (this could be done through disabling the

commenting section) or by choosing a different media. More specifically one might conclude that the plethora of different opinions on blogs, and the relativism to which that might lead, might make the evangelistic message be seen as just another opinion rather than a truth claim. However, if one's theological perspective is such that a certain level of relativism is tolerable or desirable, blogging platforms would be an appropriate choice (given the conclusion assumed in the examples used here).

More generally, one can ask which people express faith (Vanhoozer 2007:60). In the above case, one can recognize faith into the community which is believed to know more than the pastor. Furthermore, one can also recognize some faith in the medium, for it is believed that through blogging (the medium), participation is enabled and authority structures disabled.

### **10.2.7 Phase 7: Definition of outcomes and ethical standards**

Based on the observations and reflections, it is now necessary to define the intended outcomes. Within this context it is also suggested that evangelists define their ethical standards explicitly.

More specifically, through this process, the evangelists determine not only what they want to accomplish, but also how they want to accomplish it. The definition of the intended outcomes and the ethical standards one has set guide the planning process and later allow for proper assessment of the results after implementation (phase 11).

### **10.2.8 Phase 8: Planning strategies for mission**

There are various methods one can draw upon for evangelizing online (see particularly 5.3.2; also 8.4). The proper choice is based on the medium or online-environment chosen (see next phase), the person to be evangelized and the intentions, values and beliefs of the evangelist. Furthermore, the method chosen needs to conform to the ethical standards one has defined.

### **10.2.9 Phase 9: Selection of media usage**

As demonstrated above (see 8.3), evangelists need to reflect upon the medium used since there are always unwanted or unintended implications of technology or media. Section 8.3.1 and 8.3.2 have provided a matrix of responses to the unwanted implications.

This study has also drawn special attention to a particular feature of VR, namely the avatar. Research revealed four different possible usages of an avatar (see 8.1.2). A similar process can be done for various others computer-mediated forms of communication.

## **10.2.10 Phase 10: Fostering credibility and understanding**

This phase has two aspects. First, evangelists should address the issue of credibility. How does the evangelist anticipate generating credibility? As the research has shown, gaining credibility or establishing authority online is challenging for various reasons (see 1.1.4, 5.3.4, 6.2.1.3). However, there are various means of building credibility online (e.g. linking to something known in FR) which were also described above (see 9.1).

Secondly, on a very different level, evangelists should determine the epistemological framework within which they want to persuade another person. For example, do they hope to present a rationally coherent argument or do they want to help people experience God, etc.? Different evangelistic methods, as well as various media, are more or less suitable for the approach one chooses (see 8.4).

Thus, not every medium serves every mode of persuasion equally well. Ignoring this process of reflection can cause unintended consequences. The reflections under 7.2.1.1 and 7.2.2.1, for example, show how social media are suitable for certain forms of evangelizing but not for others.

## **10.2.11 Phase 11: Action**

The final phase is at the same time the beginning of the next cycle. After the execution, one can start again with the observation (phase 1-3). The cycle is thus a continuous process in which there is a back and forth between all phases, constantly discerning if actions, values and the intended outcome align. It requires a continuing process of modification.

In this phase it become obvious how interrelated all the different phases are. There is a constant process of weighing possible advantages and disadvantages. Thus, at the center of the diagram is the process of discernment and modification. This reflects the need to constantly discern the proper action and to adapt to ensure that one's ethical standards, values and desired outcomes are met.

## **10.2.12 Continuous discernment**

As a way of being, discernment needs to be practiced through this process. Ideally, the discernment would not take place by an individual but through a community of stockholders which discerns the different phases based on shared values, as they are for example expressed through a *code of conduct*.

## 10.3 Summary

The chapter began with a general introduction into the relationship between technology and theology. In this section, it was argued theological and particularly ethical reflections are needed to ensure that technology is in line with the creation process and thus honours God and serves humanity.

This subsequent section provided an answer to the research question: *How is evangelization modified for VR?* It was proposed that there are four general ways in which one can respond to a particular technology.

- *Rejecting*: avoiding a particular technology.
- *Embracing*: enthusiastically integrating new technologies into one's life and society.
- *Controlling and Limiting*: limiting the amount of influence a technology has in one's life or to control the aims for which it is used.
- *Compensating*: overcoming the problems caused by technology through further and better technology.

Furthermore, it was suggested that the Amish provide a helpful example of the important process of discernment. Discernment requires a time of reflection during which one tries to anticipate whether or not a given technology will foster or hinder one's values and goals. Though the Amish are often viewed as technophobic, a discerning use of technology does not need to lead to the rejection of a technology but also to its embrace.

In the same way, evangelists interested in working online need to incorporate a process of discernment in which the advantages and dangers are weighed and a proper response is intentionally decided on.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind, as was suggested at the beginning of this section, that technology can become an alternative religion as people increasingly put their faith in it. Further research could be conducted to discern if the gospel should be (or perhaps already is) articulated in a way that challenges the *gods* of technology.<sup>156</sup>

The following section introduced the cycle of discernment and modification which shows how the various findings from this study can be placed in connection with each other and inform the process of reflection upon evangelization online.

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<sup>156</sup> It was a surprise finding that not all recognized a religious nature of technology and particularly VR.

# 11. Retrospective methodological reflection

This chapter offers a critical reflection on the methodological decisions made in this research. It reflects on both the implementation of the methods and the quality of the results generated by them. This chapter thereby constitutes the first part of the sixth phase of the ETP cycle, the *missiological-methodological reflection*.

The first section will introduce the established criteria for qualitative research and show how this research fulfilled these criteria. The second section will offer both a personal and a methodological reflection. The two aspects are dealt with in tandem as they often stand in close relationship to one another. To reflect on the methodology understandably involves reflecting on one's personal experience of its usage.

## 11.1 Quality criteria for empirical research

Empirical research needs to meet certain standards which ensure its quality and distinguish it from subjective opinions. Whereas quantitative research uses objectivity, reliability and validity, these criteria cannot be used with regards to qualitative research. Qualitative research produces results of a different nature, often too complex to be measured according to quantitative standards. This is due to the fact that qualitative research often focuses on discovering new phenomena which cannot yet be quantified. Yet, qualitative research needs its own criteria in order to be accepted in the larger scientific community (Steinke 2012; Seale 1999). Steinke (2012:319–323) has summarized seven criteria which have emerged particularly over the last decades. These criteria will be used here.

### 11.1.1 Intersubjective traceability

Whereas quantitative research can verify previous results by having them reproduced, an exact replication of qualitative research is not possible. What can be provided is a means by which the research process is reconstructable and is therefore traceable.

Steinke (2012:324-326) describes three different ways to provide such traceability: documentation, group interpretation and the coding process. The first two were applied for this research.

The first way to provide traceability is through *documentation* of the entire process. This has been done in this study through the use of the ETP cycle which enables others to follow the different phases of research. The entire research process has been documented in chapters four

to seven. The transcription of the interviews and the questionnaires can be found in the appendix.

A further means of providing traceability is through *group interpretation*. Particularly, the second round of the Policy Delphi Method allowed all participants to discuss the results from the first round. This second round introduced statistical data which is more typical of quantitative research. Such a mixed-method use of data is common in Delphi research as it allows the participants to engage with a large portion of the findings. In the case of this study, this was particularly necessary since the first round covered a wide range of issues relating to online evangelization. At the same time, this process also allowed outsiders to respond to the findings which created transparency of the empirical research.

### **11.1.2 Indication and adequacy of the research process**

This section will address the adequacy of the research methods chosen in correlation to the research question and the available data.

The intention of this research was to explore a new phenomenon (e.g. evangelization in VR) from a missiological perspective. The initial research revealed that, so far, little empirical and theological research has been done. Thus, the method chosen needed to be well-suited for an explorative research.

Given the intended explorative nature of this research, the methods chosen were the Policy Delphi Method and Grounded Theory (the auxiliary method for data analysis). Both methods were very helpful.

The Policy Delphi Method has proven itself to be fitting for such occasions, since it not only collects and gathers experiences and opinions but also allows all participants to provide their interpretative competency (see 4.4). The intentional selection of panel members ensured that it consisted of leading experts in their respective field. Thus, it was important that the research methods accessed their interpretative competencies as well as their particular experience. The Policy Delphi Method allowed the various participants to respond to each other's opinions and interpretations which in itself provides a form of data analysis through a group of experts, rather than solely through the researcher.

Judging the quality of the empirical research is complicated since quality is a relative category and depends on its intention. In this case, the intention was to explore a new area of research and for this aim, the methodology and methods have produced the desired results.

### **11.1.3 Empirical anchoring**

In order to create results of good quality, it is not only important that the process of data collection and analysis is retraceable, but that the theory development can be reconstructed, allowing others to affirm, reject or modify the proposed theses. In order to allow for this level of transparency and traceability, the first round used Grounded Theory for the development of the categories. Furthermore, the summary of each round made ample references to the data either through diagrams which provided statistical support or quotes from the interviews. Special attention was given to areas with contradictory findings. Furthermore, participants had the opportunity to correct any of the conclusions drawn from the first round through the rating process of the second round.

### **11.1.4 Limitations**

To address the limitations of the research means to “test the limits.” The researcher seeks to further saturate the findings through further sampling where cases are sought that maximize (or minimize) the difference to those cases already analysed, or to explicitly search for negative or extreme cases. This is done in order to discover the limits of the applicability of the results.

The application of either method (maximization or minimization) was only partially possible for this study since the area researched consists of only a small number of possible participants. Nonetheless, deviating participants were searched for in each round.

### **11.1.5 Coherency**

Creating coherency means that there is no internal inconsistency between the data and the conclusions drawn. The Policy Delphi Method intentionally seeks out cases that challenge other opinions and requires that they be discussed in the next round. This was, for example, the case with the use of social media for evangelization or the thesis that particularly shy people are more likely to inquire about faith online. Both of these issues were carried over into the third round so that clarity could be gained as to why people held contradictory opinions.

### **11.1.6 Relevance**

An important goal of qualitative research is that its findings and conclusion have practical relevance. This is particularly the case with regards to missiological research. The entire nature of this research moves from the praxis (e.g. evangelization online) into the academic realm with the intention that the findings will, in turn, improve praxis. The development of the *cycle of*

*discernment and modification* is an example of how the various findings are put into relationship with each other and can be used to improve praxis.

Furthermore, several participants confirmed the relevance of this research, and indicated that they would like to see the final results.

### **11.1.7 Reflective subjectivity**

Chapter 4 argued that all researchers, including those who operate under a positivistic paradigm, are subjective. However, just because objectivity cannot be gained, the research process is not in danger. As argued under 4.1 and 4.2 and implemented through the ETP cycle, the *context of discovery* can be included into the research. Thus, the researcher can attempt to make his or her subjectivity transparent.

This has been explicitly done under 4.6.1 as part of phase 1 of the ETP cycle. Furthermore, the following section provides a personal and methodological reflection of the research process after its conclusion.

## **11.2 Reflection of the research process**

This section offers a personal and methodological reflection upon the research, as the final step of the ETP cycle and allows for further transparency of the empirical process. Guidance for this process was found through the work of Kelle and Kluge (2010) and Helfferich (2011).

### **11.2.1 Sampling process**

An important part of Grounded Theory is sampling. The participants for this research were joined together to make up a panel which enable them to engage indirectly with each other.

In order for the panel to do so productively, it was important for the panel to be well-selected. What makes for a well-selected panel is, of course, based on the question that needs to be analysed. The panel needs to be diverse enough to ensure that the members bring different areas of expertise to the table while ensuring enough overlap that they can still engage critically and constructively with each other (Kelle & Kluge 2010:41-50).

In the case of this study, there were some panel members that had direct experience with online evangelization, whereas others came from academia. Overlap was provided since even those from academia could draw on their experience of religion online.

Establishing the panel proved to be challenging in itself, as few people can be considered experts on online evangelization and most who were invited were either involved in their own

academic research or were pioneers and leaders in doing actual online evangelization. Either way, they had limited free time. It required perseverance to find willing participants, particularly for the first round (the expert-interviews). Often several contacts had to be made and it took months to find and interview the first twelve participants.

Even after the formation of such a high-profile panel, the drop-out rate after each round of the PDM remained high. This was not unexpected since it is a common problem with the PDM.

The difficulty in coming up with such a unique group of experts was, however, made up for by the quality of their contributions. Their participation allowed for easy access to their expertise. Even if the knowledge of an expert had already been published (as was sometimes the case), that expert still provided easy access to the information and knowledge of his or her entire field of research and could make it quickly accessible to the panel. Such a process would otherwise have taken a single researcher much longer. What is perhaps common knowledge in one field might be highly relevant but foreign in another.

The insight from Schut and Heidbrink on video games, for example, shed new light and perspective on the ways in which they function as a social meeting point and the way evangelization can take place within them. Such knowledge would have been hard to acquire without their insight.

Lastly, it should be noted that the participatory approach can, at times, leave the researcher feeling like he or she is losing control, particularly after the second round, because the panel establishes which questions are carried forward. But trusting the panel has shown to be the right approach.

### **11.2.2 Data collection**

The first round of the Policy Delphi Method used expert-interviews with half-standardized questionnaires. The conduction of the interviews went well, but not entirely flawlessly. At times leading questions were unintentionally formulated or the clarification of a question might have revealed a personal opinion. However, unlike psychological research, for example, where one is primarily interested in the experience, emotions and feelings of a person, here opinions were an important asset. Challenging the views of those interviewed often helped to gain a better understanding of their opinions. An example of this occurred in the interview with Bridges. When his statement that he did not have a hidden agenda when he evangelized online was challenged, his response to the challenge resulted in a more nuanced understanding of what it means to operate with a hidden agenda and when it can become unethical (see 8.4).

Some of those interviewed controlled the interview process. Rather than interrupting them, they were free to talk about what they considered relevant with regards to this research, regardless of whether or not it was part of the half-standardized questionnaire. This not only generated good findings, but it also created a large amount of data. However, to allow those interviewed freedom in the unfolding interview process concurs with the participatory nature of this research (4.3.2).

Concessions had to be made since interviews could not meet the ideal form of being in person. Due to distance, some interviews were done through *Skype*, and some participants only agreed to contribute in written form. Although the quality of the written answers was mostly good and concise, this format did not allow for follow-up questions.

The transcription of the interviews was done through two different transcription companies (one each for the German and English interviews). It was somewhat challenging to transcribe the *Skype* conversations with those whose first language was not English or German. The content was clear, but the grammar was often incorrect. In order to increase readability, the interviews were cleaned up where they have been quoted (as is indicated).

The data collection for the second round implemented a tool from quantitative research whereby a rating system resulted in statistical data which helped with the large amount of findings gathered during the first round while still exposing the participants to most of the findings.

The third round was designed to be much shorter, in part to ensure that a large enough panel participated, but also because the Policy Delphi Method only allows those areas which showed dissent to be carried forward to the third round.

### **11.2.3 Data analysis**

The analysis of the first round utilized Grounded Theory. The open coding of the data helped to create a comprehensive overview of the data and effectively managed the large amount of data generated with the help of MaxQDA.

It also should be noted that PDM is an analytical tool in its own right and Grounded Theory had an auxiliary function.

Delphi can be in danger of dismissal as merely a form of data collection, when it is much more than this. Its iterative feedback method develops an insight, which in its totality, is more than the sum of the parts.

(Day & Bobeva 2005:104)

Thus, the Delphi Method does not require Grounded Theory, but it is a useful addition. The application of Grounded Theory was limited since it was used as an auxiliary method to

establish the different categories. Its usage, however, gave the conclusions drawn better *traceability* and *empirical anchoring*.

Whereas some categories established themselves effortlessly and almost intuitively, other codes and categories were much more complex and underwent several revisions. It became evident that the process of coding is a skill and an art, which one can constantly improve, but is unlikely to master.

Similarly, the transitions for the different rounds were at times clear and coherent and at other times challenging. Even the statistical data did not always provide as clear a guidance as anticipated. At times, for example, the statistical results did not correspond with the comments made. Wherever inconsistency existed and the data did not allow for clear conclusions this was documented in the research reporting.

The analysis of the second round with the statistical information provided a new perspective of the data since it revealed consensus and dissent among the panel. Consensus fulfilled a similar function as saturation.

MaxQDA was used again in the third round. The many features of the program allowed for a flexible engagement with the data.

Since this was this researcher's first exposure to empirical research in general, including the use of Grounded Theory and the Policy Delphi Method, it must be admitted that despite having read the literature, and having received excellent advice from supervisors, it is in the actual application that clarity comes and competency grows. Particularly the use of Grounded Theory and the interviewing process seem to require competency that grows through praxis.

Diligence is a crucial trait required for the coding process. At times the desire to find useful and meaningful data created an unhelpful urgency. However, with experience, one learns that the findings emerge when all the data is given equal attention and processed methodically.

The entire research process took much longer than anticipated. Particularly the construction of each round and the data analysis took more time than anticipated. The former is due to the fact that the second and third round depended on the analysis of the previous round.

#### **11.2.4 Scope of the research**

This study was intended to be explorative and thus it addresses a wide range of issues, ranging from technology to ethics. The various experts each brought a depth of expertise from their respective fields. This was challenging as it required the researcher to familiarize himself with the various disciplines.

Another challenge of the wide scope of this research was bringing the various findings into relationship with each other. This was finally made possible by introducing the *cycle of discernment and modification*, because the cycle shows how the various aspects are interrelated to each other while at the same time revealing how complex the usage of media is in evangelizing.

### **11.2.5 Final remarks**

Upon reflecting on the research process, there were many moments marked by insecurity and hesitation simply due to lack of experience. However, excitement began to grow after the first interviews, as people began to reveal significant and interesting information which was otherwise not accessible. Likewise, despite the strenuous effort of analysing the data, the process became rewarding as the various findings developed.

## 12. Conclusions

At the beginning of this research it was suggested that a *theology of virtual reality* is needed because VR asks new questions and challenges old answers. Virtual communities, for example, challenge our understanding of presence, and avatars provide us with a new way to engage and reflect upon our identity. The field of digital humanities is now being established at many universities because of the increasing relevance of digital technology for the humanities. The University of Leipzig, for example, explains the need for this new department as follows:

The Humboldt Chair of Digital Humanities at the University of Leipzig sees in the rise of Digital Technologies an opportunity to re-assess and re-establish how the humanities can advance the understanding of the past and to support a dialogue among civilizations.

(2016a)

A similar process of reassessing the field of theology in light of the rise of digital technology is needed, but is, as yet, developing slowly. A number of theological questions arose out of this research and were reflected on. Hopefully they will offer some foundation for developing a theology of virtual reality. Some of the implications might also be relevant and applicable to FR.

This study set out to explore evangelization online from a missiological perspective, and in this conclusion the major findings and the contribution of the research to the field at large are summarized. Furthermore, attention will be given to some areas that are particularly interesting and would benefit from further research. Finally, some suggestions will be made for the praxis of online evangelization.

### 12.1 Summary of findings

The scope of this research covered many topics since it was designed as an explorative study of a phenomenon which has only recently attracted academic interest. A number of themes arose deductively from the literature review. Other themes, including ethical concerns, the role of the virtual church, as well as the theme of adaptation/modification, were later added as they developed from the empirical research process.

The Policy Delphi Method, and its use of qualitative (round one and three) and quantitative research (round two), allowed for a structured and transparent engagement with the data. Various findings were discovered through the research – too many to offer a comprehensive summary of them all. In this concluding chapter, the key findings that pertain

to the research questions proposed under 1.1 will be presented and embedded in other relevant research.

### **12.1.1 Identity: Does an avatar affect the evangelistic process?**

The avatar constitutes an important feature of VR. This study has shown that people use an avatar for different purposes, and it certainly affects the evangelistic process. Four usages of an avatar were noticed through the empirical work and brought in conversation with the recent research on *online identity formation*.

#### **12.1.1.1 Hiding in order to reveal**

In general, it was affirmed that the anonymity provided by an avatar allowed people to be more open. It was further suggested that shy people are more open online but it was also proposed that it is *not* the personality which accounts for the difference, but the type of questions. I.e. it is possible that people are more willing to talk about faith and spirituality in VR than in FR. It was also suggested that people that suffer from anxiety or physical disabilities might appreciate the protection and control an avatar can provide.

Supplementing this research with that of others lead to the suggestion that people present, reveal and hide different aspects about themselves online. Thus, there is not a fundamental difference between VR and FR. Both on- and offline, people engage in what Goffman calls “identity performance” (1956). The difference being that in FR this is done through our body which projects information about ourselves, and in VR it is done through an avatar. In some ways, avatars are more flexible than our body. Thus, it is proposed that the way people present themselves online is different in degree but not in nature to that which is done in FR. As a consequence, some of the hesitation towards relationship-building via avatars might be based on its unfamiliarity of receiving and interpreting identity information from an avatar instead of a physical body. Yet, expressing oneself through an avatar should not be interpreted as inauthentic. This is important for the further development of evangelization online because a suspicion towards relationships which are developed in VR was at times detectable during the empirical research. Rather it is here suggested, that expectations of what is revealed, need to be readjusted. This, in turn, means that those evangelizing should expect and accept that people, for example, use an avatar to hide behind or to even play with their identity. Thus, they might provide false or misleading information about themselves, but it is also this hiding which allows those people to feel protected and to reveal something that they would otherwise not share.

It was further suggested that those evangelizing do not need to provide (or expect) full disclosure as this is neither necessary nor safe, but they should be truthful in what they do reveal about themselves.

#### **12.1.1.2 Computer-mediated-communication – where less can become more**

According to most members of the panel, communication online and through an avatar can be considered impoverished, based on the level of technological sophistication currently available.

An aspect of particular concern was the lack of physical presence. Without it, the process of ministering holistically to another person is complicated since the sensory information available in a FR context is not (yet) equally available in VR. Thus, communities and relationships that develop online need to (and often do) find workarounds.

However, it remains questionable if communication online has to be like a conversation offline in order for meaningful conversation and relationship to develop. Based on the research, I would suggest that physical presence is a means by which we can develop relationships, but not the only one. The unfamiliarity that one might experience while communicating through an avatar should not be equated with inauthenticity.

Communication through an avatar, was considered impoverished since one is not necessarily able to read gestures or body language. Yet, it is the assumption of the researcher that such concerns could be overcome in the future as technology improves. This argument should lose on persuasion as technology improves and computer-mediated-communication becomes more second-nature to us.

#### **12.1.1.3 Online relationships as both shallow and deep**

However, the research did draw attention to another challenge: Since one can easily disengage from a conversation online, relationships can have less risk which can have negative implications for the development of a strong relationship. Online, people can easily exit a conversation (e.g. just closing a browser window) if it becomes uncomfortable or too personal, resulting in superficial relationships. This might present an important challenge for evangelization online since the formation of relationships was presented in this research as an important element in evangelizing. Relational evangelization was considered the most suitable form of online evangelization.

Thus, in conclusion, the avatar affects evangelization online in both positive ways (people are more open) and negative ways (the development of relationship is challenged by the lack of physical nearness and the lack of risk). The weighing of the challenges against the opportunities is an important task of the evangelist.

It is important to understand the use of an avatar as an expression of identity and its role in the communication process in order to avoid wrong conclusions. Different rules apply while communicating online through an avatar and a proper understanding of these will help one from drawing wrong conclusions. Thus, as shown under 12.2.1, four ways of using an avatar were discerned from the research and brought into context with the larger research on digital identity formation.

### **12.1.2 Cyber Culture: How does VR impact evangelization?**

First, it can be noted that VR does not impact evangelization in a single discernible way. While it was suggested that there is a people group online which has its own common language and culture, this was not confirmed by this research. Rather, according to the panel, there is a plurality of different cyber cultures or VRs, offering the potential for a variety of differing ways to evangelize. This is further supported by the suggestion made in the research by Stamper, namely that the internet has given room to the rise of micro-celebrities, i.e. that are of greater influence in a particular sub-culture and people which interact online (e.g. social-media influencer or Youtuber).

Each of these sub-cultures is the result of a particular online-platform, and the way it is used by its users, including evangelists. Each sub-culture carries within it its own set of advantages and disadvantages for evangelization. *Facebook* was explored in greater depth as one prominent example of a social media platform. The participants of the research saw this platform as disadvantageous for evangelization since, for most of them, it does not foster the development of deeper relationships, although a clear consensus was not reached on this issue. Some found that the public nature of social media did not encourage longer or private conversations. However, social media platforms were also seen as advantageous for evangelization since they allowed for a convenient way to reach a large number of people. What is perhaps more important is that many participants from the panel revealed through their answers that they went through a process of discernment while reflecting on each particular platform in order to contextualize his or her evangelistic efforts.

Fast-paced communication and the tendency for people to be more open were two suggestions for commonality of VR, but the data did not support this. Although these aspects are common, they cannot be classified as a commonality.

However, fast-paced communication allows for immediacy which *is* needed for the development of social presence (Coob 2009). In other words, people feel closer to each other if there is little distance (i.e. time passing) when they are communicating.

It was further suggested that online-evangelization is often less intrusive because people voluntarily choose to visit a particular website, and thus the evangelist is not the initiator.<sup>157</sup> This was seen as a positive development since people are not confronted with an evangelistic encounter if they do not wish to engage in one. In Germany at least, people generally do not wish to be approached by evangelists (Wrogemann 2014:63).

However, as with the use of avatars, a hesitation was noticeable towards the equality between online and offline communities, e.g. most panel members still believed that people should eventually be led into a FR church community. The most common argument was that computer-mediated-communication is an impoverished form of communication compared to FR, as non-verbal communication (gesture, mimic, etc) are missing. Yet, as has also been pointed out, communication through an avatar reduces the likelihood of stereotypes based on people's appearance.

Furthermore, since for some the alternative of inquiring about faith through an avatar is to not inquire at all, one could consider computer-mediated-communication to be superior for those people.

Thus, the difference in communication online and offline does not necessarily allow one to draw conclusions regarding the quality of that communication. Rather one has to acknowledge that the reasons for what is or what is not communicated online depend not only on the technological-communicational options available, but also the person's comfort with technology as well as the topic of the conversation.

### **12.1.3 Evangelization: How is evangelization modified for VR?**

Through the three rounds of the research, it was not possible to develop a clear consensus on a particular way of how evangelization should be modified for VR. Rather, it was repeatedly suggested that online evangelization needs constant experimentation, dialog and humility.

#### **12.1.3.1 The attributes: experimental, dialogical and humble**

The need for experimenting or continuous adaptation was considered by the panel because of the complexity of technological developments which make it hard to anticipate the way a certain technology will affect the evangelistic process. How such a process of discernment can take place has been described in this research through a cycle of discernment and modification.

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<sup>157</sup> This is of course not true of all forms of evangelization online but it is applicable to a significant part.

Furthermore, open dialog was suggested – particularly within social networking sites, chats or forums, where discourse is common. Through dialog the evangelistic encounter is negotiated by both parties, hence the evangelist is not determining the agenda.

This correlates with a further need, namely that of humility. This posture was not only raised with regards to evangelization but also ethics and credibility. The majority of the panel believed that in order to be heard, the evangelist needed to show sincere interest in the faith or worldview of the other, as well as being willing to reflect critically upon his or her own faith. Such concerns are not unfamiliar to those evangelising offline. Intervarsity, for example, writes in their *code of ethics*:

As Christian evangelists, we seek to embrace people of other religious persuasions in true dialogue. That is, we acknowledge our common humanity as equally sinful, equally needy, and equally dependent on the grace of God we proclaim. We seek to listen sensitively in order to understand, and thus divest our witness of any stereotypes or fixed formulae that are barriers to true dialogue.  
(CECW 1989)

While this call for humility was already raised in the first round, the second round revealed uncertainty as to how far this humble attitude should be applied. Does it, for example, mean that the evangelist should remain open to changing his or her own beliefs? No conclusive consensus could be reached.

The results of the panel did, however, suggest that because dialog is a common feature in VR (particularly compared to the traditional media of TV and radio), such a posture is even more necessary. Two reasons were mentioned for the need of a humble posture. Some felt that such an attitude ought to be taken because it is simply the right attitude, as one cannot ask another person to reconsider their faith or worldview without being willing to do the same. The second line of reasoning suggested that only through such a posture can one gain the right to be heard (i.e. credibility). Thus, we can say that for the sake of integrity and effectiveness, humility is necessary.

Based on these missiological reflections and the engagement with the work of Thiessen (2014), a posture of humility and respect without denying one's convictions is suggested. For Thiessen, this is accomplished by operating with a transparent agenda, allowing the other to follow his or her own agenda, and by trying to serve the other person holistically.

Thus, building upon the work by Stackhouse on apologetics, it is here suggested that VR and particularly interactive platforms, such as social networking sites, call for *humble evangelization*. It is both more appropriate and more effective. However, this calls the evangelist (and for that matter any Christian or person of faith) to enter into a tension of “humility and conviction” (Vanhoozer 1998:455; cf Bosch 2004:484-485). We have conviction since we believe that God is a communicative agent who has revealed himself sufficiently

through Jesus Christ (cf Heb 1:1f.) but we understand that as fallen human beings we do not yet see God clearly (cf 1 Cor 13:12).

### **12.1.3.2 The methods: experiential, educational, rational and personal**

Four different methods for evangelization online were identified in this study. The first one was *evangelization through experiencing*, which means that the inquiring person, for example, joins an online Christian church community and participates in their liturgy, thereby being able to experience Christian community first hand. Another way to allow seekers to experience elements of the Christian faith (e.g. grace or forgiveness) is through games. In that context, the evangelist can draw upon the experience and explain how it relates to the Christian faith. The term *liturgical evangelism* was introduced in the second round, since it is more established in literature as another way to describe the *experiencing* method. Although very little direct support was found for this approach in both the first and second rounds, the researcher considers it very promising given the way credibility is gained online.

The second method, *evangelization through catechism*, was discovered at a late stage of the research process and only upon reassessing the data from the first round. It became apparent that most of the evangelists interviewed use e-learning platforms where they offer an extended explanation of the various aspects of the Christian faith. This led to the inclusion of the category *catechism* as an evangelistic method used online. The emphasis here is to explain and teach about the Christian faith.

The third method, *evangelization through apologetics*, was deductively proposed as a category, but no matching codes were found. This was considered a surprise discovery since *apologetics* is a known approach of evangelization. The lack of findings was confirmed in the second round since only a few participants saw it as a helpful approach for evangelizing online.

However, the fourth method, *evangelization through relationships*, where the Christian faith is shared and explained in the context of a person-to-person (or avatar-to-avatar) encounter, was strongly confirmed.

Most participants of the research believed that people inquire about faith because they are in need of help, and it was suggested that online evangelization can be done reactively when people come to an evangelistic site, forum, etc. This process is also less intrusive since the person inquiring does so on their own initiative.

Little data related directly to the content of the message shared during online evangelization. The few suggestions that were made focused on reassuring people that God loves them. It was also noted that moral and ethical issues tend to be avoided, which led the

researcher to suggest that a process of “de-moralization” might be occurring in online evangelization.

The second round confirmed that most participants saw the gospel as an unalterable entity, yet it reveals itself in the particularities of people’s lives.

The third and final round further suggested that evangelization online needs to be experimental, flexible and reflective since technology, and people’s use of it, constantly change.

#### **12.1.4 Credibility: How are authority and credibility established?**

Several means of developing credibility online were suggested throughout the different rounds. The panel confirmed ways already practiced in FR to generate credibility, but also suggested the need for new ways, thus confirming the research by Campbell and Teusner (2011) who suggested that the internet has allowed for the creation of new sources and means of authority, particularly a “democratisation of knowledge” (2011:67). Finn and Gil De Zúñiga suggest that deep-reaching transformation is taking place online regarding the way credibility is created and perceived:

The embrace of new forms of information technology, simultaneous with continued belief in indicators of "traditional" authority, suggest that humans' credibility judgments may be more bound up the emergent "how" of information behaviour rather than the static "what". That is, the social constructs that surround an information exchange, and how they change over time may have a much greater influence over credibility judgments than any articulated heuristic.

(Finn & Gil De Zúñiga 2011:3)

Thus, networks play an important role in the development of relationships. Fulton analyses various blogs in order to understand how they create credibility, and suggests that “there are three ways to build credibility with an audience: authenticity, engagement and interactivity with the audience, and transparency” (2015:1). Thus, her findings support the suggestions from this panel of experts, and the call for humble evangelization suggested here, as well as the clear preference for relational evangelization.

The panel made several suggestions on how to establish credibility and gain authority online which are here summarized in three categories.

##### **12.1.4.1 Credibility through authenticity and vulnerability**

It was further argued that individuals can still gain credibility even if they do not appear professional, since an unprofessional appearance can sometimes be perceived as authentic or “real”, which also builds credibility. To be seen as authentic was considered important in order to gain credibility. Present research on YouTube confirms this new sensitivity for authenticity

or the appearance thereof. Cunningham and Craig, for example, come to the following three conclusions:

The first is that the claims to authenticity that animate native SME [social media entertainment] content are established through comparisons with the presumed inauthenticity of established fictional screen formats. The second is that the distinctive mode of address of SME is constituted in the relationship between discourses of authenticity and community. The third is that there is a discursive logic that attempts to render brand relationships subordinate to the dominant discourses of authenticity and community.

(Cunningham & Craig 2017:80)

Thus, to appear as an authentic individual rather than an organization gives one credibility. This could correlate with the growing suspicion towards organized FR religion which Campbell and Teusner drew attention to (2011:67).

The arguments presented above follow what has already been said with regards to the need for *humble evangelization*. However, one concrete and noteworthy suggestion was that in order to be authentic, the Christian witness has to offer more than an easy solution to life's problems. Such a reductionist and simplistic interpretation of the gospel might undermine its own credibility since it does not necessarily correlate with people's experience.

#### **12.1.4.2 Credibility through investing into a community**

It was further suggested that individuals could also gain credibility by committing to and investing into a particular online-environment, and that expertise in one area (e.g. being a good gamer) might give people credibility in another area (e.g. faith).

Although a relationship between community and credibility was often assumed by the panel, not much strong research could be found to support those findings. Some research has been done on online healthcare communities and how credibility is established in this particular context. How far those results correlate to credibility in religious online communities is uncertain. However, it can be affirmed that the very nature of trust is often interpersonal.

Trust is partially a product of people's capacity to assess the trustworthiness of their potential partners (Sheppard & Sherman, 1998). Trust, therefore, can be considered as the reflected trustworthiness of the trustees and their trustworthiness that is subjectively entertained in the judgment of the trustors (Sytompka, 1999, p. 70). The potential partners then have the burden of not only creating trust but also maintain it and this process involves the duty of presenting themselves as trustworthy persons (Hass & Deseran, 1981).

(Beldad et al 2010:859)

Thus, if evangelists want to be heard, trust needs to be established and maintained, as was suggested by the panel.

Based upon the empirical research and further theological reflection on *oekumenical doxology* (Wrogemann 2014), it is my suggestion that using a community which practices liturgical evangelization is an appropriate way to create trustworthiness and credibility.

An enquiring person can watch the community interact, and make his or her own assessment if the community is trustworthy. Integrity and benevolence are witnessed easier through observing someone's actions.

#### **12.1.4.3 Credibility through connecting to FR**

It was further suggested that credibility can be established through linking FR with VR. This could be done by simply including one's pastoral or academic credentials since credibility does transfer from FR to VR.

Other research shows that people confirm what you have heard online and offline, the vice versa can be assumed.

Despite the tremendous amounts of information available on the Web, research has shown that users continue to rely on people in their networks when seeking various types of information. Such work has examined different domains of information search from recreational activities ... to cultural content ... and has found that users supplement online sources with advice they get from friends and family. This underscores the importance of seeing information technology uses in the larger context of people's everyday lives where online and offline activities are constantly intertwined.

(Wang and Emurian 2005:859)

Research concerned with the credibility of e-commerce noticed that companies which have stores in FR transfer their trustworthiness to VR (Urban 2009:184).

#### **12.1.4.4 Credibility through SEO and design**

On a technological level, it was suggested that for websites which were designed explicitly for evangelization, professional design and search-engine optimization (SEO) were helpful. Through their research on online health-care communities, Hajli et al have shown that "the ease of use of the forum, [and] the quality of website is an important aspect" for users to perceive the information as credible (2014:246). The research of Urban et al comes to similar conclusions regarding how trust is created for e-commerce.

[It was] confirmed that privacy and security are important in site design, but not as important as user-friendly navigation and presentation. After navigation and presentation, the next most important site design aspect was the perception of a seller's "assistive intent" through interactive tools. This plays an important role in the formation of online trust.

(Urban et al 2009:181)

Regarding SEO, the assumption was that people correlate a high ranking of the search results with credibility. This is certainly not true of everyone but can be perhaps assumed for many.

We find evidence of users' trust in search engines with respect to the credibility of information they find when using these services. To complete many of the assigned tasks, students often turned to a particular search engine as their first step. When using a search engine, many students clicked on the first search result. Over a quarter of respondents mentioned that they chose a Web site because the search engine had returned that site as the first result suggesting considerable trust in these services.

(Hargittai 2012:479)

However, others have pointed out what has been labelled the filter bubble. This describes the common programming technique of search engines which modifies the search results based on location, past click-behaviour and search history.

[The] algorithms employed by internet search engines narrow searches according to user history. Thus, ensuring you are likely to see more of the same each time you search. Filter bubbles are also self-perpetuating. In our choices of Twitter followers, Facebook friends, Reddit sub-groups, we share and follow those who we perceive to share affinity for our interests, beliefs, and ideas. This is not always true of course, and some may actively seek out antagonistic or opposing parties or opinions, but this is certainly not a given.

(Erden 2016:3)

Thus, the filter bubble can also be self-imposed if a user, for example, only befriends like-minded people on Facebook.

Despite the availability of varying perspectives in this information-rich cultural environment, research suggests that people are becoming more ideologically isolated seeking only confirmatory messages and avoiding arguments that contradict their existing ideologies.

(Ault et al 2017:324)

However, the research so far is inconclusive, as the review of Bozdag shows.

We show that factors that caused bias in mass media news selection still play a role in information selection in online web services. We have shown that search results in Google can differ, but an extensive empirical research is needed to determine the extent of so called “echo chambers” in social networks. What percentage of information do users miss or feel like they are missing if they turn on a personal filter or an inter-personal filter? Is there enough variety in their choice of friends? Are users aware of these algorithms? Do they modify their filter periodically or switch to other forms of information sources? Are there routines that are used in the design of personalization algorithms, just like routines used in traditional gatekeeping? How does the introduction of implicit and explicit filtering algorithms affect user trust in systems and user autonomy? More research is needed in order to answer these questions.

(Bozdag 2013:224)

However, it should be noted that such filter bubbles can present a threat to (religious) freedom, as they hinder unbiased access to information.

These suggestions above apply mostly to organizations. However, it can generally be concluded that SEO can help to establish credibility.

### **12.1.5 Ethics: Which ethical considerations need to be made?**

The need for ethical considerations arose during the first round, particularly with regards to the way fundraising uses the statistical data of online conversions. Objection was taken to organizations that used the statistical data from their evangelistic websites to show donors how many people are becoming Christian in the context of fundraising. For one, some in the panel found that the statistics were not strong enough for drawing such conclusions. Secondly, this can also be seen as ethically questionable since it reduces the evangelized person to a number and creates a very binary way of evaluating the success of evangelization online. For example,

by this method, a person either accepts Christ or not. There is no appreciation of being further along on a journey.

Further, concerns were also raised in cases where evangelists operated with a hidden-agenda e.g. to convert someone) which could overrule the other person's interests. As Thiessen has suggested, this is a violation of the dignity of persons. The concern was not with the agenda, but that it was concealed. It was generally affirmed that one should operate with integrity, which means, for example, that one should play games because one is interested in playing games and not just as a means to evangelize people.

Additionally, evangelists should present themselves truthfully, although not necessarily comprehensively. They too have a right to privacy and need to take safety concerns into consideration. In order to protect people from too much self-disclosure, it was suggested that people should be made aware to what degree they are actually anonymous in a particular online context.

Lastly, a potential area of ethical concern lies in the use (and possible misuse) of vulnerability (i.e. brought on by a crisis) for the purpose of evangelization. It was however confirmed that a good starting point for an evangelistic conversation is not necessarily God or faith, but hope in light of life's problems. Whether or not this leads to the exploitation of a vulnerable person depends on how the evangelistic encounter proceeds.

In general, it can be affirmed that ethical concerns arise in various ways online. Some are consistent with offline concerns, some concerns are heightened online, while some can be seen as particular to the online context.

Thus, it was here suggested that those participating in online evangelization – particularly as an organization – should develop a code of conduct. Although the panel did not clearly confirm the need for a code of conduct specific to evangelization online, I do still suggest the development of such a code, or the supplementation of an existing one due to the particular possibilities and challenges that exist online. An example of this can be the *APA code of conduct* (2014), which has added an extra section to deal with counselling in online environments.

### **12.1.6 Games: How can one evangelize in and through games?**

Online-games were much discussed as a potential place for evangelization and the concept of games that could themselves evangelize was also entertained. It was suggested that people are more receptive in games and that it is legitimate to socialize and evangelize in a game. However, it was also suggested that “gamers” might be less open to critique than other people groups.

Using a game itself to evangelize was seen as challenging but possible. This could be done through developing a game that explicitly follows the biblical narrative. Challenges for this would include the high costs of game development, and the problem of developing a game that has a fixed story-line, which is rather unusual for games.

Another idea was to use existing games or to develop a game that allows the user to experience an aspect of the Christian faith. For example, a game could allow a player to experience grace. In this case, the challenge would be to link the particular experience to the Christian faith. This is an area where future research could be beneficial.

In general, it can be noted that games provide a promising platform for evangelizing young people in particular. Buckingham makes the following observation on how young people learn:

In learning with and through these media, young people are also learning how to learn. They are developing particular orientations toward information, particular methods of acquiring new knowledge and skills, and a sense of their own identities as learners. They are likely to experience a strong sense of their own autonomy, and of their right to make their own choices and to follow their own paths—however illusory this may ultimately be. In these domains, they are learning primarily by means of discovery, experimentation, and play, rather than by following external instructions and directions.

(Buckingham 2008:19)

One can easily see how well such a learning style fits games, and *game-based learning* is a growing research field.

Games of all stripes have long been of interest by educators as a way to engage and motivate students to learn new concepts and apply their knowledge in a meaningful context. Learning theories from the sociocultural cognition family of learning theories points to the potential games have to motivate, engage, and provide authentic learning experiences. Despite this promise, however, games (particularly video games) have struggled to penetrate the formal education marketplace.

(Chmiel 2015)

Thus, if the research on game-based learning is transferable to the area of religion and spirituality, online-games appear to be a fitting platform for evangelization, particularly among young people. However, further research on game-based learning is needed (Vu et al 2015:11), as well as on evangelization in and through games.

However, games provide an even further promising aspect in that they frequently deal with religious themes, and allow the gamer to immerse into a narrative. Game architects aim at designing a coherent, temporal, digital universe which often utilizes transmedia storytelling (Ryan 2015:1-19), and thus allows the gamer to become immersed in the world and story of the game. As such, games operate as a *third-place* where the gamer can explore and experience religious themes and religion. The experience gained through a game allows gamers to critically reflect back onto their own lifeworld (Waltemathe 2017:124-125).

Depending on the nature and intent of a game, gamers can be confronted with religion and religious themes in three ways: (1) Moral decisions: Gamers have to make complex moral decisions. This is particularly true of role-playing or strategy games. (2) Religion making: Some games allow gamers to create their own religion in order to progress in the game (e.g. *Civilization*). Similarly, games often allow the user to enter into God-mode as he or she controls the destiny of others. (3) Religious information: Some games directly reflect a particular faith and thus expose the user to it.<sup>158</sup>

Thus, in conclusion, it can be said that the panel has confirmed the usability of games for evangelization and saw the potential for the use of games themselves for the purpose of evangelizing or explaining something through experience. It was further suggested that experienced-based learning can be accomplished through existing games that have not been intentionally designed with an evangelistic purpose as well as intentionally developed games. Thus, more research is needed as well as a willingness to embrace new and creative ways of evangelization in order to overcome preconceived notions about the value of online-games.

## 12.2 Contributions of this study

As the previous sections show, this study has added to the field of missiology by exploring evangelistic praxis online. Through the engagement with a variety of experts, the unique nature of this particular context was made clearer.

Four particular contributions should be emphasized here, namely (1) a better understanding of an avatar, (2) a more nuanced appreciation of technological determinism, (3) the cycle of discernment and modification and (4) the application of the Policy Delphi Method for missiology.

### 12.2.1 Better understanding of an avatar

First, this research has shown that an avatar is used in many different ways, but none of them create an inherent problem for evangelization. Four different usages of an avatar were derived from the research and discussed in conjunction with insights from *social psychology*:

- *Creating*: the avatar as our edited self
- *Revealing*: the avatar as an expression of our self

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<sup>158</sup> For an overview of the different means through which religion is communicated or embedded in games see Heidbrink & Knoll 2017:7-39).

- *Protecting*: the avatar as a shield to hide the self from others
- *Discovering*: the avatar as a means to gain self-knowledge

Regarding the avatar as our edited self means viewing it as an expression of our persona, thus not being a direct presentation of how we see ourselves, but of how we want to be perceived. Furthermore, the development of a persona is a common practice in everyday life and not limited to an avatar.

Though this is perhaps the main usage of an avatar, three others were further derived from the empirical data. The function of revealing and protecting, as an *expression* and as a *shield*, correspond with each other. The ability to hide certain aspects of ourselves actually enables us to reveal others. Lastly, the function of an avatar to explore one's identity was explored. This means that an avatar is used to explore and gain self-knowledge. Since VR can function as a *magic circle*, the person using an avatar might no longer feel limited by social confinements and is therefore free to try new things, including religion.

Perhaps this more nuanced understanding of its use will help counter negative perceptions where an avatar is simply considered a "fake-identity." This may, in turn, help some to embrace evangelization online. The academic realm might also benefit from a more differentiated perspective of how avatars are used in relationship to our (perceived) core-identity.

### **12.2.2 A more nuanced appreciation of technological determinism**

The second contribution of the study is its exploration of the ways in which technology affects evangelization. Technology does something to us and it does something to evangelization. This is inevitable since even the choice to forgo the use of new technologies to evangelize has consequences. This study brought together the technological determinism of McLuhan (often summarized through his statement *the medium is the message*) with the concept of religious social-shaping of technology by Campbell. It was demonstrated that every technology and medium has an impact (8.2). However, the research has also shown means through which one can alter and modify technology and its usage in order to compensate for undesired consequences and to realign it with one's values and intentions. Based on this research, a matrix of responses was developed. This matrix revealed that the various responses to technology can be linked to particular understandings of and beliefs about technology. The four responses developed were:

- *Rejecting*: The usage of a given technology is rejected because the intended or unintended impact of the technology violates one's values or does not line up with one's intentions and aims.

- *Compensating*: Although a technology does not line up completely with one's values and aims, it is still used and its short-comings are compensated for by improving it through further technology.
- *Controlling/limiting*: Similar to the previous response, the undesirable impact of technology is compensated for by limiting the usage of this particular technology or through controlling its influence.
- *Embracing*: A technology is considered sufficiently beneficial that its effects are accepted as they are.

The researcher proposed that through a process of discernment, as demonstrated by the Amish community, one can shape technology with regard to one's values and intentions. But this requires the use of the four different responses described.

### **12.2.3 The cycle of discernment and modification**

As the previous point has suggested, online evangelization needs an acute awareness of the impact technology has on evangelization as well as of the different ways one can respond to that impact. Based on the results, the following cycle of discernment and modification has been proposed. The cycle is based upon Lewin's four steps of Action Research, and the missiological praxis cycle from Karecki (see 4.3.2.3). They were expanded and adapted for evangelization online.

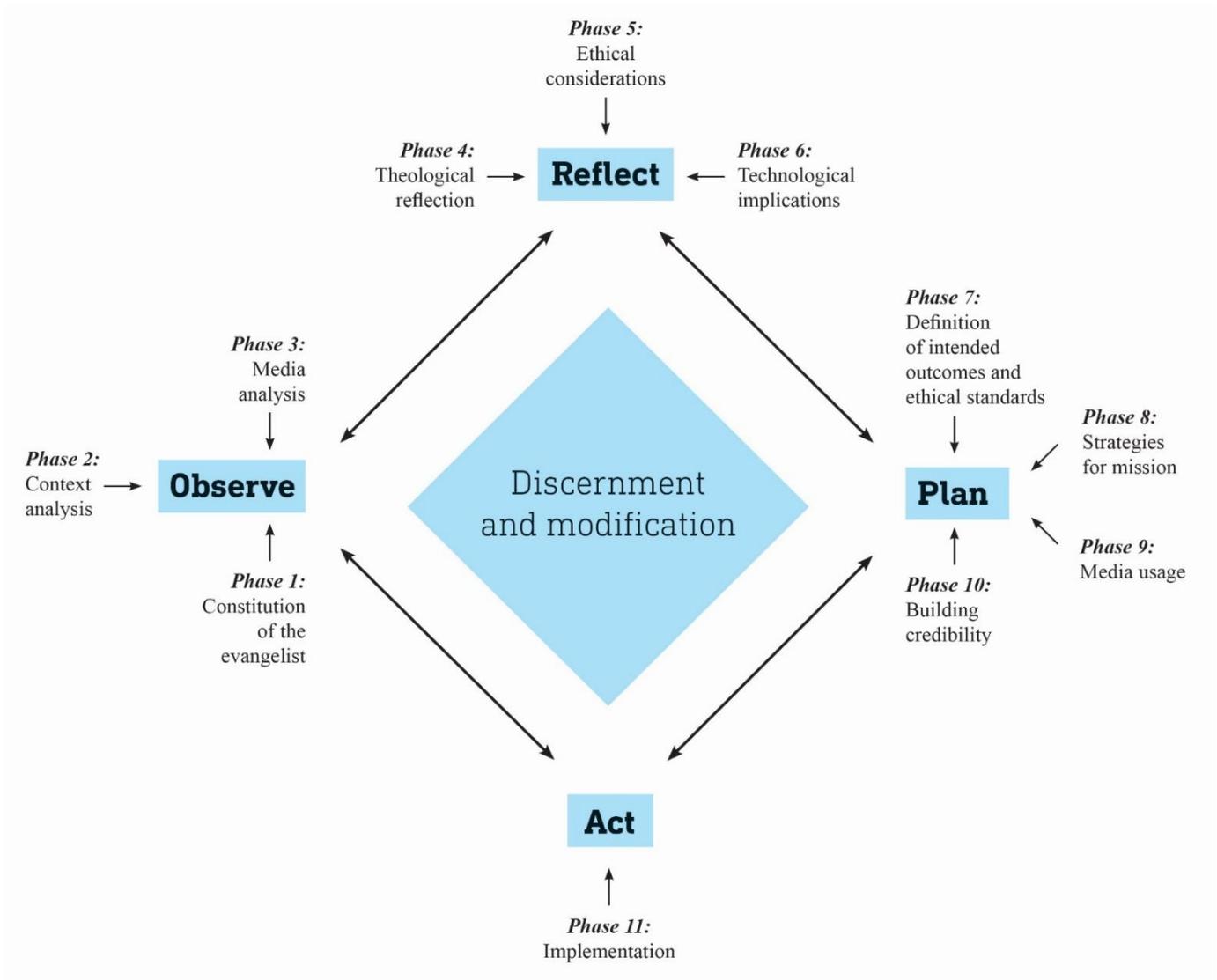


Illustration 91: *Cycle of discernment and modification*

The cycle offers an integration of most of the findings of the study and highlights the need for constant discernment and modification. The need for modification does not only apply to the technology used, but includes the entire process. Particularly because it is not possible to fully anticipate the impact of a given medium, nor its use, evangelization online requires an on-going process of discernment and modification.

#### 12.2.4 Application of the Policy Delphi Method for missiology

Lastly, this research contributed to the field of missiology by implementing the Policy Delphi Method. To the knowledge of the researcher, this participatory and Action Research driven method, has so far not been applied to missiological research.

The Policy Delphi Method was chosen because it has been used successfully in other disciplines to explore new areas of research. Furthermore, it was chosen because the participatory approach allowed not only access to the panel's experience, but also the panellists'

knowledge and interpretive capacity by inviting them to engage with the experiences and responses of the others.

However, the Delphi Method has not been used much in theology. To the knowledge of the researcher, there is only one other example of theological research (Elkington & Lotter 2013) that used the *Delphi Method* and none that has used the *Policy Delphi Method*. Thus, this study also offers an opportunity to reflect on this particular methodology with regards to missiological research.

The first advantage of the PDM is its participatory approach to research which allows the research panel to contribute and engage in the development of the research. This increases the buy-in since participants have a sense of being the researchers and not just the ones researched. Despite the high drop-out rate among panellists, others showed an active interest in the following rounds of the PDM.

Furthermore, at least some Christian traditions would find this less hierarchical and more participatory approach rather fitting to their general way of decision-making and discernment. Anabaptist traditions, for example, emphasize consensus in decision-making. The Policy Delphi Method reflects the biblical affirmation that all members of the body of Christ are important and contribute to the whole (e.g. 1 Cor 12).

The different advantages of traditional DM and PDM have already been discussed (see 4.4.2). The decision which of the two methods is most suitable depends on the intention of the research.

What is perhaps most important about the PDM is the ability of the participants to offer interpretative insights and additional information. This, for example, became evident when a participant offered a better interpretation during the third round than had been suggested by the researcher, precisely because that participant came from a different perspective (i.e. sociology).

In summary, the participatory approach and the ability of the panel to engage with the answers of the other panellists makes the Policy Delphi Method a good addition for those interested in empirical theology.

Since this research was intended to be explorative in nature, it has fulfilled this function by offering several suggestions (or bold hypotheses) as well as drawing attention to areas which need further research. Some suggestions for future research are made in the next section.

## 12.3 Future research

As this study was intended to be explorative, all the themes raised by it can benefit from further empirical research and theological reflection. However, nine specific suggestions are introduced here, as they seem most promising.

First, a possible way to advance the process of discernment and modification could be provided through Christian wisdom as a means through which one can deal with the complexity of technology.

Commenting on the general complexity of life, Ford expresses the following:

It is still necessary to try to combine knowledge, understanding, good judgment and far-sighted decision-making. The challenges and dilemmas of prudence, justice and compassion remain urgent. Choosing among possible priorities, each with a well-argued claim, is no simpler today. [...] The shaping over time of communities and their institutions is as complex and demanding as ever. The discernment of meaning, truth and right conduct in religion has not become any easier, despite many confident and well-packaged proposals from religious, non-religious and anti-religious sources. The potential for disastrously foolish judgments, decisions and actions is illustrated daily. So it is not surprising that wisdom, or the desire for it, crops up more and more.

(Ford 2007:2–3)

Ford fully developed the idea of Christian wisdom and applied it to scriptural reasoning between Jews, Christians and Muslims (interfaith wisdom); to the knowledge, formation and collegiality in the negotiable university (interdisciplinary wisdom); and to the L'Arche Community (interpersonal wisdom). Perhaps by applying his concept of wisdom to this study, it would be possible to develop a “virtual wisdom” or “technological wisdom.”

Second, the idea that a game itself could communicate the gospel is an interesting area for further research and reflection. A possible source of guidance could be found in the work of C.S. Lewis and T.R.R. Tolkien. Through their fictional literature, they provide examples of how fairy tales can be used to communicate elements of the Christian message. Though Tolkien himself disliked the obvious Christian undertones in Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, his own work also conveys many Christian values, albeit more subtly. Not only does their fictional literature serve as an example, their defence of fairy tales might help to argue why online-games that invite players into a fictional reality can be beneficial. Particularly Tolkien in his article, *Tree and Leaf* (1975), argues convincingly that fairy tales are not a means of escapism, but provide an opportunity to reflect upon our world by comparing it with a fictional one.

Third, further research could support or disprove the idea of a de-moralization of the gospel in online evangelization, and show more clearly what the underlying motivations are. If de-moralization does occur in online evangelization, it would be necessary to determine if that is any different to what is happening with evangelization in FR.

Fourth, further engagement with the joint declaration *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*, as well as the work of Elmer Thiessen and other related research, could offer further help on developing a code of conduct or ethical guidelines for online evangelization.

Fifth, as has been shown, each virtual community is unique. Thus, there are possibilities for further studies which look more closely at how and where a particular online-culture is receptive to the gospel.

Sixth, the concepts of presence and relationship were mostly discussed here from a communicational perspective. In order to establish a theology of VR, it would be beneficial to engage in some theological reflection on the meaning of presence in light of God's (omni-)presence or the importance and nature of the relationship Paul had with the various congregations to whom he wrote, particularly, those congregations he did not previously visit.

Seventh, the concept of beauty could be used as a means of evaluating online activity and as a means for evangelization. Most evaluation of VR happens on the basis of comparison with FR. This was particularly evident in the discussion on virtual churches. VR communities were considered to be of a lesser degree because they were not like FR communities. However, the concept of beauty, as developed by Wrogemann (2012) for example, could provide a point of reference that is more independent. The question would no longer be, "how does VR compare to FR", but rather, "does something in VR contribute to beauty?". Beauty can be found in art, but it can also be found in relationships and communities, for example in the way people interact with one another. Furthermore, beauty is also a possible means for people to think about and explore faith. It provides a very different way of proving the faith apart from apologetic arguments or the individual or communal witness, if one follows Forte:

Hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch: beauty overtakes them all – and takes them to itself. At first, it is the beauty of created things, but then ultimate Beauty, the source of every other. Augustine's whole story thus becomes a journey from beauty to Beauty, from the penultimate to Ultimate: only at this journey's end is he able to rediscover the meaning and measure of the beauty of everything that exists in the light of that which founds every beauty.

(Forte 2008:2)

Thus, it is possible that created beauty leads people to ultimate Beauty. Perhaps such an approach is generally more fitting and helpful in a time where the idea of absolute truth is epistemologically challenging for many people. Further research could include engaging with VR as an art, or the use of visual arts, music, etc.

Eighth, another area of ethical concern which was not addressed by the panel is the influence of chat-robots and algorithms which can impact and guide human actions (Zöllner 2016:23-24). With the emergence of artificial intelligences which possess the ability of deep learning (i.e. learning through experience), the most convincing evangelist of the future might

be an artificial intelligence. Such technologies are presently being used for marketing and this will likely remain its primary usage. However, one has to assume that it is only a question of time until not only tech-support but also counselling and pastoral-care can be offered through artificial intelligence.

Lastly, as has been indicated under 5.1.1, the empirical research here explored evangelization online from the perspective of those evangelizing, and those researching religion online, and not from the perspective of those using evangelistic offers online. It would be very beneficial to now include the perspective of those using online evangelistic offers. Such findings could then need to be compared with the assumptions of those evangelizing.

## **12.4 Recommendations for implementation**

This research started by exploring the practice of evangelization, and now ends by offering some suggestions for the praxis of evangelization online. The intention of this section is to offer some suggestions for online-evangelization which can inform and improve current practice.

### **12.4.1 Development of a code of conduct**

Practitioners should develop *best-practice guidelines* or a *code of conduct* regarding a number of ethical issues. This could include the reporting of conversions and the way people in a crisis situation are evangelized in order to prevent exploiting their vulnerability. Furthermore, evangelists should be intentional about informing people about the level of anonymity they actually have online.

### **12.4.2 Developing a third place of authority**

As stated before, the way authority is established online is changing. The authority structures which are established in FR are often not accepted. On the other hand, some FR churches struggle with the ways authority is developed online and find it hard to operate within this framework. For example, an ordained pastor might receive the same (or even lower) level of authority with regards to spiritual questions than any other person online. Sacraments are also being exercised without the traditional form of authorization.

It is here proposed that a *third place* could be developed to mediate between both sides so neither can be ignored. This would mean that the emerging and the established authority would enter into dialogue with one other and discuss the general notion of online authority and how authority should be implemented online.

In order for this to be a true third place, there needs to be freedom to think beyond the known ways of established authority while still building upon the past.

Such a third place could also give room for evangelization, but the researcher here proposes that it should be understood as a more foundational endeavour, not limited to evangelization, but benefiting all the ministries of the church. Technologically such a third place could be created through a forum.

### **12.4.3 Intentional creation of a “magic circle” for evangelization**

Talking about faith is often considered a private issue. Depending on culture and upbringing, not everyone is comfortable to talk about doubts, beliefs, personal struggles or existential questions. As discussed earlier, an online environment can create a *magic circle*, i.e. a place where certain rules do not apply. I would suggest that such places be intentionally created. This means that one should not ask for too much information about the person and any information that is revealed should remain anonymous. Furthermore, it is advisable that a secure server be used. Lastly, in order for a *magic circle* to function, all participants have to “play along.” Thus, everybody – including the evangelists – should be willing to share private things about his or her faith.

### **12.4.4 The use of stories instead of propositions**

The research by Stamper has shown how important the sharing of personal stories is, and this was confirmed by participants of the panel. Personal testimonies are often an example of theological propositions. They describe how a particular person has found his or her way into God’s grand narrative. To start with one’s own story allows people to identify with something particular, instead of a universal faith claim. For example, for many people the statement that Jesus has died for our sins has no tangible meaning. However, a person explaining how he or she found freedom from guilt and shame through faith might be a more helpful expression of how God desires to lead us into shalom.

Furthermore, sharing one’s personal experience makes one vulnerable precisely because it is personal. Theological statements, on the other hand, are abstract and impersonal. One can argue if a particular theological statement is true or not, but one’s personal experience usually does not trigger such a debate but rather invites the hearer to reflect upon his or her own life in light of the speaker’s experience.

### **12.4.5 Building a diverse witness**

Building upon the last suggestion, it is advisable that many different stories are presented. As the panel pointed out, there seems to be a tendency to share testimonies where people had some kind of crisis before becoming Christian and life was good again after conversion. Firstly, not everyone has such an experience, but more importantly people are interested in faith for different reasons, and a life crisis is only one of those reasons. Thus, it seems advisable to create a plethora of various stories of how and why people become Christian. This can be done through websites, *YouTube*, social media etc.

### **12.4.6 Experimenting with a liturgical witness**

To offer a liturgical witness means allowing people to experience faith. This means that people take part in the different rituals. This is essentially the way children grow up in the faith. They participate in the faith of their parents and their church community. There is no reason why adults could not go through the same experience. This is precisely where the virtual church can play an important role. It offers people an easy and anonymous way to participate in a worship service, receive prayer, etc. This is clearly a broad suggestion so there is room for experimentation with such an approach. As the technology improves, more or different ways to perform Christian rituals online will become possible.

### **12.4.7 Engaging in a form of humble evangelization**

The panel drew attention to the proper posture for evangelizing. Some saw it as morally wrong to presume one has the epistemological high place in a relationship. Through engaging with the work from Stackhouse and Moltmann, a posture of humble evangelization was considered where we acknowledge our subjectivity and the limitations of our understanding. The historic Christian teaching asserts that we are fallen beings, including in our thinking. When we relate to others we should be mindful of our own times of need and draw upon those experiences.

### **12.4.8 Addressing issues of religious freedom online**

For evangelization to be possible in the future it is important that Christians strengthen and protect religious freedom online. This would mean that people everywhere have free access to all the information necessary to make an unbiased and informed decision. Perhaps this could include helping people overcome technological barriers installed by their government. But it also means that we should look at the way technology manages information for us, as it was

seen in the case with filter bubbles. Access to information needs to be protected from forces which try to limit one's access to information for their personal benefit.

## **12.5 Concluding remarks**

To evangelize an avatar and through an avatar is a complicated matter and yet a potentially very valuable means for evangelization. The avatar provides a unique way for people to engage with each other. For many, the anonymity and protection an avatar provides helps them to explore religious matters and build their religious identity. Yet, like all technology, each Virtual Reality carries within it its own values which can create unintended consequences for those who want to evangelize. Thus, a process of discernment and constant modification is needed through which action and reflection enter into a dynamic process with each other.

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