

The Lord is My Textmate –
Folk Catholicism in the Cyber Philippines

The Philippines is currently undergoing its third major conversion. The first was the rapid Christianisation of the islands by Spanish friars during the 16th century; the second was its assimilation of Yankee values as taught by enthusiastic American teachers; and the third has been the cellphone revolution.¹

Cell phones were introduced into the Philippines² only in 1999;³ the country is now heralded as the texting capital of the world, with one hundred million texts being sent around the archipelago daily.⁴ Although the ratio of cell phones to population in the Philippines is low by international standards, the number of text messages sent by SMS users is double the world average. A recent national survey⁵ found that one in three Filipinos use mobile phones, including 17% of the poorest sector. Colloquially, texting is described as the “national pastime”. The popularity of texting is directly related to the inadequate infrastructure, notorious unreliability of traditional landlines⁶ and the low cost of SMS. Sending one text message costs a mere peso (approximately US\$ 0.02), compared with the relatively expensive rates of voice calls made directly from one’s cell phone

¹ R. Pertierra and E. Ugarte, *Cultures and Texts: Representations of Philippine Society*, Diliman, Quezon City: University of Philippines Press, 1994, p. 125.

² Readers, please forgive me if my position or language herein is more partial than standard anthropological writings. I acknowledge that the work is at times rather tongue and cheek, but I hope not offensive in any way.

³ Texting became possible in the Philippines in 1999 via Globe Telecoms’ introduction of prepaid calling cards (Pertierra and Ugarte, *op. cit.*, p. 87).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁵ The Pulse Asia survey was conducted from March 29th to April 12th, 2003, with 12,000 persons, see Martin Marfill, “One in 3 Filipinos Uses Cell Phones, Says Survey”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 21, 2003, pp. A 1, A 14.

⁶ G. Strøm, “The Telephone Comes to a Filipino Village”, in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 274–283.

or landline.⁷

Locally, users are commonly referred to as “generation texters”. They are usually urban or semi-urban dwellers, from lower-middle economic brackets and up, and are often students. A texter can be conceptualized as a regular participant in text exchange with other cell phone owners. Becoming a texter involves the development of texter-textee relationships, or general reliance on mobile communication in the fulfilment of one’s communication desires.

The Philippines is Asia’s only predominantly Catholic country, with 83% of the population adhering to Roman Catholicism.⁸ Fieldwork was conducted over the period of 2000–2003 in a semi-urban town (Kalibo, population 63,000) on Panay Island, the central Philippines. Panay is celebrated for its great festivity, hospitality and religiosity (i.e. rich religious sentiments and practices).⁹ Kalibo is situated near Boracay, the leading (sex) tourist destination in the country, and annually hosts *Ati-Atihan*, a three-week Mardi-Gras festival. Undergoing rapid social change, Kalibo provided an apt site to examine competing desires among young people; particularly dialectics of tradition and modernity, remnants of the Spanish colonial experience and notions of Cannell’s¹⁰ “imagined America”.¹¹

Although my study focused on young women’s sexual health, I could not help but respond to the prevalence of the texting phenomena. Through

⁷ Young people often receive their cell phones as a gift from their parents, extended family member, or an elder sibling. Occasionally women acquire cell phones from a boyfriend, signifying an ultimate romantic gift within the Filipino context due to the relationship between texting and romance. It is also customary to buy oneself a cell phone from a retail outlet or, less commonly, the black market. Other forms of acquisition include purchasing a second-hand cell phone or acquiring a phone through *pamilya* (family) networks. In addition, people may purchase their cell phone through remittances received from family members living overseas, and are able to keep in touch with that family member by text.

⁸ According to the *CIA - The World Factbook - Philippines*, Filipino religious affiliations are categorized as such: Roman Catholic 83%, Protestant 9%, Muslim 5%, Buddhist and other 3%. See <http://www.geoplance.com/hottopics/CIAwfb/factbook/geos/rp.html>, retrieved January 2004.

⁹ M. Reyes-Tinagan, *Viva! Kay Senor Santo Nino. Viva!* Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2001.

¹⁰ F. Cannell, “The Power of Appearances: Beauty, Mimicry, and the Transformation in Bicol”, in V. Rafael (ed.), *Discrepant Histories: Translocal Essays on Filipino Culture*, Manila: Temple University Press, 1995, pp. 223–258.

¹¹ Cannell, *op. cit.* p. 224, posits that Filipinos commonly compare the Philippines to America, as a place of distinct power, wealth, beauty, glamour and enjoyment.

standard anthropological methodologies (participant observation,¹² focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews¹³), I worked to gain an in-depth understanding of young women's (aged 15–29) lives. Data was also informed by young men's experiences and in light of salient themes within popular culture.¹⁴

Cell discourse has infiltrated Filipino social life as a powerful, far-reaching communication device. A strong example of this is its instrumental role in the overthrowing of Philippine president Joseph Estrada in January 2001. Text messaging was used to propagate anti-Estrada sentiments, organize massive demonstrations against the President, and during these protests, in response to riot police, to redirect crowds.¹⁵ My work, however, as presented elsewhere,¹⁶ focuses on the emotional, particularly the romantic and erotic aspects of text exchange. I examined how texting enables young women to side-step traditional gender constraints and experiment with their desires; the transformation of “anonymous texters” into embodied couples; how texting increases strife among friends and lovers in terms of privacy and in regard to what Kenneth Gergen has termed as *absent presence*.¹⁷ In this paper, I contrast these findings with an-

¹² During fieldwork I attended many social events under a religious banner. These included official church services (e.g. Sunday Mass, novenas), life cycle rituals (baptisms, marriages and funerals) and festivals (e.g. All Saint's Day, *Ati-Atihan*, and St. John Baptist Day).

¹³ Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 50 young women, and approximately 30 prominent community players (e.g. health practitioners, religious heads, social commentators and artists).

¹⁴ Specifically this included careful consideration of media (newspapers, magazines, radio, television and film), advertising, and primary health related material.

¹⁵ James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), *Perpetual Contact*, p. 3. For further discussion see Pertierra, *op. cit.*, or F. Paragas, “Dramatextism: Mobile Telephony and People Power in the Philippines”, in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy: Essays on Society, Self and Politics*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003, pp. 259–283.

¹⁶ See B. Ellwood-Clayton, “Virtual Strangers: Young Love and Texting in the Filipino Archipelago of Cyberspace”, in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy*, pp. 225–235; B. Ellwood-Clayton, “Desire and Loathing in the Cyber Philippines”, in R. Harper, L. Palen and A. Taylor (eds.), *The Inside Text: Social, Cultural and Design Perspectives on SMS*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, forthcoming.

¹⁷ Katz and Aakhus (*Perpetual Contact*, p. xxi) discuss how ownership of a mobile phone creates “the internal psychological feeling of being accessible or having access”. As a consequence, social relationships are changing due to new pressures and obligations. Gergen specifically addresses this in terms of the notion “absent presence” whereby “[o]ne is physically present but is absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere” (Kenneth J. Gergen, “The Challenge of Absent Presence”, in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus, eds., *Perpetual Contact*, p. 227). This “pervasive state” (*ibid.*, p. 240) is further defined in terms

other significant domain of the texting phenomena in the Philippines – sacred love: the relationship between SMS and God.

Herein I argue that local appropriation of religiosity is enacted through folk *text* Catholicism. This is demonstrated through users' communiqué, which I refer to as "*barkada* gospel", and in commercial avenues catering to the pious, which I refer to as "evangelical gospel" (e.g. text how-to books such as "The Lord is my Textmate", ringtones such as "Amazing Grace"). Of particular interest are priests' use of texts both socially and in their sermons and the emergence of commercial markets whereby texters are encouraged to "text God".

Folk Catholicism

Until the late 14th century, Filipinos generally believed in the dominance of one supreme deity, other lesser gods and an active spirit world.¹⁸ *Anito* deities¹⁹ were considered good and came in the form of spirits of the deceased, or lived in special nature spots of power (e.g. majestic trees), while nocturnal creatures called *asuangs* were responsible for evil activities,²⁰ and often came in the form of vampire.²¹ Despite implantation of the colonizers' religion in the modern day Philippines, numerous people have reported seeing *asuangs*. The island where I conducted my fieldwork, for example, is commonly believed to be the breeding ground for such vampire spirits. This demonstrates how local beliefs have persisted despite foreign ideologies and religious conversions.

Catholicism was brought to the Philippines when it was conquered in the 16th century.²² "The church building became the representation of authority, with the [male] priest as the spokesperson and the human medi-

of interrelationship: "the continuous presence at hand of family, friends and colleagues who are physically absent" (see Kenneth J. Gergen, "Self and Community in the New Floating Worlds", in Kristóf Nyíri, ed., *Mobile Democracy*, p. 105).

¹⁸ P. Rodell, *Culture and Customs of the Philippines*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002, p. 30.

¹⁹ Sacrifices were made to *anitos* in order to ward off any angry influences and to gain favours (Rodell, *ibid.*).

²⁰ These are activities such as attacking pregnant women, ill people, or those out in the evening alone (Rodell, *ibid.*).

²¹ *Asuangs* could take different forms: vampire, ghoul, witch, or a beautiful woman ready to trick men to their demise. Unlike *anitos*, offering or prayer could not placate *asuangs*; those inflicted sought the service of a shaman (Rodell, *op. cit.*, p. 31).

²² For more literature about religion in the Philippines see Reyes-Tinagan, *op. cit.*, and T. Agoncillo and M. Guerrero, *History of the Filipino People*, Quezon City: R. P. Garcia, 1977.

um to the spiritual world.”²³ Missionary priests spread throughout the archipelago and although monastic orders grew to have a great deal of political importance at the local level, as Rodell asserts, priests’ religious conversion of the local population was weak. Many Filipinos converted without an adequate understanding of Christian doctrine. Thus, the peasant majority interpreted Catholic beliefs through their own perspectives of worship, resulting in different forms of folk Catholicism. Folk Catholicism has been characterized by Lynch²⁴ as the “unique blend of official Catholic ritual and belief, peninsular Spanish and Mexican additives, and the pre-existent Malay base”. The merging of orthodox and folk-religious customs is demonstrated in contemporary religious practices, for example All Saint’s Day and *Ati-Atihan*. Lynch argues that folk-religious customs such as these provide members’ faith “a physical form which they recognize as their own, communicating the Good News in language and other symbols that are distinctly theirs”.²⁵ We will see how richly this notion is manifested in contemporary texting discourse.

***Barkada* Gospel: Love Thy Neighbour**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1).

The Catholic message is twofold: love of God and love of thy neighbour (as well as ideals of kindness, respect and compassion for those in need).²⁶ These values surface into personalized text expression, which I refer to, in general, as “text gospel”, and in the particular context of the Philippines: “*barkada* gospel”. *Barkada* refers to a long-term group of close friends who act almost as extended family to one another.²⁷ I argue that regular religious-supplemented text communication creates an independent form of community religiosity that is more or less autonomous from the Catholic Church. Within egalitarian power structures, individuals text other individuals: friend to friend, sister to sister, lover to lover. This complements Anderson’s²⁸ con-

²³ Rodell, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

²⁴ Aram A. Yengoyan and Perla Q. Makil (eds.), *Philippine Society and the Individual: Selected Essays of Frank Lynch, 1949–1976*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1984, p. 197.

²⁵ Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 206, my emphasis.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁷ Less commonly, *barkada* also refers to the negative influence of a group (e.g. men drinking too much due to peer pressure).

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed., London and New York: Verso, 1991, pp. 5–7.

cept of *imagined communities*, where the emergence of nationalism is related to, for example, the strengthening of communication devices and movements to abolish divine rule or monarchy.

Filipinos send two types of text messages to one another, what I have termed “hallmark”²⁹ (forwarded) and personal (self-composed) texts. Personal text messages range from trivial social detailing to more intimate dialogue, and often include the ubiquitous “God bless” at the end of messages. Hallmark religious texts are passed across the archipelago like chain letters;³⁰ generally syrupy and corny, there seems to be no stigma or irony involved in sending or receiving them:

God’s love is like the sunshine after the storm. Even when we get engulfed by life’s floods, we can be assured that the sun will always shine.³¹

A typical morning greeting of such calibre would be: SACRED HEART of JESUS CHRIST shower d person readn dis w ur blessings 2day & always. Gud am!³²

Messages such as these are frequently derived from commercially sold text books, catering to a range of emotional themes, e.g. humour, love, friendship, inspiration and religion. These books provide readers with theme-associated texts, ringtones, and graphics. This highlights the symbolic and cultural value of text messaging, whereby texts need not be necessarily individualized, as meanings are derived from shared values that are incorporated into the messages.

Sometimes texters incorporate playful or humorous elements into their texting repertoire even when the content has religious elements. For example, a police officer sent my friend Antonio the following text; imagine his surprise when reading the first screen:

²⁹ Hallmark Cards is the world’s largest “social expressions” company.

³⁰ Kasesniemi and Rautiainen also report that young people in Finland send texts like chain letters. See E.-L. Kasesniemi and P. Rautiainen, “Mobile Culture of Children and Teenagers in Finland”, in James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), *Perpetual Contact*, pp. 170–192.

³¹ It is significant to note that texters sending religious sentiments to one another often return to standard grammatical rules of spelling and punctuation, thus placing the messages into a more formal and ceremonial domain.

³² Sacred heart of Jesus Christ shower the person reading this with your blessings today and always. Good morning!

I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU	I LOVE YOU MAMA MARY! Txt dis msg 2 5 of ur frends & ur	Wish wil b grantd in 1 day. Pls dont ignor! ³³
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This second, 7-screen message is even more remarkable:

1 missed call	1 new number	Missed 1: JESUS	He will never stop calling	No matter how many times you miss His calls	'til you hear and answer	JESUS LOVES YOU
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SMS provides users a financially solvent, endearing and particularly rewarding form of adhesion in maintaining social relationships. Acting to enrich and nurture relationships, text exchange keeps people feeling socially connected and acts to abate loneliness and social alienation. This technology supports familial relationships, an intrinsically important component of the Filipino social structure.³⁴ Being able to communicate despite geographical distance is especially salient in light of the current economic situation, characterized by high relocation and migration. For example, according to Tan et al. estimates of Filipinos living and working overseas range from 4 to 6.5 million.³⁵

Many users find emotional solace or inspiration through text discourse.³⁶ Text exchanges among *barkada* often act as reminders of faith, love and friendship and reinforce enjoying the good life despite numerous external hardships. Thus, *barkada* gospel can be understood as a form of emo-

³³ Text this message to five of your friends and your wish will be granted in one day. Please don't ignore!

³⁴ M. Tan, T. Batangan and H. Espanola (eds.), *Love and Desire: Young Filipinos and Sexual Risks*, Manila: University of the Philippines, 2001.

³⁵ It is difficult to determine absolute numbers of Filipinos living and working overseas due to the large number of individuals working abroad illegally. See M. Tan, K. Cheng and J. Lamung, *Living on the Edge: Case Study on Filipino Seafarers*, Pasig City: Health Action Information Network (HAIN), 2000, p. 1.

³⁶ For example, as said by one respondent: "The messages my friends send me make me feel better when I'm down. Sometimes it's coincidental; they send me messages that I need to hear. They can be significant in your daily life. It's good to have someone reminding you how wonderful life is."

tional hospitality:³⁷ as goodwill enacted on the micro level through cyber means. It can also be likened to Mauss's³⁸ conceptions of gift-giving and balanced reciprocity, where like is exchanged for like (text for text).³⁹

Looking at the relationship between texting and religion in other Asian contexts, I turn to journalist Sani's⁴⁰ unique account of the celebration of Muslim Hari Raya festival in Kuala Lumpur:

While nothing could replace the actual noisy and chaotic atmosphere where everyone will be talking a mile a minute, we could be part of the Hari Raya gathering by sending notes and messages via SMS. We could even carry out a text-based conversation without missing much. Even better, we could also send out picture messaging through multimedia messaging (MMS)-enabled mobile phones for that visual impact.

Here we have some reference point for future directions of the mobile phone in terms of religious experiences. This indicates that SMS is altering important religious events – one does not have to be present in a physical, traditional sense to practice religion. It highlights how the body is technologically engaged and how postmodern technological embodiment is not a singularly discursive condition.⁴¹

What does it mean that individuals are passing on the Good Word to one another, instead of through more standard [male] means of church, bible and priest? Will texting act to subvert such institutions by its own Catholic appropriation? *Barkada* gospel fosters virtual communities that cut across temporal and geographic constraints and works to maintain relationships and support community-based forms of religiosity. Aided by cyberspace, religious communication, as a micro, daily social relation occurring between individuals, has an alternative site of expression; it has

³⁷ Hospitality is a highly honoured Filipino (Agoncillo and Guerrero, *op. cit.*) and certainly Kalibonhon trait (see Reyes-Tinagan, *op. cit.*).

³⁸ M. Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* [1925], London: Routledge, 1997.

³⁹ See also Ellwood-Clayton, "Desire and Loathing" (forthcoming), and A. Taylor and R. Harper, "Age-Old Practices in the 'New World': A Study of Gift-Giving between Teenage Mobile Phone Users", *CHI 2002*, Minneapolis: ACM Press.

⁴⁰ R. Sani, "Connecting Raya Spirit in Technological Ways", *New Straits Times*, November 24, 2003, p. 2.

⁴¹ A. Balsamo, "Forms of Technological Embodiment: Reading the Body in Contemporary Culture", in J. Price and M. Shildrick (eds.), *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999, pp. 278–290, the quoted passage is on p. 287.

literally become based in the *hands of the people* rather than primarily through institutions. In addition, women are networking religious thought to one another by text, and are thus key players in religious discourse.⁴² However, as we now turn to priests' roles in texting relationships, and then to commercial or evangelical gospel, women's role is again inverted as subordinate.

The Priest Is My Textmate: Secular and Sacred Forms of the Good Word

Research findings indicate that priests in the Philippines, not removed from modern living, often own a personal cell phone, which they use for social purposes as well as general convenience. Linked also to pre-established *barkada* networks, priests often engage in the passing of friendly, inspirational, and humorous-based text messages among those with whom they are acquainted. For example, I received the following inspirational SMS from a priest in his mid-thirties:

Prayer lifts our hearts above the battles of life and gives us a glimpse of God's resources which spells victory and hope. God bless YOU all the time. Gud am!

This SMS is similar to inspirational texts sent among *barkada* networks, with the theme of prayer or religious faith as providing a means to transcend personal hardships. The essential difference is that receiving messages such as these from a Father can be perceived as a post-modern form of cyber blessings. This verifies how words are often given power through their delivery, i.e. by the source of the message sender.

However, research also suggests that it is not atypical for priests to send *bastos* (rude) jokes to their male (and less frequently female) acquaintances, such as the texts listed below:

A man asks a rabbi: Is sex work or play? Rabbi: My son, sex is def play. If sex were work, my wife would

⁴² Analysis of religion through feminist critique was specifically brought forth through the deconstruction of the hierarchies of the major world religions. Feminists have examined religions in terms of androcentrism, sexism, and exclusive language, that is, the institutional exclusion and the marginalization of women in religious practices and writings, see S. Andermahr, T. Lovell and C. Wolkowitz (eds.), *A Glossary of Feminist Theory*, London: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 231. Pointing to the immense significance of religion in the lives of women around the world, Irigaray argues for the feminist necessity to better understand women's religious lives. See L. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, transl. by C. Porter, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.

have asked the maid to do it!⁴³

Two sperm are swimming side by side, one says to the other: "How far till we reach the ovaries?" The other says "Fucking miles, we're just passed the tonsils."

Perhaps priests use provincial SMS humour like this in order to build trust and rapport with other men,⁴⁴ or to a lesser extent women, believing these exchanges illuminate their "human" or modern sides.

Preliminary research also points to some priests sending women romantic-coded SMS messages, whereby Catholic norms are clearly breached:

I have had textmates who are priests, but they don't always send religious messages. They often text just to say hello. One of my priest-friends even made me feel uneasy by texting: "I miss you! I want to kiss and hug you! Mwah! Mwah!⁴⁵ I love you!" (Rosie, age 26)

The examples (above) pertain to *virtual* communiqué. Priests, however, are beginning to incorporate text messages into their lived worlds as indisputably sacred, i.e. they are using them in their sermons. For example, the following message was found in *Texters' Choice*⁴⁶ (a text how to/quote book): I quote some text messages every time I preach. Its been a great help to me. Thank God and more power to you (Kier of Cagayan de Oro). It will be interesting to see how this trend plays out in future church services.

Addicted to God: Evangelical Gospel

New commercial markets have arisen in the Philippines whereby texters are encouraged to text religious corporations in order to access spiritual readings. Recent Philippine media discusses how the Catholic Church

⁴³ In another example, according to one of my respondents, a priest sent her uncle the following SMS joke: "There are different kinds of soap: For virgins, Tender Care; for those who masturbate, Camay [the Tagalog word for "hand" is "*kamay*"; "*kinakamay*" means to give a "hand job"]; for horny girls, Dial ["Dial" is a Filipino term for female masturbation, specifically the rubbing of the clitoris]; for those who use condoms, Safe-guard."

⁴⁴ See for example P. Lyman, "The Fraternal Bond as a Joking Relationship: A Case Study of the Role of Sexist Jokes in Male Group Bonding", in M. Kimmel and M. Messner (eds.), *Men's Lives*, 2nd ed., New York/Toronto: Macmillan/Maxwell, 1992.

⁴⁵ "Mwah" indicates the sound of smacking lips, i.e. a kiss.

⁴⁶ See T. Edsel, *Texters' Choice: Text Thots Book 3*, Paranaque City, The Philippines: ERI Enterprises, 2001, pp. 105–106.

has tapped into the SMS phenomenon in order to spread its gospel. Manila Auxiliary Bishop Socrates Villegas's archdiocese, for example, recently launched "Catextism", a service that provides spiritual readings and prayer through SMS transfer in cyberspace. The Bishop said, "Texting is now undeniably a way of life for the largely Roman Catholic Philippines."⁴⁷ The service works in collaboration with the Philippines' two top cellular phone companies. To access Catextism, texters key in the word "Amen" on their cell phones and send it to a particular number, and subsequently receive a menu of spiritual readings and prayers. Welcome to the postmodern cyber bible. Below Honey (age 23, college graduate, single), comments on her use of a similar evangelical service:

I have subscriptions on two SMS services that provide me with my daily dose⁴⁸ of religious quotes and Bible verses. One is from the Shepard's Voice. To get a subscription, you just have to type "GOD" and send to 463 if you're using a Smart cell phone. The other is from 777; I just typed "JESUS" and I have been receiving inspirational messages ever since.

The following two examples come from Honey's collection:

From GOD (#463): *There are some days when we do not feel like we belong. There are times when we feel alone. In those days, God loves you more than you know.*⁴⁹

From JESUS (#777): *When we get tangled up in our problems, be still. God wants us to be still so He can untangle the knot.*

Note the central theme: God loves the said person, one is not alone. Also, we can see how services such as these cater to those in the face of problems and struggle. Serious concerns about people's appropriation of the Word, and issues pertaining to censorship arise (e.g. the content of messages, who chooses these, what boundaries exist). Before SMS, priests acted as the vehicle to God, now one can bypass the intermediary. The commercial nature of such services is also salient.

⁴⁷ "A Step Beyond: The Gospel according to SMS", *Independent Online*, 2002, see http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?click_id=29&art_id=ct20020412111115754B260390&set_id=1A.

⁴⁸ Note Honey's reference to such services in terms of habit or dependence, i.e. receiving her "daily dose" of religious quotes.

⁴⁹ Another SMS of a similar calibre is: "Feeling out of love? Look up to the sky, God made that for you. The trees, bees, flowers, these are all for you! GOD LOVES YOU!"

Hotline to God?

Planning for your future? I am. :) --God⁵⁰

Evangelical SMS services in the Philippines not only respond to texters by offering them spiritual prayers. In one's darkest hour instead of kneeling by pew and praying for spiritual guidance, one can merely key in "Jesus" and within seconds will receive "Word" directly *from* God. During my last visit to the field (late 2003), I noticed a campaign in all of the main newspapers: *Addicted to God: Addict Mobile, get hooked*. Here Filipinos are encouraged to text God. The ads "Passion" and "Devotion"⁵¹ read:

Here's how you can get addicted to God through Addict Mobile: Simply start a conversation with God by texting your thoughts, feelings and prayers to 463. You'll receive personal replies of God's Word to guide you in your life. So text God now!

One of my younger respondents did just this:

When I feel like praying or when I feel down, I send my messages to GOD at #463. A reply comes with a Bible verse related to my problem. For instance, I texted: "Dear God, please help me. I am broken hearted." The reply was: "Mission Possible! :) Isaiah 14:24 'Surely as I hav planned, so it wil b, & as I hav purposed, so it will stand.' --Love, God."

The individual implications of commercial ventures such as these are multifold. As Bishop Villegas stated, "Catextism's message is that God is with us in all situations."⁵² Indeed, this is perhaps the strongest ramification of such an enterprise. Aided by cyberspace, God is with us in all situations, and we can hear directly from "Him"⁵³ at any given time. Does this not irrevocably answer the question of God's existence? Is there need for existential pondering, if we already have proof of God's material incarnate?

Text relationships with God are less expensive and time consuming than donations or church visits. Access to religious membership such as

⁵⁰ This text was found in Edsel, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

⁵¹ We can also see some evidence of the sexualization of God, through earlier jokes, themes of addiction, "passion" and "devotion".

⁵² *Independent Online*, cf. note 47 above.

⁵³ Here I am referring to local conceptions of God as a male entity.

Addicted to God is less costly than joining popular national organizations such as Couples for Christ. For the poor,⁵⁴ the overburdened, the outcast and sexual dissidents, for whom visiting the community church is either not feasible or undesirable due to social stigmas, text services such as these provide religious refuge, to one and all.⁵⁵

The global implications of such services are considerable. Now God can talk to people all over the world via cyberspace. Is Catholicism being trivialized as a commodity? Is this an example of capitalistic venture or evangelical gospel? As Bishop Villegas said, “Text messaging is a powerful force for shaping the minds and hearts of the children of God, all over the world.”⁵⁶ What can we expect in the future? Perhaps the following excerpt found on the “Web Evangelism Bulletin”⁵⁷ provides an indication:

The number of text messages sent to mobile phones each day is huge. Is there potential for using texting evangelistically? The Catholic Church in the Philippines has been using a new service called “Catextism” to encourage young Catholics... Could there be a similar application to help young people access very brief positive messages with an evangelistic element? Has anyone tried?

The Pope was expected to issue a message on World Communication Day, May 12 (2004) that text messaging must be “embraced” by the church.⁵⁸ Although I could not find literature about this, I did uncover the Pope’s 2002 message about the relationship between evangelicalism and the internet:⁵⁹

The Internet causes billions of images to appear on millions of computer monitors around the planet. From this galaxy of sight and sound will the

⁵⁴ As already noted, any Filipinos classified as poor have access to a family cell phone, acquire one from remittances received from family members living overseas, or purchase one on the black market.

⁵⁵ Again, the benefits of texting in terms of anonymity arise.

⁵⁶ *Independent Online*, cf. note 47 above.

⁵⁷ “Texting for God”, *Web Evangelism Bulletin*, 2002, see <http://www.gospelcom.net/guide/resources/webull02jun1.php>.

⁵⁸ This is according to *Independent Online*, cf. note 47 above.

⁵⁹ *Message of the Holy Father for the 36th World Communications Day: “Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel”*, May 12, 2002, see http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day_en.html.

face of Christ emerge and the voice of Christ be heard? For it is only when his face is seen and his voice heard that the world will know the glad tidings of our redemption. This is the purpose of evangelization. And this is what will make the Internet a genuinely human space, for if there is no room for Christ, there is no room for man. Therefore, on this World Communications Day, I dare to summon the whole Church bravely to cross this new threshold, to put out into the deep of the Net, so that now as in the past the great engagement of the Gospel and culture may show to the world “the glory of God on the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6). May the Lord bless all those who work for this aim.

Moreover, working with the Vatican and Italian wireless services provider Acotel (situated in Rome), Verizon Wireless is launching a new mobile service in America which provides texters to receive messages from the Pope. As Charny⁶⁰ reports:

By offering the pope’s daily message, U.S. cell phone service providers hope to find an audience among the growing number of people developing a taste for virtual religion and who want to get theirs on the go. Religion now ranks as among the top three reasons why people use the Internet, and religious options on the wired Web are nearly as vast as the medium itself. However, very little of it is created for a cell phone’s small screen and limited processing power.

The aim of this article was to generate ideas and imaginings of the future in terms of religion and technology. I will conclude by posing some questions. What will happen when Buddha starts texting people, when Allah does? Will this lead to postmodern theomachy:⁶¹ holy wars in cyberspace, such as what is already occurring through the internet medium? I have discussed elsewhere⁶² that text-based confession is spreading throughout the Philippines, most often in the form of married men disclosing that they have been unfaithful due to relationships they have built with women through texting. What’s next, confession by way of text, whereby after texters disclose their sins and receive a response from cyberspace of “5 hail Marys”?

⁶⁰ B. Charny, “Pope to Ping the Faithful”, April 6, 2004, see http://news.zdnet.com/2100-9584_22-5185965.html.

⁶¹ Theomachy refers to battles among the Gods.

⁶² Ellwood-Clayton, “Desire and Loathing” (forthcoming).

