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Of watchdogs and safe havens

Control mechanisms and/in online sacred spaces

Introduction

'Die große Schlacht. Der Hass des Satans auf Benedikt XVI. Non prae-valebunt'[1] is the headline of an article the Austrian-based and Catholic news portal, kath.net, published in early June 2012. It is about how badly and unfairly the media treat the Catholic Church and its official representatives in the wake of the so-called 'Vatileaks' scandal and it reasons that Satan is behind the attacks of the media, society, popular culture, on saintly figures such as Pope Benedict XVI. 'Gegen die Diktatur des Relativismus'[2] is another article published on the same platform in the context of a conference hosted by the Catholic Heiligenkreuz monastery. On the forum kath.net, powerful language is employed to draw the faithful in, to make them feel themselves to be safe within a community of like-minded people in the midst of turmoil. I argue that news portals and message boards such as kath.net create safe spaces within a world whose culture, values, and morals are not only not understood but despised. My analysis is informed by critical discourse analysis and based on Paul Ricœur's understanding of narratives and how narratives create worlds. As a first step I will discuss the concept of space and Ricœur's understanding of narrative identity. After an introduction to the news portal kath.net, I will offer a close reading of some articles to show how these safe spaces are created and guarded. To conclude, I will reflect on the implications of the self-understanding of kath.net and some of its user base on the understanding of hierarchy and the role of theology in the Church.

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1   'The Great Battle – Satan's hatred towards Benedict XVI – non praevalebunt.'
     Schwibach 2012. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.
2   'Against the Dictatorship of Relativism'. Kath.net 2012c.

Data, approach, methodology

Doing research on news portals and message boards or online forums is challenging and a good example of a larger study which involved coding practices and 100 blogs as source material is Heidi Campbell's study of religious authority, 'Religious authority and the blogosphere' (Campbell 2010: 251–76). This present study is on a much smaller scale. I do not employ any quantitative methods, but offer a close reading of an article covering the US 2012 election results which is supplemented by an analysis of the coverage of an altar consecration in the Diocese of Graz-Seckau in Austria in April 2012. A similar analysis – with similar results – could be made of coverage of topics such as marriage, (homo)sexuality, or abortion, though a detailed analysis of all these issues would go beyond the scope of this article as well as constraints on its length.

For data gathering, I relied on virtual ethnography as method as outlined, for example, by Christine Hine (2008). I have been following articles and posts on the kath.net forum for at least four years as a passive and non-registered observer. I have looked at the site as-is and at what a non-registered guest gets to see/read when they visit it. As such, all the articles and postings I have looked at are publicly accessible. It is important to point out that – like many online forums or portals – kath.net reserves the right to moderate user comments on kath.net news articles.[3]

Besides the news portal with its commentary function, there is also a message board – kathnews.com – which often carries heated discussions. The focus of this analysis, however, is the news portal and its associated comments. Hine points out that passive data collection from online sources is not necessarily the best data collection method and that a more active approach might be beneficial for the findings (Hine 2008: 257, 261). However, since kath.net defines itself as a news portal ('Katholische Nachrichten') with the majority of content being the news posts, I chose to take the passive approach.

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[3] The terms and conditions for posting comments under each article states: 'Für die Kommentiermöglichkeit von kath.net-Artikeln müssen Sie sich bei kathLogin registrieren. Die Kommentare werden von Moderatoren stichprobenartig überprüft und freigeschaltet. Ein Anrecht auf Freischaltung besteht nicht.' ('You need to be registered with kathLogin to be able to post and comment on kath.net-articles. The comments are being checked by moderators randomly and published. There is no right to have your comments published.') See, for example, kath.net 2012d. Between the time of the writing of this article and its publication, kath.net has started to modify the commenting function and commenting is currently disabled for all articles. All discussions are currently taking place in the kath.net message board, kathnews.com.

I am aware, though, as Hine points out, that the outsider or passive observer 'might find a culture bizarre in its practices and experience difficulties in taking it seriously as a coherent domain of cultural practice' (Hine 2008: 262). Having grown up in a traditional Catholic environment, I am familiar with the various shades of Catholic culture. Hine also points out that 'the lurker risks assuming, without any experiential basis for doing so, that the public bulletin board is all that there is for all members. Trying out what it is like to be a participating member can be a route into a complex set of communicative practices which deploy multiple media in flexible and creative fashion' (Hine 2008: 262). I am aware that the news portal forms only a part of the communication processes in the kath.net universe. Yet it is exactly this public appearance of the news portal and its user comments, which is accessible to all, that I am interested in and what these discourses which are open to and accessible by the internet community might tell us about the self-understanding of kath.net and its users.

The guiding question in the analysis of the material has been the question of the visual, symbolic, and linguistic representation of self, other, and world. As such, I have looked at the design of the site, the style the articles are written in and what they emphasize or leave out, as well as what language the comments employ and the dynamic between the posts as the number of comments posted rises. The analysis of the material is informed by critical discourse analysis (CDA). Teun A. van Dijk understands CDA as 'a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality' (van Dijk 2001: 352). Most scholars agree that CDA is neither a unified theory nor a form of methodology, but rather a critical mindset that tries to uncover ideologies, power structures, questions of gender and hierarchies in their social contexts (cf. Wodak 2002: 6). I am thus interested in the social effect of the texts and their construction and representation of ideologies (cf. Fairclough 2003: 8 f.).

To interpret the data and my findings, I draw on Paul Ricœur's idea of narrative identity. Norman Fairclough argues that 'texts are . . . parts of social events. One way in which people can act and interact in the course of social events is to speak or to write. It is not the only way. Some social events have a highly textual character, others don't' (Fairclough 2003: 21). Social events, however, always also have symbolic character and are part of a system of representation, communication, and processes through which we construct

and mediate meaning (cf. du Gay and Hall 1997: 13). However, according to Ricœur, all texts and actions need to be 'read' and interpreted with regards to their socio-cultural, religious, and political context in order to be understood. This paper is concerned with the production and re-production of identities and spaces. The combination of CDA and Ricœur's framework of narrative identity allows us to uncover the identity processes which are at work on kath.net.

While this paper focuses on the Austrian platform, kath.net can be seen as part of a broader and worldwide phenomenon of increasingly traditional and conservative Catholic blogging. This particular 'Catholic blogosphere' consists of both lay and ordained Catholics and is becoming increasingly conservative as it attempts to enforce official Church doctrine. Recently, the Catholic theologian Tina Beattie, Professor for Catholic Studies at the University of Roehampton has been the focus of attention for her support of a re-reading of Catholic sexual-moral teaching.[4] Examples such as blog posts commenting on Beattie's academic research or the site kath.net show that Catholic (online) discourse is increasingly shaped by (a probably small number of) highly engaged Catholics who are very well-versed in staging their media presence.[5]

Theoretical framework: space/spaces/sacred spaces and the internet

When the internet gained momentum and its use started to spread in the 1980s and 1990s, many media artists, media theorists, cultural studies scholars, techno-scientists, journalists and activists perceived it as revolutionary, as a utopian space, or at least a space which could be transformed into a utopian, non-discriminatory space, free from earthly economic, political, and power interests. In 1996, for example, John P. Barlow, the co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)[6], a non-profit organization and advocate of personal rights in digital space, published the Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace, reflecting some of the ideals floating around of what the internet is meant to be: 'We are creating a world that all may enter

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4   Following this attention, the University of San Diego withdrew an invitation
     extended to Beattie to give a public lecture. Cf. Beattie 2012, McElwee 2012.
5   Examples for blogposts are: Farrow 2012, Donnelly 2012, Archbold 2012.
6   Electronic Frontier Foundation EFF 2012.

without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth' (Barlow 1996, cf. also Barlow 1996b).

Virtual reality was often viewed in contrast to mundane, earthly reality and existence.[7] While not without its critics, virtual reality was both the 'wholly Other' as well as a means for self-transformation; a means by which we could transcend our very existence. These visions were infused with religious language and religious symbols, a rhetoric of deliverance and freedom. Stephen Talbott poignantly summarized the religious visions connected with the internet: 'The Internet, many believe, will cleanse us from sin. In particular, it will deliver us from prejudice and bigotry. The idea is that I can't see your age or race or gender or handicap when I interact with you across the Net, and therefore I can't cultivate prejudicial feelings against you' (Talbott 2000: 99[8]). And he critically remarks: 'It's bizzare, this widespread sense of exhilaration about freedom from prejudice. Think about it: we are supposed to triumph over the urge to mistreat each other – how? By not seeing each other! By making distant abstractions of each other. The idea seems to be that we can be more fully human toward each other by being less human, less *there*, less in view' (Talbott 2000: 199).

As time went by, network-based communication technologies pervaded everyday lives and the distinction between 'real' reality and 'virtual' reality, between online/offline became increasingly blurry and messy. The omnipresence of communication technologies today, in particular in the Western world,[9] and the ready availability of the internet through mobile devices, have created an atmosphere in which many users take its possibilities for granted. Being able to log on has become something almost like a basic need, bringing

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7   This difference between 'here' and 'there', the earthly domain and the domain of the cyberspace is also reflected in the Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace: 'We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear.' Barlow 1996a.

8   Page numbers in Talbott 2000 references refer to the printed German translation, English original available in the PDF version of the book.

9   Modern communication technologies have become an integral part of the way we 'do' things, but the 'digital divide', not only between Western and developing countries, but also within Western countries is often overlooked.

with it the pressure for many to actually be available by means of ICT 24/7. To counter the stress this is causing for some, Volkswagen was reported to have stopped delivering emails to mobile devices outside of working hours (BBC 2011). As such, in the West the internet has lost much of its early promise of being a utopian and democratizing power, as the German media theorist Norbert Bolz has pointed out (cf. lecture: Bolz 2009). At the same time we witness a phenomenon where many young people are immersed in computer-mediated communication and social media but are, at the same time, very computer illiterate.

For the purpose of this paper, it is important to keep the initial excitement about the internet and the subsequent disenchantment in mind because I argue that this dis-enchantment is not a complete one, or in other words, the disenchantment has left room for re-enchantment. On the internet, spaces and places have emerged which users experience as special, wholly other; as sacred in their own right (cf. Helland 2007, Jacobs 2007). The perception of a website or an online space as sacred/special, however, is not limited to online churches, temples, or online rituals; the notion of the 'sacred' can be applied to websites or online spaces which are experienced as 'other', as space in which the profane is transcended, a space which is marked as 'other', experienced as such, and which offers the possibility of encountering something 'other'. And it is this construction and perception of internet spaces, of community spaces as forms of sacred space which I am concerned with in this paper.

Wholly other spaces

As human beings, we are always already social and communicative beings and communication is a vital part of our *conditio humana*. In fact, we exist to communicate, not just through language and words or bodily gestures, but our sheer existence is grounded in, emerges from, and *is* communication. We are part of, participate in, and contribute to communicative practices in a variety of ways. As communicative beings we never exist in isolation, but are at the very heart relational.

The notion of human beings as communicative and relational finds expression in Paul Ricœur's understanding of narrative identity. He argues that we each contribute to our narratives, to the narrative of our lives; we are agents in this narrative, but never the sole authors. Rather, we are agents and co-authors, because the beginning and end of the narrative of our lives, births and deaths are written and told by others; they are part of someone else's nar-

rative rather than our own (cf. Ricœur 1995: 160–2). 'By narrating a life of which I am not the author as to its existence, I make myself its coauthor as to its meaning' (Ricœur 1995: 162).

The understanding of our beginning and end as (other people's) narratives which are – ultimately – withdrawn from our grasp expresses very well the notion that we are always already related to one another through communicative practices. Narratives tie people together and bring people into relationship; they can foster a sense of community and value within that community. Narratives are particularly important for religious communities, as Paul Ricœur stresses: '[t]o be a religious subject is to agree to enter or to have already entered into this vast circuit involving a founding word, mediating texts, and traditions of interpretations' (Ricœur 1998: 145). And with the term 'vast circuit', he means 'hermeneutic "circles": I know this word because it is written, this writing because it is received and read; and this reading is accepted by a community, which, as a result, agrees to be deciphered by its founding texts; and it is this community that reads them' (Ricœur 1998: 145).

But narratives are always also more than a mere web or network which brings people together, or helps to form a community. Narratives, in particular our life narratives, consist of written and spoken words, language, actions, and practices. Language as well as human action and human communicative practices, however, are highly symbolic practices which need to be 'read', interpreted, and understood, based on their socio-cultural and historic contexts.

Drawing on Ricœur's understanding of narrative identity, we can think of computer-mediated communication practices as 'texts' which can be interpreted, which have a social dimension, and which leave their marks on history (cf. Ricœur 1971). These texts, text fragments, and communicative practices in all their variety and range of genres, then, understood as narratives and narrative fragments, both allow for worlds to emerge and can be used to create and construct worlds;[10] worlds which users, readers, recipients are confronted with, contribute to, have to interpret and make sense of. As such, narratives also frame the users' or readers' perceptions of the world, they 'teach' them to view and understand the world in a certain way (cf. Ricœur 2005: 200). We rely on narratives to 'invent' fictional worlds, but also to invent our very own world. At the same time, we use narratives to 'discover', explore, explain, and frame the world we live in (Ricœur 1979: 120). And these

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10   In the context of the cinema, Brent Plate makes a similar argument that films create and re-create worlds, cf. Plate 2008.

narratives we create, we find ourselves immersed in, and expose ourselves to 'change reality'. This process of invention and discovery through narratives, what we do with narratives, how we frame narratives, and what these frames do with and to us can be understood as a process of a '*redescription* of reality' (Ricœur 1979: 123–41, 127).

Most of what Ricœur says about narratives is based on his understanding of fiction. For him, in particular the genre of fiction offers – and he understands this in a very positive way – a laboratory of meaning in which we can experiment with different worlds, different behaviours, contexts, values, and moral frameworks (cf. Ricœur 1995: 115, 140, 148, 156–64). Yet, what Ricœur says about fiction in particular can be applied to the possibilities narratives in general can offer as well as to the narrative fragments we find on the internet or on online message boards.

Computer-mediated communication is not just a way of exchanging messages but is also a powerful way to create narratives. As Peggy Nelson's artwork shows, short messages such as 160-characters-long twitter messages can be used to create (narrative) worlds. Using twitter, Nelson has created two distinct characters, each with their stories; not a narrative in a traditional sense, but a narrative nonetheless, as Nelson herself argues: 'I do new media art with a focus on decentralized, episodic storytelling. . . . So they're [her projects] all stories told in little bits at a time, with a lot of gaps' (Pitzer 2010). These examples show that new media, message boards, short messages, can, in fact, contribute to this construction of the world, the changing, rewriting, and redescription of reality. As such, they can create and offer a framework through which we experience and interpret whatever phenomena we encounter.

Narratives are a way to structure life, they offer a symbolic system or a symbolic structure that helps interpret our experiences, conflicts, or our encounters with the world. Ricœur argues that such symbolic systems are vital to social life:

> Unless social life has a symbolic structure, there is no way to understand how we live, do things, and project these activities in ideas, no way to understand how reality can become an idea or how real life can produce illusions. This symbolic structure can be perverted, precisely by class interests and so on as Marx has shown, but if there were not a symbolic function already at work in the most primitive kind of action, I could not understand, for my part, how reality could produce shadows of this kind. This is why I am seeking a function of ideology more radical than the distorting, dissimulating function. The distorting function covers only a small

> surface of the social imagination, in just the same way that hallucinations or illusions constitute only a part of our imaginative activity in general (Ricœur 1986: 8).

We can use the idea of narrative as creating worlds and spaces in the analysis of the dynamics of online religion news portals and religion message boards. Narratives – not only fictions, but narratives in general – write and re-write our world and as such contribute to a social imagination which 'is *constitutive* of social reality' (Ricœur 1986: 3). This 'social imagination' or 'cultural imagination', according to Ricœur, operates 'in both constructive and destructive ways, as both confirmation and contestation of the present situation' (Ricœur 1986: 3). People contributing articles to religious news portals, or posts in the comment section or on message boards, then, construct and deconstruct the world using narrative fragments. They deconstruct the world as they perceive it to be and (re)construct a world as it ought to be. This re-written and re-described world is within this world and yet apart from it. It is an ideal, a utopian world, because many believers participating in online communication long for its realization eagerly.

Typically, an ideal world, a utopian world, is a world that portrays a social state that is not realized yet but anticipated. However, its non-realization or its virtual state does not make it less real (cf. Gehmann 2012: 7–9). It is very real for many of its participants and its ideal/utopian make-up 'bleed[s]' into the real world (Geraci 2010: 72). These virtual worlds, or narratives, created online do not only frame the perception of the offline world; they have real world consequences.[11] As scholars such as Christian Stegbauer point out, the internet does not suspend social structures or hierarchies, but can produce and reproduce them online. Rather than being an anarchy, the internet maps offline hierarchies, prejudices, or creates new hierarchies (Stegbauer 2012a and 2012b). In turn, the internet also re-writes and transforms offline social structures, contributing to how these structures are perceived and interpreted. Online and offline, then – and I am wary of using these terms in this way because I do not want to suggest that online and offline are two entirely separate spheres – are not only in a mutual relationship, shaping each other and imprinting their characteristics and structures onto each other, but both are part of 'our reality' and our attempts to make sense of the world.

11   Cf. the blogging activites on Tina Beattie mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Kath.net

According to the imprint on its website, kath.net is an independent, Catholic, Austrian, internet-based magazine/news portal which aims to report on what is going on in the Catholic world, in particular in the German-speaking countries. According to the website kathpedia.com, a Catholic online encyclopedia based on Wikipedia software, kath.net is an 'unabhängige, katholische Nachrichtenagentur im Internet, die seit Herbst 2001 existiert und zu den wichtigsten Internetseiten im deutschen Sprachraum gehört' (Kathpedia.com 2012a).[12]

Kathpedia.com's evaluation of kath.net as one of the most important websites in the German-speaking area is more a self-evaluation, however, because both kath.net and kathpedia.com are operated by the registered society 'kath.net', based in Linz/Austria. The website kath.net was founded in 2001, is run by lay Catholics and runs on a not-for-profit basis. It is mostly financed by donations from its readers, a yearly payment by the Austrian branch of the Pontifical Foundation 'Aid to the Church in Need', advertising, and the selling of books and readers' tours (Kathpedia.com 2012a).

One of the founders and main contributors to the site is Roland Noé, nicknamed 'Gandalf' in the kath.net universe. He and his team are part of what I perceive to be an interesting phenomenon of religious conservatism among young people. The European religious landscape has dramatically changed in the last few decades. While radical secularization theories predicting the end of religion have been proven wrong and religion in a variety of forms and contexts is more present than ever in Western Europe, institutionalized religious communities do, indeed, struggle and face a steady decline in numbers. However, we can witness what seems to be a growing number (or at least one which is increasingly visible in the public sphere) of young, dynamic, and tech-savvy Catholics for whom the Pope is a hero. Most of them are committed to the teachings of the Catholic Church in all its aspects and are organizing themselves with the help of the internet to attempt to spread their enthusiasm out into the world with the help of communication technologies. Another example for this highly dynamic and active scene is the recent Catholic radio project 'Fisherman.fm' in Switzerland.[13]

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12   An 'independent, Catholic online news agency which exists since fall 2001 and which belongs to one of the most important websites in the German-speaking area.'

13   Another example of what I perceive to be an increasingly active and engaged, conservative Catholic movement is 'Catholic Called to Witness (CC2W)' a Catholic faith-based organization based in the USA. It gained attention because of a TV short

Connected to kath.net is a Catholic version of YouTube, 'kathtube.com: the Catholic Media Portal', as well as the aforementioned Catholic version of Wikipedia, 'Kathpedia.com'. Another branch of kath.net, kathhost.net, offers free web space to Catholic projects under the condition that the contents of the website are in accordance with the teachings and the catechism of the Catholic Church (Kathhost 2012, also Kathpedia.com 2012b). The editor of kath.net, Roland Noé also operates the twitter account @KatholikenNet, which had 656 followers at the beginning of November 2012 (Twitter@ KatholikenNet 2012).

It is difficult, however, to say anything about the size of the kath.net community. Kath.net itself states that in the period 2009–10 (and these are the most recent figures published on kathpedia), they had an average of 300,000–400,000 unique visitors (that is unique IP addresses) and around 30,000 visitors per day (Kathpedia.com 2012c). These numbers, however, do not tell us anything about how many people really visited the site, who those people are, how long they stayed on the site, how much they read or how engaged they were, or what brought them to kath.net.

Kath.net is a private initiative and when one contacts Catholic Church officials for a comment on it, they are quick to point this out. For the purpose of this article I have contacted Austrian Church officials and those who replied either referred me to someone else, or only offered a very brief statement emphasizing the private nature of kath.net. One reply pointed out that individual bishops sympathize with the platform and that there seems to be the perception that kath.net has become more moderate in the past few years (email conversations in April–June 2012). Despite its private nature and not being connected to any diocese, the website 'kath.net: Catholic News' strives to imbue itself with an official character by means of both language and visual style. The iconography used (the logos and images) as well as the terminology ('Catholic news', 'from the Catholic world') makes the visitor at least wonder what the exact nature of the relationship between kath.net and the Church hierarchy is and whether or not the site might be an official outlet. At the very least, kath.net attempts to create an aura of legitimacy and to establish itself within the ecclesiastic hierarchy. This is supported by an entry on kath. net – on Kathpedia.com – where the operators confirm that their platform is

piece entitled 'Test of Fire' which it produced (through Creative Lab LLC) for the US elections, calling on US Catholics to vote for the candidate who supports a traditional understanding of marriage and is anti-abortion. The video can be viewed on the CC2W website.

not an official medium of the Catholic Church. They stress, however, that 'the Vatican, many bishops, priests, and practitioners appreciate kath.net because of its independence and its coverage, which is closely tied to the teachings of the Catholic Church' (Kathpedia.com 2012a).[14] The operators then go on to cite cardinals and bishops from the German-speaking area who highlight the important contribution that kath.net is making to Catholic life and pride themselves that the official homepage of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication lists kath.net as a Catholic medium.[15] Most importantly, kath.net takes pride in statements by Pope Benedict XVI himself, appreciating kath.net's contribution to Catholic life:

> You provide humanity with important news.
> I'm glad kath.net exists and that kath.net reports on what's going on in the Catholic Church.
> kath.net – great work (Kathpedia.com 2012c).

Kath.net, however, is not without critics from within the hierarchy, among theologians and the broader society (at least among those who are aware of its existence). The official communication channels of various dioceses criticize kath.net and every so often,[16] many theologians are critical in particular of kath.net's understanding of what the relationship between the Church and theology should be,[17] and watchdogs have developed which observe and comment on kath.net's posting endeavours, for example the blog episodenfisch.blogsport.de (Saß 2012a). These few examples show that the evaluation of kath.net with-

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14 'KATH.NET ist – ähnlich wie Radio Maria Österreich oder Radio Horeb oder K-TV kein offizielles Medium der katholische Kirche, wird aber beim Vatikan, vielen Bischöfe, Priestern und Gläubigen aufgrund der unabhängigen aber dem kirchlichen Lehramt verbundenen Berichterstattung sehr geschätzt.'

15 'Ag. Kath.Net' on the website of the Pontificio Consiglio delle Comunicazioni Sociali 2012.

16 Cf. for example the article in the church magazine of the Linz/Austria Diocese: Kirchenzeitung 2009.

17 A good example is the debate on kath.net which followed the so-called 'Memorandum Freiheit 2011', a petition signed by 240 professors of theology from the German-speaking area emphasizing the need for reform in the Catholic Church. Following the publication of the Memorandum, kath.net published several articles, among others an interview with Peter Seewald who published several works on Pope Benedict XVI addressing the Memorandum. In the comments section of this and other articles it becomes quite clear what is expected of theology: to give readings of and teach the catechism rather than critically reflect, challenge, and re-read traditions. Cf. kath.net 2011b.

in the German-speaking, Catholic world remains ambivalent; some welcome and support it while others are critical of it.

Kath.net is making use of the ambivalence which characterizes both its own perception and the range of approaches to understanding and doing Catholic theology to legitimize what it is doing and to stage and locate itself within the heart of the Catholic Church; one could even say within the ecclesiastic hierarchy. It does so by referring to bishops and the value for and contribution to Catholic life they see kath.net as having/making, by emphasizing their opportunities for exclusive interviews with representatives of the official Church hierarchy, such as the Vatican's press secretary P. Federico Lombardi (cf. Suvada 2007), or a quote from Cologne's Joachim Cardinal Meisner when asking for donations during Lent in 2011: 'KATH.NET leistet "einen wichtigen Beitrag zur Meinungsbildung" und ist ein "unverzichtbares Informationsmedium", schrieb uns Kardinal Joachim Meisner (Köln)' (kath. net 2011a).[18] As such, while kath.net is a private initiative, it is always more than just that; it is also an attempt to weave and write itself into the web of ecclesiastic narratives, thus creating a space that transcends ordinary or profane spaces. Sacred space is always something that is different and other from profane space. In the case of kath.net, this process of 'othering' a space happens on at least two levels: that of Church authority (who may or may not know what exactly they are legitimizing) and the way kath.net is using and staging itself, incorporating official comments into its narrative of self-understanding. With its good relations to benevolent bishops, by criticizing bishops, parish priests, or theologians who are not 100 per cent in line with official Church doctrine as laid out and interpreted by the Vatican, it tries to put mechanisms in place in order to project the online, utopian, safe and sacred space onto the Catholic Church without understanding that Catholicity always also means diversity, plurality, and a permanent re-negotiation of traditions.

Examples and a detailed analysis

Kath.net reports on a range of events or topics relevant to Catholic life and the abundance of material makes the tracking, categorizing, and analysis of the material a tedious and time-consuming task. Philip Saß, a German studies student, has been following and categorizing kath.net articles and user com-

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18   'KATH.NET makes "an important contribution to the formation of opinion" and is a "indispensable information medium" Joachim Cardinal Meisner (Cologne) wrote us.'

ments since July 2010 and currently uses 39 categories dedicated to topics or individuals, ranging from abortion to Islam, homosexuality, right-wing ideas, and what he calls 'Wirres' (rants), to group articles and user comments (Saß 2012b). While not necessarily an academic categorization, with its particular focus on user comments, it nonetheless gives the reader an idea of the variety of topics that are being covered, as well as the discussion style of the website. It would be a worthwhile endeavour to properly categorize, tag, and code articles and user comments, as well as forum posts in the kath.net forum, but this is beyond the scope of the present study. It is also important to point out that not all users join in the often very harsh and polemic discussion style, in particular when it comes to the hot issues.

For the close reading and analysis, I have chosen the kath.net article 'Der "Christ" Obama und die Heuchelei des Westens' (kath.net 2012b)[19] on the US 2012 election results because of its timely relevance. This detailed analysis will be supplemented by a brief overview of the discussion on the nature of the 'proper' relationship between religion, culture, and the arts.

2012 US Elections

For the close reading and analysis I have chosen the coverage by kath.net of the results of the 2012 US presidential elections and the comments to the kath.net articles. User comments can be rated by other logged-in users using a simple 'up' or 'down' choice. No details are given as to how many users, or who, gave the post a positive or negative rating; the results of the rating are merely represented using a colour code ranging from dark red (negative) to bright green (positive). More analysis using coding and tagging strategies would be needed to decipher the exact process of which comments get which ratings and why. For obvious reasons – that is to say, the fact that the site has a Catholic background – posts in line with Catholic doctrine generally receive high ratings, whereas others generally receive low ratings. There are, however, the odd posts, both supportive and critical of Catholic doctrine or kath.net's agenda, which receive mixed or unexpected ratings.

Kath.net makes it clear that it does not approve of the results of the presidential elections, or the characterization of Barack Obama as a Christian. The headline of an 8 Nov 2012 article states: 'Obama, the "Christian", and the hypocrisy of the West' (kath.net 2012b). The opening paragraph states that the majority of faithful Catholics did not vote for Obama and the less frequently attended church services, the more likely they were to be pro-Obama. While

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19   'Obama, the "Christian", and the hypocrisy of the West'.

initial exit polls, indeed, suggested that Catholics who attend service at least once a week preferred Romney over Obama (Obama: 42 %, Romney: 57 %; cf. MSNBC 2012), the message of the headline and the first paragraph is clear and seems carefully constructed. Obama is not a Christian, but a 'Christian' (notice the quotes), and faithful Catholics (in contrast to people who self-identify as Catholics but do not go to church regularly) predominantly backed Romney. The use of the quotation marks in the headline clearly suggests that the editors do not think of Obama as a faithful or proper Christian, most probably because of his stance on issues like abortion and marriage equality. The headline, together with the first paragraph, then, sets the tone and the agenda for the entire article, suggesting that if someone considers themself to be a proper Christian/Catholic (without quotes), they simply cannot vote for Barack Obama. No matter what Obama's stance on social issues might be, he has violated what are often termed the non-negotiable issues, including issues such as abortion, marriage equality, stem cell research, and, often, religious freedom.

Obama might or might not be a believer according to a 'traditional' understanding, but it is interesting that only some criteria, for example the non-negotiables, and not others, for example social issues, are being employed by some faithful to classify someone as religious or not. To back up the article's claim on Obama's religiosity – or lack thereof – further on in the article the author states that 'the Catholic Church' was not overly excited about Obama's re-election either. Rather than considering if there are opposing views (by opposing I mean Catholic representatives or members of the official Church who leaned towards the Democrats), the choice of words 'the Catholic Church' paints a picture of it as a unanimous bloc. This not only poses a question about the understanding of the Church and the role of the relationship between its members, i.e. the hierarchy and lay people, but it silences critical voices within the hierarchy itself.[20] To support the argument, the article then quotes Timothy Cardinal Dolan, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), stating that the Catholic Church will continue to fight for the sanctity of life, marriage, and religious freedom. The terminology used in the article also makes it clear that kath.net does not think much of media reports that aim to depict Obama as having any kind of spiritual life.

The user comments on the article continue the article's construction process of the narrative of what a proper Christian is supposed to be. One user, tünnes, states that a 'faithful Christian' (notice again the quotes) who never

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20   Cf. for example the statement by Jesuit Fr. John D. Whitney in Morris-Young 2012.

attends services is already caught in the devil's clutches and lists Obama as a 'prominent' example (tünnes 2012).[21] For his comment, he received not the highest, but a very high user rating. Other users express their dismay at the election result, referring to the number of unborn lives the election results may cost. In their discussion of abortion and the election of Obama, some users alluded to Hitler and his brutal killing of millions of Jews and received the highest rating for their comments. Some of these posts, such as that by a certain Dismas, rely on the use of double exclamation and question marks; '!!' and '??'. The use of quotation marks in Dismas' post is interesting. In his last sentence, he/she points out that neither Obama nor Romney are Christians, but uses quotation marks when talking about Obama: 'Barack Hussein Obama ist kein "Christ" ebenso wie der Mormone Romney kein Christ ist. Oh Heilige Jungfrau bitte für uns!!' (Dismas 2012).[22] Interestingly, another user, MatMatt, who points out that he/she does not think that Obama is a faithful Christian but that his faith is rather just a role he is playing received a very low user rating for his post: '**Ich glaube auch nicht, das Obama ein gläubiger Christ ist**. Er mußte und muß weiterhin diese Rolle spielen, um in den amerikanischen Medien bestehen zu können. Im Übrigen paßt das auch nicht zu seiner lockeren und sympatischen Art. . .' (MatMatt 2012).[23] While this is a rather critical post addressing the questions whether or not one has to be – or appear to be – religious in order to win elections, the highly rated response by bücherwurm to MatMatt's post shows why the post received a very negative rating. People seemed to have interpreted the post such that they thought that it implied that having a casual/friendly attitude and being Christian do not go together (cf. bücherwurm 2012). In his reply, MatMatt clarified that politicians should stay out of religion altogether, and receives yet again a very low user rating (MatMatt 2012). Obviously, kath.net users do not agree with the opinion that politicians should stay out of religion.

A post saying 'I congratulate all those Catholics who once again opted in favour of legalized child murder' (pro papa 2012)[24] only received an average

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21   'Ein „gläubiger Christ" der nie in die Kirche geht, mag sich noch für einen solchen halten, aber in Wirklichkeit ist er schon lange in den Fängen des Widersachers. Prominentes Beispiel: Obama.'

22   'Barack Hussein Obama is not a "Christian" and the Mormon Romney is not a Christian either. Holy Mary, pray for us!!'

23   '**I, too, do not believe that Obama is a faithful Christian**. He had and will continue having to play this role to survive in the media. Further, it doesn't match his casual and friendly attitude. . .'

24   'Glückwunsch an alle Katholiken die sich wieder einmal für den legalisierten Kindermord entschieden haben.'

user rating which is surprising given the background and opinions held by the portal operators and many of the portal users. Overall – looking at the comments themselves and the coloured user ratings – there is a very positive attitude towards the Catholic Paul Ryan and George P. G. Bush, the Catholic nephew of former president George W. Bush.

Interestingly, many of the user comments which were critical of Mormonism received a low user rating. This might be a reflection of a broader and global transformation process in the religious landscape. In his analysis of the ways the US American religious landscape has changed in the past few decades, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell point out that the lines of division have shifted from being based on denominational boundaries to the degree of religiousness: 'By the 2000s, how religious a person is had become more important as a political dividing line than which denomination he or she belonged to. Church-attending evangelicals and Catholics (and other religious groups too) have found common political cause. Voters who are not religious have also found common cause with one another, but at the opposite end of the political spectrum' (Putnam and Campbell 2012: 2).

Given its conservative and traditional agenda and often populist methods, one might think that kath.net and kath.net users would have a positive attitude towards the populist Tea Party movement. But the contrary seems to be the case. Several kath.net users are quite critical of the Tea Party movement, understanding it to be more of a problem for the Republican Party than anything and generally they receive good ratings for their criticism of the Tea Party, in particular when the Tea Party movement is used as an explanation as to why Romney lost the election.[25]

Quite a number of users also expressed their discontent that the 2012 elections really were about choosing the lesser of two evils and high hopes were voiced regarding Paul Ryan as potential candidate for the 2016 elections (Gandalf 2012).

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25   User Adson_von_Melk (2012), for example, writes '**Not Obama's or the Democrats' strengths** have decided these elections, but the wretched state of the Republicans. This wretched state has a name or a focal point: the Tea Party' ('**Nicht eine Stärke Obamas oder der Demokraten** hat diese Wahl entschieden, sondern das Elend der Republikaner. Dieses Elend hat einen Namen bzw. einen Brennpunkt: Tea Party'), receiving a bright green rating for his post. Placeat tibi (2012) also receives a bright green rating but states 'I wanted to defend the Tea Party a little bit because the picture media over here [Europe] portrayal of the Tea Party is not accurate in many respects' ('Wollte nur die "Tea Party" ein wenig in Schutz nehmen, die eben in vielem nicht der Karikatur entspricht, wie sie von hiesigen Medien oft gemalt wird'). Roland Noé (rn) 2012.

While the German/Austrian religious landscape is different from that of the US, kath.net's discourse is driven by a very ambitious conservative Catholic group which is not afraid publicly to speak, fight, and stand up for their beliefs and values and which encourages its readers to contact both public and Church officials in matters of Church doctrine, Church discipline, and public policy.

The consecration of a new altar

The construction of a contrast between religion and today's culture becomes particularly obvious in the community's engagement with modern art. On 10 April 2012, the auxiliary bishop of the Austrian Graz-Seckau Diocese, Franz Lackner, consecrated an altar in the Welsche Kirche in Graz (Kath. Kirche Steiermark 2012). The design of the altar was inspired by the *sigma* or *agape* tables found in early Christian communities (cf. Sanders 2005). Kath.net reported on the consecration and expressed its disdain, not only with regard to the artwork, but also to the consecrated altar itself. The short article consists mostly of quotes of 'faithful Catholics' (without quotation marks this time, i.e. proper faithful Catholics) who remain unnamed and one could argue that kath.net is objectively reporting on what (some of) the faithful think of the altar. Yet, the deliberate use of quotes throughout the article makes kath.net's own stance quite clear: kath.net and the kath.net community does not endorse the new altar and does not perceive it to be a work of art. The headline of the article is a quote saying that the altar reminds the faithful more of the console in the engine room of the Starship Enterprise, rather than an altar fit for the celebration of the Eucharist: 'Erinnert eher an den Kontrolltisch im Maschinenraum der Enterprise' (kath.net 2012a).[26] In the comments section, one user compared the newly consecrated altar with an Ikea table and asks: 'Wer kann denn da Abhilfe schaffen? Man kann doch nicht für jeden Unsinn gleich Rom einschalten?!' (Dottrina 2012).[27] The reference to Rome here expresses the user's desire for more control over bishops and dioceses.

Other users voice their criticism of the reform of the liturgy by the Second Vatican Council (cf. e.g. JohannBaptist 2012) or the concept of a people's altar in general (cf. Tina 13, 2012). One user in particular employed strong and highly symbolic language to describe his/her emotions, saying that he/she would love nothing better than to storm the church and destroy this 'thing'

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26   'Reminds one rather of the console in the Enterprise's engine room.'
27   'Who can help here? One cannot immediately bring Rome in to deal with every idiocy!?'

in a holy rage (Hl. Hilarius 2012). Similarly, another user calls on fellow Catholics to fight against the spread of what is perceived as sacrilegious art (cf. Catolica 2012, waldi 2012). The language employed here, of the 'fight', fits into the perception of a world increasingly hostile to religion where believers not only have to stand up for their values, but raise their voices and do battle. Interestingly, one user expressed his/her hope that modern art such as this new altar would pave the way for a return to the use of the high altar rather than the people's altar (cf. Callixtus 2012). A number of users, however, expressed an appreciation of modern art such as this in church buildings, but by means of the colour-rating, the kath.net community made it clear that there is no space for such an appreciation and engagement with modern art – at least not this kind of modern art (cf. myschkin 2012).

Art wants to unsettle, challenge, provoke, question. In the context of religion and faith practices, art can be the barb of alterity which prompts the faithful to reflect critically on his/her own faith and thus come to a deeper understanding of the mysteries of faith and human life (cf. Larcher 2005). Art is, should, and wants to be subject to debate and it is through this very debate that art can open up a space in which the o/Other can be experienced. With the dismissal of the newly consecrated art and the bridge it tries to construct between early Christianity and Christianity today, kath.net tries to safeguard what it perceives to be the mysteries of faith. In reality, however, kath.net and its community deprives itself of a fruitful space which can lead the user to a better understanding, both of self as well as modern culture, which is often seen as alien or hostile.

Implications: safe spaces and conclusion

The kath.net website is not a mere news portal, or simply a website dedicated to news and discussions from the Catholic world. The way the website is presented, the articles written, the terminology used, what is reported on or what is left out, and the user comments, create an online safe haven with implications for offline structures and practices.[28]

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28   I want to point out that some users who contribute to the kath.net debates are not Catholic or religious. As long as these users are respectful to the Church's teaching, as well as to the religious users, they are usually tolerated or appreciated as message board contributors.

Safe havens

The operators and users of kath.net create a narrative space designed according to their own preferences. Through the way the narratives are constructed, the viewpoints that are expressed, and various control strategies, such as censorship, deletion of posts and articles, or the coloured rating system for user comments, boundaries are established. Operators, moderators, and 'ordinary' users contribute to safeguarding these boundaries: operators and moderators do so by means of the ability to modify posts, and users through their ability to voice their opinions and deploy different visual cues, such as the red-to-green lantern system in the comment section, or the ability to choose an avatar picture that locates and roots them in a specific religious understanding.[29] Doing so, these various narrative fragments combine to create a safe haven: a space that is in the world and emerges out of the world, but is not of the world – to draw on Biblical language. Kath.net, then, is effectively constructed as a space in which its followers can be reassured of and reassure themselves of two things: that this virtual space is a space – maybe one of the last spaces – in which they can exert control amidst a socio-cultural climate that is perceived to be increasingly hostile, not necessarily towards all religion (kath.net people might be inclined to argue so, though they see a difference in society's attitude towards Islam and Christianity) but particularly towards Christianity and people who try to stand up against the evil of relativism.

In a way, the kath.net universe, then, can be understood as an endeavour to extend and appropriate an important aspect of the Church's self-understanding: that the gates of hell will not overpower it. Drawing on Church teachings and Papal authority itself, the kath.net universe becomes a mission: to gather the last few remaining righteous and faithful and provide a sanctuary, a safe haven for them.

Closely connected with this self-understanding is the perception that not all is well with the world. It is a world that is perceived of and portrayed as straying off the path God has in mind for his creation. Articles and comments on kath.net repeatedly foster this notion by referring to typically hot issues, such as the ordination of women, or more generally the debate on what the role of women in the Church should or ought to be, celibacy, homosexuality, or complete obedience to the ecclesial hierarchy and Church doctrine.

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29   It would probably be worthwhile just to analyze the avatar images which are used in relation to the views of the users. Roland Noé, aka Gandalf, one of the founders of the portal, for example, uses an image of Gandalf the White from the *Lord of the Rings* narrative, which is shaped by Catholic ideas and symbols.

Watchdogs

The purpose of the watchdog mentality which both kath.net itself and many users exhibit, is not only to safeguard the boundaries of the online space as space of retreat, but they extend their actions to the 'real' or material world as well. Drawing on Ricœur, we can argue that socio-cultural experiences are voiced and interpreted through one's religious framework, relying on templates found in one's religious tradition. These expressions – understood as narrative fragments – then, contribute to what makes up kath.net. In turn, kath.net becomes a new template 'for the organization of social and psychological processes' (Ricœur 1986: 12). As such, we can identify a mutual relationship between kath.net as safe haven and the socio-cultural and religious world it ultimately is a part of. As a safe haven, kath.net is an ideal world, a utopian world that frames the way some of its users perceive the all-too-earthly doings of their fellow human beings. By pointing a finger at the evils of this world they are implying a model of the way the world is supposed to be – a world that does not exist but could and should exist, a world that is almost within reach because it can be so neatly constructed and created through narratives, a world that through narratives becomes very real, but is not yet achieved. To actively work towards the fulfillment of this utopia, the kath.net authors regularly call upon their readers to get in touch with bishops or politicians to lobby for their cause. To analyze how successful they are, who acts on the calls for action, and what impact or influence they actually have on religious life and on what level would need further research. However, the fact that the Graz-Seckau Diocese issued a press release, signed by the Episcopal Vicar Heinrich Schnuderl, explaining the reasoning for supporting the artwork shows that the Church hierarchy is at least aware of communities such as kath.net (Diözese Graz-Seckau 2012). Drawing on Thomas More, Paul Ricœur argues that a 'utopia' is a 'place which exists in no real place; it is a ghost city; a river with no water; a prince with no people, and so on. What must be emphasized is the benefit of this special extraterritoriality. From this "no place" an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now open beyond that of the actual; it is a field, therefore, for alternative ways of living' (Ricœur 1986: 16). And he goes on to argue: '[i]s not utopia – this leap outside – the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is authority, what is religion, and so on? Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization "nowhere" work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is?' (Ricœur 1986: r16). And contesting 'what is', the perilous pleasures of earthly doings, is what kath.net aims to do.

While parts of the Catholic hierarchy welcome and endorse the activities of kath.net, I argue that sites such as kath.net or the Catholic Answers Forum (2012)[30] are part of a highly problematic phenomenon within the Catholic community. While one certainly should appreciate the involvement with and engagement in the Church of many of the kath.net users, the language employed and the intolerance towards what they perceive to be 'dissenting'[31] opinions rather than crucial theological debates expresses an ahistorical, acultural, and ungrounded – or better: unearthed – understanding of both the Church and faith itself. These tendencies and phenomena are problematic both for the Catholic Church and from a theological perspective, because the watchdog mentality in effect establishes (or tries to establish) a parallel hierarchy that bypasses not only local hierarchies but also the local church. Whether or not kath.net practitioners grant authority, authenticity or credibility to the local church and its representatives, the parish priest and the local bishops depend on whether or not the local church's theology fits into kath.net's theology proper. The argument made is that priests and bishops owe obedience to the Pope and thus have to be in line with whatever is issued by Vatican authorities – according to the motto *Roma locuta, causa finita*. In this context, some posts also critically challenge local parish priests and local bishops who expect their flock to pay obeisance to them, but who themselves do not pay obeisance to their higher authority, namely the Pope. Recently, kath.net published a book called *Liebesbriefe an die Kirche* (Love Letters to the Church) (Knapp-Biermeier and Noé 2011) in which we find a short essay on the mission of kath.net by Armin Schwibach, a member of the editorial team and a correspondent for kath.net in Rome. In this essay, he states that kath.net's work is shaped by the overall notion of 'ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia, ibi Deus' (Schwibach 2011). The focus is on the universal church and the Pope without mentioning the local church whatsoever. 'Wesentlich ist der Blick auf Rom: Das Lehramt der Päpste, das Wirken des Papstes und seine konkrete Gegenwart in der Weltkirche sind Leitstern der Arbeit von KATH.NET. Dazu gehört: Für einen Katholiken [sic!] ist es nicht möglich, das, was er [sic!]

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30   In some posts, users of the Catholic Answers Forum give what I perceive to be highly problematic, if not harmful, advice. One user asks if he/she can stay with his/her cohabiting daughter on his/her visit and another user calling herself Michelle Arnold recommends they do not to do so (coco2, 2012). Yet another user asks whether or not to invite a lesbian relative and her girlfriend to a family gathering and Michelle Arnold recommends that they be very careful and weigh the pros and cons (thanhple 2010).

31   As an example for a recent discussion on the issue of dissent cf. Lash 2010; and the response to Lash's essay by D'Costa 2012.

tut, von seinem [sic!] Katholischsein zu trennen, was im Besonderen für die Arbeit im Informationsbereich gilt' (Schwibach 2011).[32]

Today's religious landscape is often characterized – and criticized – as a pick-and-choose mentality in a competitive religious marketplace and one can but wonder if this watchdog mentality is not a pick-and-choose mentality in itself, where the criteria for what is allowed into the safe haven are the words of the Pope – who is seen to be suffering from the disobedience in the Church – as well what can be found in the catechism of the Catholic Church. In doing so, however, kath.net community members themselves exert a pick-and-choose mentality because they fail to realize that Catholicity always also means multiplicity and never means blind obedience to rules and regulations for their own sake. A brief glimpse into Church history suffices to show that theology and faith have always been about struggles and debates rather than uncritical obedience.

In this narrow view, the utopia of the safe haven and the control mechanisms employed online to safeguard those safe havens become instruments of attempts to reshape and rewrite offline social and religious structures according to the utopia created online. In the words of Paul Ricœur, utopia becomes pathological, which means it becomes a form of escapism:

> The nowhere of utopia may become a pretext for escape, a way of fleeing the contradictions and ambiguity, both of the use of power and of the assumption of authority in a given situation. This escapism of utopia belongs to a logic of all or nothing. No connecting point exists between the 'here' of social reality and the 'elsewhere' of the utopia. This disjunction allows the utopia to avoid any obligation to come to grips with the real difficulties of a given society. All the regressive trends denounced so often in utopian thinkers – such as nostalgia for the past, for some paradise lost – proceed from this initial deviation of the nowhere in relation to the here and now (Ricœur 1986: 17).

Kath.net followers also challenge the role of theology within the Church and question whether or not Catholic theology should be taught at public universities with faculties funded by the state, as is the case in Austria and Germany.

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32   'It's essential [for kath.net] to look towards Rome: the magisterium of the Pope, what he does and his concrete presence in the universal church are the guiding star for kath.net's work. Related to this: for a Catholic, it is not possible to dissociate what he [sic!] does and what he is, i.e. Catholic, and this holds true in particular when one is working in information technology.'

An increasing number of kath.net followers argue that the Church should give up theology at public institutions altogether and teach seminarians at ecclesiastic institutions in order to have more and tighter control over professors, lecturers, and the kind of theology taught. Rather than supporting theology and its contribution to academia, theology – and with it the Church – should retreat from the world. Kath.net followers often recommend that professors who are not 100 per cent in line with Church teachings (in particular with regards to the hot issues) should go back to the books and read the catechism, because everything one needs to know is in there. Theology, then, is reduced to a process of merely repeating and reiterating the catechism rather than critically reflecting on Church teaching, or, more to the point: theology is reduced to a literal repetition of the catechism as divine truth. There is no notion whatsoever that theology can and should critically reflect on and challenge Church teaching or that the academic discipline always also finds itself in a tension with the hierarchy. Theologians who voice criticisms of Church teachings are often railed against and the operators of kath.net call their followers to action; to contact their local bishops to urge them to get rid of unwanted academics. More attention and research needs to be done with regards to real life consequences, but it is worrying enough that kath.net operators regularly prompt bishops to take action on whatever matter it is the kath.net community is not happy about.

In particular in discussions on celibacy or the ordination of women, many posts question the critical role of theology in uncovering the socio-cultural contexts of Church history and thus better understanding the current make up of the Church. Rather, many posts exhibit an ahistorical and a-cultural understanding of theology and the Church. In using the terms ahistoric and acultural I am referring to a lack of awareness that the Church is always also part of culture and speaks in the voice of this culture. This understanding is expressed in posts such as this one: '**Beschwerden gegen das "Männerpriestertum"** bitte direkt an den Administrator (Jesus@Heaven). Selbst der Papst kann das nicht gegen den Willen des Stifters ändern, der im Abendmahlssaal bekanntlich keine Frauen beauftragt hat (obwohl zumindest seine Mutter und Maria Magdalena damals sicherlich 'in der Nähe' oder sogar im Saal anwesend waren. . .) (Chris2, 2012, emphasis in original).[33]

33   '**Critics should send their complaints against male priesthood** directly to the Administrator (Jesus@Heaven). Even the Pope cannot change this against the will of the founder who, as is very well known, did not mandate women with the priesthood during the Last Supper (even though at least his mother and Mary Magdalene were almost certainly nearby or even in the same room).'

Finally and to conclude, Ricœur understands narratives to be a critical concept. According to Ricœur, narratives can create hypothetical worlds which we can use to experiment with and in. As such, they are a laboratory of meaning, a space for critical reflections on the issues we face in our everyday lives, a space that can enable us to discover something new, something we would not have noticed or realized otherwise. In its pathological form, however, there is a risk that narratives lose their critical potential. Every narrative has its counter-narratives. When these counter-narratives, however, are discarded or dismissed, the master narrative becomes what its name suggests: the exclusive frame through which the world is seen; or – to conclude with a reference to film: 'One Ring [or in this case narrative] to rule them all.'

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