Church Responses and Theological Resources for Technological Addiction

Armand Babakhanian

Abstract: In this paper, I engage work done in philosophy, theology, and addiction science to argue that the church possesses resources for preventing technology addiction. First, I briefly sketch what technology addiction is and provide evidence to suggest that it is rapidly growing. Then, I suggest two causes for the growth of technology addiction: boredom and the desire for a meaningful identity. Third, I discuss two resources that the ancient churches possess to address these two causes. These two resources are the doctrine of divinisation and the sacrament of reconciliation. Fourth, I argue that some Protestant traditions possess similar practices for addressing technology addiction. The significance of my thesis is that the church can help preventing non-addicted people from falling prey to technology addiction.

Keywords: addiction theory; boredom; divinisation; meaningful identity; philosophy; technology

Technology addiction has become an increasingly widespread issue. Addictions to smartphones, the internet, digital pornography, social media, and online gaming have become familiar phenomena in popular culture. The problem only seems to grow as technology becomes

a ubiquitous feature of daily life. Concerned Christians might be interested in how the church can respond, which is what I propose to discuss here. I intend to draw upon Christian philosopher Kent Dunnington's work *Addiction and Virtue*[1] and other philosophical literature, theological sources, and addiction science, to argue that the church possesses some helpful resources for the prevention of technology addiction. My intention is not to provide a strategy for addiction recovery.

In addressing this matter, I refer to two causes of technology addiction and suggest two ways the church may stave off the growth of technology addiction among believers. The two causes to which I focus here are boredom and the desire for a meaningful identity. While the web of causation undergirding addiction is undoubtedly complex,[2] I choose to take a more modest and focused approach by homing in on these two specific causes in my paper. I choose to focus on these two specific causes because they seem to be the most directly addressable by the church and its mission. The church could address these causes of technology addiction as follows. First, I refer to the Christian doctrine of divinisation, which can provide a unifying goal that infuses life with enough meaning and purposefulness to prevent boredom. Second, I focus on the sacrament of reconciliation, which provides a way of maintaining a meaningful Christian identity over one's lifespan. The church employs these tools as integral to fostering Christian koinonia or fellowship. In this light, what I propose is that Christians do not have to feel powerless in the face of the growing problem of technology addiction, and that they are already in possession of some helpful resources for preventing it. Another implication of my paper is that, from this viewpoint, Christians have another reason to be more eagerly involved in the church and to invite others into the church, namely, for the purposes of avoiding boredom, maintaining a meaningful identity, and avoiding technology addiction. To be clear, my claims and argu-

---

1 Kent Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue: Beyond the Models of Disease and Choice*, Strategic Initiatives in Evangelical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2011).

2 See Bruce Alexander, *The Globalization of Addiction: A Study in Poverty of the Spirit* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), ch. 1.

ments are not based on any clinical trials, surveys of practitioners who work on addiction recovery, surveys of recovered addicts, or other empirical research. My aim is primarily conceptual and theoretical, and meant to inspire further research into addiction prevention. I chose to focus on the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions because the two resources I engage with are most readily available in these traditions. However, as I will argue, some Protestant traditions are also open to these resources.

What is Technology Addiction?

Addiction is a concept that is difficult to define in regard to outlining the necessary and sufficient conditions which constitute it. Technology addiction is even more difficult to define because of its relatively recent appearance. It has not received nearly as much attention in the scientific literature as more traditional forms of addiction, such as alcoholism or other forms of substance use addiction have. Nonetheless, there are some core features which typically characterise technology addiction with sufficient accuracy for present purposes.

Technology addiction is a kind of behavioural addiction. What distinguishes a technology addiction from other behavioural addictions is that its object is a technological device or an associate process, such as a smartphone, a website, or an app. For example, technology addiction includes addiction to social media, digital pornography, smartphone, online gaming, and online auction. The most obvious characteristics of technology addiction are: unsuccessful efforts to stop behaviours, cognitive salience, use for mood regulation, withdrawal symptoms, tolerance, and use despite knowledge of negative consequences.[3] There is no clear line of demarcation between a troublesome habit and addiction proper. Nevertheless, if one exhibits increasingly more characteristics of technology addiction with respect

---

[3]   Petros Levounis and James Sherer, *Technological Addictions* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association Publishing, 2022), 34–35.

to some device or process, it becomes increasingly likely that one has a technology addiction.

Rates of technology addiction and problematic technology use have grown uncomfortably high. For example, it is estimated that approximately 3–6% of American adults are addicted to digital pornography, approximately 10% of Americans are addicted to social media, and nearly half of them consider themselves "addicted" to their smartphones.[4] Countries such as China and Japan have instituted laws that limit the amount of access people have to online gaming and the internet in general.[5] Popular books and films have been produced such as Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows*,[6] Adam Alter's *Irresistible*,[7] Johann Hari's *Stolen Focus*,[8] and the Emmy-nominated film *The Social Dilemma*.[9]

Christians have begun to take notice of the harmful impact of obsession with technology on our spiritual lives and personal relationships with God.[10] They worry that the heavy use of technology keeps us distracted from God, forgetful of our spiritual goals, and distant from Christian fellowship. Some negative consequences of the heavy use of technology are an increased likelihood of depression, anxiety, lone-

---

4   Levounis and Sherer, *Technological Addictions*, 37; Trevor Wheelwright, "2022 Cell Phone Usage Statistics: How Obsessed Are We?" *Reviews* (24 January 2022), https://www.reviews.org/mobile/cell-phone-addiction/ (accessed 20 April 2023).

5   Sofia Brooke, "What to Make of the New Regulations in China's Gaming Industry," *China Briefing*, https://www.china-briefing.com/news/what-to-make-of-the-new-regulations-in-china-online-gaming-industry/ (accessed 16 November 2021); Ben Dooley and Hikari Hida, "A Government in Japan Limited Video Game Time. This Boy Is Fighting Back," *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/11/business/japan-video-games.html (accessed 11 June 2020).

6   Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

7   Adam Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked* (New York, NY: Penguin Press Publishing, 2011).

8   Johann Hari, Stolen Focus: *Why You Can't Pay Attention – and How to Think Deeply Again* (New York, NY: Crown Trade, 2023).

9   *The Social Dilemma*, directed by Jeff Orlowski (Argent Pictures, 2020), 1:33:42. https://www.netflix.com/watch/81254224.

10 Eliza Huie, "Screen Abuse: An Acceptable Addiction," Biblical Counseling Coalition (26 July 2019), https://www.biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2019/07/26/screen-abuse-an-acceptable-addiction/ (accessed 10 March 2023).

liness, and other health aspects.[11] Studies show that smartphone use contributes to a decline in social skills, less self-control, emotional instability, and an increased difficulty of making friends.[12] Other studies show that a heavy consumption of digital pornography negatively impacts social and romantic relationships, contributes to social anxiety, and entertains distorted views of sexuality.[13] It is noteworthy, moreover, that Christian traditions teach that the production, distribution, and consumption of pornographic material is a matter of grave sin. Sadly, the problem seems to only grow as technology becomes a ubiquitous feature of our daily lives.

As I have already pointed out, in what follows I present two causes of technology addiction. I do not mean to say, however, that technology is exclusively harmful, and that Christians must turn into Luddites. Obviously, technology has enhanced the quality of our lives in innumerable respects. However, we should seek to minimise the negative effects of excessive use of technology, whatever they may be, as much as possible.

Cause #1: Boredom

One cause of technology addiction is boredom. The kind of boredom I am referring to is the existential boredom which involves the condition of lacking a unifying *telos* that ultimately justifies one's choices and actions. This kind of boredom is related, but distinct from the more colloquial sense of boredom, which usually refers to a temporary lack of excitement, interest, or motivation. When one is bored in this sense, life lacks any ultimate goal that gives one's actions a meaningful "point" and definite direction. Modern societies are uniquely susceptible to boredom because they are highly compartmentalised. Modern

---

11   Levounis and Sherer, *Technological Addictions*, 108.

12   Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, "Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study," *Preventative Medicine Reports* 12 (2018), 217–283, DOI: 10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003.

13   Naomi Brower, "Effects of Pornography on Relationships," Utah State University Extension (April 2023), https://extension.usu.edu/relationships/research/effects-of-pornography-on-relationships (accessed 22 April 2023).

societies lack stable and unifying social structures to offer an overarching point to people's lives. Dunnington writes:

> As the lives of modern persons are fragmented by the partitioning off of work from leisure, of the public from the private, of the religious from the secular, of the young from the old, of the local from the national, and so on, it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine how the activities and commitments of an individual life can amount to an ordered whole. Modern persons who are spread thin by their disparate and disconnected responsibilities desire some unifying principle that can supply integrity in the place of compartmentalization and fragmentation.[14]

Modern societies value pluralism, individual liberty, and self-expression. While commendable in important respects, these values come at the cost of parsing apart various dimensions of human life from each other for the sake of personal independence. The atomisation of modern society makes it difficult for modern folks to see how all the facets of life come together to form a coherent unit aimed at a choice-worthy goal.

Some addiction theorists suggest that addiction can be a response to boredom.[15] As Frank Schalow writes,

> Boredom points to a preliminary disclosure of the mundaneness of our everyday situation which impels us, as if seeking an "escape," to shift our attention to the "excitement" provoked by individual things. In the case of technology, where the "instant" offers the greatest fascination, the excitement of such mundane activities, e.g., "computerized war-games" (e.g., as a special genre of video-games), becomes especially pronounced. Although experienced as a possible escape from boredom, the excitement and allure of technology still confirms the power of indifference as casting its spell over anything.[16]

---

14 Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue*, 117.
15 Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue*, 117–118.
16 Frank Schalow, *Toward a Phenomenology of Addiction: Embodiment, Technology, Transcendence* (Springer, 2017), 101.

Technological devices are simply a more effective and accessible object of addiction than other substances and behaviours for those who are trying to escape boredom. Technological devices are well-suited as "distractions" because of how easily accessible and ubiquitous they are.

Additionally, many technological devices and processes like frequenting social media and digital pornography release abnormally high amounts of the brain's reward neurochemical dopamine.[17] Dopamine is released as a way of incentivising productive activities and can help form neural networks which habituate the person to engage in those activities.[18] However, the reward-system can be "hijacked," as when the brain is repeatedly exposed to abnormally large releases of dopamine while engaging in harmful behaviours. This makes many technologies more attractive distractions than non-technological behaviours such as physical exercise, board games, or conversations with others. While the specific way that boredom may be related to specific kinds of technology addiction, like online gambling or pornography, boredom can play a more general role in rendering people vulnerable to addiction. So, the growth of technology addiction may be seen as partly caused by the modern condition of boredom.

Cause #2: Desire for a Meaningful Identity

The desire for a meaningful identity amounts to aspiring to foster an identity that is grounded in community and ordered towards an end. Some addiction theorists describe this phenomenon as a desire for psychosocial integration. According to psychologist and addiction theorist Bruce Alexander, psychosocial integration is—

---

17   Min Liu and Jianghong Luo, "Relationship between peripheral blood dopamine level and internet addiction disorder in adolescents: A pilot study," *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Medicine* 8:6 (2015): 9943–9948.

18   Ethan S. Bromberg-Martin, Masayuki Matsumoto, and Okihide Hikosaka, "Dopamine in Motivational Control: Rewarding, Aversive, and Alerting," *Neuron* 68:5 (2010): 815–834, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2010.11.022.

a profound interdependence between individual and society that normally grows and develops throughout each person's lifespan. Psychosocial integration reconciles people's vital needs for social belonging with their equally vital needs for individual autonomy and achievement.[19]

Alexander claims that psychosocial integration is often experienced as a sense of social identity, a oneness with nature, or a connection to the divine.[20] Alexander argues extensively that addiction is a social phenomenon that emerges as a response to a sustained loss of psychosocial integration or "dislocation." He provides ample evidence to show that many people are in a condition of "dislocation," that is, alienated, uprooted, and disconnected from sources of social belonging such as community, tradition, and religion. One piece of evidence is the case of addiction amongst Canadian aboriginal people after the advent of British colonisation, disruptive Canadian government measures, and British cultural influence. Alexander writes:

> Although some Canadian natives developed a taste for riotous drunkenness from the time that Europeans first introduced alcohol centuries ago, most individuals and tribes abstained, drank only moderately, or drank only as part of tribal rituals as long as they maintained an intact tribal culture. It was only during periods of cultural disintegration that alcoholism emerged as a universal, crippling problem for native people … Eventually, every tribal culture in Canada was broken down by the overpowering European culture, and every tribe succumbed to addiction and other ravages of dislocation. Universal dislocation produced nearly universal addiction. Addiction among Canadian natives has not been limited to alcoholism. It has kept pace with the times as addictions to the latest drugs, gambling, television, and video games have been added to the list. The causal relationship between dislocation and addiction has been apparent from the start.[21]

---

19   Alexander, *Globalization of Addiction*, 58.
20   Alexander, *Globalization of Addiction*, 58.
21   Alexander, *Globalization of Addiction*, 134.

A second piece of evidence which Alexander mentions is that addiction often is an adaptive function which provides "substitute communities" in place of psychosocial integration. This is also apparent in the case of technology addictions to video games, digital pornography, and the internet. Alexander writes, "The Internet has an enormous capacity to enhance the illusion of interactivity at low cost to the merchant, and thus can provide highly profitable mass substitutes for psychosocial integration. Therefore, it can serve an addictive function very well."[22]

Dislocation and the loss of a meaningful identity is widespread in modern societies because of the destabilising social effects of free market economies, the growth of secularism, the regular movement of people/groups around the world, and other social transformations. Modern people are uniquely susceptible to being left "afloat", without stable and meaningful identities, and without a unifying *telos*. In traditional premodern societies, people possessed a "teleological" sense of life because they were integrated into tightly-knit social networks.[23] Folks had their identities shaped and shared alongside their family, friends, faith, authorities, and broader community. People were born into their identities as Christians, carpenters, Romans, or nobles. People occupied a social role within their respective social order which was not entirely self-determined. Their social roles or "functions" were accompanied by ends and justifications for their actions, as indispensable members of a larger social organism. One ought to farm because one was a farmer, one ought to pray because one was a Christian, and one ought to rule because one was a nobleman. Alasdair MacIntyre writes:

---

22   Alexander, *Globalization of Addiction*, 168.
23   Alan Macfarlane, "History, Anthropology and the Study of Communities," *Social History* 2:5 (1977): 631–632, DOI: 10.1080/03071027708567401; Gemma Blok et al. (eds), *Imagining Communities: Historical Reflections on the Process of Community Formation* (London and New York: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 9.

> In much of the ancient and medieval worlds, as in many other pre-modern societies, the individual is identified and constituted in and through certain of his or her roles, those roles which bind the individual to the communities in and through which alone specifically human goods are to be attained; I confront the world as a member of this family, this household, this clan, this tribe, this city, this nation, this kingdom.[24]

MacIntyre describes how premodern people approached the world from within their socio-historical roles as members of a larger group. One's personal identity was inextricably tied to and structured by one's social identity. In premodern societies, the immediate environment was thought to be a part of a larger cosmic order. Social structures, natural objects, and historical events had their place and function within the divinely-ordained universe; the premodern social world is an "enchanted" and theologically-charged world. Charles Taylor elaborates upon this thesis when he writes the following:

> The natural world they [premodern people] lived in, which had its place in the cosmos they imagined, testified to divine purpose and action; and not just in the obvious way which we can still understand and (at least many of us) appreciate today, that its order and design bespeaks creation; but also because the great events in this natural order, storms, droughts, floods, plagues, as well as years of exceptional fertility and flourishing, were seen as acts of God … God was also implicated in the very existence of society (but not described as such—this is a modern term—rather as polis, kingdom, church, or whatever). A kingdom could only be conceived as grounded in something higher than mere human action in secular time. And beyond that, the life of the various associations which made up society, parishes, boroughs, guilds, and so on, were interwoven with ritual and worship … One could not but encounter God everywhere.[25]

---

24   Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 172.
25   Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 25.

According to Taylor, premodern people believed that the events in the world were charged with deep religious significance. Physical objects and events were imbued with meaning through their connection to spiritual agents such as God. The natural order was taken to be a grand cosmological structure which was designed by God for certain purposes. The natural order included the social order, such that premodern people believed that their social arrangements and identities were features of God's cosmological architecture. This ingrained sense of one's social role within a deeply spiritual and teleological order conferred a stable and meaningful justification for one's existence, actions, and choices. Of course, some premodern folks must have fallen into boredom. However, premodern people were not very susceptible to boredom because of the stable social structures in place at the time.

On the other hand, modern people are disconnected from traditional sources of identity formation, social cohesion, and social integration. The modern world does not enjoy the same stable social structures as the premodern world did, or as enduring archaic societies do to this day. Thorough secularisation of modern life and the rapid transformations inaugurated by free market capitalism contribute to an environment that is hostile to the characteristically slow and gradual processes of development required for meaningful communal identities. The disentanglement of religion from public societies leaves many people feeling lost, dissatisfied, and without a sense of purpose. Taylor writes that—

> Many young people are following their own spiritual instincts, as it were, but what are they looking for? Many are "looking for a more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth," in the words of an astute observer of the American scene. This often springs from a profound dissatisfaction with a life encased entirely in the immanent order. The sense is that this life is empty, flat, devoid of higher purpose.[26]

---

26   Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 506.

Taylor captures the feelings of deep existential unrest and dissatisfaction many secular modern people have with their newly disenchanted and "purposeless world." The subjugation of social life to economic life produces a similar effect of inducing dislocation. Alexander describes our environment as—

> a "desymbolised" environment, in which the symbolic potency of religion, nationality, intellectual achievement, authority, gender, and race must be discredited in order to make people maximally responsive to continually changing economy. People must be flexible workers and trendy consumers with all their options open.[27]

Alexander offers an economic explanation for the similar phenomena addressed by Taylor and MacIntyre. The destabilisation of community and identity in modern life is partly due to the usual sources of communal identity becoming transformed into mere means for economic ends in modern capitalist societies. Addiction tends to grow as a therapeutic substitute for those modern folks in desperate need of a meaningful identity. The individualistic, disenchanted, and economic structures of many modern societies render meaningful identities unstable and insecure. Of course, none of the above suggests that the transition from medievalism to modernity was a net loss of human wellbeing, and that we should return to a premodern state of affairs. Modern people clearly enjoy numerous goods which those in the medieval era could never have, including technology, and a romantic image of premodern ages that should be avoided.

However, this fact about modernity's many successes does not mean we should ignore uniquely modern issues, such as the prevalence of addiction, and not seek ways of ameliorating them. Addiction often becomes an antidote for people who struggle under these modern structures to form and maintain stable meaningful identities. The particular way that the desire for a meaningful identity may lead to addictions may vary between kinds of addiction. However, it seems to

---

27   Alexander, *Globalization of Addiction*, 117.

remain the case that the desire for a meaningful identity is a general pressure on people which can push them into addiction. Technology addiction can be understood as just the most recent form of addictive response to the natural human desire for a meaningful identity.

Response #1: The Doctrine of Divinisation

I argue that the doctrine of divinisation may help the church prevent the growth of technology addiction by counteracting the factors leading to the existential condition of boredom. Divinisation is sometimes also called deification, *theosis,* as well as divine adoption and divine participation. Divinisation is the elevation of the human person, by divine grace, to Godlikeness by way of divine participation. It is the end to which grace orders the human aspirant.

Divinisation is intimated in biblical texts such as 2 Peter 1:4, which reads, "he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire." It is a common notion in many patristic authors such as St Irenaeus of Lyon, St Athanasius the Great, and St Maximus the Confessor.[28] Athanasius famously wrote in his *On the Incarnation of the Word,* "For he was made man that we might be made God."[29] Divinisation is also somewhat present in Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther and theologians in the Lutheran tradition. As one astute theologian notes, Martin Luther preached in a Christmas sermon that, "As the Word became flesh, so it is certainly necessary that the flesh should also become Word. For just for this reason does the Word become flesh, in order that the flesh might become Word. In other words: God becomes man, in order that man should become God."[30] In many Christian theological traditions such as Lutheranism, Roman Catholi-

---

28   Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 105, 166, 262.

29   Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54.3.

30   Kurt E. Marquart, "Luther and Theosis," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 64:3 (2000), 186.

cism, and especially Eastern Orthodoxy, divinisation is tied to matters of grace, soteriology, and incarnational theology. Maximus the Confessor summarises the doctrine of divinisation as follows:

> By a gracious adjustment God became man and is called man for the sake of humankind, and by exchanging his condition for ours revealed the power that elevates human beings to God through love for God and brings God down to humankind out of love for humanity. By this blessed inversion, humankind is made God by divinisation and God is made man by hominisation.[31]

Divinisation consists in the elevation of the human being to a Godlike status through participation in God. It is the ultimate end and culmination of the Christian life. Participation in God is made possible through God's incarnation and provision of grace to human beings. Importantly, when human beings are divinised they do not become identical to God or a second instance of God. Divinisation does neither imply a monistic identification between God and creatures nor a polytheistic vision of multiple all-powerful and perfect beings. Instead, it denotes the ennoblement of human beings by a more intimate union between God and God's children.[32]

The doctrine of divinisation can help Christians combat the growth of technology addiction by a unifying *telos* that ultimately justifies one's choices and actions. Divinisation is the ultimate *telos* of the Christian life that infuses one's life with enough meaning and purpose to prevent boredom. The disparate responsibilities and compartmentalised features of modern life cause boredom to everyone, including Christians. It seems difficult to conceive of how one's various activities and projects can be unified into an ordered whole. However, the church is uniquely positioned to offer Christians a unifying *telos* for their life-narrative.

Divinisation is a traditional feature of many theological traditions that present life as amounting to an ordered whole and as being

31   Maximus, *Difficulty* 7.22.
32   Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification*, 109.

endowed with a transformative goal.[33] For these traditions, Christian life ultimately aims at the divinisation of the human person. One's responsibilities, projects, and social relationships reach fulfilment in the supernatural condition of Godlikeness. This is the meaning-giving narrative of the Christian life that justifies one's choices, actions, and experiences. A diverse array of philosophers and theologians, such as the proponents of narrative theology and radical orthodoxy, have already argued extensively that the Christian life ought to be construed in the form of narrative.[34] Brian Ballard argues that—

> Christianity is telling us to adopt a narrative orientation towards our past, both near and far; to be prepared to make verbal and explicit our behaviors; to be highly reflective about the inner life that underwrites those behaviors; and crucially, to bring to bear on this narrating of behavior and inner life the concepts of the gospel—creation, fall, and redemption. Seemingly disparate episodes are thus brought together in a narrative of God's grace and human need.[35]

Christian life is a dramatic story of sin, redemption, growth, and ultimately salvation. In this context, divinisation is the final goal of the Christian individual's life-story. Christian life is structured around achieving this God-ordained end as adopted children of God. The unification and justification of experiences, choices, actions, and relationships originates in one's knowledge of an ultimate destiny and future reward of divinisation. Suffering, work, and social life are all infused

---

33   Although Russell largely focuses on the Greek tradition in his study of deification, he also notes in an appendix of his work that deification is present in the Syriac tradition and figures prominently in Latin theologians such as St Augustine.

34   Brian Ballard, "Christianity and the Life Story," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 38:2 (2021), 207, DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2021.38.2.3; Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, "Introduction: Why Narrative?" in *Readings in Narrative Theology: Why Narrative?* ed. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997), 1–18; James K. A. Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2004), 87.

35   Ballard, "Christianity and the Life Story," 210.

with newfound significance by being integrated into a larger story of a deeply Christian drama of struggle, humility, and joy. So, one way that the church can help prevent the growth of technology addiction is by emphasising the role that divinisation can play as the unifying *telos* of the Christian life in order to overcome boredom.

Resource #2: The Sacrament of Reconciliation

I argue that the sacrament of reconciliation, as a suitable means for maintaining a meaningful Christian identity, may prevent the growth of technology addiction. Christian identity is a helpful buttress against dislocation and boredom, contributing to a meaningful identity. However, a meaningful Christian identity is difficult to maintain for several reasons. One reason is the reality of sin in the Christian life. Part of what it is to be a Christian is to be someone who seeks after God, desires spiritual growth, engages in charitable works, etc. When Christians sin, an inner psychic tension between their self-conception as virtuous and their personal history intensifies, inducing a harmful fragmentation of their identity.[36] It is as though they lead a "double-life," which may lead them to despair over their condition, overwhelmed by self-deception, guilt, or shame. They require reconciliation to God and the church to fully restore the integrity of their Christian identity. Many Christians have experienced this tension or fragmentation. Some have become increasingly susceptible to addiction as a deceptive means of self-therapy. This is so given that people aspire to an integrated and meaningful identity, and it has been shown above that the otherwise legitimate desire for a meaningful identity can sometimes lead to addiction. Psychic disunity leads them to seek harmful addictive objects as ways of finding a meaningful identity.[37] This kind of vulnerability to addiction

---

36   Aaron B. Murray-Swank, Kerry M. McConnell, and Kenneth I. Pargament, "Understanding spiritual confession: A review and theoretical synthesis," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 10:3 (2007), 278–279, https://doi.org/10.1080/13694670600665628.

37   Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue*, 117.

increases because of the shame that accompanies sin and determine people to avoid the appropriate paths to reintegration.

The sacrament of reconciliation is able to help Christians resolve psychic tension and fragmentation by absolving sins, thereby enabling them to live out their life-story in a way that exhibits consistency and a fruitful direction.[38] The sacrament contributes to the maintenance of their meaningful identity, by weaving the Christian's past sins into their life-story in a redemptive manner, leaving them hopeful and confident about the future. It enables Christians to "move forward" and not be weighed down by their personal history of sin. Upon receiving absolution and completing one's penance, in Catholic parlance, Christians realise that they are no longer tied to a sin-marred past.[39] The psychic tension between Christian identity and personal sins is thus resolved.

Addiction researchers have argued that this process of narrative reconstruction is an important part of addiction recovery. Apart from testimonials given by addicts, Dunnington mentions evidence from neuroscience that addicts have a difficulty with tying their past and future into a coherent life story. He writes that "addicts typically display a neurological disconnect between those parts of the brain that are responsible for linking the past to the future in the form of a personal narrative."[40] Dunnington describes a process of self-construction in the case of addiction recovery as "the humble reconstitution of the self."[41] He attributes the success of traditional Twelve Step Recovery programmes (TSR) to its ability to reconstruct the self of the addict in a way that properly integrates their addicted past with their future of recovery. Dunnington writes, "In my view, TSRs work because the spiritual practices they set forth enable addicted persons to discover that there is a way of connecting their past and their future into a cohesive narrative, despite the fact that their lives have been marred by shame,

---

38   Ballard, "Christianity and the Life Story," 209–211.
39   Murray-Swank et al., "Understanding spiritual confession," 280–281.
40   Kent Dunnington, "Recovery and the Humble Reconstitution of the Self," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 70:4 (2018), 242, https://www.asa3.org/ASA/PSCF/2018/PSCF12-18Dunnington.pdf.
41   Dunnington, "Recovery," 242.

guilt, trauma, and failure."[42] In the same vein, addiction researchers Doug McConnell and Anke Snoek write that—

> Addicted people often disvalue aspects of their established self-narratives, especially in long-running addiction … these established self-narratives undermine self-governance by making recovery-directed narratives feel alien and seem implausible. Consequently, many addicted people would benefit if they received support for the narrative work required to connect their established self-narratives with recovery.[43]

Importantly, these self-narratives must be accurate enough to not stand against evidence, but also must be hopeful enough to encourage transformation and recovery. McConnell and Snoek write:

> Narrative projection, particularly in self-transformation, is an imaginative enterprise that requires the agent to narrate beyond known truths. An addict doesn't know if he or she can recover and the addict often has plenty of evidence that suggests he or she can't. When we asked one interviewee where he saw himself in one year's time, he replied, "Probably at the exact same spot as where I am now" (living a lonely life in a deteriorated house). In light of the statistics, this is a realistic narrative projection but it will not help him change his situation. A more ambitious narrative less constrained by known truths would be more helpful in realizing a truth worth living.[44]

From a Christian perspective, while encouraged, one's ambitious narrative is not constrained by known truths about the addicted self. It is theologically correct to believe that the Christian's salvific destiny also

---

42   Dunnington, "Recovery," 250.
43   Doug McConnell and Anke Snoek, "The Importance of Self-Narration in Recovery from Addiction," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Philosophy: John Hopkins University Press* 25:3 (2018), 41, DOI 10.1353/ppp.2018.0022.
44   Doug McConnell and Anke Snoek, "Narrating Truths Worth Living: Addiction Narratives," *AJOB Neuroscience* 3:4 (2012), 78, https://doi.org/10.1080/21507740.2012.721459.

makes addiction recovery possible. The Christian and the scientific approaches complement each other.

In addition to the above, and in tune with my earlier proposal, I claim that the sort of narrative self-reconstruction involved in the sacrament of reconciliation may be a suitable means for altogether *preventing* some of the conditions that leave Christians vulnerable to addiction. Participation in the sacrament of reconciliation provides concrete evidence to Christians that they have been forgiven for the sins which are creating psychic tensions and self-fragmentation; in so doing, it helps maintaining a meaningful Christian identity over time. This sacrament and the associated practices are a significant resource that the church possesses for responding to the growth of technology addiction. The church can emphasise reconciliation and narrative self-reconstruction as one facet of Christian communal life or *koinonia*.

Corresponding Means in Protestantism

The two resources for the church's response to the growth of technology addiction seem to be available only to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. The sacrament of reconciliation is inherent to the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, Eastern and Oriental alike.[45] However, Protestant traditions do not include a sacrament of reconciliation as a part of their theology. Likewise, divinisation is a central feature of the Orthodox tradition and is sometimes referred to in Catholic thought. Although divinisation is not necessarily rejected by the Protestant traditions, it is not a point of emphasis. Given these facts, it seems that my two proposals are inapplicable to Protestant Christians. However, this conclusion is not entirely true. Some Protestant traditions utilise very similar practices which can be used to respond to technology addiction.

---

45 There are two major Orthodox families, Eastern and Oriental. The Eastern Orthodox family includes churches such as the Bulgarian, the Greek, the Romanian, and the Ukrainian ones. The Oriental Orthodox tradition includes the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, etc.

First, certain branches of Protestant theology are open to the doctrine of divinisation and there seems to be no in-principle opposition to the doctrine of divinisation. Divinisation, understood as the elevation of the human being by grace to a Godlike status through divine participation, is not incompatible with the classical theology of the Reformation. As previously mentioned, divinisation has its roots in Scriptures such as 2 Peter 1:4, Psalm 82:6, 2 Corinthians 3:17–18, and John 10:33–36. Additionally, the doctrine of divinisation is present in Martin Luther's thought and alive in the later Lutheran tradition. A range of Lutheran theologians and scholars have made attempts at resurrecting the doctrine of *theosis* or "Christification" in contemporary theology.[46] Furthermore, eminent Episcopal theologians such as William Porcher DeBose have espoused views that are very similar to the doctrine of divinisation.[47] Therefore, Protestantism is at least open to this ancient Christian doctrine, and some Protestant traditions already teach and embrace divinisation as integral to the Christian narrative of salvation.

Second, Protestant traditions have always emphasised the importance of confessing sins to God. Brian Ballard, a Protestant philosopher, writes that—

> Christian morality requires contrition and confession, both of which narrate the believer's life. For, contrition requires narrative representation of one's acts as sinful. And confession should be understood—in the typical case—as verbal and habitual, making explicit the narrative of one's past about which one feels contrition. And since confession is habitual, it thus involves the believer in narrating many events of her life, including her inner life.[48]

---

46   Jordan Cooper, *Christification: A Lutheran Approach to Theosis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014), ix–x.

47   Dan Edwards, "Deification and the Anglican Doctrine of Human Nature: A Reassessment of the Historical Significance of William Porcher DuBose," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 58:2 (1989), 200, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42610327.

48   Ballard, "Christianity and the Life Story," 213.

Additionally, the practice of mentioning one's sins to fellow believers for the sake of transparency, for supplicatory prayers on their behalf, or for help in fighting against their temptations to sin, does exist in Protestant traditions. This practice has biblical roots in James' epistle which reads, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (James 5:16 ESV). There is a clear biblical injunction to speaking with brothers and sisters in Christ about one's sins for the sake of spiritual edification.

In this light, many Protestant traditions are at least *open* to this practice. Importantly, many of the relevant psychological effects that occur in the sacrament of reconciliation would likely also be present in this practice. A Christian who experiences inner psychic tension and fragmentation would likely experience a deep sense of relief upon finally confessing one's sins to a good friend, church elder, or pastor. Hopefully, the accompanying encouragement, affirmation, and assistance which would follow such a confession can help Protestant believers reintegrate their past history with a positive vision of their future. Regardless of how much practices of reconciliation might differ across the traditions, Protestants are certainly able to emphasise the practice of confessing sins to other believers for the purposes of edification and the social dimension of confessing sins to other believers. Strictly speaking, there is no Protestant theological principle which would necessitate the rejection of this practice.

All in all, my two proposals for how the church may respond to technology addiction seem to find resonance with Protestant Christians, in theory and in practice.

Conclusion

We have seen above that technology addiction is partly caused by boredom and the desire for a meaningful identity. The church can combat the growth of technology addiction in two ways. First, the church can emphasise the role that divinisation can play as the unifying *telos* of the

Christian life to solve the problem of boredom. Second, the church can recommend the sacrament of reconciliation—or a non-sacramental Protestant equivalent—as a suitable means for maintaining a meaningful Christian identity over the course of one's life. Both factors are an integral part of Christian *koinonia* or fellowship. Although these tools alone do not guarantee addiction prevention, they are nevertheless two resources whose deployment is affordable and worthwhile, since they already are in the church's possession. While these two responses are most readily available to the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Christian traditions, relevant correspondents are found in certain Protestant traditions.

Christians do not have to feel dejected before the rising tide of technology addiction; their church communities already possess resources which may help prevent vulnerability to and addiction to technological means. This evidence highlights the church as a potential bulwark against some uniquely modern issues which Christians and non-Christians alike face.