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Swipe Left: A Theology of Tinder and Digital Dating

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America

[I WANT TO HOLD YOUR HAND: NEW FRONTIERS IN DATING](#)

[1]

Michael P. Murphy | Aug 16 2015 - 10:45am | 4 comments

In Nancy Jo Sales's eye-opening article ["Tinder and the Dawn of the 'Dating Apocalypse'"](#) [2] (appearing in September's *Vanity Fair*), we see new expressions of human life in the digital wild west. Her astute report on newer "dating" apps—such as Tinder, Hinge, Grindr and more—outline a kind of lurid efficiency with which people (usually young people) navigate their desire for intimacy. We have known for a while now that young people are as likely as not to begin any friendship via text; with apps like Tinder, we see this development in full bloom, or as one of Sales's subjects muses: "It's texting someone, or multiple girls, maybe getting very sexual with them, 99 percent of the time before you've even met them."



I have taught Christian Marriage every semester for the last three years. It's a popular course; and, while I'd like to think this is because I've worked hard to fashion a sound curriculum that is delivered with keen insight and pedagogical panache, I know it's much more than that. Students are hungry for the content, are hungry for anything that gives them cause and space to ask deeper questions about intimacy, sexuality and commitment. They are also hungry for fun assignments—like going on a date—but more about this in due course.

As a scholar, theologies of marriage and family are not part of my native "training set." Of course, it helps my instruction that I am married (with children)—and have been for 15 robust and life-giving years; but it has also become clear to me that the course is a perfect venue for introducing students to the basic questions of Christian theology, anthropology and spirituality. Exploring the complex mysteries of Trinitarian relationality and *kenosis*—to take just two examples—through the lens of love and marriage provide ample ground for both personal and communal reflection.

One popular unit in the course is the interrogation of “Hook-Up Culture.” So much has been written about this phenomenon—particularly as a popular mating preference of the Millennial generation—that it’s easy to shout intellectual “Eureka!” and dig in. The topic is low-hanging sociological fruit; and the subjects in question (i.e., those who are purportedly doing the hooking-up) are sitting right in front of me. Their data seems both inscrutable and lock-box credible. This is to say that there has been much occasion for self-study: “Is Hook-Up Culture real?” “Are Millennials having more sex than Xers, Boomers, or the Greatest generations?” “How did premarital coupling look before the sea change of digital culture?” And so on. Most students will grant that Hook-Up culture is a phenomenon with merit, but a heavy slice disagree and push back. These findings, not surprisingly, mirror the scope of results found in the many scholarly and anecdotal studies on the topic.

What is not debated, however, is how digital culture has decisively changed the very DNA of dating rituals—an insight that Sales does very well to articulate in her article. This can come as no surprise. The juggernaut of digital culture, which really has hatched the biggest cultural metamorphosis since Gutenberg’s printing press, affects every aspect of late modern life in fundamental ways—ways, moreover, that are often obscured from our perception. After all, the hardest chains to break, the saying goes, are the ones you can’t see.

Sales’s piece resonates deeply on this score—particularly in her tale of apps gone wild. One of my pet intellectual interests is how the structural encroachment of digital (i.e. “virtual”) life into the real has subtly amplified certain corners of human life and spirituality—particularly in “developed” cultures. Virtual life is playing fast and loose with the physical realities of time and space and is creating a stress which is anthropologically (and therefore theologically) unsustainable. In our online lives, we certainly see new expressions of nobility and virtue; but we also see new expressions of human debasement and crass materialism. We have seen young people—particularly adolescent males—increasingly alienated by the fraudulent versions of sex and intimacy peddled by the porn industry. These young people, as Sherry Turkle writes in her excellent book *Alone Together*, dwell in a “vexed relationship between what is true and what is true in simulation”; and many of them, with these cheap scripts looping in their minds, are trying their hand in the bigger game. Sex historian, Christopher Ryan, who is cited in Sales’s article, is “troubled” by such developments: “The appetite has always been there, but it had restricted availability” he says. Now, “people are gorging. That’s why it’s not intimate. You could call it a kind of psychosexual obesity.”

Perhaps all of this may begin to explain why the dating project is so appealing to the students in my Marriage class. When I introduce the assignment (and kudos to Boston College’s [Kerry Cronin for paving the way here](#) [3]), we are met with yet another occasion to integrate essential theological concepts—like *I-Thou* relationality, like being wary of using people as means to an end, like how consent (so often a red herring) can still lead to experiences that are unethical and damaging. Together, we become astute minds on the subject, and we begin to explore a new vocabulary, which even the most sex-positive students begin to use, words like “disincarnating,” “inorganic,” “prosthetic,” “functional” and “unfulfilling.”

And we explore why it is that imagination is a most central faculty for thinking and behaving theologically. So much in digital media—imaginative conceptually and innovative in application—is also, paradoxically, a tireless thief of imagination. We think we see everything—a person, that is—but then we so quickly swipe her

or him away to the nether regions as if they were a pair of shoes on Zappos. Going on a physical date with prescribed parameters (where phones stay in pockets and purses and side hugs are held in high regard) helps to reorient students and aids, ironically, in the restoration of imagination. As Adolfo Nicolas, Father General of the Jesuits, recently wrote, imagination always begins with the real, with “what is materially, concretely thought to be there; the world as we encounter it; the world of the senses so vividly described in the Gospels themselves; a world of suffering and need, a broken world with many broken people in need of healing. We start there. We don’t run away from there.”

We need refined imaginations to rid ourselves of the notion that what is new is somehow superior. When we enter into the vulnerability of casting aside digital profiles and preferences and meeting another person in all of her/his humanity, we enter into the beautiful mystery of friendship and romance that has fired the human heart for centuries. Sure, there will be a mess (as Pope Francis says) and things may not always work out; but there will also be surprise.

This is what the students tell me anyway.

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