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PROPHETIC CHURCHES FOR THE METAVERSE

Communities That Sing the Melody of Hope

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Abstrak

Dengan banyaknya gereja yang berlomba menuju metaverse, tulisan ini menawarkan respons awal terhadap fenomena *meta-church* dari konteks gereja-gereja Indonesia. Gereja-gereja yang mengadopsi dan berpartisipasi dalam metaverse seharusnya tidak sekadar menjadi lembaga yang mengadakan ibadah atau berkhotbah di sana. Gereja-gereja yang memasuki metaverse mengikuti strategi yang didorong oleh *followers*, *likes*, dan *viewers* (Joas Adiprasetya) sebagai ekuivalen digital untuk mengukur kehadiran, bangunan, dan uang tunai (Chloe Lynch) tanpa pemahaman yang tepat tentang sifat metaverse serta kurangnya kesadaran kontekstual yang secara tidak sadar mendukung dan bahkan mempertahankan sistem yang mendorong ketidakadilan dan ketidaksetaraan. Untuk mendatangkan kesadaran ini, melalui artikel ini saya melihat kepada *Belle*, film animasi Jepang tahun 2021 yang menggambarkan metaverse. Belle menampilkan Sponsors yang memanfaatkan sumber dayanya dan dengan demikian menyalahgunakan metaverse dengan melanggengkan ketidakadilan yang mendalam. Film ini menyoroti kondisi potensial metaverse yang menjanjikan kemungkinan tak terbatas dan dimaksudkan untuk tidak memihak kepada siapapun, dengan cara menghubungkan orang-orang dan menghilangkan hambatan jarak dan waktu. Sekalipun saya berpendapat bahwa gereja-gereja Indonesia harus belajar dari karakter profetis Bitcoin, mereka juga harus tetap waspada terhadap ketidakadilan yang melekat yang hadir dengan munculnya NFT (*non-fungible token*). Memanfaatkan interpretasi Joshua Nunzianto tentang ekonomi pengorbanan Augustinian, saya mengevaluasi kembali konsep ekonomi metaversal yang didasarkan pada gagasan kelangkaan dan kepemilikan kepemilikan. Kemudian, dengan mengacu pada

Imajinasi Profetik karya Walter Brueggemann dan *The Spirit of Hope* karya Jürgen Moltmann, saya membangun sebuah eklesiologi komunitas profetis yang menyanyikan melodi harapan.

Kata-kata Kunci: metaverse, Walter Brueggemann, Jürgen Moltmann, gereja, ekonomi, *blockchain*

Abstract

With a number of churches racing towards the metaverse, this paper offers a preliminary response to the phenomenon of the meta-church from the context of Indonesian churches. Churches that adopt and participate in the metaverse ought to do so not simply to be another institution that holds worship or preaches there. Churches that enter the metaverse follow strategies that are driven by followers, likes, and viewers (Joas Adiprasetya) as digital equivalents for measuring attendance, building, and cash (Chloe Lynch) without a proper understanding of the nature of the metaverse and a lack of contextual awareness may unconsciously endorse and even underwrite a system that fosters injustice and inequality. To kindle such an awareness, in this article I wish to consider *Belle*, a 2021 Japanese animated movie that depicts a metaverse, which features Sponsors who capitalize on its resources and thereby abuse the metaverse by perpetuating deep inequities. The film illuminates the potential condition of a metaverse that promises unlimited possibility and purports to be impartial to everyone, insofar as it connects people and removes for many the barriers of time and distance. While I argue that Indonesian churches must learn from the prophetic character of Bitcoin, they must also stay vigilant against the inherent inequities brought to bear with the advent of the NFT (non-fungible token). Leveraging Joshua Nunzianto's interpretation of an Augustinian economy of sacrifice, I re-evaluate the very concept of a metaversal economy based on notions of scarcity and proprietary ownership. Then, with reference to Walter Brueggemann's *Prophetic Imagination* and Jürgen Moltmann's *The Spirit of Hope*, I construct an ecclesiology of prophetic communities that sing the melody of hope.

Keywords: metaverse, Walter Brueggemann, Jürgen Moltmann, church, economy, blockchain

Introduction

Whereas arts often serve to express the driving concerns of a given culture, film is regarded as the dominant art form of recent generations.¹ As a cinematic trope, the notion of a metaverse has been widely explored in Japanese animated movies.² The latest iteration, *Belle* (2001), coincides with a booming discourse on the actual metaversal possibilities of today and, it seems to me, insightfully depicts the potential condition of any metaverse. The film demonstrates how both the metaverse's promise of unlimited possibility and premise of universal impartiality lag far behind the ideals that frame Satoshi Nakamoto's invention, Bitcoin.³ The Sponsors in *Belle* flaunt their capital and leverage these resources, thus giving rise to abuse, injustice, and inequality at a fundamental level of the "U" metaverse—which, I argue, accurately depicts speculative economic opportunity as a systemic condition that is based on notions of scarcity and proprietary ownership, emblemized in the real world by the Ethereum-based commodity known as the non-fungible token (NFT).⁴ Metaverses connect people by mitigating the barriers of time and distance, suggesting that such wide-ranging possibilities for implementation—from entertainment to education, from trauma therapy to faith formation—are legion within the metaverse.

At the time of writing, the contemporary metaverse remains in very early development, with everyone grasping about to discern its positive and negative prospects. Certain churches have also taken notice of this frontier mission field and are racing to enter the metaverse. As Adrianus Yosia observes, "The church's cybernetic nature is important as a catalyst to go into the greater

¹ Carl Skradel, "Theology and Films," *Journal of the University Film Association*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1970): 16-27, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20687072>.

² *Digimon* (1997), *.hack* (2002) and *Sword Art Online* (2012) are some examples among many.

³ Simon Butler, "The Philosophy of Bitcoin and the Question of Money," *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 39, No. 5 (2021): 81-102, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764211049826>.

⁴ As I will elaborate later, NFT will enable the concept of ownership and scarcity in the metaverse. This helps to explain why the metaverse receives so much attention (and investment) from big companies. "Non-fungible Tokens (NFT)," Ethereum, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://ethereum.org/en/nft/#:~:text=NFTs%20are%20tokens%20that%20we,a%20new%20NFT%20into%20existence>. "The Metaverse," Grayscale Research, Grayscale Investments, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://grayscale.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Grayscale-Metaverse-Report-Nov2021.pdf>. Christine Moy and Adit Gadgil, "Opportunities in the Metaverse," JP Morgan and Chase, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://www.jpmorgan.com/content/dam/jpm/treasury-services/documents/opportunities-in-the-metaverse.pdf>.

era, that is the Industrial 4.0 Revolution.”⁵ Some real-world congregations have already created or rendered the metaversal church, or meta-church.⁶ According to Broderick Sim, a professional NFT fund manager, the church can “leverage the latest technologies for evangelism and funding missions.” However, Sim never discloses the risk inherent in the NFT as a concept underwritten by notions of scarcity and proprietary ownership.⁷ With regard to the Indonesian context, Joas Adiprasetya argues that many churches in the digital era have adopted the strategy of cultivating *followers, likes, and viewers*—what he calls the FLV strategy that is an analogous transposition of what Chloe Lynch has called the success-oriented criteria of ABC, which measures congregational merit by means of *attendance, building, and cash*.⁸

Given that so many churches in Indonesia engage social media—with some even characterizing how they hold digital online services as a kind of migration into the metaverse—it should be clear that the metaverse is much more than facilitating a digital community and far more than authoring digital content. In line with Adiprasetya, I see many churches in Indonesia that have jumped into the metaverse doing so while adopting the FLV strategy, that is, without proper researched reflection regarding the more philosophical underpinnings of the metaverse.⁹ If the church really is going to migrate into the metaverse, it must have a better

⁵ Adrianus Yosia, “Gereja Cyber-Net” (paper presented at (Re)Imagining the Future Church online conference, STT SAAT, Malang, March 1-2, 2022).

⁶ Life.Church, an American multi-site church, has launched metaverse services, while in Indonesia Nafiri Discipleship Church has launched their first metaverse service on March 6, 2022. See <https://www.life.church/> and https://www.instagram.com/p/CarPNI.IreBO/?utm_medium=copy_link.

⁷ Konstanze Tan, “Vision of a Metaverse Missionary: ‘The Church at the Forefront of Technology, Using it for Good.’,” Salt & Light, accessed March 25, 2022, <https://saltandlight.sg/faith/vision-of-a-metaverse-missionary-the-church-at-the-forefront-of-technology-using-it-for-good/>.

⁸ Joas Adiprasetya, *Gereja Pascapandemi Merengkuh Kerapuhan* (Jakarta: STFT Jakarta, 2021), 42-43. In the book, Adiprasetya shows how churches adopting this strategy in Indonesia have experienced disorientation during the pandemic, and Adiprasetya calls churches to repent from this very mindset. Daniel Lucas Lukito references the same disorientation faced by churches in Indonesia, in a blog post entitled, “Betulkah Ibadah di Rumah Tuhan Masih Nomor Satu?: Merenungkan Haggai 1:1-14,” Themelio, accessed December 7, 2021, <http://themelios.net/2021/11/19/betulkah-ibadah-di-rumah-tuhan-masih-nomor-satu-merenungkan-haggai-11-14/>. Amanat Agung Theological Seminary in Jakarta also has conducted surveys regarding church and metaverse.

⁹ Broderick Sim sees the NFT as an opportunity to raise funds for mission, yet throughout the discussion fails to mention that most NFT trades are for so-called Veblen goods and that the NFT engenders a system based on ownership and scarcity, which breeds inequality and injustice (as I will show later). See Tan, “Vision of a Metaverse Missionary.”

understanding of it to better navigate and react in that new environment.

Churches that adopt and participate in the metaverse ought to do so not simply to be another institution that holds worship and preaches there. Such churches that enter the metaverse and are driven by an ABC/FLV strategy likely lack an understanding and awareness of the nature of the metaverse. Without a proper understanding of this nature, the lack of contextual awareness may unconsciously endorse and even underwrite a system that fosters injustice and inequality.

To address these concerns, this article will show how Nakamoto, creator of Bitcoin, became an important proponent for the creation of the metaverse. In considering how Bitcoin belies an eschatological longing for justice and equality, I observe the manner in which the blockchain-based currency serves as Nakamoto's prophetic voice advocating for universal community and connectivity. That said, with the eventual development of the NFT, notions of scarcity and proprietary ownership enter the digital world. This technology becomes an indispensable component for the development of the metaverse, as it reveals an exploitative economic system that attracts interest and investment from ever widening audiences as well as venture capitalists who are able to infuse rapid development into the metaverse. I then look to Joshua Nunzianto's Augustinian *economy of sacrifice* to re-evaluate such a hyper-privatized transactional system that exploits the proprietaries of scarcity, and this evaluation will show how an economy based on scarcity and ownership ends up creating injustice and inequality. In due course, I demonstrate how the eschatological longing characterized by Nakamoto's Bitcoin still operates within the framework of privatization, which is contrasted by the eschatological hope espoused by Nunzianto's Augustinian economy of sacrifice that operates within a different framework. Such an economy of sacrifice predicates a solution founded not upon possession of goods, let alone the sophisticated means of distributing wealth represented by Bitcoin, but upon the prospect of communities of hope that demonstrate deep care for each other. Finally, I construct an ecclesiology that borrows from Walter Brueggemann's notion of the *prophetic imagination* as well as Jürgen Moltmann's discussion of *the city* in his *Spirit of Hope*, to render a vision of prophetic churches as metaversal communities of those who sing the melody of hope.

Into the Metaverse

From its vantage, the metaverse regards *the internet* as a gigantic, unified, persistent, and shared realm.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the American investment corporation JP Morgan characterizes the metaverse as “a seamless convergence of our physical and digital lives, creating a unified, virtual community where we can work, play, relax, transact and socialize.”¹¹ Although still in its early phase, the metaverse “even has the promise of facilitating accessibility from the comfort of the home, breaking down boundaries and democratizing access to key goods, services and experiences.”¹² Offering a full response to the metaverse requires a proper understanding of the same, even to see as it (or at least its purveyors) may see.

Sequencing the Web

To regard the metaverse as the domain of the so-called Web 3.0 is to align with the opinions of financiers such as JP Morgan and Grayscale, which perceive its continuation from Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. For Grayscale, Web 1.0 connected us online, while Web 2.0 connected us to online communities; as such, Web 3.0 will connect us via a community-owned virtual world.¹³ Web 2.0 online communities are centrally owned by their respective developers. Being centralized, everything is leased inside the platform, with no digital assets of ownership. This presents clear advantages to corporations underwriting Web 2.0. In fact, were a developer such as Blizzard Entertainment to no longer maintain a given online world—such as its popular World of Warcraft game—then all in-world purchases would be lost.¹⁴ In other words, purchases made using in-world currency have no value outside of its respective world, thereby propping up the importance of these companies.¹⁵

So then, how revolutionary is Web 3.0? Can we not already perceive some aspects of a metaverse within the Web 2.0 moment

¹⁰ Lik-Hang Lee, et al., “All One Needs to Know about Metaverse: A Complete Survey on Technological Singularity, Virtual Ecosystem, and Research Agenda,” *Journal of Latex Class Files*, Vol. 14, No. 8 (2021): 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.11200.05124/8>.

¹¹ Moy and Gadgil, “Opportunities in the Metaverse.”

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Grayscale, “The Metaverse.”

¹⁴ JP Morgan sees MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) such as “World of Warcraft” and “Second Life” as representations of Web 2.0, but it also recognizes the close relationship between Web 2.0 and Web 3.0. Moy and Gadgil, “Opportunities in the Metaverse.”

¹⁵ Granting the possibility of informal transactions between physical world currencies and in-game commodities, in most cases these arrangements are prohibited by the developers. For instance, see the Blizzard website: <https://us.battle.net/support/en/article/269874>.

that so thoroughly pervades internet culture today? While Web 2.0 presents the building blocks of a metaverse, insofar as the paradigm has developed the supporting technologies underlying its existence, Web 3.0 transcends Web 2.0 by virtue of the *blockchain*.¹⁶ That said, the metaverse is still in its early developmental stages and continues to be dependent on emerging technological advancements.¹⁷

Unlike its predecessor, Web 3.0 is community-governed and decentralized, meaning that it features digital assets of ownership. Transactions facilitated using cryptocurrencies and blockchain tokens are durable between the digital and physical worlds.¹⁸ Web 3.0 denotes a meta-level ecology that blends physical and digital environments, thereby allowing for the co-existence of physical-virtual reality *qua* surreality. The possibility of digital-physical asset ownership presents the metaverse as an interesting investment opportunity for prospectors like JP Morgan and Grayscale.¹⁹

Having a thorough and nuanced understanding of cryptocurrencies and NFTs will prove to be indispensable for grasping the metaverse and discerning its possible future developments.²⁰ In the next part, I briefly survey Bitcoin, the forerunner of cryptocurrency, before turning to consider the NFT. I then show how both components enable the metaverse to come to fruition, and in doing so I offer my preliminary evaluation of the metaverse at present.

Underwriting the Future

Bitcoin is the first and largest cryptocurrency on the market, invented in 2008 by an unknown internet personality or

¹⁶ This technology is the underlying principle for cryptocurrency and NFTs, whereas technologies such as AR (augmented reality) and VR (virtual reality), high-speed networks, immense computing processing capabilities, and even AI (artificial intelligence) can be found in Web 2.0. See Lee, et al., “All One Need to Know about Metaverse,” 3-5.

¹⁷ Consider Moy and Gadgil: “The metaverse is still early in its evolution, and there is no singular, all-encompassing definition to which people can turn. Themes of what the metaverse is and could be, however, are emerging.” Moy and Gadgil, “Opportunities in the Metaverse”. In other words, “The Metaverse is still emerging.” Grayscale, “The Metaverse”. Such emerging “technologies serve as the catalyst to drive such transitions of cyberspaces.” Lee et al., “All One Need to Know about Metaverse,” 5.

¹⁸ Metaversal transactions are (re)presented by way of “Decentraland” (<https://decentraland.org/>) and “Cryptovoxels” (<https://www.cryptovoxels.com/>); see Moy and Gadgil, “Opportunities in the Metaverse.”

¹⁹ *ibid*; Grayscale, “The Metaverse.”

²⁰ I will show below how JP Morgan and Grayscale see NFT as an important variable in the development of the metaverse. Lee et al. also shows how Bitcoin as a blockchain based cryptocurrency serves as the ancestor of the metaverse. Lee et al., “All One Need to Know about Metaverse,” 17.

group of people under the name of Satoshi Nakamoto. Nakamoto's aim was to create a purely peer-to-peer electronic currency to facilitate transactions without mediation by a third-party institution.²¹ And like gold, by its nature Bitcoin is limited and thus deflationary.²²

In contrast, modern systems of currency are inflationary, according to Simon Butler, being²³

based on money creation primarily through bank-issued debt with interest, transfers wealth from the bulk of society to the top (Lietaer, 2001: 54), producing an unstable monetary system and a society where the 'future doesn't matter' (Lietaer, 2014). Usury was condemned throughout much of history until only recently – now it is a systemic feature, concentrating wealth in a minority and driving inequality (Lietaer, 2001: 53). Growing inflation is also correlated with growing inequality (Albanesi, 2007) and excessive debt is related to lower growth (Reinhart and Rogoff, 2010).

In other words, by its nature, Bitcoin presents a challenge to our modern monetary system. Nathaniel Poppers, a New York Times reporter, sees that Nakamoto intended Bitcoin as a challenge towards some of the most powerful institutions in present-day society, including governments and state banks. Early on, Bitcoin envisions a utopian community.²⁴

If Nakamoto created Bitcoin to be a *prophetic voice* amid our existing monetary systems, then its call may be recognized to be one of *eschatological longing*—namely, for an even better (i.e., utopian) system where wealth inequalities are ameliorated.²⁵ However, to

²¹ This was made possible through blockchain technology. Satoshi Nakamoto, "Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System," Bitcoin, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://bitcoin.org/bitcoin.pdf>.

²² From the outset, less than 21 million Bitcoin are available by design. The last bitcoin will be mined by 2140. See Butler, "The Philosophy of Bitcoin and the Question of Money."

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Nathaniel Poppers, *Digital Gold* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2015), Introduction, Kindle. Ohtman et al. opine that cryptocurrencies could reduce global wealth inequality. Anwar Othman, et al., "The Impact of Monetary Systems on Income Inequity and Wealth Distribution: A Case Study of Cryptocurrencies, Fiat Money and Gold Standard," *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, Vol. 15, No. 6 (2020): 1161-1183, <http://doi.org/10.1108/IJOEM-06-2019-0473>.

²⁵ Granted, there are many claims that associate Bitcoin with illegal and criminal activities. It is true that there are transactions related with criminal and illegal activities. However, majority transactions are legitimate. Furthermore, most new users were interested in Bitcoin as a means of investment rather than transaction. There are also critiques that questioned Bitcoin legitimacies as

differentiate a system's original design or intent from its practical application, Poppers avers that most people are not interested in Nakamoto's Bitcoin for any philosophical merit and are instead invested in more practical applications of this revolutionary technology "as an opportunity to make money by disrupting the existing status quo."²⁶

Although the metaverse shares elements of Bitcoin's utopian philosophy as a similarly revolutionary technological advancement, the cryptocurrency has not brought much attention to the metaverse.²⁷ According to both JP Morgan and Grayscale, only with the advent of Ethereum's NFT—and with it the transversal capabilities of an integrative virtual/actual, digital assets-ownership model—did a new age dawn, even a new creation appear, that is the metaverse.²⁸

An NFT can represent anything unique as an Ethereum-based asset. An alternative kind of post-Bitcoin cryptocurrency, NFTs utilize blockchain technology to grant quasi-proprietary power to content creators who are interested in commodifying what they produce. Each NFT inventories a unique item that at any given time can only be owned by a singular official owner.²⁹ According to Ethereum, "NFTs and Ethereum solve the problems that exist in the internet today," the copy-paste problem.³⁰

money, since money transactions require trust to function. Money requires the creation of higher supra-individual formations—normally represented by the government. However, unlike our modern system, Bitcoin does not rely on trust in the government, or any central authority. In his writing, Butler shows, quoting him, "Bitcoin is a central authority, a public institution, in the same way that the state performs that role in money. And it is centralizing 'great forces at a single point' (albeit through a decentralized computing system)." Butler sees Bitcoin as an evolution of 'higher-supra-individual' formations in the global society. Again, quoting Butler, "Bitcoin may be very different to state money technically and politically, but is very similar philosophically. Bitcoin is a centralized institution for money, a machine for the concentration of the forces of value." Butler, "The Philosophy of Bitcoin and the Question of Money."

²⁶ Poppers, *Digital Gold*, Introduction, Kindle.

²⁷ For instance, Facebook only changed its name to Meta in 2021, long after the advent of Bitcoin. See Meta, "Introducing Meta: A Social Technology Company," accessed March 11, 2022, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/facebook-company-is-now-meta/>. See the analyses of Moy and Gadgil, "Opportunities in the Metaverse," and Grayscale, "The Metaverse."

²⁸ Moy and Gadgil, "Opportunities in the Metaverse" and Grayscale, "The Metaverse."

²⁹ JP Morgan and Grayscale see this as making way for new transactional methods in the digital and actual world(s), allowing transversal monetization and exchange of value. Moy and Gadgil, "Opportunities in the Metaverse" and Grayscale, "The Metaverse."

³⁰ One biggest problem facing the NFTs is the copy-paste problem. In the case of a digital image or art, people can simply take a screenshot of an NFT and make a copy of it, or even at times create a replica of the NFT. The only difference that differentiates the original NFT and its replica is the ID register

However, virtual world trading differs from the trappings of physical world necessities. Staples such as water, food, shelter, and climate derive a significant proportion of their values from their utilitarian functionality to support basic needs. Valuation in the metaverse depends more on attendant social values, wherein possession of NFTs resembles the consumption of luxurious, so-called Veblen goods that operate within a paradigm of scarcity.³¹ Exclusivity breeds elitist behavior, as demonstrated in the attention NFT attracts from content creators and celebrities alike.³²

Rendering Preliminary Remarks on the Metaverse

Cryptocurrency and blockchain are both constructed using the same basic technology. While Nakamoto envisioned Bitcoin for improved wealth distribution, nevertheless, it still operates within the frameworks of scarcity and ownership. Meanwhile, NFT currently predicated a scarcity, luxury-based, elitist ecology of the Veblen good.³³ Yet the NFT works as intended—per Ethereum, “there’s a need to replicate the properties of physical items like scarcity, uniqueness, and proof of ownership.”³⁴ Since NFT is a building block that shaped the metaverse, this paradigm is also embedded in the metaverse.

Grayscale sees that NFT has created a new free-market internet native economy that can be monetized.³⁵ JP Morgan estimated over \$1 trillion in yearly revenues opportunity in the

of the NFT in the Ethereum blockchain. Therefore the only way to verify an NFT originality is through verification to the respective blockchain. Ethereum acknowledges this problem and states that “owning the verifiably real thing will always have more value than not.” Ethereum, “Non-fungible Tokens (NFT).”

³¹ Lee, et al., “All One Need to Know about Metaverse,” 34.

³² Canadian Musician Grimes sold \$6 million worth of NFTs, while Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey sold his first-ever tweet as an NFT for \$2.9 million. See Jacob Kastrenakes, “Grimes Sold \$6 Million Worth of Digital Art as NFTs,” The Verge, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://www.theverge.com/2021/3/1/22308075/grimes-nft-6-million-sales-nifty-gateway-warnymph>; Taylor Locke, “Jack Dorsey Sells His First Tweet Ever as an NFT for over \$2.9 Million,” CNBC, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/22/jack-dorsey-sells-his-first-tweet-ever-as-an-nft-for-over-2point9-million.html>; “Several artists have made significant profits by selling their creations as NFTs. And surprisingly, many of the artists who have raked in millions are still in high school.” Langston Thomas, “5 Teen Artists Who Made More than Six-Figures from NFTs,” nft now, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://nftnow.com/features/6-teen-artists-6-figures-from-nfts/>.

³³ In “Characterizing Wealth Inequality in Cryptocurrencies,” Ashish Rajendra Sai and colleagues point out “that the configurability of policies in Ethereum based tokens can lead to poorer wealth distribution.” See Ashish Rajendra Sai, et al., “Characterizing Wealth Inequality in Cryptocurrencies,” *Frontiers in Blockchain*, Vol. 4 (2021): 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fbloc.2021.730122>

³⁴ Ethereum, “Non-fungible Tokens (NFT).”

³⁵ Grayscale, “The Metaverse.”

metaverse market.³⁶ During Q3 of 2021, crypto fundraising totaled at \$8.2 billion, while capital investment has also increased. This looks like a huge amount of capital, not so compared to Facebook's plan to invest \$10 billion in the metaverse.³⁷ This opportunity gives a whole new attention towards the metaverse. "As a result, we see companies of all shapes and sizes entering the metaverse."³⁸

Unlike companies and startups, big tech companies can afford to invest a lot of capital into the metaverse.³⁹ Lee et al. shows that metaverse has a high barrier of entry; companies' irretrievable cost in developing a metaverse system is high. Meanwhile big companies like Facebook and Microsoft can afford and have already gone into the market. Unless the cost of developing a metaverse decreases, lesser companies and startups will face financial difficulties upon entering the market. This could result in oligopolies dominating the market, especially at an early stage of metaverse developments.⁴⁰

The metaverse offers utopia, thereby exacerbating a kind of eschatological longing that also undergirds *Belle's* "U." It is by "breaking down boundaries and democratizing access to key goods, services and experiences" that the film's alternative realities can pledge that *You will be "U."* "*U*" *will be You.* "*U*" *will be Everything.*

The plot of *Belle* revolves around an unassuming high school student Suzu Naito. Although she loves singing, a certain traumatic childhood experience has rendered her unable to sing anymore. One day, the seventeen-year-old Suzu stumbles upon a metaverse called "U." Upon logging into "U," she is greeted with the following phrases: "You will be 'U.' 'U' will be You. 'U' will be Everything"; and "U is another reality. [Your avatar] is another you. You can't start over in reality, but you can start over in U. You can live as another you. You can start a new life. You can change the world."⁴¹

Suzu—whose name means "bell" in English—creates an avatar named Bell. As the greetings promise, Suzu in "U" is finally able to sing again as Bell and eventually becomes an internet phenomenon. People started to call her "Belle," meaning "beautiful" in French. While the premise of "U" is that anyone can

³⁶ Moy and Gadgil, "Opportunities in the Metaverse."

³⁷ Grayscale, "The Metaverse."

³⁸ Moy and Gadgil, "Opportunities in the Metaverse."

³⁹ Tech industrial giants such as Google, Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon are capable of investing billions and billions of money into the metaverse if they desired. For example, Google's Alpha generates revenue of \$147 billion from advertisement alone while Facebook has a market cap of \$900 billion. See Lee, et al., "All One Need to Know about Metaverse," and Grayscale, "The Metaverse."

⁴⁰ Lee et al., "All One Need to Know about Metaverse," 33.

⁴¹ *Belle*, directed by Mamoru Hosoda (Tokyo: Studio Chizu, 2021), 13:10, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81492822>.

become anything they want in the metaverse, not everyone enjoys popularity like Suzu. These Sponsors use their power to bring about “order” and “justice” in the community. The promise that “you will be everything” and the premise that “you can change the world” are, therefore, not universally valid for everyone, even in the metaverse of “U.”

In our own metaverse coexist the two opposing ideals of Bitcoin and NFTs. In the ostensible hope of fostering justice and equality, Nakamoto wanted to disrupt existing monetary systems by promoting better wealth distribution through Bitcoin. On the other hand, the NFT is more closely related to unjust wealth distribution.

It is important to understand that this world is built upon Bitcoin and NFT, hence it will adopt the underlying spirit and philosophy behind each of Bitcoin and NFT. According to Grayscale, the metaverse will move “beyond the internet that we know” and have the “potential to transform our social interactions.” Thus, the metaverse, while a virtual world, could transform the reality of the physical world.⁴²

One has to realize, neither engaging in social media or providing online service do not make a meta-church. Creating an online community is part of web 2.0. Web 3.0 or the metaverse is aimed to create a virtual world, a coexistence of physical-virtual reality-surreality. Thus, when we talk about a metaverse church or meta-church, how should the church, as people of God react or live in the metaverse? It becomes clear that the church's primary role is not to preach or hold service in the metaverse. The next part of this article will show what does it mean for a church to be a prophetic voice in the metaverse.

Voicing an Eschatological Hope

Toward an Augustinian Economy of Sacrifice

In the previous section, I showed that through the NFT notions of ownership and scarcity entered into the metaverse. Joshua Nunzianto, an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Social Responsibility and Sustainability division of the Leeds School of Business, wrote:⁴³

Our economy is always limited because our needs and desires are conditioned by embodiment. Limited goods cannot always meet our appetite to own them.

⁴² Grayscale, “The Metaverse.”

⁴³ Joshua S. Nunzianto, *Augustine and the Economy of Sacrifice: Ancient and Modern Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 12. Italics are original.

Conventionally, economists have interpreted this limit as *scarcity*. But that identification trades on an assumption about ownership.

Nunziante further regards all economic exchanges as possible because of ownership and scarcity. People part with things that they value and own, marking them as sacrificial losses for a greater good. Note that any sacrifice we make entails the renunciation or deprivation of something that is rightfully ours. In any exchange, two parties make sacrifices, and both come better off through the exchange. This is inevitable because of scarcity, and it depends on ownership.⁴⁴

The Latin roots of “sacrifice” (*sacrum facere*) allude to the act of *making sacred*. In an Augustinian economy of sacrifice, therefore, human persons are made sacred through parting with supposed possessions. For Augustine, sacrifice is neither renunciation nor deprivation, but an offering. This act of offering becomes a divestment without loss, as it is a parting with what had never been our own. Per Nunziante, to offer something entails the acknowledgement of a common good that precedes all our property claims.⁴⁵ As such, Augustine’s economy of sacrifice does not view ownership or scarcity in the way that our modern economy does.

Nunziante also writes, “Trust is actually coded into the heart of economic life as credit (from *credere*).”⁴⁶ The question becomes: “where do people put their trust?” People could put their trust into goods like money, Bitcoin, or NFTs to extend their individual power and satisfy personal appetites, or they can operate in an economy of sacrifice that puts their trust in the community that works for the common good.⁴⁷

In the Augustinian economy of sacrifice, transactional exchanges for the sake of a greater good are in reality neither renunciations nor deprivations, as if based on the assumptions of ownership and scarcity. Instead, as Nunziante notes, what matters is “what we make of life itself when we offer the things of life to others in the service of our common good.”⁴⁸ Still, such an economy of sacrifice acknowledges finitude as the natural limits of creation. In this calculus, limitation is not a negative thing but an embodied “acknowledgement of our common good in limited, mortal flesh.”⁴⁹ As such, the well-being of all people becomes a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2-3

⁴⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19.

shared responsibility, presenting a communal responsibility to stand against inequality and injustice.

In Augustine's economy of sacrifice, people ought not put their trust in finite resources but in the community of abundant love.⁵⁰ The church should live out the economy of sacrifice, first and foremost, as a community that offers a glimpse of what it is to be left in one another's keeping.⁵¹ What is offered in such an economy of sacrifice is life itself, to be represented by goods and services that enable and enrich it. Therefore, our life is not driven by hoarding ownership and scarcity—which leads to inequality and injustice—but it is a life of parting. Ownership is not denied per se, becoming instead the means by which we demonstrate the wisdom of loving and letting go.⁵² Transactions of goods and services within this framework ought to teach us how to live together in constant open heartedness, and in this way we are made sacred.

Church as a Prophetic Voice

According to Walter Brueggemann, who sees the ethos of consumerism inevitably resulting in a depreciation of memory and hope, consumerism is a culture that demands everything must be held in the now and, as such, is an abandonment of the faith for those of the Christian tradition.⁵³ Thus, the task of prophetic ministry is to bring Christians back to their faith. Rather than fortune-telling or prediction of the future, being *prophetic* is about nurturing, nourishing, and evoking a consciousness and a perception that would stand in contrast against the imaginations of our dominant cultures. Such dominant cultures resist criticism and reject the hope promised by God.⁵⁴

In contrast, Brueggemann sees the church as a prophetic community, a subcommunity—an alternative community, one that generates prophecies while participating in and living inside the dominant community.⁵⁵ Rather than adopt the dominant culture and its imagination in specific, the church should embrace its alterity, becoming a subcommunity that offers resistance and alternatives to the imaginings of that dominant community. The church does so by performing two principles defined by Brueggemann as the processes of *dismantling* and *energizing*.⁵⁶

To *dismantle* is to express the existing social sense of pain, namely, to make suffering and injustice both visible and

⁵⁰ Ibid., 232.

⁵¹ Ibid., 19.

⁵² Ibid., 230.

⁵³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), chapter 1, Kindle.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., preface to the revised edition, Kindle.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

acknowledged by the community. To *energize* is to give hope—a promise for what is yet to come—namely, the proclamation of a better condition for society. The church as an alternative community will thus have an alternative consciousness, as the people of God take care not to separate prophecy from doxology; otherwise, it will either wither in vitality or itself devolve into ideology. Through the dismantling and energizing processes, the alternative community's purpose is to enable a new human beginning.⁵⁷

Brueggemann argues that this model for the church presents as a relevant ecclesiology for our current social conditions. Amid both consumerism and an emerging “virtual reality” as the dominant culture, the church is a “community of peculiar discourse” that practices pain and hope for a healthy human life. While this notion will undoubtedly be met with rejection and other difficulties, Brueggemann also argues that consumerism and the digital environments we fashion comprise precisely the circumstances in which to demonstrate prophetic faith.⁵⁸

Whereas Brueggemann reads the event of the exodus and the figure of Moses to depict the process of *dismantlement* and *energization*, I want to bring into focus here the shift from the Mosaic era to Solomon's kingship, which Brueggemann also references. Unlike Moses' prophetic ministry against Egypt, Solomon's action is driven by a desire for amassing self-serving achievements, which serve the self-security of his kingdom as well as dynasty—ironically going back to the Egyptian era.⁵⁹

Nakamoto's Prophetic Ideation?

Let us read Brueggemann's twin processes of *dismantling* and *energizing* in tandem with the case of Bitcoin. Its pseudonymous founder Nakamoto had wished to *dismantle* the economic injustice of inequitable wealth distribution. Facing off with the dominant community, Nakamoto created Bitcoin as hope, an alternative subcommunity—though there are no (intentional) doxological aspects in the creation of Bitcoin. Meanwhile, its “successor” in the NFT also tries to foster an alternative community, purported to be better and more sustainable—yet merely adopted the logics of the previous dominant culture.

⁵⁷ Ibid., chapter 1, Kindle.

⁵⁸ Ibid., preface to the revised edition, Kindle.

⁵⁹ Brueggemann observes, “By the time of Solomon in approximately 962 B.C.E. ... there was a radical shift in the foundations of Israel's life and faith. ... The entire program of Solomon now appears to have been a self-serving achievement with its sole purpose the self-securing of the king and dynasty.” Ibid., chapter 2, Kindle. Compare this to what Brueggemann mentioned in chapter 1 where he shows how Moses dismantles the Egyptian Kingdom's self-serving community that oppressed and exploited the Israelites.

While the concept of Bitcoin all but longs for improved wealth distribution, it nevertheless operates within the frameworks of scarcity and ownership, presenting itself as a system of trust predicated on commodified goods. This is why I see Bitcoin as an eschatological *longing* rather than an eschatological hope, since—from its very inception—its longing for a utopia necessarily trades on a system that inevitably creates inequality and injustice. Now we see that the NFT brings with it into the metaverse its own notions of scarcity and ownership, along with real-world commodification. In light of recent and rapid developments concerning the metaverse (see previous section), inequality and injustice have entered the world and become part of the metaverse's DNA.

To be the body of Christ, the church should live out its life like Christ, who practiced the most radical form of prophetic imagination in his ministry, ultimately criticizing the powers of death and—as Brueggemann would say—dismantling death through his crucifixion. The church further recognizes Christ's resurrection as the energizing of a new future given by God.⁶⁰ As such, the church's presence in the metaverse should naturally evoke an alternative community with prophetic vision from within that digitally mediated space. What matters is not how it holds services or accomplishes its preaching vocation, but rather it has everything to do with the meta-real presence of the church—its stance and posture, which provide a hermeneutic for understanding the metaverse, rebuking the possibility of injustice and oppression, and proclaiming that in every context all must be brought into the light. Humbly but unabashedly, the church must share these findings to the public, showing the reality and despair that people refuse to see, so that new futures can be believed in and embraced.

To reiterate what we hear in Nakamoto's longing as emblemized in Bitcoin, we might recognize the prophetic inflection in the very notion of the metaverse itself, which can be heard and understood as voicing its own eschatological longing. Brueggemann shows that with *dismantling* it becomes possible for an *energized* people to hope—namely, by looking at the reality of pain and suffering, injustice and inequality, and the need to long for and maintain hope. In the next section, I consider Jürgen Moltmann's notion of the *spirit of hope* (from the work of the same title) whereby we can transform eschatological longing into eschatological hope. In his 2019 monograph, *The Spirit of Hope*, Moltmann extends the thesis of his seminal 1964 monograph, *Theology of Hope*, to examine the phenomenon of urbanization that had been triggered by the Industrial Revolution and has reverberated since the turn of 19th century with far-reaching implications for much of humankind. Upon considering his

⁶⁰ Ibid., chapter 6, Kindle.

analysis, I offer a preliminary evaluation of a Moltmannian *spirit of hope* in light of human urbanization and extend such assessments to the metaverse.

Whither Eschatological Hope?

Without a proper understanding of the material history of and underlying assumptions behind the metaverse and its (emergent) creation, the church cannot hope to become a prophetic voice. Without incisive perception, there is no idolatrous reality to be dismantled and, thus, nothing to be energized; the church simply participates with the dominant culture. Worse still, if the motive for the church's embrace of the metaverse would be to secure its relevance, to find sustenance for its own sake—instead of acting on behalf of the oppressed—then the church will only ever abdicate its prophetic voice and devolve to become a shill for the dominant powers, participating in the injustice and oppression they perpetrate.⁶¹ But before looking ahead toward a metaversal mission, we must consider how the church continues to find uneven footing even within our geophysical cityscapes.⁶²

Modern urbanization promotes mega-cities with the hope-filled promise that these cities brim with opportunity for a good life and teems with unlimited possibility. Recalling the tension of exilic life and eschatological hope in light of these optimisms, Moltmann asks, “When we build such modern mega-cities and want to live in the urban possibilities, are we working in ‘Babylon’ on behalf of our own prison or are we anticipating the ‘heavenly Jerusalem?’”⁶³ In their ancient forms, cities are structured by three aspects: the *temple* as the center of the world, closely connecting worship with identity; the *castle* as the center of political power, closely connecting force with orthodoxy (cf. temple); and the *market* as the center of trade, closely connecting citizens and denizen with one another through a sustained political economy.⁶⁴ These cities were historically formed by families and clans living within a circumscribed geographical location, and they live life and work in the city because they were born and thus belong in that particular city.

By the late 18th century, the Industrial Revolution began to transform the way European cities were structured. Moltmann refers to the “industrial town,” where people choose to live because they hope to find work.⁶⁵ But wherever temple life is no longer central and society is not defined by which nobility occupies that

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., chapter 7, Kindle.

⁶³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Hope: Theology for a World in Peril*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), chapter 7, Kindle.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

castle, sociocultural powers are no longer held by the religious or political elites, being held instead by financial markets and within commercial districts. In time, therefore, this model would become what Moltmann calls the “capitalistic city.”⁶⁶ An unsettling reality today, “Anyone who has to leave their apartment because they can no longer pay the rent knows how capitalism governs our cities,” Moltmann asserts.⁶⁷ The bigger today’s city, the more it traffics in false hope, even as the “big city is at the moment the great hope of humankind.” In posing the challenging query, “Can the big city keep its promise of freedom and unlimited possibilities of life?” Moltmann writes, “We don’t know the answer to this, but we do know that only the big city has a future, that is, an unknown and most dangerous future.”⁶⁸

Transposing these aspects of Moltmannian analysis to the metaverse, we recognize the familiarity with which both megacities and the metaverse evoke hope for the good life, pledge a world of opportunity, and promise unlimited possibility. Yet the metaverse is being established with neither temples nor political institutions—at least, as we have come to understand these in world history. Instead, the metaverse is rendered in and by a purely market-driven vision for the world. Just as people live in the “capitalistic city” because they expect to find work there, more people are engaging the metaverse given what they see as money making opportunities.⁶⁹ But because the metaverse does not trade necessities but luxury goods, as mentioned earlier, it is by design a place for those who have capital—a kind of *uber-capitalistic quasi-city*.

In contrast to such fallen moral imaginaries, Moltmann wants to save the capitalistic city by means of a supremely compelling vision for the future—namely, a *spirit of hope*. Extending his line of theological reasoning, I posit that we need such an eschatological hope to save the metaverse, too. In agreement with Brueggemann, Moltmann explains that “when hope dies, the resistance against injustice and corruption wanes, and the people become apathetic.”⁷⁰ Moltmann alludes to yet another model of the great city and a city-life worthy of our hope, as he describes,⁷¹

This city does not close its gates at night: it is secure and open and hospitable. This city has no temple, because the glory of God is the light and enlightens all inhabitants. This

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Moy and Gadgil, “Opportunities in the Metaverse” and Grayscale, “The Metaverse.”

⁷⁰ Moltmann, *The Spirit of Hope*, chapter 7, Kindle.

⁷¹ Ibid.

is a messianic vision of peace, embracing God, human beings, and nature in an abundance of life: the city of God.

Thus, the eschatological vision of the heavenly city of Jerusalem provides the basis of eschatological hope for the church in all places and times (Rev. 21-22; cf. Isa 65:17 and Ezek. 40-48).

In facing the reality that the gap ever widens between the rich and the poor, how should the church react? If following Nakamoto's proposals for an alternative economic structure (cryptocurrency), the church will inherit metaverse—the future of which seems to be bleak. In contrast, arguing that the solution to the depressing reality of widening wealth gaps is neither property, nor any new money system purportedly accessible for all (Bitcoin), Moltmann doubles down on *community* as a visible realization of social balance and social freedom.⁷²

Striving for the eschatological hope of achieving true Christian community, three factors are required. First, we must hold to a deep affirmation of human life instead of allowing for its denial. Second, we must see human life as participation, both in sympathy with others and in sharing ourselves with one another. Lastly, we must pursue fulfillment, not only in a private sense but also in public abundance.⁷³ To achieve all this, the church must encounter the reality of pain, suffering, injustice, and inequality, particularly as suffered by the poor, in order to show compassion to all.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Reconsidering *Belle*, we see there are unwritten rules in “U” tacitly accepted by the community that norms their conduct. One such taboo is that of personal identity, which must not be revealed. In fact, the highest judgment that can be given to anyone is a “Reveal,” where the capacity to “Reveal” is given to Justin, leader of the “Sponsor”-backed group. Thus, even in “U,” people who have control are those who are backed with capital. As the film progresses, conflicts arise within the community, and Justin fails to balance order and execute justice for the community, demonstrating that the system has failed to do its job. To ameliorate matters, Belle offers to be “Revealed,” thereby rejecting the structure of norms imposed by the community. Throwing the

⁷² In *The Affluent Society*, John Kennet Galbraith, a Canadian-American economist, defines social balance as a relationship between public services and private wealth. While Felix E. Oppenheim, professor emeritus of political science, University of Massachusetts, defines social freedom as the relation between the holder of power and a respondent, where the respondent is free to do any potential action. *Ibid.*, chapter 1, Kindle.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

“U” community into confusion over what they deem the foolish act of exposing one’s true identity, Belle’s identity is revealed to be Suzu, an ordinary high school girl—a nobody. Some are nonetheless moved by what Suzu has done, and in the end this *nobody* is able to bring peace and justice to the “U” community—not through any power received from a “Sponsor” but by her own voice, namely, the gift of her singing. As her voice surprisingly echoes throughout the “U” community, her prophetic song accomplishes what Justin and his group failed to achieve.

This imagery sketches how churches should engage in the metaverse, namely as a prophetic subcommunity that stands against injustices and inequalities everywhere. By leaning on the contributions of Nunziato, Brueggemann, and Moltmann, the church can engage the metaverse with reflective nuance. First, laying the prophetic groundwork for the church to not be complicit with any oppressive system, Nunziato’s *Augustinian economy of sacrifice* can serve as the economic lens for the church to perceive instances of oppression and injustice in the metaverse. Second, Brueggemann’s prophetic imagination reveals to the church how it can and must *dismantle* the inequitable realities of our society and, in faithful commitment to Christ’s economy of sacrifice, must *energize* the community by exposing injustices of our modern economy. Third, the church should not naively flock (as in, migrate together) to the metaverse, as if it were just another capitalistic town; as Moltmann shows, the *spirit of hope* points to a theological new creation that reorients every relationship throughout the city of God.

Following Moltmann a bit further, I argue that churches must bring hope to the metaverse. Like Belle’s singing, the church should “sing” out prophetically the “melody” of eschatological hope in Christ. By becoming a community of social balance and social freedom, the Christian community as the body of Christ lives out and exists within the economy of sacrifice. In presenting itself as a *living sacrifice* (see Rom. 12:1-2), the church becomes a prophetic subcommunity—one that sings the melody of hope by insisting upon an economic mutuality of sacrifice.

Rather than busying itself with creating some institutionalized meta-church or investing certain assets in the metaverse looking for a return on the investments of holding Sunday worship services or preaching evangelistic messages as token actions, the church in our world must *energize* the subcommunity with the eschatological vision of the heavenly city of Jerusalem as the eschatological hope for a prophetic witness. The church will maintain this hope by becoming a prophetic subcommunity that affirms human dignity, shares life abundantly, and pursues mutuality in fulfillment of the ideals of a new creation.

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