

Internet, Social Media & Amateur e-Theologians

The internet is full of misinformation as well as good information. Without real training and education, those who rely on the internet for information are unable to critically evaluate what they read. They have no basis for discerning truth or falsehood, no means to evaluate the qualifications of the person who posted the information, and no ability to recognise a bias. Even the fact that internet users endlessly post and repost a great deal of misinformation is often disregarded.

The internet is a “mirage of knowledge” with an inexhaustible supply of “facts” to confirm any bias (a good example of this recently is the vast amount of quotes falsely attributed to modern ascetics, especially Venerable Paisios of Athos, that are posted on various social media). It “encourages not only the illusion that we are all equally competent” but also the illusion “that we are all peers.” Since our society is based on the principle that we are all equal, we are encouraged to believe that everyone’s opinion is equally valid, regardless of whether it is based on actual knowledge. Reporters routinely ask ordinary people for their opinions, and “talking heads” on news programs spend hours speculating and pontificating on matters of which they have no direct knowledge, their comments based on presumptions with no attempt even to hide their biases. Any idea of maintaining a clear line between fact and opinion seems to have disappeared.

Although more people are more educated today than in the past, common sense is often lacking, and we have not necessarily become more intelligent. Yet we believe ourselves to be more intelligent, and we convince ourselves that we have expertise in areas that require years of intense study because we are confident in our education and because technology allows us to access a superficial answer to most questions in seconds.

This has led to too many Orthodox Christians comfortably and confidently functioning as armchair theologians (whom the Church Fathers called “dabblers”) with no awareness of the consequences to themselves or to others. Those who are not trained in theology or pastoral care should avoid answering theological questions and giving spiritual advice, even on the internet. Often the answers and advice provided show the absence of basic Orthodox theological education and phronema (mind-set). The hubris and lack of discernment can even be alarming and dangerous.

The overintellectualisation of religion has contributed to the belief that anyone can theologise. Our Western culture, which itself is a by-product of the Renaissance, and so-called Age of Enlightenment, influences us to focus on the intellectual aspect of Orthodoxy. For many, faith is reduced to a set of logical precepts that they have concluded are rationally supportable and therefore acceptable. Therefore, the intellectualisation of Western culture has also contributed to the development of many amateur theologians who approach the Orthodox Faith as an object for study. Their enthusiasm is wonderful and they may be well intentioned, but in general they lack an Orthodox phronema. They do not realise that even if their statements are mostly correct, they create spiritual problems for themselves and others, because knowledge of the faith is more than simply book learning.

Theology is too often perceived as something that someone can dabble in, just as one might casually participate in a hobby such as painting. Having done some reading, we think it is enough to have learned the basics, and then we feel free to share with great self-confidence what we think we know. We consider ourselves qualified to answer theological questions and direct others in their spiritual lives and theological investigations.

We delude ourselves and readily believe that we know more than we actually do about almost every subject.

The easy availability of information via the internet leads people to be overly confident in their knowledge, and many behave as pseudo-experts because they have researched a topic for a few hours on the web. Because they have learned something, they are confident that they understand it. They have no appreciation for the complexity of the subject, which they actually know almost nothing about. Others have devoted their lives to studying a specific subject deeply, but this means little to the amateur who is overconfident in their competency. This clear trend of “hostility toward established knowledge” has also been observed, not only in theological circles but in virtually every profession. People are no longer “merely uninformed” but rather are “aggressively wrong.” People become hostile and combative when those with actual knowledge and real expertise challenge the amateur dabblers. Furthermore, the amateurs are “unwilling to learn” when they are corrected by experts, and they “reject professional know-how” with anger.

In the theological discussions on the internet, precious time can be lavished on pointless debates, and not enough time is spent engaged in what is useful for salvation and the spiritual life. Pastoral considerations and sensitivity to the mental and spiritual state of those who participate in these discussions is often lacking, since these amateur theologians are not priests, have no pastoral concern for anyone, and are oblivious to the inherent dangers of theologising. The amateur theologian may even be smug and insensitive to the feelings and issues faced by those who are reaching out for answers online.