

The pearly gates of cyberspace: Escaping from the body

by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [December 20, 2000](#) issue

Science writer Margaret Wertheim suggests in *The Pearly Gates of CyberSpace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* that cyberspace has become for some a technological substitute for the heaven of Christian aspiration. “The Heavenly City of the New Jerusalem was the great promise of early Christianity,” she writes. “In the last centuries of the Roman era, as the empire disintegrated, such a vision offered special appeal. No matter the chaos and decay on earth, no matter that disharmony, injustice and squalor reigned here, after death those who followed Jesus could look forward to an eternal haven of radiance and light.” And she draws the parallel. “So too, in our time of social and environmental disintegration—a time when our ‘empire’ also appears to be disintegrating—today’s proselytizers of cyberspace proffer their domain as an idealized realm ‘above’ and ‘beyond’ the problems of a troubled material world. Just like the early Christians, they too promise a ‘transcendent’ haven of radiance and light, a utopian arena of equality, friendship and virtue.”

Cyberspace is the coinage of the science fiction writer William Gibson, whose hero, Case, in the cyber-punk novel *Neuromancer* (1984) “jacks” his nervous system into a “consensual illusion” where the world is a computer simulation and humans live apart from bodies. Like a biblical Adam, Case experiences a “Fall” from cyberspace back into the imprisoning “meat” of the body. Another character, Dixie Flatline, who had Case’s EEG flattened while he was jacked in, now maintains his identity solely within the computer network—a form of cyber-resurrection.

As Wertheim makes clear, this technological fantasy of disembodied escape from the mundane is not confined to the sci-fi crowd. Computer scientist Marvin Minsky of MIT, robotics expert Hans Moravec of Carnegie Mellon University and other credible students of virtual reality and computer science have seriously suggested that human identity could persist in a computer simulation. Underlying this provocative claim is the widely held assumption that human identity can be equated with

information, “wetware,” that runs on a meat computer. It then is merely a technical challenge to retrieve this information from its “primitive” carbon-based processor and upload it to more perfect and long-lasting silicon.

Cyberspace, Wertheim suggests, with its accompanying dreams of cyber-souls, cyber-immortality, and cyber-resurrection, reprimates in a materialistic and monistic culture an ancient, dualistic ideal. Like Erik Davis (*Techgnosis: Myth, Magic + Mysticism in the Age of Information*) and N. Katherine Hayles (*How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*) and other recent commentators, Wertheim draws enlightening parallels between contemporary assumptions and ancient Gnostic, Manichean, Platonic and Hermetic beliefs.

Wertheim identifies the rub for Christians. “Orthodox Christianity has always affirmed the value of the flesh,” she observes. “Humanity was created in body as well as soul, the great medieval theologians asserted, and the duty of the Christian is to live life well in body as well as in spirit.” She goes on to say: “Unlike genuine religions that make ethical demands on their followers, cyber-religiosity has no moral precepts. Here, as we have noted, one gets the payoffs of a religion without getting bogged down in reciprocal responsibilities.”

Wertheim, Hayles and other recent commentators also recognize that in reducing human identity to disembodied information, these cyber-utopians miss much of what defines human being, including gendered embodiment and finitude. Even our rationality, if neurophysiologist Antonio Damasio is correct, depends heavily on our embodied, emotional nature.

There is also an ironic paradox in this techno-spirituality. “Even though many cyberspace enthusiasts long to escape the limitations of the body, most also cling to the glories of physical incarnation. They may not like bodily finitude, especially the part about death, but at the same time they desire the sensations and the thrills of the flesh.”

It is worth recalling that byte by byte, more Internet traffic involves pornographic images than any other “information.” It is called “one-handed surfing,” and suggests, returning to Wertheim’s words, that the cyberspace enthusiast “wants his cake and to eat it too—to enjoy the pleasures of the physical body, but without any of its weaknesses or restrictions.”

Christians can learn from Wertheim's analysis. Somewhere in our collective history, we began de-emphasizing the resurrection of the body in favor of the immortality and independent existence of the soul. The "glorified body" of Christian tradition sounds suspiciously like the cyber-soul of today's techno-fantasy, and "pie in the sky by and by" suspiciously like the ethically vacuous dreams of cyber-immortality through technology. Segments of today's culture are powerfully stirred by these technologically mediated forms of spirituality; we Christians need to add our perspectives, and our cautions, to this evolving world picture.