The Face, the Body, and Virtual Showcases: The Tyranny of Social Media over Personal Image

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Article

The Face, the Body, and Virtual Showcases: The Tyranny of Social Media over Personal Image

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Abstract: This article aims to examine how social media has changed the way human beings perceive themselves, exerting a tyrannical influence over personal image, leading people to aesthetic procedures and surgeries. It happens through the imitative dimension of human beings. Social media has created idealized world(s) where people see images of faces, bodies, and lives they perceive as perfect, leading them to question such aspects about themselves in comparison to the presented ideal. These idealized world(s) foster a contemporary Gnosticism, where people start seeing their own faces and bodies as flawed or inferior compared to these idealized images. This gives rise to a tyranny of social media over personal image, reshaping how individuals view themselves and pressuring them to conform to these idealized world(s). Theology has a mission to help people appreciate the beauty and goodness of real bodies and guiding them toward the fruition of being bodily beings.

Keywords: social media; neuroscience; Mimetic Theory; Instagram; aesthetic procedures; Gnosticism

1. Introduction

It is well known that throughout the centuries the human body has been undervalued and instrumentalized, and even thought of as a prison for the soul and/or reason. Similarly, it can be observed that, today, on the one hand, it is seen as a machine, and on the other, plasticized by and within digital culture. The human body is considered an instrument, under a global utilitarianism. In this way, something essential is lost: the fruition of being human in itself, of being a body (e.g., see Mata de Vasconcelos and Leandro 2019, 120-57).

Without a doubt, the greatest challenge to self-fruition of being a body today is digital culture, particularly social media with its virtual showcases. Instagram, in particular, plays a leading role as a platform for the display of these showcases. Certainly, social media is not real life, and the showcases displayed on it reflect idealized lives. However, even though they are not real life, they are part of the concrete and real lives of most of the world's population, becoming part of daily human life. The problem is that, with this digital revolution, a culture of submission to the virtual has subjugated the lives and ways of being of countless people. Moreover, it has a substantial impact on how human beings see themselves.

Nevertheless, as Emily Qureshi-Hurst (2022, 522-23, 532) rightly points out, despite its high prevalence, particularly among young people, social media have not received significant engagement from either philosophy or theology. The work to be done by both on this subject—such as exploring the implications of social media—is considerable, and this lack of engagement is an error. However, while she argues that it is a responsibility of philosophy and philosophers to engage with such a ubiquitous phenomenon, especially in our post-truth era (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 532), I believe it is important to emphasize that theology has an essential role in this discussion. Specifically, in affirming that God's creation, which includes our bodies—our real bodies—and the experience of being bodily beings. is beautiful and very good.

The route I will follow in this article is as follows: first, I will introduce the issue of how social media exerts a tyrannical influence over personal image, leading individuals to undergo unnecessary aesthetic procedures and surgeries. Second, by engaging with neuroscience and Mimetic Theory, I will

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explore how this phenomenon occurs, particularly through the imitative nature of human beings, which is deeply rooted in mimetic desire. Third, I will argue that social media has created idealized world(s) where people perceive certain images of faces, bodies, and lives as perfect, prompting them to compare and judge their own appearance. This occurs either by viewing the virtual profiles of others or through their own profiles, which have often been altered with edits and filters. I will also argue that these idealized world(s) foster a form of contemporary Gnosticism, where individuals come to view their real faces and bodies as flawed, or inferior compared to these idealized images. This, in turn, leads to a social media-driven tyranny over personal image, reshaping how people perceive themselves and pressuring them to conform to these idealized standards. Finally, I will explore potential solutions to reverse this trend, encouraging people to appreciate the beauty and goodness of real bodies and guiding them towards the fulfilment of being embodied beings.

2. The Tyranny of Virtual Showcases

In 2018, BBC News published an article by Anna Davies (2018) highlighting the exponential rise of young people who, dissatisfied with themselves or wanting to please others and/or society, undergo surgical procedures to resemble the filters found on social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat.

This phenomenon was the subject of Janella Eshiet's research (2020), which shows the impact that social media and its filters have on young women. It affects their self-esteem and the way they see and perceive their own bodies, particularly through comparisons with filtered images. Together with AJ Willingham, she emphasizes that the issue with filters arises when people start to believe they should look like the filtered images. Eshiet also demonstrated that "fitspiration"[1] content can both motivate or make young women feel insecure about their bodies. She highlights that there is nothing wrong with being a social media influencer or user but calls for caution regarding the content we post and its messages, particularly in consideration of young women, who are more affected by society's high and often unattainable beauty standards (Eshiet 2020, 1, 67-68).

In addition, in Brazil, we have witnessed a tremendous increase in the procedure known as facial harmonization, where many seek a more "sculpted" and harmonious face. Brazilian dentist Fábio Bibancos explains that his financial income primarily comes from reverse procedures that undo unnecessary aesthetic treatments, including of facial harmonization. He says that these aesthetic procedures are meant for people who genuinely need them. He provides examples such as individuals with significant enamel wear, accident victims, and those who habitually bite their cheeks. For the latter group, as these lesions can become cancerous, bichectomy becomes essential to prevent further damage to the mucosa. However, he notes that most people seeking these aesthetic procedures do not fit the profile of necessity, that from his professional point of view most of them are physically and aesthetically fine. Bibancos mentions a case of a 12-year-old girl who approached him, asking if she could undergo an aesthetic procedure. He describes such actions as madness, "crazy things," that lead to distorted individuals, in his opinion "monsters" who resemble nothing. Furthermore, he asserts that these procedures do not bring facial rejuvenation and that excessive procedures can even result in facial aging. In Bibancos' opinion, the issue with these individuals is not aesthetic but instead lies in their mind and gaze, especially when looking at themselves in the mirror. He attributes this "social illness" to social media and advocates for common sense and equilibrium (UOL 2021).

Of course, people have the freedom to pursue the procedures they wish. And certainly, it is not about devaluing those who undergo such procedures or who have such desires. After all, there is nothing wrong with someone wanting to undergo a procedure on their own, as long as it is done with mental health and equilibrium. The issue I am addressing is the motivation and/or unease that drives so many people to undergo these procedures. In the face of idealized images, whether through

[1] In the context of social media, 'fitspiration' refers to profiles that serve as inspiration for a fit and healthy lifestyle. These profiles often feature personal figures who promote this lifestyle through photos, videos, motivational content, and advertisements.

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social media filters or "virtual showcases" of influencer profiles who have undergone such procedures, these individuals project their own images or an idealized version of themselves onto these images. These social media users no longer recognize—or do not want to recognize—themselves in the mirror, but rather in these plasticized images that many turn to. This movement indeed seems to be a social pathology, in a culture and/or dictatorship of the plasticization of the face/body.

Sometimes we fail to see the value and feel the pleasure of being a body, of being a human body. And, of course, the face is part of the body. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2020) has expressed very well the value of the human face: all living beings show and communicate themselves, but only humans have a face, the place of their own truth, as this makes their communicational appearance their fundamental experience. It exposes and reveals more than words, what cannot be expressed through them. Unconsciously, one puts their very self at stake in their own face. The openness, exposure, and communication of the human being, more than their state of mind, are expressed in the face. Animals are not interested in mirrors, in the image as image, but humans desire to recognize themselves and be recognized; to own their own image, in which they seek their own truth. Thus, the face is both the place and the condition of politics, through which one enters into a dialectical relationship with others. "It is by looking at each other's faces that men recognize and become passionate about one another, perceiving similarity and diversity, distance and proximity" (Agamben 2020).

There is a difference between a mirror, in which we see our imperfect reflection and recognize ourselves, and front-facing cameras and social media feeds, where we see perfect and plasticized images, almost unknown, almost unidentifiable, and almost unrecognizable. They are projected images that can evoke tyrannical feelings of dissatisfaction and the desire for change. These images are not only different from a mirror reflection, but, as Qureshi-Hurst argues,

> the idealized self is *not* an artistic representation, rather it is intended to be an accurate (though enhanced) depiction of the self. Whereas one would not readily and realistically compare oneself to a portrait or poem, the idealized selves on social media are held as realistic standards to strive for. One can create a version of themselves that looks real, in a way that a portrait or poem does not, and though this reflection is sterile and two-dimensional, it can create an unrealistic standard of comparison with which one cannot be reconciled. It is precisely because these images are so realistic that they are so threatening (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 528).

In other words, while the perfect and idealized images are realistic, they appear to be real, they can hardly be identifiable, recognizable, reconciled with concrete life, bodies and faces. But if these filtered images and idealized selves are so dangerous, along with the comparison to other people's profiles and pictures why does this comparison happen? What motivates the imitation, the mimetic desire, to have a face and/or body as depicted on social media, whether from filtered images or others' profiles? I will attempt to better understand this phenomenon by engaging with neuroscience and Mimetic theory.

3. Imitation and Mimetic Desire

I believe that mirror neurons, a recent discovery in neuroscience, and the French philosopher René Girard, can help us understand this phenomenon.

According to neuroscientist Vilayanur Ramachandran, mirror neurons could offer as much to psychology as DNA has provided to biology. He considers this discovery of great importance, which may even help explain mysterious mental issues that are difficult to access for experimentation (see Garrels 2005-2006, 56). But what are the mirror neurons? Scott Garrels explains that "mirror neurons are brain cells that are activated regardless of whether the individual is performing a particular motor movement or observing the same movement being made by another person" (Garrels 2005-2006, 58-59).

Allan Limeira, Luiz Gawryszewski e Antônio Pereira Jr. states:

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Mirror neurons play a crucial role in human behavior. They are activated when someone watches an action performed by someone else. The most impressive thing is the fact that this *mirroring* does not necessarily depend on our memory. If someone does a complex corporal movement that we have never done before, our mirror neurons identify the corresponding proprioceptive and muscular mechanisms in our own corporal system, and we tend unconsciously to imitate what we observe, hear, or perceive in some way (Lameira, Gawryszewski, and Pereira Jr. 2006, 129).

Imitation provides and plays a special role in learning, which is the foundation of human culture, and the emergence and evolution of mirror neurons explain how imitation and other skills, such as language, learning, and culture, developed (Lameira, Gawryszewski, and Pereira Jr. 2006, 130). Then, such cells have revolutionized the understanding of the mechanisms of imitation and mimetic reciprocity, as well as other inseparable dimensions of social interactions (Garrels 2005-2006, 56-58). However, as Garrels point out, "while mirror neurons provide valuable information about the neural correlates of social reciprocity, the phenomena of human imitation is vastly more complex than the *in vivo* resonance of affective states and visual motor information" (Garrels 2005-2006, 58-59).

Girard's thought is fundamental to deepening the issue. For him, desire is mimetic in its essence: a person takes another as a model and begins to desire the object of that person's desire, thereby starting to imitate them (Godoy 2012, 128-30). That is, human beings have a tendency to imitate others because they desire to have what the other, their model, has or desires. In dialogue with Garrels, Girard even asserts that "all human relations are based on imitation" and that, in addition to gestures, words, and ideas, we also imitate desires, that "we desire something because others find it desirable". According to him, this is the why Aristotle considers the human being the most mimetic animal (Garrels 2011, 216-17).

When asked by Garrels if he considers the discovery of mirror neurons to be important and if he is interested in it, Girard confirms that he does, although he is not a specialist in it. He also states that "the fact that mirror neurons respond to the same thing whether one is observing or participating I think is very important to my ideas" (Garrels 2011, 241-42).

As a theologian, I cannot assert that mirror neurons are activated during the use of social media. However, the discovery of their existence shows us the deep-rooted nature of human imitation, a human dimension that Girard explains on a level beyond neuroscience, in which he makes clear how human imitation is closely tied to human desire, what he calls mimetic desire. With the increased access to and development of social media, mimetic desire and consequent imitation have never been so present in human life. Filters and profiles become showcases that exert a totalitarian mimetic desire on users, and as a result, many people seek facial and bodily aesthetic procedures that, otherwise and under different circumstances, they might not even consider. A recent survey which analyzed the relationship between social media use and the desire for cosmetic procedures during COVID-19 pandemic concluded that "time spent on social media and use of photo-editing applications significantly contributes to desire to undergo a cosmetic procedure" (Khan et al. 2024, 42).

The issue arises when the motivation for any procedure is driven by a tyranny of image, an imposition influenced by exposure to social media showcases. When there is neither an alleviation nor suppression of needs and anxiety, nor an enhancement and/or a restoration of self-esteem, after such procedures, the result is merely a submission to these virtual showcases; a fragile and vulnerable conformity to virtual standards subject to sudden changes. The risk of social media in this context is the amplification of the mimetic desire of oneself to transcend their faces and bodies in order to imitate other's faces and bodies displayed in these new idealized world(s). Here, a vicious and even pathological cycle of dysmorphia and surgeries can be formed.

I argue that these created idealized world are new Gnostic worlds, consisting of a contemporary manifestation of the old Gnosticism. Let us examine what Gnosticism is and how it is manifests today, particularly in relation to social media usage.

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4. A Digital and Infernal New Gnosticism

In his thorough research on Gnosticism, Luiz Pinheiro points out that it is a modern category used to describe an ancient and complex phenomenon. While its roots appear as early as the first century BC, it emerged as a "movement" in the second century BC within paganism, Judaism, and Christianity. Gnosticism, or gnosis, is a peculiar form of religious knowledge that asserts the true reality of the cosmos, humanity, and God exists in a spiritual dimension known as the Pleroma or Totality. However, a disruption occurred within this spiritual realm, resulting in the creation of the material cosmos and the physical body. Humanity is divided into two groups: spiritual, pneumatic beings who understand their true nature, and those who are merely material and physical. It is through gnosis—knowledge—that one can attain salvation, awakening to the true reality of the spiritual world. The spiritual, pneumatic human being is a divine spark trapped within the body, seeking liberation to achieve their fullest existence in the spiritual realm. This awakening is facilitated by a spiritual Being who reveals human's true nature. Pinheiro asserts that Gnosticism not only took on various forms throughout history but also manifests in diverse and specific ways in contemporary times. One such manifestation of the "Gnostic spirit" in the technological age is Cybergnosticism, also known as Cybergnosis, Technognosticism, or Technognosis (Pinheiro 2022, 13-14, 208, 290, 607).

Pinheiro also discusses various escape routes—from reality—that people seek out, often turning to elevated spaces where they look for security and hope for rescue. Among these, he highlights the metaverse and social media. While the wealthy can escape to resorts, scenic landscapes, and refuges as paradisiacal getaways, the poor often find alcohol to be their only accessible escape, using it to cope with frustration, oppression, and marginalization. In general, young people turn to drugs, alcohol, sex, and even self-destruction in their search for an escape. Religious experiences also serve as a form of escape for many. He notes that social media has globalized escape routes (Pinheiro 2022, 576, 588).

I agree with Pinheiro that social media serves as an escape route from harsh realities and has made these escape routes globally accessible to the majority of social groups. However, social media, especially Instagram, has also created many idealized worlds, as I have discussed previously. These new worlds reflect the resurgence of ancient Gnosticism in contemporary life. Concrete and real faces and bodies are seen as inferior, like potentialities trapped in imperfects faces and bodies. On the other hand, the faces and bodies consider are perfect are those displayed and seen on social medial—on the idealized and new Gnostic worlds, where the true beauty and the perfect lives seems to exist. As a result, mass of people tends to desire and imitate what they are see in these "superior" places, leading to the social pathology that we witness today: Many undergo numerous facial and aesthetical procedures in pursuit of these idealized, perfect, Gnostic images portrayed in this modern manifestation of the old Gnosticism. These are the new Gnostic world(s). Each profile on social media can be an idealized and Gnostic world, composed with idealized and Gnostic images, in format of pictures, videos, reels, and stories. At the same time, a single Gnostic image can form a whole Gnostic world, an entire world of projection. A Gnostic image, in this sense, is one which is considered the place of beauty and perfection, in contrast to real faces and bodies, which are seen as bad, inferior, and flawed by comparison, as well as matter with potential to achieve the Gnostic image and world. In this context, dysmorphia is not uncommon.

In this sense, Qureshi-Hurst, while highlighting that social media contains elements that exacerbate anxiety—such as the virtual self, the quantification of social approval, and its failure to facilitate genuine social interactions—points out that this anxiety can lead not only to depression but also to anxiety disorders and body image disorders, citing empirical research to support her claims. As an example of the growing number of people seeking to alter their appearance to match their idealized self-image created by social media filters, including through surgery, she refers to Eshiet's research, which demonstrates that Snapchat filters, by altering appearance in various ways, significantly impact young women's perceptions of their body image and beauty. The result is what has been termed "Snapchat dysphoria" or "Snapchat dysmorphia," a phenomenon where young

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people, particularly women, pursue aesthetic procedures and surgeries to look like the image manufactured by these filters (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 528-29, 531; Eshiet 2020).

Psychologically, these aspects of social media and these new and idealized Gnostic world(s) are hells in people's lives, as they serve as sources and intensifiers of anxiety, depression, and dysmorphia. In the words of Paul Tillich and Qureshi-Hurst, they are also sources and intensifiers of one's feeling of "estrangement" from the cosmos, from God—or from the ground of being—and notably from oneself (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 525).

Qureshi-Hurst addresses how certain features of social media intensify and heighten negative emotional states, such as feelings of alienation and estrangement (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 522-23). She explains that "social media acts like a magnifying glass to the extent that it focuses and fortifies aspects of human social existence that lead to [these] feelings" (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 522); and discusses how it causes/exacerbates anxiety disorders—conditions that have increased exponentially among young people, particularly due to social media use (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 523).

Qureshi-Hurst explores three ways in which social media negatively affects its users. The first relates to the individual and their self-perception: social media enables the creation of idealized and artificial versions of oneself—distorted images of one's face and body—through both social media filters and photo editing software. The second and third ways pertain to the social dimensions of social media. On the one hand, it provides means for quantifying social approval, particularly in group sizes beyond which the human brain has evolved to handle and interact—according to Yuval Harari, humans are, evolutionally speaking, prepared to exist in networks of around 150 people. On the other hand, while social media significantly extends our social networks, the quality of interactions among people does not improve; in fact, it decreases (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 522, 526, 529; Harari, 2014). As consequence of these social effects, opportunities for people to experience social exclusion increases, and it can clear the way for one to experience social unfulfillment, since the online interactions are mostly transitory and poor (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 529). Here, Qureshi-Hurst points out a paradox in social media: "the temptation to seek out communion and escape solitude drives social media usage, but the type of impoverished connection provided through these platforms is unable to fulfil the desire that drove the user to log on in the first place" (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 530).

I return to the first way presented by Qureshi-Hurst, which pertains to the individual and their self-perception, and is central to the subject of this article. Qureshi-Hurst asserts,

> Social media platforms allow individuals to construct idealized versions of themselves. Individuals then see this idealized self as, in Tillichian terms, unactualized potential which they are unable to realize. This creates yet another environment in which the individual is aware of latent potential that they are unable to manifest in their lives, resulting in another source of anxiety. The idealized self is created in the following ways. Only the "best" pictures get posted, which creates a highlights reel showing only positive experience. Moreover, and perhaps more damaging for mental health, is an increasing prevalence of photo editing software and the use of filters which distort an individual's appearance. These create a social experience and physical appearance which functions as a representation of unrealized, often *unrealizable*, potential (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 526).

In fact, she also highlights the overwhelming quantity of data people receive about others on social media, against which each person can compare themselves. Additionally, the exponential growth of social media users provides even more data for individuals to use in evaluating and comparing themselves. This immensity if data informs people about how their lives should be, the expectations and achievements they should have, as well as how they should look physically. Qureshi-Hurst describes this as a plethora of potentialities displayed by social media, "in terms of both what is possible for humans in general and what is possible for a specific individual to achieve, engage with, or look like" (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 527).

She concludes that intense feelings of estrangement can be caused by comparing oneself to unrealizable potentialities. In addition, due to the massive quantity of users on social media, "with

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every criterion against which we can be evaluated, there will be another social media user who outperforms us", which, in turn, "can have a seriously damaging effect on self-worth if by every metric we come up short" (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 527). Anxiety, then, is an effect of the creation of idealized and unrealizable images by an individual, insofar as the person is unable to achieve these creations and satisfy their idealized self-image (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 529). "Striving after such a representation is likely to leave a subject unsatisfied. The individual is faced with a version of themselves that is distorted, and desires reconciliation with the self who is reflected back at them. This is unobtainable, as the reflected, virtual self is an artefact of editing software, not a living, breathing, complex person" (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 528).

5. Conclusion: Looking for Directions

To sum up, despite being quite useful, social media has significant negative effects on people. Some of these consequences include dysmorphia and the increasing recourse to cosmetic procedures and surgeries in an attempt to resemble idealized images of oneself or conform to beauty standards created by social media societies. Two concrete examples of this are the phenomenon of undergoing surgeries to look like one's Snapchat-filtered image and the massive, socially pathological pursuit of facial procedures such as facial harmonization in Brazil. This is not to mention the desire for fit or sculpted bodies, driven by the aesthetically modified bodies of others seen as objects of desire on social media—a topic not addressed here, but which need to be addressed in future research in theological science.

Imitation and Mimetic desire, as explained by neuroscience and Mimetic theory, provide an explanation for this, revealing how deeply ingrained the desire to imitate and aspire to what others have, do, or desire is in human nature. The result is a new and infernal form of Gnosticism, where people see their real bodies as bad, ugly, and imperfect, striving to reach the plethora of potentialities displayed in social media's idealized, Gnostic world(s). These worlds consist of filtered and edited images—either of oneself or others—which present artificial projections. As most people fail to achieve these objects of desire, and the comparing never ends, anxiety disorders, dysmorphia, depression, and other issues such as bulimia arise and/or are amplified from the way human beings interact with these idealized, artificial, and Gnostic world(s), filled by idealized and artificial images. The result is a tyranny of social media over personal image.

What can be done about this situation? How can we liberate human beings, with their faces and bodies, from these Gnostic worlds and this tyranny? Here are some possible directions that we can take towards addressing these questions.

It is not easy to overcome these problems arising from social media. I don't have a definitive answer or solution—nor do I believe such a thing exists. Nevertheless, I think we can find ways to address these issues; by following certain directions, we can learn to free ourselves from the tyranny of social media over personal image and from this infernal form of Gnosticism. I therefore highlight four potential paths in this direction.

First, one should keep in mind the principle of not using life as a utilitarian tool, a teaching present in the Gospel of Mark (2:27), which depicts Jesus reversing the value of the Sabbath over life, showing that the day was made for humankind, not the other way around. Similarly, Instagram, social media, the internet, aesthetic procedures, etc., exist for human beings, and not the other way around. These means and technologies should serve humanity and life, not the reverse. Unfortunately, humanity has become enslaved to them. Although it is the responsibility of Christians and theologians to teach this principle, and despite it originating from words attributed to Jesus, it can be applied and taught beyond Christian circles: people do not need to be Christian to understand that their lives are not meant to serve social media or be enslaved by its tyranny.

Second, it is important to encourage the reduction of time spent on social media, what can be done through campaigns and education. Initially, there is no need to completely abandon it. However, reducing the time spent on social media would undoubtedly be beneficial for all users. In her article, Qureshi-Hurst points to empirical studies showing a link between loneliness and

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depression and social media usage, and that limiting social media use to 10 minutes a day significantly reduces both feelings of loneliness and depression. She also references a study that shows interaction and browsing on Instagram are associated with lower rates of loneliness, whereas Instagram broadcasting is linked to higher rates of it (Qureshi-Hurst 2022, 531). Yet, it is reasonable to conclude that limiting social media use would benefit everyone, especially young people.

Third, as Eshiet indicates,

> Spreading awareness about self-love, confidence, and natural beauty on these social media platforms is one way we can help young women all around the world and generations to come to love themselves, and not let society or any beauty images/filters on social media tell them that they are not beautiful enough. With the right resources we can help the younger generation find beauty within themselves and not these beauty filters (Eshiet 2020, 68).

Moreover, "by understanding why many young women use these beauty filters it can help and encourage companies to create reliable resources and campaigns that encourage natural beauty and self-love for women all around the world" (Eshiet 2020, iii). Still, we cannot rely on companies to promote self-love, especially when the opposite is often in their interest, as it drives profit and revenue. It is a responsibility of Christianity and theology to affirm that God's creation is very good and beautiful, not only because of the points discussed here but because it is the truth—a truth that is part of Revelation. And promoting self-love and the fruition of being bodily beings is part of this Christian Good News.

Four, discussing what he calls escape routes, the metaverse, Pinheiro acknowledges that, despite its Gnostic aspects and potential as an escape route, it can also serve as a point of encounter—a space where we can stop and dialogue, where the Good News about the real body and the world can be shared. As he asserts, theology must venture into these escape routes so that, through the kerygma of the *salus carnis*—salvation of the flesh—, they can be transformed into points of encounter. In this way, theology can deliver its *salus carnis* salvation message in our contemporary context (Pinheiro 2022, 576, 589, 610-13).

Pinheiro, then, argues that points of encounter can be found within escape routes, where fundamental questions can be addressed, such as "the meaning of life, authentic humanization, the preservation of life, care for the planet, the search for an alternative and sustainable economy, the awareness that everything is interconnected, and the importance of a global educational pact on these themes" (Pinheiro 2022, 593). According to him, the *salus carnis* is one of the Christian contributions to these subjects (Pinheiro 2022, 593). Moreover, in dialogue with José Comblin, he says that there is no place, no reality, in which the Spirit cannot work; including the escape routes, which can become points of encounter, of salvation (Pinheiro 2022, 588).

But what is, after all, the *salus carnis*? According to Pinheiro, *salus carnis* is an anti-Gnostic doctrine, particularly from Irenaeus of Lyon, which defends the unity of salvation; that the human being, in their entirety, can see God. It is, therefore, regarded as the true gnosis—while the Gnostic doctrine is thus regarded to be false—, for it is the human being in their wholeness who is saved. The human being, as a whole, is *capax Dei* and *capax visionis Dei*, meaning capable of receiving and seeing God. The Christ's incarnation, then, is the foundation of salvation. The kerygma of *salus carnis* affirms that God, from creation to its fullness, directs the one human race, and emphasizes the unity of salvation, which is work of the whole Trinity, of the human being in their entirety (Pinheiro 2022, 439-41).

In this sense, the Good News of *salus carnis* must be shared by us, even through social media platforms like Instagram. We need to find ways of transforming these spaces—currently escape routes where countless idealized and Gnostic worlds flourish and where the infernal tyranny of social media distorts how people see and perceive their faces and bodies—into points of encounter, where the beauty and goodness of our faces and bodies can be shared and celebrated *here and now*. Moreover, the fruition of being bodily beings can be shared not only by Christians but by all of humanity.

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Nevertheless, Christians and Christian theology have a mission of declaring the beauty and goodness of creation, as it so highlighted in Genesis 1. One way to do this is by creating virtual profiles on these platforms to spread this message.

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