

# Digital Alienation and Orthodox Therapeutics (A Pastoral Approach to Technology)

By His Beatitude Archbishop of Tirana,  
Durrës and all Albania John\*

## I.

The 21st century, with its rapid and often frightening technological advancement, raises numerous questions. For different people and groups, the answers vary. Some view technology as a great opportunity for development, while others see it as a threat. For both those who embrace it and those who oppose it, this phenomenon is already a reality and presents difficult challenges for the entire human community – challenges that demand solutions. Undoubtedly, the Orthodox Church cannot be excluded from these challenges. It must confront them, not merely to defend itself, as has unfortunately often happened, but also to find original and creative solutions as part of its global responsibility.

Although the treatment of technological issues presents a wide and very complex range, I would like to address in this paper an important aspect of the human being's approach to new technology, stemming from extensive clinical experience in the field of mental health. This experience reveals a common element that spans a broad spectrum of psychological disorders: *the inability to manage*. Whether it concerns the inability to manage emotions, as observed in emotional and personality disorders – a condition that contemporary scientific research describes as “emotion dysregulation”<sup>1</sup> – or the inability to manage thoughts in

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\* Ἡ Α.Μ. ὁ Ἀρχιεπίσκοπος Τιράνων, Δυρραχίου καὶ πάσης Ἀλβανίας κ. Ἰωάννης εἶναι ὁ Προκαθήμενος τῆς Αὐτοκεφάλου Ὁρθοδόξου Ἐκκλησίας τῆς Ἀλβανίας.

1. Marsha M. Linehan, *Cognitive-Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*,

psychotic disorders, or the inability to manage impulses in addictions, the person suffering psychologically is overwhelmed by internal or external forces that exceed their capacity.

This clinical observation takes on a new and urgent dimension in the era of digital technology, where statistical data confirm the magnitude of the phenomenon. An increasing difficulty is observed in managing digital overload – the flood of information and pressure for constant connectivity. Internet Addiction<sup>2</sup>, nomophobia (fear of being disconnected from one's mobile phone)<sup>3</sup>, digital fatigue<sup>4</sup>, and social comparison syndrome<sup>5</sup> now constitute documented psychological conditions. According to a 2023 meta-analysis, approximately 20% of individuals display mild symptoms of nomophobia, 50% moderate, and 20% severe<sup>6</sup>. A systematic review in PLOS ONE (2021) – digital fatigue and social comparison syndrome<sup>7</sup> now constitute recognized psychological conditions. The consequences are manifold, particularly among youth, where, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, social media use for more than three hours daily doubles the risk of developing symptoms of depression and anxiety<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, comorbidity between traditional diagnoses and technology-related disorders is now becoming a documented rule,

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Guilford Press, New York 1993, pp. 49-53.

2. Kimberly S. Young, "Internet Addiction: The Emergence of a New Clinical Disorder", *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 1, 3 (1998), pp. 237-244.

3. A. C. León-Mejía, M. Gutiérrez-Ortega, I. Serrano-Pintado, & J. González-Cabrera, "A systematic review on nomophobia prevalence: Surfacing results and standard guidelines for future research", *Plos One* 16, 5 (2021), e0250509; C. Yildirim & Ana-Paula Correia, "Exploring the Dimensions of Nomophobia: Development and Validation of a Self-Reported Questionnaire", *Computers in Human Behavior* 49 (2015), pp. 130-137.

4. L. Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes", *Human Relations* 7, 2 (1954), pp. 117-140.

5. F. Reer & Th. Quandt, "Digital Fatigue," *The International Encyclopedia of Media Psychology*, ed. Jan Van den Bulck, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ 2020.

6. Karla G. Tuco *et al.*, "The Prevalence of Mild, Moderate, and Severe Nomophobia Symptoms: A Meta-Analysis", *Behavioral Sciences* 13, 1 (2023), p. 35.

7. F. Reer & Th. Quandt, "Digital Fatigue", *op.cit.*, p. 23.

8. U.S. Surgeon General, "Social Media and Youth Mental Health": *The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory* (May 2023).

with research confirming the significant positive correlation between internet addiction, depression, and anxiety disorders<sup>9</sup>.

The clinical reality highlights the urgent need to treat technology not as a neutral tool, but as a powerful force that requires specific psychological and spiritual skills for its healthy utilization.

## II.

The Orthodox Tradition, centuries before the emergence of modern psychology, recognized the importance of inner formation for healthy interaction with the world. The Church Fathers distinguished between the mode of existence “according to nature” («κατὰ φύσιν») and “against nature” («παρὰ φύσιν»). The former is characterized by man’s movement toward God, with self-knowledge, measure, and wisdom, while the latter by distancing from God, leading to ignorance, extremism, and confusion<sup>10</sup>.

This distinction finds direct application in our relationship with technology. Using it “according to nature” presupposes the spiritual health of the user – their ability to set boundaries, to distinguish the essential from the non-essential, and to remain master of their choices. Saint Maximus the Confessor taught about “movement according to nature” as man’s direction toward his true destination: communion with God and neighbor<sup>11</sup>. Technology, when used by spiritually healthy people, can serve this movement. Conversely, when used by the spiritually ill, it can accelerate the movement “against nature” toward alienation, narcissism, and superficiality.

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9. Kr. Kumar *et al.*, “Internet Addiction and Its Association with Demographic Variables, Depression, Anxiety and Psychological Well-Being in College Students”, *Ann Neurosci* 31, 1 (2024), pp. 21-27.

10. John of Damascus, *Ἐκδοσις ἀκριβῆς τῆς Ὁρθοδόξου Πίστεως*, Β΄.

11. Maximus the Confessor, *Κεφάλαια διάφορα θεολογικά τε καὶ οἰκονομικά*, Α΄, 47, PG 90, 1197C.

## III.

The Orthodox Tradition offers specific practices that can function therapeutically in treating digital alienation. The tradition of spiritual vigilance («*νήψις*»), with its emphasis on watchfulness and attention, offers a way of resisting the distraction and superficiality promoted by digital culture<sup>12</sup>. Prayer, especially the Prayer of the Heart (Jesus Prayer), constitutes an exercise of discipline and concentration that unifies man's inner world.

The ecclesial community, with its emphasis on direct, face-to-face communication, constitutes an antidote to virtual communication. Participation in the liturgical life of the Church, with its multisensory nature –icons, incense, psalmody, and the taste of Holy Communion, as the psalmist urges “taste and see that the Lord is good”<sup>13</sup>– offers a holistic experience that resists the disembodiment of digital existence<sup>14</sup>.

It can be proposed that the ascetic tradition of abstinence can be extended to our relationship with technology. A “digital asceticism”, including periods of disconnection and conscious limitations, can help cultivate a freer relationship with technology<sup>15</sup>. Finally, the Mystery of Confession, as a practice of self-knowledge and accountability, can contribute to treating digital addictions.

## IV.

The concept of *discernment* (“*discretio*” in Latin, «*διάκρισις*» in Greek) occupies a central place in Orthodox spirituality. Anthony the Great, as transmitted to us by John Cassian, called it the greatest virtue, recognizing

12. Hesychius the Priest, *Περί νήψεως καὶ ἀρετῆς*, in: *Φιλοκαλία*, vol. 1.

13. *Psalm* 33, 9 (LXX 34, 8): «Γεύσασθε καὶ ἴδετε...».

14. Randa K. Anderson, “Bringing Balance to Our Digital Lives”, Orthodox Christian Network, 2021, p. 1, <https://myocn.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2021-handout-for-OCN.pdf> [09.09.2025].

15. T. Reinke, “Know When to Walk Away: A Twelve-Step Digital Detox”, *Desiring God*, 2015, May 30, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/know-when-to-walk-away> [09.09.2025].

the importance of the ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood, the beneficial and the harmful<sup>16</sup>.

In the digital age, discernment takes on new importance. Daily we are bombarded with information and algorithms designed to manipulate our attention. Cultivating “digital discernment” requires spiritual maturity. The Fathers taught that discernment is cultivated through prayer, humility, and guidance from spiritual directors<sup>17</sup>. Today, we need new forms of spiritual guidance. The Church is called to develop a “digital pastoral care” that will offer criteria of discernment for confronting the challenges of the digital age.

## V.

The Church’s call to sanctification encompasses the totality of human life. Orthodox theology teaches that the purpose of human life is *deification* («θέωσις») – the transformation of all existence through union with God, as Athanasius the Great summarizes: “For He became man that we might become divine”<sup>18</sup>.

The sanctification of technology does not mean the sacralization of devices, but the transformation of how we use them: for purposes that harmonize with God’s will. The Church is called to offer a theology of technology that will recognize its potential while also highlighting its dangers.

The journal *Theologia* (Θεολογία), with its centennial presence, is called to contribute to the formation of this theology, offering a platform for dialogue among theologians, scientists, and technologists. On the threshold of its second century, it has the opportunity to highlight the relevance of the Orthodox Tradition, contributing to the sanctification of technology and the promotion of a more human relationship with it.

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16. John Cassian, *Conferences*, II, 4, PL 49, column 528.

17. John Climacus (John Sinaites), *Κλίμαξ*, Λόγος 26 *Περὶ διακρίσεως*, PG 88, 1013A-1081C.

18. Athanasius the Great, *Περὶ τῆς ἐνανθρωπήσεως τοῦ Λόγου* § 54, PG 25, 192B.

## SUMMARY

Ψηφιακή αλλοτρίωση και ὀρθόδοξη θεραπευτική  
(Μία ποιμαντική προσέγγιση τῆς τεχνολογίας)Α.Μ. Ἀρχιεπισκόπου Τιράνων, Δυρραχίου  
καὶ πάσης Ἀλβανίας κ. Ἰωάννου

Στὸ ἄρθρο ἐξετάζεται ἡ ψηφιακὴ ἀποξένωση ὑπὸ τὸ πρῖσμα τῆς ποιμαντικῆς θεολογίας. Ἡ ραγδαία τεχνολογικὴ πρόοδος τοῦ 21ου αἰ. δημιουργεῖ σοβαρὲς προκλήσεις, τὶς ὁποῖες ἡ Ὄρθόδοξη Ἐκκλησία καλεῖται νὰ ἀντιμετωπίσει δημιουργικὰ καὶ ὑπεύθυνα. Κεντρικὴ διαπίστωση, βασισιμένη σὲ κλινικὴ ἐμπειρία ψυχικῆς υἱείας, εἶναι ἡ ἀδυναμία διαχείρισης συναισθημάτων, σκέψεων καὶ παρορμήσεων. Στὴν ψηφιακὴ ἐποχὴ, αὐτὴ ἡ δυσκολία ἐκφράζεται ὡς ἀδυναμία διαχείρισης τῆς ὑπερπληροφόρησης καὶ τῆς διαρκοῦς συνδεσιμότητας, μὲ φαινόμενα ὅπως ὁ ἐθισμὸς στὸ διαδίκτυο, ἡ νομοφοβία, ἡ ψηφιακὴ κόπωση καὶ τὸ σύνδρομο κοινωνικῆς σύγκρισης, ποὺ συνδέονται μὲ ἄγχος καὶ κατάθλιψη, ἰδιαιτέρως στοὺς νέους.

Ἡ ὀρθόδοξη παράδοση, ἥδη ἀπὸ τοὺς Πατέρες, διέκρινε μεταξὺ ζωῆς «κατὰ φύσιν» καὶ «παρὰ φύσιν». Ἡ ὑγιὲς χρῆση τῆς τεχνολογίας προϋποθέτει πνευματικὴ ὀριμότητα, διάκριση καὶ ἐγκράτεια, ὥστε ὁ ἄνθρωπος νὰ παραμένει κύριος τῶν ἐπιλογῶν του. Πρακτικὲς ὅπως ἡ νῆψις, ἡ προσευχὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, ἡ λειτουργικὴ ζωὴ, ἡ ἀσκητικὴ ἐγκράτεια (ὡς «ψηφιακὴ νηστεία») καὶ τὸ Μυστήριον τῆς Ἐξομολογήσεως προτείνονται ὡς θεραπευτικὰ μέσα.

Καθοριστικὴ εἶναι ἡ ἀρετὴ τῆς «διακρίσεως», ποὺ ἐπιτρέπει τὴν κριτικὴ ἀντιμετώπιση τῆς ψηφιακῆς πληροφορίας. Τελικὸς σκοπὸς παραμένει ἡ θέωση ὁ ἁγιασμὸς καὶ τῆς ἴδιας τῆς χρήσεως τῆς τεχνολογίας μέσα ἀπὸ τὴ μεταμόρφωση τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.