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Google as God

What faith looks like in the Internet age

By Nathan Schneider Sunday, June 19, 2011

Apple CEO Steve Jobs returned to the stage earlier this month to announce a long-awaited new product: iCloud. “We’re going to demote the PC and the Mac to just be a device,” he said. “We’re going to move your hub, the center of your digital life, into the cloud.” No longer will the data that circumscribe our lives, from our dental records to our unfinished novels, remain confined to the tangible shells that presently contain them. They’ll live elsewhere, up there, in a better place.

Apple may be the latest to try, but no company has puffed out more clouds than Google. All of the Google services so many of us depend on — Gmail, Docs, Calendar, Reader, YouTube, Picasa — lure our electronic selves, bit by bit, out of our computers and up into the cloud. If the cloud is a heaven for our data, a better place up in the sky, then Google is, well, kind of like God. But what kind of God?

Some have actually tried to find out. Their efforts may appear to be mere intellectual exercises. But they raise serious questions about the nature of faith. In 2004, a Universal Life Church minister named Peter Olsen started the Universal Church of Google; last year, the misleadingly named First Church of Google appeared as well. But by far the most developed denomination is the Church of Google, founded by a reclusive young Canadian around 2006. It comes complete with scriptures, ministers, prayers, a holiday and, best of all, nine proofs that Google is “the closest thing to a ‘god’ human beings have ever directly experienced.” These proofs are based on the proofs for God’s existence put forward by the likes of Saints Anselm and Aquinas, and they can seem almost as convincing.

But tucked within these proofs of Google’s divinity, just as in the canonical proofs for the existence of other gods, are assumptions and inferences that hint at something deeper. Take proof No. 2, which speaks to Google’s omnipresence. “Google is virtually everywhere on Earth at the same time,” it observes. “With the proliferation of Wi-Fi networks, one will eventually be able to access Google from anywhere on Earth, truly making Her an omnipresent entity.” (In Church of Google circles, Google is always referred to with feminine pronouns.)

Proof No. 4, similarly, points out that “Google is potentially immortal.” The upshot comes in proof No. 6:

“By uploading your thoughts and opinions to the Internet, you will forever live on in Google’s cache, even after you die, in a sort of ‘Google Afterlife.’”

Many of these proofs are amusing. It’s suggestive that many are also essentially promissory notes. Google and its cloud, as they unburden us of our most precious information, are also promises. Yes, the cloud “will eventually” deliver everything we need; don’t worry, this information is “potentially” going to stick around forever. Proof No. 9 — an argument from the ‘direct experience’ with Google so many of us have simply by using it every day — ends by claiming, “No faith required.”

But if it’s faith we’re talking about, there doesn’t seem to be much choice in the matter. With each query on Google, we lift more and more of our data up into Her miraculous cloud. And while the Church of Google is something of a lark, it provokes a serious question: Is our faith deserved? Is Google a force for good? Consider proof No. 7, which deals with Google’s omni-benevolence. Since the beginning, the company’s informal motto has been “Don’t be evil.” It would seem to follow, therefore, that Google is logically incapable of wrongdoing. Phew. Until one recalls what is known as the Euthyphro dilemma: Is something good because a god wills it, or does the god will it because it is good? In other words, when Google talks about evil, who gets to define what evil means? The board of directors? Federal regulators? Chances are, we’ll try to learn about Google’s behavior and misbehavior the same way we learn about almost everything else nowadays: We’ll Google it.

The penultimate proof resembles the old argument for the existence of God from “general consent.” It starts off from the fact that “Google” is actually searched for on Google far more often than terms like “God,” “Jesus” and “Allah” combined. People turn to Google in their times of need more than any of these deities, the reasoning goes, so Google must have usurped their former stature. It — excuse me, She — is what we pray to now, offering our problems up to the search field like prayers left in the cracks of the Wailing Wall.

Considering all the proofs, it’s clear that many of us have faith in Google and its cloudy competitors, like Facebook and Apple, on par with the faith we put in traditional religions. But it’s not clear that there’s good enough reason to do so.

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