

# Understanding God as a Medium: A Dialogue between Albert Camus and Marshall McLuhan

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## Résumé de l'article

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## **Understanding God as a Medium: A Dialogue between Albert Camus and Marshall McLuhan**

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the idea that the deity or the divine figure serves as a medium or technology. It does so by establishing a dialogue between Albert Camus and Marshall McLuhan. There are two conceptual pillars to sustain the theoretical framework undertaken in this work: the Camusian notion of philosophical suicide and McLuhan's aphorism "the medium is the message." Once it is understood that the idea of God is an abundant aggregator of elements that represents all values of the creed, it is also possible to understand that it defines a relationship between oppressors and those that are oppressed. Since this figure came to be used as a support for religions to act, it has worked as a coercive device as well as it has carried all symbolic aspects of its tenet and have mediated the aforementioned relation between dominators and the dominated.

**Keywords:** Media Ecology; Albert Camus; Marshall McLuhan; God; Philosophical suicide; The Medium is the Message.

### **Beseeches to Heaven**

Throughout history many important minds have questioned and debated different aspects of religion and creeds. Hegel and Nietzsche, e. g., declared that God was dead. On the other hand, Kierkegaard would not dare defy the Christian deity, showing unhesitating faith. And although people have debated God and what it represents, the discussion has not gone far regarding the technological sense – and especially not with the theoretical framework based on the thoughts of Albert Camus and Marshall McLuhan.

Even though, the Algerian writer Camus, his work and his legacy do not belong canonically to Communication studies area – being much more related to literature and philosophy, several of

his ideas can be discussed in this multidisciplinary field. His legacy has not been depleted thus. This essay, therefore, focuses on the idea of a superior deity as a technology from the perspective of the media ecologist Marshall McLuhan and the absurdist Camus.

We attempt to establish a common ground that links McLuhan and his aphorism 'the medium is the message' firstly uttered in *Understanding Media* (1993, [1964], p. 21) with Camus's notion of philosophical suicide unveiled by him in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2020 [1942]). This theoretical dialogue consists of examining McLuhan and Camus views with respect to the idea that the notion of the deity serves as a technology or a medium.

The effort undertaken in this work is based around the scrutiny of the monotheism-based religion deity figure. If the temple or house of worship and the religions symbols used therein are characteristically media, then we argue so is the idea of a God. We will not argue about the existence of a divinity, but the focus will be on a dialogue between McLuhan and Camus and how the idea of God can be comprehended theoretically as a technology or a medium.

### **McLuhan's 'The Medium is the Message'**

McLuhan's ecological approach of media studies understands that technology, an extension of their users, surrounds humankind and shapes them. The main objective of Media Ecology is to study the relation between the world, humankind, and technology in its diversity, in order to understand the unknown and subliminal effects of the different media. McLuhan's aphorism: 'the medium is the message (McLuhan, 1993, p. 21)' stresses that the impact of the technology is more important than its content. Of course, the content has its own importance, however, the silent manner in which the media are inserted in everyday life causes irreversible transformations – and that the medium per se is much more decisive for humankind than its content. He describes his stance as the one occupied by Louis Pasteur in the sense of enlightening others that the most important foe is not visible. The medium is the message because without the medium, there is no message and, therefore, the medium precedes, enables and shapes the content. Moreover, the medium is the message because they create a bias of human perception, affecting the user's awareness and judgment. Therefore, the content carried by a medium is not as important as the medium itself in terms of its overall effect on its users.

## Camus and His Notion of Philosophical Suicide

McLuhan, although he was a faithful Roman Catholic convert; the topics of God, praying, religion and the meaning of life were not the main focus of his research or his legacy. Camus was the opposite of McLuhan as far as religion was concerned. Camus was an atheist and believed that life was meaningless and as a result developed his notion of philosophical suicide.

During his entire lifetime, the Algerian novelist, playwright and essayist never backed down in relation to what he had criticized – and that even led to the break-up of some friendships. Both his biographers Sharpe (2015) and Sherman (2009) have described his relationship with Pascal Pia and Jean-Paul Sartre that suffered a schism because of major disagreements caused by his revolutionary posture.

Camus' work can be divided in essays, novels, and plays, and they are all related to his thought matrix. In this study, however, the focus will be on one concept of his prose, namely the notion of philosophical suicide.

Albert Camus (2020) once declared suicide was the single problem to be taken seriously in Philosophy. At the end of the day, people do not take away their own lives due to theoretical discussions, but they rather do it later, due to the questioning regarding the meaning of life. 'Where do I go?' 'What is this all about?' are common questions that incinerate this outlook. Therefore, Camus tries to scrutinize this issue so as it can be comprehended more clearly.

In light of these thoughts, Camus (2020) developed an argumentation in which he advocated that life itself does not have a meaning. Human beings attach a symbolic value to things (like experiences) that do not possess that quality and to stuff or objects that just exist in the world. And when this innate movement of the mind tries to apply the same *modus operandi* to such abstract and deep topics, they struggle. There is not a main reason why people are part of life and part of the world, and just like the trees, the animals, the sun, and the moon, humankind is just part of the whole universe, without a superior purpose.

Once one faces the gap between reality and the empty valuation of it, one starts noticing the absurdity of life. Because life is not a thing per se, in the sense that it does not have a form, like an object, Camus (2020) himself defined the absurd as the lucid reasoning which finds its own limits. The absurd, therefore, is 'essentially, a divorce' (Camus, 2020b, p 58), it does not lie in the human or the world, but in the intersection, the human spirit, in the common presence. In his words, it can be summarized this way:

If it is true that the absurd is accomplished (or, rather, revealed), then it is true that no-experience is of value in itself, and that all gestures are on the same instructive level. Will is nothing. Acceptance, everything. Provided that in the humblest or most heart-breaking experience man is always 'present'—and supports it without disarming, armed with all his lucidity. (Camus, 2014, p. 25; *free translation*)

Hence, the perspective proposed by the Camus is clear: life does not have meaning. People are destined to live in a meaningless world. Without a doubt, Camus (2020) does not leave it that way; the novelist also debates how the humankind need to face it. As a reference to his book, people need to fathom the absurd and yet fight against it, by trying to find blossom in a 'unflourishable' ground. This arm-wrestling against this absurdity is through exhausting one's experiences, enjoying the pleasure of human relations, the pleasure of dancing, the pleasure of music, and so forth.

Nonetheless, the Algerian writer considers that there are people who succumb to the absurd and kill themselves physically; also, there are people who renounce their own freedom as living beings. This study's main objective is to discuss the latter in what follows. Camus (2020) elucidates that many human beings are dragged away from understanding these dynamics of the absurd because of a nonsensical hope brought by a religious essence, for instance. He delves especially on Lev Chestov's and Søren Kierkegaard's views just to draw that line. In the Chestov case, he declared:

One commentator transcribes a sentence of his which deserves interest: 'The only true way out,' he says, 'is precisely where there is no way out in human

judgment. Otherwise, what would we need God for? People only turn to God to obtain the impossible. For what is possible, men are enough.' If there is a Chestovian philosophy, I can very well say that it is totally summed up like that. Because when, at the end of his passionate analyses, Chestov discovers the fundamental absurdity of all existence, he does not say 'Here is the absurdity,' but rather: 'Here is God: we must refer to him, even if it does not correspond to any of our rational categories.' Lest there be confusion, the Russian philosopher even insinuates that this God is perhaps a little hateful, incomprehensible and contradictory, but the more hideous his face is, the more he asserts his potency. His greatness is his inconsequence. Proof of it is inhumanity. [...]. Thus, for Chestov, the acceptance of the absurd is contemporary with the absurd itself. Noticing is to accept it; all the logical effort of his thought is to show it and at the same time to give rise to the immense hope that it implies. (Camus, 2020b, p. 63-64; *free translation*)

When he examines Kierkegaard's arguments, Camus starts by highlighting his Christianity – which he describes as 'the scandal' (Camus, 2020b, p. 68; *free translation*) – which is like a step forward in the direction of a paradoxical comprehension of the *absurd* of life. Camus attacks the hopeful idea of death, instead of its meaning of finitude, picturing life as desperation. If sin dispels the prayers from God and if being alive equals suffering until the day of your death – when the reconciliation shall happen –, then every pillar of this outlook is based in a paradox. After all, 'the sin is not knowing (as to that, everyone is innocent), but in the desire to know' (CAMUS, 2020, p. 83; *free translation*). By sacrificing their own intellect, the believer puts their own fate behind a doctrine that undermines their freedom. Kierkegaard, thus, appeals to contradictory irrationality to make up for the lack of solutions his belief has.

Albert Camus then describes that this attitude – just like the existentialists, according to him – is a form of denial. 'The denial is the God of the existentialists', he affirmed (Camus, 2020b, p. 73; *free translation*). When someone ignores the absurd – which is the case for the aforesaid Chestov and Kierkegaard –, they are embracing that rejection. When the Danish philosopher, conforming to the Algerian novelist, gazes at his God, he gives up on everything and comprehends life on that bias – it is a type of surrendering. They turn their back on the absurd in

favour of contemplating and/or chasing some sense of eternity that will never happen – or cannot be secured. The eternity might be represented by ‘the truth’ of human rationalism, or by the figure of God itself.

The philosophical suicide can be described as the denial of the human limits, the denial of life limits. The philosophical suicide is seeking subterfuges for the harsh existence of the absurd, the attempt of ignoring the world’s natural instability and life’s finitude. The Algerian writer, thus, argues that the only way to live is to comprehend those limits and not running away from the damages those limits may cause to the flawed metanarratives defended by the previously mentioned authors. For Camus metanarratives are ways to sustain power and justify crimes or moral glitches. Even though he does not spend much time unveiling every pillar of Chestov and Kierkegaard, for instance, Camus speaks to determine a position within the aforementioned discussion.

Thereupon the figure of God is of major importance to discuss because, even though the deity’s existence cannot be proven, the humankind chronology has been majorly devoted to one or some divine figures. The aim is not to discuss its existence but the role it plays taking the theoretical framework presented thus far. In the next section there will be dedicated to that discussion.

## **Beyond the praying**

Up to now, there has not been much talking on the existence of God’s figure per se. Differently put, if there is a superior deity (or deities), it is not in this paper interest to examine. Yet, the divine character is a rich subject of analysis from the academic point of view. First and foremost, because, in monotheistic religions, the figure of God has not been portrayed in artistic pieces; and, in a stark contrast, the polytheistic creeds illustrate every of their numen.

Needless to say, there are many elements that would be worth analysing. involving people’s creed as media, such as the temple in which prayers gather around, the objects that refers to the divine figure (such as a cross) and so on and so forth. And, as already mentioned, the concept of God will be the focus in this theoretical effort.

Prior to start the discussion, it needs to be stressed that even though there are two types of religion which have deities, only one will be approached in this study. The aforementioned crossroad provides two layers of the examination: monotheist and polytheist religions; therefore, two distinct types of medium. The monotheist religions (the likes of Catholicism, Judaism, Islamism etc.) don't have graphic representations of their superior deity with the exception of Jesus Christ (due to the Catholic understanding of him being the son of the superior deity) and the Holy Spirit, however, the lack of the image does not diminish the faith of millions of people, and, as a consequence, this characteristic becomes an idiosyncrasy, because they pray and devote themselves to a sacred entity even though they do not know what this holy one looks like. Whereas polytheist creeds (e. g.: Candomblé, Hinduism, Yoruba) display several forms of portrayal their divinities. I focus here on the monotheistic divine being represented in a single figure.

Earlier in this paper, it was briefly explained that both the medium (singular) and media (plural) are comprehended as synonyms of technology in the Media Ecology approach. Yet, in pursuance of understanding God as a medium, it is worth mentioning what Robert Logan wrote, so as to advance on the main topic:

For McLuhan, a chair is as much a medium as is a newspaper. The content of the chair is the person sitting in it, whereas the content of the newspaper is its news stories and its advertisements. [...], he also analysed a number of technological tools that are not considered to be communication media such as the wheel, the bicycle, the motorcar, roads, houses, clothing, clocks, the airplane, and weapons. All media with the exception of the spoken word involved some human artefact or technology. For McLuhan, "technology" includes hardware, software and all forms of user and his or her environment where the environment includes the physical, biological and social dimensions of human interactions. The fact that computers are referred to as information technology supports the notion that the distinction between media and technology is an artificial one. A computer is both a technology and a medium of communication as is the case with paper, the pen, the telephone, radio,



television and computers. [...]. For McLuhan media include all the tools, technologies and communication systems by which human interact with each other and hence mediate their physical, biological, cultural, social and economic environments. The mediasphere of all human tools, technologies and communication systems is unplanned – it self-organizes itself and evolves like the biosphere through interactions of individual inventors and users with their media. The mediasphere evolves in the same Darwinian pattern of descent, modification and selection, as is the case with the evolution of living organisms since every medium, technology or tool is a combination of some combination of prior media, tools, and technologies. (Logan, 2016, p. 135)

The excerpt above raises three points to argue about, but prior to that, it is fair to say that what Logan (2016) maintains is that a simple gadget will change interactions, the environment, and, further on, the people, the culture, the landscape, and so on and so forth. All users of a technology are subliminally affected by the media they make use of; everybody operates in a technological system formed by many types of medium – an ecosystem of media. Thus, the topics for examination are: 1) the characteristics that define the deity figure as a medium; 2) once it is understood as a medium, the content carried by the deity or God; and 3) how that content is mediated.

It is, then, needed to underline that although the figure of God is not materialized with an anthropomorphic representation (like a doll, a statue etc.), it does not disqualify the fact that the deity is conceptually a medium. Actually, not necessarily every medium has a physical form, as exemplified by Eric Havelock's (1996) research on the alphabet understood to be a technology –, or Walter Ong's (2002) theoretical efforts to disclose orality as also a medium. When those examples are fathomed as media, the discussion gains depth.

Then, the idea of someone omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient that utilizes these characteristics in order to judge and/or determine the individuals' fate is, therefore, revolutionary in a sense. And when this Almighty one was first conceived, elaborated or recognized there were no surveillance devices like security camera, drones or Amazon's Alexa and so on and so forth. It is important to remember then that, in the 2010 decade, Edward

Snowden revealed to the world the highly complex operation of surveillance executed by the United States government (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2017/03/07/why-the-cia-is-using-your-tvs-smartphones-and-cars-for-spying/>, access Jan. 9, 2022.). Therefore, before the use of this technology the only medium for surveillance was the idea of God.

The idea of God comes in handy because it works as an engine that is permanently monitoring every believer – since the religious agents cannot oversee each individual in their flock at the same time. Therefore, the only possible way would be to force the religious individuals in their flock to act in a specific manner. And the theoretical framework helps us understand that, in order to become a part of a creed, one has to concede (at least) some of one's freedom of thought according to Camus (2020b). Otherwise, one will challenge the creed's moral standards and/or its theoretical foundations. Every one of the religious' moral standards supports the religion's doctrine and they are enforced with the promise that there is a life after death.

This argument can be illustrated by a passage from Albert Camus's book *The Plague* (2020a [1947]). Camus illustrates our point by picturing/depicting a character named Father Paneloux, a conservative Christian priest that tries to attach every event of the world right into God's will. In the novel, Paneloux attributes the plague to a divine punishment which, in turn, is motivated by the sins of the citizens of Oran.

Brothers, you have fallen from grace, brothers, you have deserved it. [...] The first time this scourge appears in history it is to attack the enemies of God. Pharaoh opposes the eternal plans and the plague then makes him fall to his knees. From the beginning of all history, the scourge of God lays the proud and the blind at his feet. Meditate on this and fall to thy knees. [...]. If the plague looks at you today, it's because the time has come to reflect. The righteous cannot fear it, but the wicked have reason to tremble. In the immense farm of the Universe, the implacable scourge will beat the human wheat until the chaff separates from the grain. There will be more chaff than grain, more called than chosen, and this disgrace of the plague was not

willed by God. For a long time, this world was compacted with evil, resting in divine mercy. It was enough to repent, everything was allowed. And to repent everyone felt strong. When the time came, repentance would surely come. Until then, the easiest thing was to let yourself go; divine mercy would do the rest. Well then! This couldn't last. God, who for so long has lowered his face of pity on the men of this city, tired of waiting, disappointed in his eternal hope, has just looked away. Deprived of the light of God, here we are for a long time in the darkness of the plague (CAMUS, 2020a, p. 93; *free translation*)!

The passage then also reveals the different layers of the explanation. This epitomizes the notion of attributing the idea of a superior deity to punish and gratify, of determining all the events of the world without needing to argue about them. Once the relation of a figure who will sentence the whole humanity based on every individual's lifestyle, devotion, behaviour, etc., the medium is already operating. Everything becomes explainable; the clairvoyance of the universe bows before the demands mediated by the belief in such a divine portrayal. The people subordinated to this environment cannot challenge for the reason that they might be punished during their lifetime and also in that promised post-life era. There is no space for dialogue, because everybody is always under an arbitrary judgement by the God head.

Although not every one of the monotheistic deities necessarily have a hateful vein in their background, their credentials have already constricted any possible easing, due to their almighty decision-making responsibility. When destiny becomes the outcome of someone or something, it is an absolutist role that is played by the central figure. Hence, the content of that religious device is, therefore, the creed's dogma. From the moment the God element has been brought to a community, it then begins to work as a representation of the doctrine. Without a God, the tenet must be argued, proved. When the divine figure is in the play, it thus turns into a support for the whole praying cult and becomes the main clockwork of the engine. The deity element mediates the relationship of the dominator and the dominated ones, between the ones who mastered that medium and the ones who have succumbed to it. With every medium, as Postman (1994) said, there are those that are oppressors and those that are oppressed (i.e., winners and losers as he termed it) and the irony is that the oppressed ones, regard what the

oppressors are doing as legitimate and even applaud them or worship them in the case of religion.

## Conclusion

Up to now we have described two of the three objectives of this essay, namely:

- i. the notion of the Deity serves as the medium for the moral aspects of the creed, and
- ii. what it mediates (clergy and believers – the shepherds and the flock).

Now it is time to turn to what is the most decisive characteristic to understand about the nature of the divine figure as a medium and how the Godhead by His/Her very existence mediates the content of the creed.

We begin with an excerpt from the Russian novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoyevsky, 1970 [1879-1880], p. 646, *free translation*): “If God does not exist, there is no virtue.” The aforementioned quotation illustrates a specific scenario: without a God to shield the religious institution, there is no moral framework, the whole symbolic structure does not sustain itself because it misses the omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent being. God by His (masculine noun is used as God in the monotheistic religions is referred to as Father) very existence is the silent force that coerces people into following the doctrine’s dogmas because of its idiosyncratic elements.

Hence, every time the concepts of Camus and McLuhan are placed side by side, it follows that when an individual opts to follow a monotheistic creed, they are giving up in a certain sense part of their freedom in exchange for the guidance, direction and grace which are part of their religion’s creed. In order to seek or to secure life after death, the believer allots time and life choices as required by the guidelines of the doctrine they follow.

Camus (2020b) believes that life is absurd with no particular purpose. Embracing the notion of God and an after-life is one way of dealing with this supposed absurdity. This requires a leap of faith according to Camus as originally suggested by Kierkegaard (2010). One way of denying Camus’s conjecture that life is absurd and with no purpose is to embrace the notion of an

omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent superior being that provides one with an after-life in which all the suffering of life on earth no longer exists. Belief in God provides every believer of a certainty and the necessity to adhere faithfully to the doctrine's precepts. This belief in God is strictly a matter of faith, but once it is accepted, it serves as a mechanism for the believer to faithfully follow the moral precepts of the creed as much as they are able to do so.

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