The Democratization of Scholarship and Theosis: *The Short Version*

by *Melody Layton McMahon*

Recently, upon making full professor, I was called on to give a fifteen-minute talk. As a theological librarian, one can make a decision—will I speak about some theological matter or will I talk about librarianship? But I couldn't decide and I realized I could practice what I preach by bringing together an idea from scholarship and one from theology. I teach the students in my research and writing course, the very first class meeting, that there is nothing you cannot theologize about. As these are usually new students, they often look at me like I'm crazy, but after further conversation they usually come to agree. So the idea from the area of scholarship I chose is the "democratization of scholarship," and the idea from theology is *theosis*. As my title states, this is quite obviously the short version—each idea could demand pages and pages. However, I'm unaware of anyone else who has ever brought these two ideas into play.

One area of librarianship that has come to consume more and more of my time is being aware of the many facets of scholarly communication and undertaking to keep my faculty colleagues abreast of these areas that require our attention. Copyright, author's rights, open access, Creative Commons licenses, ORCID numbers: these are all things that are becoming increasingly important to each of us in the world scholars inhabit today.

Democratization of scholarship is another area of scholarly communication, scholarly conversation that is emerging as significant, and a prime example of democratization of scholarship, and one with a high profile, is *Wikipedia*. I remember being asked after I gave my short public lecture here at CTU as part of the interview process whether I was in favor of *Wikipedia*. Wow, did I stun some people when I said enthusiastically, "Yes"—with a qualification that like any resource, print or online, you must evaluate the individual article you consider using. So there are some great *Wikipedia* articles as there are some wonderful encyclopedia articles. There are some bad *Wikipedia* articles as there are some wholly inaccurate encyclopedia articles, even ones published by what we consider to be highly reputable print publishers. Even in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* there are very bad articles. For a much longer discussion of this, I can refer you to my 2009 article in the open access journal *Theological Librarianship*, titled "Librarians, Publishers, and Theological Reference Resources: A Way Forward."[1] I'm afraid we have not come much further in the past eight years.

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1   Melody Layton McMahon, "Librarians, Publishers, and Theological Reference Resources: A Way Forward," *Theological Librarianship* 2, no. 1 (2009): 8-19.

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Wikipedia is probably the best-known example of the democratization of scholarship, and each year I give an assignment for my students to read a blog post titled "Wikipedia and the Death of the Expert," having them write their own blog post in response to it. (I want to give credit to my current students who all wrote so expressively in this assignment that they decided my topic for this speech for me!) The article suggests that gathering lots of disparate ideas from different disciplines seems irreconcilable at first, yet if one considers them together they result in "a shifted perspective, and a cascade of new insights."[2] But for democratization of scholarship to result, then more than just different disciplines have to come into play. The voices of all informed people must be conversation partners whether or not they have advanced degrees or even a high school education! Believe me, this is a somewhat difficult thing for me to say as I stand proud as punch to be promoted to full professor. Maybe, as one of my former students pointed out in his assignment, "'charity' in allowing other voices to be heard, [is one of] the great theological implications of *Wikipedia* and democratization of scholarship."[3] But, as the original blog post on *Wikipedia* goes on to declare, "So long as we believe that there is such a thing as an expert rather than a *fellow-investigator*, then that person's views just by *magic* will be worth more than our own, no matter how much or how often actual events have shown this not to be the case."[4]

I have another example that I use to illustrate what I mean by experts. I belong to a society for the promotion of a certain British woman middle-brow fiction writer who wrote over thirty works in a series beginning in the mid-1930s and ending in 1961. Most members of the organization have read the entire series several times, some six or seven times from beginning to end. (I don't want to admit how many times I have read them!) Once an academic gave a presentation about the writer (AS IF she was an expert) and she had not even read all the books once. Who is the "expert"?

My students this year, in the *Wikipedia* assignment, had some wonderful observations which raise salient points about who has authority—or is an expert—within the church and in theology. Adriana Calzada eloquently remarked, "If the Kingdom of God was about knowledge, then this (*Wikipedia*) will be the perfect exercise of building it! *Wikipedia* seems to be the round table of scholarship where everybody is welcomed to have a sit and speak out their voice."[5] Javier Del Angel replied to her post,

> I like your metaphor of "banquet" to describe the *Wikipedia* era. One of the questions that came to my mind is, as in any other banquet, who are those invited and those excluded, voluntarily or not. Regardless how much *Wikipedia* signifies a democratization of knowledge, we can also notice this is not a democratization for everyone because many people still have not access to this seemingly universal table of information."[6]

And in his own post he voiced a discomfort, contrasting the *Wikipedia* paradigm with the way knowledge is produced, sanctioned, disseminated, and taught in the Catholic Church. He wrote, "*Wikipedia* and the whole democratization of scholarship challenge all this paradigm. Indeed, the 'Wikipedia paradigm,' collaborative, argumenta-

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2   Maria Bustillos, "Wikipedia and the Death of the Expert," *The Awl* (May 17, 2011), https://theawl.com/ wikipedia-and-the-death-of-the-expert-76631e5e9976#.g7a065hgr.

3   Nhien Minh Truong, "The Theological Implications of Wikipedia and the Democratization of Scholarship," *The Spiritual World* (April 28, 2016), https://truongminhnhien.blogspot.com/2016/04/the-theological-implications-of.html.

4   Bustillos, "Wikipedia and the Death of the Expert." (Emphasis mine.)

5   Adriana Calzada, "The Banquet of Scholarship," blogging on "The Theological Implications of Wikipedia and the Democratization of Scholarship," Course discussion post, September 30, 2016.

6   Javier Del Angel, "The Banquet of Scholarship," blogging on "The Theological Implications of Wikipedia and the Democratization of Scholarship," Course discussion comment, October 3, 2016.

tive, democratic, open, diverse, and in constant evolution and revision, drastically challenges the 'magisterium paradigm.'"[7]

But we must now turn to *theosis* if we are to have space to say anything about it at all. A very important theological concept in Orthodox Christianity, it is also found in Catholicism and some Protestant denominations. Also called "divinization" or "deification," it asserts that we are made in the image of God and are called as the baptized and worshipers to a process where we are to become more and more like God in *this* life, culminating in the resurrection. In Western Christianity it has been expressed by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*,

> The command "Be ye perfect" is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were "gods" and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to Him perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness."[8]

All of life is, to this way of seeing things, caught up in making choices to become more and more like God. "Being like God" is such a rich idea that it leaves room for all kinds of Christians to find ways and means to employ their special talents and gifts to mirror the image of God—creativity, healing, showing love, gaining knowledge and intelligence. Through the knowledge of God that is given to us, it is up to us to respond and to endeavor to achieve the goal of deification. It is in gaining knowledge and intelligence where there is –for me– an intersection with the democratization of scholarship. If we are to be becoming more like God, then gaining knowledge, producing knowledge, teaching knowledge, disseminating knowledge, are all ways to mirror God, to become like God. Every Christian is called to become like God, so for me it is implied that for many this knowledge-oriented way will be for them the way to respond and endeavor. Thus, it must be democratized to account for those who are NOT among the happy chosen few who are made full professors!

We see many areas of scholarship where scholars and non-scholars are working together to produce knowledge. In some cases, the non-scholars are instrumental in the gaining of knowledge. So—I think democratization of scholarship might not only lead to writing and editing for *Wikipedia* (although I think my fellow professors should think about incorporating these as a course assignment). But I also think of crowd-sourcing the research involved in gaining knowledge. In his book *Crowdsourcing,* Daren C. Brabham defines crowdsourcing as an

> online, distributed problem-solving and production model that leverages the collective intelligence of online communities to serve specific organizational goals. Engaged volunteers are given the opportunity to respond to crowdsourcing activities promoted by the organization, and they are motivated to respond for a variety of reasons.[9]

I think of the huge crowd-sourced projects like the ornithology project at Cornell where they have made use of the data of the hordes of birders who happily gather and provide data that has led to major discoveries in the patterns of bird migration. Or of the hundreds of amateur astronomers who have "found" things in the sky that no scholar astronomer has ever seen. The Smithsonian has almost 7,000 volunteers transcribing various manuscripts, as do

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7   Javier Del Angel, "The Battle for the Knowledge of God," blogging on "The Theological Implications of Wikipedia and the Democratization of Scholarship," Course discussion post, October 2, 2016.

8   C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 174.

9   Daren C. Brabham, *Crowdsourcing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), xix.

hundreds of other museums, newspapers, and even projects transcribing ancient Greek papyrus fragments. One undertaking that is sort of crowd-sourced, but not successfully in my opinion, is the wonderful resource Hymnary. org. If you are at all interested in hymns, I encourage you to visit the site. It's fabulous, but there are millions of missing points of data. Anyone can offer to work on it, but the barriers to be accepted are very high. I have been a musician my entire life with an undergrad degree with an emphasis in music and know hundreds of hymns from nearly every Christian denomination and I have failed the test twice. Might this be where "charity" could be extended?

So all this raises questions. Does any of this ring true? Is it possible we could develop a way to discover the *sensus fidelium* in crowd-sourcing? Will those of us who are full professors have "charity" and encourage non-scholars to endeavor with us in our work in some way? Currently my attorney husband is in the process of submitting articles on the Latin Mass in James Joyce's *Ulysses* to a non-scholarly theology journal and to a scholarly literary journal. Will that scholarly journal deign to accept the work of a person outside their guild? Should *New Theology Review*, our faculty journal, which employs double-blind peer-review, which means peer reviewers and authors do not know who the other is, also be degree-blind? Should we be stifling the voice of the true amateur theologian, or of the professional pastoral minister who doesn't have an advanced degree, but maybe has the most reign-of-god-making message of our time?

The *great* goal for all of us is to become like God, to become divinized, to bring the reign of God on earth. I'm willing to open up my room in the ivory tower to bring in others who want to study, to write, to research, to edit, to teach if this will make the reign of God a reality.