Evangelizing Digital Natives
Prospects for Religion in the Virtual Age

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The internet as we know it is only 20 years old. Facebook is 11. Smartphones are 8. But already, it is hard to imagine life without them. The first generation of digital natives are now entering college. They cannot remember the first time they used a computer any more than they can remember the first time they walked. This generation also looks to be the most unchurched generation in human history. According to the latest PEW survey on American religious life conducted just last year, 23% of all Americans now identify as "nones"–those who respond to the PEW survey on religion affiliation with "none of the above." For those 18-30, the emergent digital natives, the percentage of nones rises to 35%–fully one third of all young adults in this country. And of course many, perhaps most of those who still do identify with a religion do not actually practice their faith or know much about it.

Are these two trends related? Is there something about virtual culture that undercuts religious practice? It is not that many of the nones are atheist or even agnostic. PEW reports only 3% of Americans identifying as atheist, and only an additional 4% as agnostic. Thus it is not that the millenials have a problem with religion; they just do not see the need for it, at least at this time in their lives. Religion is irrelevant for them. John Paul II had already called for a New Evangelization to reach out to these "post-Christians." But by this he meant finding new ways for proclaiming the same message as before. I think it is time for a more radical apostolic strategy. I think it is time for a new, new evangelization.

Christianity has done this before. For Jesus himself was an oral prophet proclaiming a return to oral values in an increasingly urban, literate culture. That he wrote nothing down is likely not an accident. That he could read aloud from sacred scripture in a synagogue service does not mean that he could read, let alone write in our understanding of the term. When Jesus read aloud publically from the Scriptures in the synagogue he already knew what it said; the script served mostly as a memory aid. It is highly unlikely that he could have picked up a book, say Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, and be able to read a word of it, even if it had been

translated into Aramaic.

However within a generation, Jesus teachings were being transcribed and already by the end of the second century, Christianity had become a "religion of the book". Talk of the Hellenization of Christianity is most fundamentally talk about the translation of the Gospel into literate categories and its application to a literate culture. The Hellenization of Christianity was the transformation of an oral religion into a literate one.

Today texts are giving way to hypertexts. Social relationships are increasingly moving on line. Work and play, even such quintessential literate activities as learning and scholarship are all increasingly being conducted online. If by virtual technology one includes all internet-enabled technology, from laptops and tablets to smart phones and social media, our lives are shifting from a literate way of life to a virtual one. And as we begin to attach sensors to connect more and more things to the internet for monitoring and managing, even our material world is becoming an increasingly virtual world.

In such a virtual world human aspirations are also changing: from the fulfillment of our nature to the transcendence of human capacities altogether. The new prophets of "transhumanism" are calling upon us to take charge of humanity's ongoing evolution, to redesign not just the world, but our own nature. They exhort us not to accept but to transcend what philosophers have traditionally referred to, often in somber, even tragic tones, as "the human condition." The urgent question for the Church today is what does religion have to offer our new virtual culture and what does virtual culture have to offer those of us who still prize and practice Christianity?

The first thing that needs to be said about such a new, new evangelization is that we should approach it from the perspective of inter-religious dialogue. Sure the "nones" say they are not religious, but as contemporary thinkers from Paul Tillich to Charles Taylor insist, everyone needs to hold something sacred. For the sacred provides the horizon of meaning and value against which anything appears as good or evil. It is what makes our universe a cosmos, a meaningful world in which we can find our place and define our identity. What we hold sacred provides the metric for evaluating whether our lives are on the right track or whether we are in need conversion, literally, of turning our lives around. But the nones have little language, few

resources and virtually no experience in articulating, let alone critically reflecting over what they hold sacred. They cannot always recognize, and so cherish and cultivate the places and times, the language and the rituals by which they access the sacred meanings and values that define them. In the words of the mystics,   too many of them are spiritual sleepwalkers.

The church is the bearer of 4,000 years of critical reflection, broad experience and hard won wisdom in recognizing what can be held sacred and what ultimately cannot sustain a meaningful life. To the extent that the "spiritual but not religious" embrace a "do-it-yourself" spirituality, their approach holds about as much promise for profundity and liberation as do-it-yourself calculus. One individual, over one lifespan, can only be so insightful.

In fact "do-it-yourself" spirituality actually runs counter to the logic of the internet, where agency is dispersed across a network. The idea that we can do or even think anything by ourselves alone is belied by the trauma of a fried laptop, or the disorientation induced by a lost smart phone. The virtual self is not the autonomous individual of literate consciousness but a networked self, continually accessing resources across the web to perform even the most mundane tasks– saying hi to our mom, finding our way to a friend's house, even, for more and more of us, reading the morning news.

But not only is the virtual self a node in a global network, the virtual self is also itself a local network of virtual personae, partial selves or sub-identities we enact on different virtual platforms. My Facebook persona is not my work email persona is not my World of Warcraft persona. Hopefully these are not fully dissociated and split off from one another, hopefully they are in harmony with one another, but they are not identical and none can be fruitfully identified with my "true self".

Which leads to one thing virtual technology has to teach religion. Our emergent virtual lifestyle involves a heightened sense of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things. Virtual religion portends a revitalization of the mystical. In fact some, like Antonio Spadaro, are already creatively understanding the internet religiously, through Teilhard de Chardin's vision of the noosphere. As our connectivity becomes increasingly thick and immersive our technologies are converging to evolution's Omega point and the rise of the cosmic Mystical Body of Christ.

Virtual technologies offer the prospect of new forms of ritual and community. For some,

like Spadaro, such virtual rituals can never adequately substitute for face to face embodied presence; their virtual connectivity can never replace the communal life and support provided by physical congregations and parishes. But they do not need to. After all when we learn to read we do not stop speaking. Similarly the writing of the Gospel did not obviate the need to hear and proclaim it. It enabled one to pray over the Scriptures in solitude without having to remember Jesus' words, but it did not undermine communal prayer. On the contrary it enabled Christian communal prayer to spread far and wide across the earth. So too, virtual ritual and virtual community need not, and indeed should not, be seen as rendering physical sacraments and brick and mortar churches obsolete. The question is not their potential as substitutes but as supplements to traditional religious practices that can enhance religion's outreach to a digital generation for whom institutional religion too often no longer attracts.

On the other hand, what does the new digital generation have to learn from us Christians? Two things immediately come to mind. First of all, we can offer an array of sacred places and practices to cultivate the very virtues of literate culture that virtual technology is eroding. An interior life it itself the fruit of literacy. To read for oneself, and to record one's own thoughts, feelings and experiences enables the articulation and cultivation of an individual self. Accordingly a principal locus for the sacred in Christianity lies in our interior depths. But the cultivation of interiority requires solitude and virtual culture is eliminating the privacy necessary for solitude altogether. We are coming to learn that, even off-line, we know that we are under constant surveillance, by big business and by big government. It is true that on the internet we can remain anonymous, but anonymity is not privacy. We may only be a data point for tracking programs, but any one of us can be found if someone has a reason to (as would be terrorists and pedophiles have learned only too well). Indeed the point of these tracking programs that promise to "protect" our privacy, is to "personalize" marketing to us as individuals. While government and multinationals may not know you, they sure know a lot about you.

Religion can offer a refuge from being always online and ever on call. Religion can offer "retreats" from our everyday virtual lives, to step back, quiet down and unencumber ourselves that we might attend to who we are, where we have come from, who we are living with and where our lives are headed. Religion can provide sacred rituals in a sacred space at a sacred time

to reconnect with what we do hold sacred, but which is too easily lost in the clutter and the chatter of virtual life.

Religion can also bring spiritual direction to digital natives. We can offer tools to discern where, when and how to be online, and when, where and how to disconnect and re-engage in the material world and re-immerse ourselves in embodied face-to-face mutual presence. In short, we can help digital natives develop practices that are not enhanced by becoming easier, quicker and cheaper; activities whose value lies principally not in their product but in the very doing of them—whether it is going for a hike or learning to play an instrument, or simply spending some time at rest in quiet, waiting for God.

Now it is a paradox and one of the challenges of such practices whose value lies in the very performance of them, that those outside the practice do not know what they are missing. After all they have never experienced it. And its external benefits often do not seem worth all the effort. Why learn to play an instrument when you can download any music you please instantly at virtually no cost? So to evangelize the nones we cannot simply tell them that they don't know what they are missing. We will need to come in their door. And to get their attention, and respect, we will also need to have them tell us what we don't know we are missing to the extent that we do not link up. Blanket critique is a rearguard strategy. Like the "God of the gaps" it serves only to increasingly withdraw religion from relevance for more and more of the population. In any case soon enough they will be us, as digital natives enter religious life, start families and inherit the earth.

If Christianity's experience with literacy is any gauge, the inculturation of Christianity into the virtual age will be the work of centuries. But we need to start.... yesterday. Had the Gospel not adapted to the surrounding literate world would it have ever grown or even survived the destruction of Jerusalem? In fact, since the very word "Christian" came from literate Greeks in Antioch, would Christianity itself, as a distinct religion, ever even have come to exist?

May we engage this task before us with the same faith and vigor that Peter and Paul, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Justin, Origen and Augustine committed to the proclamation of the Gospel to their own literate culture. And may we be as effective in building the Kingdom of God for our time.