The Technology of Religion

1. Welcome to this second video lecture in the series on virtual religion. In this video I shall explore how religion can itself be understood as a technology, a technology that binds us together by connecting us with what we hold sacred.

2. Technology and religion appear to be opposites. Martin Heidegger, for example, contrasts the essence of technology which he identifies with a (1) calculative, instrumental orientation to reality in which we seek to (2) transform reality to suit our goals, with (3) meditative, religious thought in which (4) reality reveals itself to us and it is we who are transformed by the world of which we are but a part. In instrumental thinking objects, even other people, appear to us as mere tools, resources or obstacles, in the pursuit of our own goals. Nature is treated by us as mere raw material. (5) Personnel departments, for example (6) become HR, human resource departments.

3. Religion on the other hand is about reconnecting to what we hold sacred. To hold something sacred is to say its value lies not in being a means to any other end, but in being an end in itself. It reveals what is of ultimate value and significance, our highest good, a horizon of meaningfulness that defines us, gives our life its meaning and purpose. To treat the sacred in instrumental terms is to desecrate it, and defile ourselves.

4. Religion is uniquely characteristic of the human species. As seen in earlier videos, it is found in every culture across all ages, reaching back prior to language itself. Religious ritual's power lies in mimetic communication—rhythmic group movement iconically circling a central fire, accompanied by rhythmic sounds, beating sticks, ecstatic cries and mournful wails.

5. Mimetic communication in turn works through imitation. The human species is also the most imitative species on the planet. When we see someone rhythmically moving to a beat, we are impelled to follow suit, and not only to move but to begin to feel what we imagine they are feeling.

6. Thus, human feelings are contagious, particularly in groups, even more so in crowds. And so too, should we stop and critically reflect over our desires, we find that most of what we want, we want because we see that others want it too. We

learn what is desirable by others, from what others strive for and enjoy. It is the primal logic that animates both in-group solidarity and out-group scapegoating.

7. And so in religious rituals, religious feelings of serenity or ecstasy, intimacy, friendship inspiration spread through their participants and their feelings, and through this contagion their consciousness is transformed. Thus my definition of religion—what binds us together by reconnecting us to what we all hold sacred.

8. As mimetic, religious ritual communicates in a visceral manner, below conscious language. Religious speech is not a substitute for religious ritual, but supplements and enhances, ritual mimetic communication, by expressing shared feelings, articulating group thoughts, focusing our common attention.

9. Unlike scientific language that describes and explains from the perspective of a detached, impartial observer, religious language inspires its audience, bathes them in feelings of both belonging, and commitment, conviction and guilt. Rather than an objective record of a thing's behavior and its effects, from which the experimenter seeks to bracket his or her own subjectivity, religious language reveals a reality to which we are called to surrender our own subjectivity, so as to be transformed by it. Or to put it simply, while scientific language is informative, religious language is primarily performative, and through its performance, transformative of both speaker and hearer, author and reader.

10. As performative, Bruno Latour argues that religion is itself a technology. Religious rituals, symbols, places and times as well as a religion's abstract doctrinal teachings and creedal confessions, are all resources and allies for reconnecting us to what its participants hold sacred. Insofar as they are effective in doing so, they are themselves sacred by analogy.

11. Unlike Heidegger's critique of industrial technology, religious technologies then are not mere means, external to us. but rather catalysts that implicate our very identity, that define the meaning, direction and purpose of our lives, our human being in the world.

12. Origen, the first great Christian philosopher, born and raised in Alexandria at the end of the second and beginning of the third century, argued that religious language must be interpreted in three different registers. (1) First there is its

literal, narrative meaning, what any competent speaker of the language would understand by what is expressed. One could call this its oral sense. (2) Secondly, religious language also bears a moral message. It teaches by word and example what it means to live a religious life. One might call this its mimetic message, Jesus as a role model for Christians to imitate. Finally, and (3) most importantly for Origen, religious language also has a third, spiritual or mystical sense that draws our thoughts to what we hold sacred and thereby reconnects us, unites us with the divinity it reveals. This last calls for sitting with the text, reflecting over it, playing with its images and symbols. One might call this the literate meaning of the text, accessible only by reading it over thoughtfully, repeatedly, over and over again, sitting with the text in solitude.

13. Take for example the wedding feast of Cana in the Gospel of John. First there is the familiar story itself, the literal narrative of the text. Mary and Jesus attend a wedding in the nearby village of Cana in Galilee. At some point the hosts run out of wine. Mary asks Jesus to solve their problem and after some initial hesitation, he has some servants fill large amphora with water which wondrously turns into wine. This story also gives us a moral example for Christian life. (1) Mary feels sorry for her hosts threatened with humiliation by running out of wine at a wedding party. She enlists her son Jesus to save the family from embarrassment. Jesus at first resists, but Mary persists, and her son relents, obeys his mother and miraculously saves the situation. The moral lesson is clear: if we imitate Mary's concern for others and her unwavering faith in Jesus, he will deliver. (2) Jesus gives us a moral example to emulate as well. Even though he does not originally want to, he ends up obeying his mother, and something wondrous results. When we face our own moral dilemmas, we too should ask ourselves, what would Mary do, or even more, what would Jesus do in such a situation, and emulate them.

14. Finally, pondering over the passage in prayer opens up a third, spiritual meaning that draws us up into union with the divine. This spiritual meaning is allegorical in the sense that behind the literal story, accessible to anyone, lies a second spiritual story, accessible only to those initiated into the evocative sacred symbols and beliefs of Christianity. In the story at Cana, Origen argues that the amphora

filled with water symbolize us. The clay material is like our bodies, the water within them like our soul. Wine is also a symbol, but to understand it one needs to be familiar with the larger Christian story.

15. In Genesis, wine is a gift God gave to Noah after the flood. After Adam the father of humanity had sinned, God banished him from the fruit trees of paradise cursing him that only by the sweat of his brow would the earth yield food to eat. (1)But humanity only sank deeper and deeper into mimetic desire and violence.

16. Responding mimetically himself, God responded in anger, opening the celestial floodgates determined to wipe human beings off the face of the earth. But seeing Noah's righteous resistance to mimetic desire and violence, God turned from his rage, by sparing Noah and his household.

17. Afterwards, he blessed Noah with the vine, that humanity might find some relief from its labor, its punishment, for the sin of its ancestors. (1) Reflecting prayerfully over this story, ruminating and digesting it like a good scribe, we can feel our own watery, languid souls transformed, we can experience relief from our daily suffering and sorrows and become rejuvenated by God's own Spirit.

18. Playing yet further with the spiritual symbolism of the story, we Christians also know what happens to wine during the central ritual of the Mass. Wine becomes the very blood of Christ, and in our ritual partaking of Christ's blood we enter into communion with Christ himself. In Augustine's words, in eating the bread and wine, transformed into the body and blood of Christ we do not so much assimilate Christ as he assimilates us. We become the very Body of Christ ourselves for our contemporary world.

19. The Buddhists have a saying "Don't mistake my finger for the moon." Religious language is not literal but symbolic, it points beyond itself to what we hold sacred. The literal story is an allegory for a more religiously important spiritual story, a saving story. Origen will call this ultimate mystical sense of religious language its anagogical sense, from the Greek meaning to lead upwards. Religious language is not a scientific description but a point and vector leading our consciousness beyond itself, beyond all word and image, to the transcendent divine.

20. Dionysius, a few centuries later will make a similar threefold classification of religious language. We can speak of God in three ways: (1) affirmatively, (2) negatively and (3) analogically. Affirmative statements about God can be drawn from the scriptures. (4) Paul for example calls Christ "our rock." This is true insofar as the Son of God reveals himself as having rocklike characteristics. His love for us is unshakable. We can rely on Christ as our rock in turbulent times, indeed as the bedrock on which to build our lives. To rely on anything else is to build our lives on sand. So too he is the cornerstone, rejected by the builders, the religious leaders of his day, upon which God has built his own home, the new temple of which we are all elements. (5) On the other hand God is not only a rock. Its also true, then, to deny that God is a rock. And this sense is truer than the first, in that a rock is a very partial way of talking about what Christians hold sacred. The Christian God is more different than similar to a rock. But this is true of anything we might say of God. As Dionysius puts it, whatever we say of God is more false than true. (6) On the other hand, anything we might say of God is also partly true of God, in that, as its creator, anything and everything depends upon him and reflects him in some sense. And we sensual, embodied, finite creatures need sensuous symbols and metaphors to point us towards God. But no such description is fully adequate to its referent. It informs to some extent, but in so informing it performs a transformation of our understanding, drawing us to what transcends our understanding altogether.

21. Now one might object: while God may not literally be a rock, surely there are some things we can say about God that are literally true. (1) For example when we say God is good, is that not to be taken as literally true? Not according to Dionysius, or Origen. (2) For what we mean by calling someone "good" is not what we mean when we praise God as good. For example, human goodness includes resisting temptation. But by "God", Christians mean, in the words of Anselm, "that than which nothing greater can be thought." A God who never even has to struggle with temptation would be greater than a good God who resists all temptation. (3) Thus God's goodness must be untemptable, perfect, pure goodness, boundless goodness, goodness without qualification. For such goodness

to ever be subject to temptation, would mean there is something that could threaten God's goodness, something greater than God. So while there is a sense in which God is good, God is not good in the sense that we call anyone else good. God is not good in a univocal sense, but analogically, in a sense that transcends all human goodness. (4) Now we cannot literally understand what we mean by such goodness. It transcends not only our experience, but our understanding altogether. We can only extrapolate from our own understanding of goodness. Divine goodness is then a point and vector. In speaking of God's goodness we should be sure not to mistake that point and vector, our finger so to speak, for the moon. (5) "God is good" is ultimately more performative than informative. (6) It's a ritual use of language that transforms our lives by inspiring us to imitate an idealized goodness that transcends any clear and distinct, literal understanding.

22. On the other hand, we can enhance our understanding of what we cannot understand fully (1), (2) by combining our extrapolation of goodness with our extrapolation of other perfections extrapolated to a similarly transcendent limit. That is, whatever transcendent, divine goodness might mean it must coincide with (3) transcendent divine wisdom, (4)transcendent divine power with (5) transcendent divine love, (6) transcendent divine justice with (7) transcendent divine mercy. In this way we can triangulate divine perfections to create a semantic field, which, though beyond our full understanding, does give us our attention a focus, towards which our imaginations can relate.

23. Finally Meister Eckhart will take the analysis of the nature of religious language one step further yet. If by calling God good we mean that God is perfect goodness, that, is the perfect instance of the concept (1) then, by contrast we can never be literally good. In other words, rather than saying that God's goodness is analogous to human goodness we should rather say that human goodness is analogous to God's and (2) so that we can call ourselves good only insofar as we imitate or participate in God's goodness. Indeed we can only be said to be anything at all insofar as we in some sense or other imitate God, that is, participate in God's own being. (3) Eckhart asks for example "what burns in hell"? His answer is that (4) nothing burns in Hell, that is, all that is not God, who

alone exists in the proper sense of the term, all that is imperfect and to that extent does not exist in the proper or absolute sense of the term, all that burns away, purifying us, transforming us, ultimately deifying us. Eckhart clarifies his point by going on to ask why (5) a white hot iron bar from the furnace burns our hand. It burns us only to the extent that we too are not white hot. In the words of Origen, we must become one with the white hot fire of God's being. Again not literally, but metaphorically, analogically. Such language is true, in a religious sense, not by literally informing us but by effectively performing a transformation of our being, our consciousness, and even more, our lives.

24. It is then in virtue of these performative and transformative senses, that Latour frames religion as a technology. (1) Every religion enlists a network of actants: rhythmic and communal mimetic movement, sacred storytelling, resonant chant, petitionary invocation, hymns of praise and thanksgiving. Every prayer ritual, whether communal or solitary, while a node in a religious network, itself also enlists its own network of evocative symbols and inspiring ideals, to be held in sacred spaces, at sacred liminal times in the lifecycle of its participants. These rituals are presided over by priests and prophets adopting sacred personae, all in the service of reconnecting its participants to what they all hold sacred, that by which they define themselves and understand their place in a meaningful cosmos. All are resources and allies contributing to the efficacy of the religion as a whole to transform the individual and build a community that can inspire and sustain their commitment to the sacred to which all point

25. Now Latour goes so far as to argue that religious language is purely performative; that it conveys no informative content. Thus while agreeing with Anselm that by God Christians mean that than which nothing greater can be thought, (1) he rejects Anselm's claim that such a meaning entails that God actually exists. Paradoxically, he confesses to be a Catholic who does not believe God exists. But this is ultimately a misleading way to talk. (2) As Dionysius would argue, while "God exists" is literally false, "God does not exist" is also literally false. (3) Rather God does not exist in the same way that we exist. God's existence is analogous. Indeed (4) Eckhart would argue, properly speaking, it is we who do

not exist in an absolute sense. Only God fully exists. (5) To use Latour against Latour: God does not exist in a scientific sense, (6) but science too is a technology and its statements also performative. (7) Performative vs informative does not refer to two different kinds of statements but are two different aspects of any statement. God does not exist in a scientific sense because science is not a sacred technology. (8) But that only entails that scientists cannot only be scientists. To live a meaningful life, even (9) a scientist must hold something sacred and consequently must engage in a sacred technology of some sort, indeed a sacred technology that is compatible with their scientific technology. Thus while religion and science speak in different registers, they do bleed into one another, or co-evolve. In my video lectures on the evolution of religion and technology I have shown how each has catalyzed the evolution of the other.

26. I say that this is to use Latour against Latour, because his latest book is a sustained argument that reality exists in several registers. He condemns modernity precisely for privileging science at the expense of these other modes of existence. However he does have a tendency to treat these different modes of existence as separate from each other and so continues to insist that God exists is a purely religious performance with no bearing on any other register, scientific or otherwise.

27. However, let me end this video on an appreciative note. Latour offers three words of wisdom, three philosophical commandments one might say, the first two memorably expressed in virtual language, that well summarizes all that has been said in this video lecture: (1) Don't double-click; (2) Don't Freeze-Frame (3) Don't be an iconoclast.

28. First, don't double-click. Do not take religious language (1) as literal language whose meaning (2) is (3) immediately accessible, (4), (5) that you only need to hear or read to understand. Religious language does mean something (6) , In fact it means many different things, but those meanings are only accessible through (7) regular (8) practice, (9) ongoing (10) reflection (11) and (12) personal (13) conversion. Religious meaning is not immediate, but the fruit of a lifetime of religious practice.

29. Second, don't freeze-frame: that is, do not mistake my finger for the moon. (1) Do not mistake religious language or any religious ritual, (2) for what they point to. We need the right tools to perform the intended task. And in different circumstances, with a different audience, at a different time, the tools may need to be different as well, or at least redesigned or repaired. Treating religious language as itself sacred in some absolute sense, that can never be changed or adapted, is like a frozen computer screen. It turns an icon,that points beyond itself, into an idol, a broken link, so to speak, that can no longer speak.

30. On the other hand, do not dismiss an icon as an idol (1) because it is only an icon (2) and not itself the sacred reality (2) to which it points. I do not want you to mistake my finger (4) for the moon but I do need (5) to use my finger (6) if I am to point you where to look. Wittgenstein ends his Tractatus with the proposition, "Of that which we cannot speak, we should remain silent." But to not speak about what we cannot speak about is to risk everyone forgetting about it. If only that is sacred which is not relative to time, person and place, than nothing is sacred. Our very purity would lead us to hold nothing sacred. Our world would be left a wasteland of empty profanity, our lives a story without a plot.

31. So religion is a technology. Little wonder then that they have co-evolved over human history. Furthermore, in the industrial and now virtual age, this relationship has often been inverted. That is, technology has itself become a religion. In the next video lecture I shall explore contemporary culture's faith in technology, largely by looking at World's Fairs that often foregrounded technological progress and the future marvels, literally, miracles, it holds in store for human life.