

Virtual Ritual

1. Welcome to this first of a three-part dive into the nuts and bolts of what virtual religion is beginning to look like in practice. In this lecture we will be exploring virtual ritual. This will be followed by another video lecture on virtual ecclesiology and the rise of online churches. The series will then wrap up with a final video lecture exploring virtual mysticism.
2. Authentic religious ritual is the epitome of a focal practice, an activity whose very activity reconnects one with what participants hold sacred. On the other hand, the instrumentalization of a religious ritual is the very definition of its secularization. Luther's reform of medieval Christianity began with his 95 thesis against the granting of indulgences charging that it instrumentalized grace by quantifying forgiveness.
 - a. (1) We have seen in earlier videos how religious critics of industrial and virtual technologies warn that these technologies are creating a culture that threatens to increasingly instrumentalize contemporary life by replacing richly social, inherently meaningful focal practices with alternatives that are more convenient, more efficient, and less demanding, even to the point of enabling multitasking. More can get done, they acknowledge, in the sense of goals attained that lie beyond the activities themselves, but at the cost of any inherent meaning in those very activities. But meaning cannot be an infinite regress. At some point a meaningful life requires engaging in activities that are meaningful in themselves.
3. Can there be activities online that are meaningful in themselves? (1) Can there be virtual focal practices that elude efficiency metrics and multitasking? (2) In religious terms, can there be such a thing as a virtual ritual?
4. For traditional theories of religious ritual this amounts to a contradiction in terms. Religious rituals are inherently embodied and embedded, (1) performed face to face in a particular sacred space at a particular sacred time. Therein lies their mimetic power
5. ...to transform their participants reconnecting them to what they hold sacred.
6. However, by definition, virtual activities are instances of extended cognition and agency, disembodied and disembedded from the actual world, potentially accessible to anyone at any time. Virtual religion can offer a refuge from life online, but how can it serve as an online resource itself for digital natives?

7. On the one hand video game designers have developed strategies for enhancing what they call “character bleed,”—that is, how players “bleed into” their gaming avatars and avatars “bleed out” to affect their players. In other words just as with religious rituals, video games are engaging and immersive to the extent that they are effective media for mimetic communication as well. The rubrics of a ritual are like the rules of a game. (1) Indeed of those traditional theories of religious ritual would frame ritual as play and understand *homo religiosum* as a dimension of *homo ludens*.
8. To my mind, the question cannot be whether religious ritual can migrate online, but how. Recent studies have measured time spent by the average digital native at over nine hours a day. And of course thanks to smart phones, they are all accessible online 24/7. If there can be nothing sacred online, if virtual technologies are inherently secular, god-less, then its denizens, the digital natives will become godless as well. Or otherwise put, religion will become irrelevant.
9. Before addressing the question of virtual ritual, it is important to remember that virtual life is inherently hybrid. The boundary between the actual and the virtual has blurred. As we discussed in exploring the demons of the virtual self, already today, virtually no one on the planet can ever be fully offline. Not just social media, but the emergent internet of things give everyone at every moment some kind of digital footprint.
10. Virtual religion must be addressed in similarly hybrid terms. The question is not whether traditional mimetic, oral and literate forms of prayer, cultivated and refined across the millennia by generations of practitioners can or ought to be replaced by new online rituals.
11. The question ought not be about substitution but supplementation. Not what will virtual religion render obsolete but what kind of new opportunities for prayer do virtual technologies open up? As we have already seen, new technologies rarely render old technologies obsolete. Most often new technologies transform older technologies from a universal tool to a niche application. And again, rarely is either in a pure form.
12. As pioneer media ecologist the Jesuit Walter Ong liked to remark, writing down the gospel did not make its oral preaching obsolete, but rather enhanced it by enabling preachers to be more informed. So too written copies of the Gospels enabled access for solitary meditation over the same sacred stories as well. More recently, electronic

technology, (1) in the form of microphones and speakers has enabled greater access to the spoken word in larger gatherings, even sports stadiums, without rendering small group, face to face faith sharing and bible study obsolete.

13. The question then is not whether there can be virtual ritual but how can ritual be designed online in a way that is transformative. (1) In other words how create a sacred space online? And the question is not whether virtual ritual will ever replace traditional ritual (2) but how it can supplement ritual offline, and even further, just as evangelical preaching with bible at hand is a hybrid of both oral and literate ritual, (3) how might hybrid forms of oral, literate and virtual ritual enhance both old and new forms of prayer, individual and communal?

14. To answer this question, I will divide virtual ritual into a number of categories each progressively more immersive:

- a. (1) First, there are apps designed to virtually assist the performance of ritual offline.
- b. (2) Other apps are designed to conduct to lead users through its own ritual or even to conduct the ritual with the participant.
- c. (3) Video teleconferencing platforms have also been used to create sacred places for ritual in which others are telepresent in your world and you are telepresent in theirs.
- d. (4) Video game technology enables all participants to be telepresent through avatars in a common online sacred space
- e. (5) VR goggles enables first-person interactive immersion in a virtual sacred space.

15. With regards to apps, there is already a host available online many of whom have already been depicted in the video. The contrast between an app that assists ritual offline and one that conducts a ritual online can be illustrated by considering two Catholic apps, (1) “Confession” and (2) “Click to Pray.” “Confession” offers to lead a user through an examination of conscience so that they might then make a “good confession.” It also provides the text of the rite and all the prayers to be said by the penitent. At the beginning of the text of the rite it explicitly cautions that “this is not a substitute for a valid confession.” “Click to Pray” on the other hand, released by the Vatican in January 2019,

explicitly states that using it is itself a prayer. The app offers daily petitionary prayers from the pope. At the end of the petition there is a button entitled “click to pray”. After clicking it, a pop up screens thanks the user for praying and a counter on the screen increases by one. Participants can also upload their own petitions for other users to pray for. The app also has prayer “campaigns” such as a “Rosary for Peace”

16. Pray As You Go is a long running, popular app, which offers a daily fifteen minute ritual complete with music, the day’s readings, and reflections on the reading, interspersed with periodic questions for the user to ponder to the sound of soft instrumental music and a closing short and familiar rote prayer. The reading is then repeated for the user to sit further with the words. The app speaks directly to the user in the second person.
17. There are a multitude of similar meditation apps from an array of religious traditions, as well as related mindfulness and guided relaxation apps. For example, once having enabled the app to track your GPS location, “Muslim Pro” provides the five times for prayer at your location this day. It also indicates the orientation towards Mecca from where your phone is currently facing as well as its orientation from your city. These are just two of over twenty features, not counting an enhanced “premium version.”
18. So too Buddhist and Zen apps offers meditations for all kinds of occasions. They also often offer multi-week training programs for learning the practice of meditation.
19. Ritual websites provide opportunities for communal prayer as well.
Comepraytherosary.org enables one to be telepresent in an ongoing recitation of the rosary online across the world.
20. As you enter the site, the rosary is already in progress. An image of a rosary on the side indicates where the group is in that particular rosary. A counter on the screen informs you of how many people are currently on the site praying with you.
21. Finally there is also the opportunity to offer petitions to pray for and to read petitions uploaded by others. This too serves to enhance the immersiveness of the site.
22. The times and spaces such apps creates can surely be as prayerful as anything in a church or at a shrine. They can create very effective, immersive rituals that reconnect participants to what they hold sacred. Already “best practices” are evolving on these sites.

23. But what about a ritual in the format of a video game? Take for example Secondlife, a “sandbox” social game site, where one constructs environments and interacts with others through avatars. (1) It is a “sandbox” site in that there is no winning conditions and players are not competing but rather in which you can present yourself to others through avatars that transcend normal cultural and bodily limitations, (2) where you can create things that would be prohibitively expensive offline and in which you can relate to and play with others you could never meet in person.
24. People have hosted religious rituals of all kinds on Secondlife. For example one can find neo-pagan reconstructions of ancient Celtic rites. (1) Marriages on site are particularly popular. A given couple may never have met in person in RL, rather each has only related to the other through their own avatar persona. As I just mentioned, players may even feel that their online avatar is a presentation of how they would wish to be seen by others and their online personae a more liberated and truer expression of their authentic self. The couple may well value their love and companionship online more than their off-line relationships. In fact given the variance between their online and offline personae their relationship together may well not survive a meeting offline. Does this make the relationship less real, less sacred? If the two are already married to others offline, are they committing adultery or are they just playing a game? In enabling new forms of interconnection, virtual technologies are creating new moral dilemmas as well.
25. But can’t such online religious rituals, however sacred they be taken by participants, be disrupted and desecrated? Of course. There as an infamous incident that occurred on World of Warcraft, in which a member of a guild had died, and the other members together with other friends held a nighttime memorial service online, on a snowy virtual bluff overlooking a virtual ocean. Each walked in a procession to the bluff, holding a candle, instrumental music softly playing, and participants conversing quietly. (1) Suddenly a raiding party ambushes the procession, killing all the avatars, desecrating the service. Participants were outraged, demanding the offenders be banned from the game altogether. Ambushers defended their actions by claiming that “it was just a game. Those offended needed to get a life.” But of course, the funeral procession was part of their life, and a meaningful part of it that reconnected them to their departed friend in a prayerful memorial. For most, this was an example of cyber-bullying not one of people over-

identifying with their life online. But does the vulnerability to such desecration mean that online nothing is sacred, or does the very fact that one calls it a desecration not mean that there was something sacred to defile?

26. Virtual reality goggles offer the potential for even greater immersion. Could a virtual simulation of say a hallucinogenic shamanic initiation rite be itself a transformative religious experience?
27. Or imagine sitting suspended high above the floor of Chartres Cathedral eye level with the great south rose window, the sun piercing the colored glass, Gregorian music softly in the background.
28. Or imagine oneself in the midst of a 3D projection of the Milky Way taken from a space telescope in 4K resolution. One would not need to treat such simulations as religious experiences, but couldn't you?
29. Its early days, but already best practices are emerging for effective virtual rituals. The question is no longer whether there can be sacred rituals conducted online but how. Today many online rituals simply record or translate traditional oral and literate rituals into cyberspace as early scribal culture did with traditional oral myth and ritual. But as virtual culture matures, rituals are already emerging that cannot be performed offline but enlist the unique affordances of virtual technologies themselves. These cannot replace traditional sacramental rituals but they can offer new religious opportunities for times, places, groups and occasions where oral and literate ritual cannot reach and respond to religious needs unique to the new networked identities and hybrid life of digital natives.
30. Having addressed the preliminary question of whether virtual ritual it is even possible, given its immaterial, disembodied and disembedded character online, and having looked at some concrete examples of effective virtual ritual on a variety of digital platforms, we are now in a position to turn to the question of content.
31. What kinds of insights, feelings, ideals, should virtual rituals be designed to evoke and reveal? What do digital natives need to hear, experience, do, to be saved? What would enhance self-knowledge, meaning and purpose for someone who no longer aspires to be a solitary, autonomous individual, but who is a network of personae embedded and extended across an array of other networks; for whom the sacred lies less in freedom than in connectivity; or perhaps better put in this current time of transition, one who

increasingly understands freedom itself in terms of connection rather than autonomous, self-reliance.

32. The next couple of videos will address this question in two registers: first through the lens of communal ritual, or virtual ecclesiology and finally through the lens of contemplative practice or virtual mysticism.