

# Religion in the Virtual Age

## Part 2: What Does Religion Have to Offer Digital Natives?

*In this next video I explore what religion might have to offer digital natives who increasingly feel no need for it themselves.*

First I believe that religion can do what religion already does best—offer a refuge from everyday life--today, life online-- by providing face to face, embodied rituals that can enhance attentiveness and inspire reverence and compassion. Religion can offer opportunities for solitary reflection and communal face to face support. In short, it can offer those harried and harassed by multitasking, exposed and exhausted by being always available, always “on”, an opportunity to get off the grid for a while, and critically reflect over how one’s life is proceeding. Silent retreats, solitary meditation, prayerful reflection over Sacred Scripture can give the digital native time and space to slow up, quiet down, empty out, let go. Religion can aid the digital native in the cultivation of an interior life, characteristic of literate spirituality and the original axial age.

However, religion cannot just be a refuge from what is increasingly the world we live in. Christians must also be able to find the sacred online. For if the internet and social media is dismissed as godless, then the digital natives who live online risk becoming godless as well. But religious ritual is traditionally understood to be inherently physical, face to face and embodied, enacted in a special sacred space at a designated sacred time. Consequently some liturgists have raised the question whether there can even be such a thing as a virtual religious ritual. Is that not in itself a contradiction in terms?

But, again, if religion is ever to effectively evangelize digital natives, religion is going to have to upload itself online. Our understanding of religious ritual will need to expand beyond physical presence to encompass telepresence in virtual space. This is not to say that we need to create virtual rituals to replace traditional sacramental rituals such as the Mass. But just as reading the Gospel did not make its oral proclamation and preaching obsolete, but rather enhanced our understanding and extended the reach of our preaching, so too virtual ritual should be thought of as a supplement, not a substitute, for Sunday worship. Already we see internet sites that supplement

Sunday church participation by offering online rituals for personal use on the other six days of the week. Micro-rituals you might say for daily prayer.

For example, I can google today, right now, a host of meditation apps that can dispel distractions, catch my breath, center my attention. There are also gaming platforms in which one can participate in a virtual ritual through an avatar, whether its attending an online wedding in Second Life, or through participating in a winter solstice ceremony on a Wicca site. So too, as is now the case with psychological counselling, spiritual direction and faith sharing can also be done over Skype.

New virtual technologies just coming to market offer prospects for greatly enhancing such nascent virtual rituals. Facebook's Oculus Rift involves 3-D goggles and surround-sound earphones to immerse you into a virtual world. Imagine a virtual meditation in a digital reconstruction of the cave of the Delphic oracle, light from the opening penetrating the darkness, water lapping the rocks, breaking the silence. Or imagine sitting suspended at eye level, thirty feet off the ground before the great rose window inside the entrance to Chartres Cathedral, the light of the rising sun streaming through its stained glass, Gregorian chant sounding softly in one's ears. Or imagine sitting in quiet darkness in the midst of a 3D hologram of our Milky Way Galaxy taken in high resolution from a space telescope. I believe that virtual reality holds the promise for powerfully immersive religious experiences.

So too, augmented reality, such as offered by the soon to be released Microsoft Hololens, can afford similarly immersive group rituals. Holograms of individuals from anywhere and everywhere can assemble in a common sacred space for virtual faith sharing, bible study, perhaps even ritual movement as we become proficient with the technology. Imagine, for example, a memorial service where all loved ones can attend no matter where they are, to grieve and console one another.

*So much for how religion rituals can offer a refuge from the pressures and distractions of ordinary life and how churches might extend such rituals into cyberspace. In the following video I shall go on to speculate on the inverse relationship. That is, what do these new virtual technologies, and the world they open up, have to offer traditional Christian understandings of God, Christ and Creation?*



