

Religion in the Virtual Age

Part 4: Virtual Technologies as Catalysts for Religious Reflection

In this final video I explore how traditional Christian thought and symbolism might be translated into the language of a new virtual networked ontology. I see this as an exercise in speculative theology. The internet is only 25 years old. Its too early to settle on how traditional literate Christian theology ought to be translated into virtual categories. If literate theology is any measure, that is a task for generations to come. But it's a task we need to begin. And so in what follows I play with the concepts of node and network, avatar and actant. I brainstorm how such terms might be employed to understand our Christian faith in a virtual world.

As a positive catalyst for religious thought, virtual life is already leading to a revival of mystical spirituality. If freedom and autonomy is the modern sacred, connectivity is becoming the virtual sacred. A network ontology transcends modern dichotomies of subject and object, self and others, even human and machine. Smart technologies are expanding to an internet of things, in which anything and everything will soon be potentially linked by nanosensors and nanoprocessors, leading potentially to the emergence of what Teilhard foresaw as the rise of the noosphere—reconceived not as a planetary consciousness, but a planetary network, a smart planet, one might say, whose intelligence is converging towards what Teilhard called the Omega point, the Mystical Body of Christ. Virtual theology may awaken a more concrete and compelling Christian eschatology going forward.

Christianity also teaches us that we are made in the image of God. Thus this networked understanding of the self also suggests new speculations over the nature of our God. Traditional dogma holds God to be three-in-one, a sacred trinity of interrelated divine persons constituting a single divine being. Extrapolating from the networked self, what if we were to consider the Trinity a network of divine personae, each making its own contribution; none an autonomous agent acting independently of the other two. What if we were to see the world as God's own virtual reality, a video game that he plays for the sheer joy of it.

In his very thought provoking article, “Nerd Theology,” Kevin Kelly, the founding editor of Wired magazine, has proposed modelling God’s creation on that of someone creating a video game. After all, literate Christianity drew an analogy between God’s creation of the cosmos and the writing of a book. God expressed himself not only in the book of revelation, but also in the “book” of nature. What then if we were to think of the world as God’s virtual reality— the Father as its designer or *demiurgos*, his Word as its design, its *logos*, and the Spirit as the energy, the divine *energeia* powering it all.

Or to explore this analogy further, what about an avatar Christology? Would Christ as an avatar of the divine be himself divine? We have already raised the question of whether and to what extent one can and should identify with one’s own online avatars. Certainly, no telepresence channels our full identity, but to fully dissociate from the behavior of one’s avatar on any medium constitutes the very fragmentation that is one of the principle demons of the virtual self. Christ as avatar would in fact be to return to the original meaning of “avatar”. Gamers took it from Hindu theology where it refers to a personification of the divine in our world.

I think the tougher question would be whether an avatar Christology could keep Christ fully human. On a first hearing an avatar Christology sounds gnostic, Christ only appears human, the man Jesus merely a puppet of the Father. What degree of genuine agency would Christ as avatar have?

Telepresent as a character in a video game, God would have to abide by the rules of the game like any other player. You cannot play chess by having your knight act like a rook. So too, an avatar’s agency is also shaped by its history in the game, the powers and tools it has acquired, the screens and levels it has passed through. In all these respects Jesus would have to act like any other character in the game. In this respect Christ would have the same human nature as any of us.

But would Christ as avatar ever deviate from the will of the Father? No, but traditional Christology does not admit of Christ ever sinning either. “The Father and I are one” quotes John. “Whoever knows me knows the Father who sent me.” As fully human, Christ would have to have had the physical, even the psychological capacity to sin. After all, he did suffer genuine temptation. But he never succumbed. His ever actually sinning remains a counterfactual abstraction. In the case of Christ as avatar, he would, like any other avatar, be coded to act in a wide range of possible behaviors. We could say that it would be possible in principle for him to act in a different way than

the Father actually intended for him to act at a given time and place. But as an avatar of the divine he never would. Is there a difference here from accepted dogma that makes any difference?

Of course the ultimate religious value of any such Avatar Christology would lie in whether it enhances the religious life and practice of its adherents. How effective would Christ as avatar of the divine be as a religious symbol? To the extent that what Jesus is by nature, we are by grace, an avatar Christology would call upon us followers of Christ to act, insofar as we are able, as avatars of the divine ourselves. That is, it would call upon us Christians to think of ourselves not as religiously autonomous agents any more than we should think of ourselves as socially or psychologically autonomous agents. Such a spirituality is certainly not Pelagian. Furthermore, Ignatius himself call upon his Jesuits to become instruments of God's will. One could argue that to become an avatar of the divine expresses a greater appreciation for our distinctive individuality than seeking to become a tool. Tools are interchangeable. Avatars, as I have argued, have unique histories and capabilities.

Understanding ourselves as avatars of the divine would certainly decenter ourselves. But again, this is pure Christianity. "Not I, but Christ lives in me." "Not my will, but God's will be done." In the words of Theresa of Avila, the Risen Christ has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet. To become Christ's hands and feet is to become avatars of the divine ourselves.

Finally, the video game as a model for creation can also give us yet further religious insight into the problem of evil. For on the one hand, a video game's designer does enjoy virtual omnipotence. In principle, a designer's can code however and whatever he or she wants. But on the other hand, if a designer wants to design a game that will be engaging, he or she will need to work within parameters. If a game's architecture and programming make game play too predictable, it will be boring and not gain a following. A game without risk, where winning is guaranteed, would not be much of a game. Without challenges or dangers, that is a game without "evils" to confront and overcome, a game will not engage anyone, its inventor included. On the other hand, if what occurs in a game is too unpredictable, if all that happens is just sheer luck, no one will want to play it either. Analogously then, if we were to imagine God wanting to design a virtual world that He himself would find engaging and meaningful, something whose play He could care about, whose characters He could root for, even love, He would need to design a game where risk is real, losing possible, and something of meaning and value is at stake.

But still, even given all this, does creation as God's video game not ultimately trivialize reality? Does not thinking of reality as a video game not make everything seem rather pointless? But then what do Christians affirm is the point of creation, taken as a whole? Is it not for God to share his life with his creation? How is this different from being absorbed in a video game one has oneself designed? The ultimate value of life, the video game, would lie in God's engagement with its characters, his appreciation of the gameplay. Is that enough to make our lives meaningful? Is it enough to make life as an avatar of the divine sacred? On the other hand what more could life's meaning be?

If religion is to address the needs, aspirations and worldview of the new digital natives, churches are going to need to embark on a new evangelization. They will need to program new rituals, and design new symbols to supplement the tried and true literate and oral sacraments and devotions already on hand. So too religion will need new theologies consistent with the new, emergent virtual ontology. Religion can serve as both a refuge and a resource for digital natives. And our increasingly virtual world can serve as both a foil and a catalyst to religious reflection. We need a spirituality that can address this "New Age." Religious philosophers and theologians, especially we Jesuits missioned to the frontiers of contemporary culture, need to engage and critically reflect upon the religious significance of this second axial revolution in which we live. We companions of Jesus are called to become, like him, avatars of the divine in our own way. Our mission is to mobilize our own Jesuit network of apostolic works to enable all reality to open out onto its ultimate reality in God.