

I. Virtual Religion and the Rise of a New Axial Age

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I am Fr Tim Clancy S.J. I teach both the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of technology at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington in the United States. This website is the fruit of my work at their intersection. In this series of videos I provide an overview of the recent emergence of a new communication technology, the internet, and how it promises to radically change how we relate to one another, and so how we understand ourselves. I also explore how such virtual technologies may effect our thinking and reasoning and how we see the world around us. Given this background, I then explore what religion might have to offer the new digital natives and what the ontology opened up by these new virtual technologies has to offer religious belief and practice.

In the early fifties, Karl Jaspers argued that a remarkable shift in human consciousness had occurred in the first millennia BCE away from tribal or imperial religion towards a more ethical, principle-based religious universalism. He called this new era in religious belief and practice the “Axial Age¹”. Common to Socrates in Greece, Zoroaster in Persia, the Buddha in India, Confucius and Lao Tse in China as well as to the Hebrew prophets such as Second Isaiah, Jaspers found a loosely contemporaneous, cultural revolution occurring across the civilized world characterized by a new, critical attitude towards nature and society, body and soul, the world and the divine. These movements challenged tribally grounded religiosity centered around temple sacrifice and its legitimation of a sacred social order or hierarchy. Their founders called for a conversion from such familial and tribal identity towards a new emphasis on individual salvation and the awakening to a “true self,” distinct from social position and public role. This true self, often referred to as a spark of the divine, or by the Buddha even as a “non-self,” can only be attained through detachment from externals and a disciplined turning inward into the obscure and often elusive depths of an “interior” life. Jaspers was not sure how and why this revolution had occurred, other than to claim that it represented a maturation of human consciousness.

Tellingly, this new way of thought and identity closely matches what Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong have identified as the characteristics of a literate culture. Primitive forms of writing had been around for a thousand years or more prior to the Axial revolution, but the early practice of writing was restricted to commercial record keeping, contracts, legal codes, and the

¹ Karl Jaspers, [The Origin and Goal of History](#) first published in 1949; English translation in 1953. His first chapter, “The Axial Period” introduces this claim.

transcription of essentially oral religious incantations and myths. It was only in the first millennium BCE that writing became widespread enough to extend beyond court and temple, to enable the “lettered” to record their own distinctive thoughts and feelings, desires and experiences.

Admittedly few of these founding prophets wrote anything down themselves. However, their teachings were transcribed, critically reflected over and preserved by their immediate disciples. These writings or scriptures, were subsequently revered, even held sacred, to be a focus of public ritual and private reflection. In this way even the unlettered were led into a new kind of piety shaped by the written word.

For example, Jesus was himself still an oral prophet. But his Gospel was similarly transcribed and revered by his immediate followers. And over the next 400 years, Christian thinkers would translate Jesus’ oral teachings into the abstract, literate categories of Hellenistic philosophy.

Today we are on the cusp of yet another revolution in communication technology, one mediated electronically over the internet. This revolution is already beginning to reconfigure human relationships and reshape human consciousness once more in radically new ways. Content on the internet is virtual. In other words, it need not be physically present to exist, but neither is it merely possible. Rather it is virtually present, that is accessible, ideally from any place at any moment.

In this lecture I will explore how the array of emergent virtual technologies and the virtual modes of communication and information storage they enable, may be giving rise to what some are calling a new second axial age. I will also be arguing for the need for a corresponding new *aggiornamento* of religious belief and practice to meet these new times in which we live.

The internet is only 25 years old. Facebook is 13. Smartphones are 10. But already, it is hard to imagine life without them. The first generation of digital natives is now entering college. They cannot remember the first time they used a computer, any more than they can remember the first time they walked.

Is it a coincidence that this generation also looks to be the most unchurched generation in human history? According to the latest PEW survey on American religious life conducted in 2015²,

² See <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape>

23% of all Americans now identify themselves as **A**nones@**B** that is, those who respond to the PEW survey on religion affiliation with **A**none of the above.@ For those aged 18-30, the emergent digital natives, the percentage who identify as “nones” rises to 36%**B** over one third of all young adults in this country. Furthermore, even among those who are religiously affiliated, 30% of them report that they rarely or ever attend religious services. Only 36% of the religiously affiliated, or 25% of Americans overall participate in communal religious rituals or the sacraments on a traditional weekly basis.

Is there something about virtual culture that undercuts traditional religious practice? It is not that these nones are atheists or even agnostics. PEW found that only 3% of Americans identify as atheist, and only an additional 4% as agnostic. It is not so much that digital natives have a problem with religion, they just do not think about it or see any need for it, at least not at this time in their lives. Furthermore, its specifically institutional religion that is their problem. 70% of the “nones” will say that they are still “spiritual,” just not “religious.”

By virtual technology I mean to refer to all internet-enabled technologies: hypertexts, social media, video gaming and smart-wear as well as robotics, neural implants, gene editing, big data and the internet of things. Such technologies are not neutral. A laptop is no more a souped-up typewriter than a printing press is a mechanical scribe. The internet is not only a new medium. It brings into being a new way of thinking, indeed a new way of being in the world. And such a new way of living draws in its train new religious needs and sensibilities.

Indeed it introduces a new form of identity altogether. If the oral self is a communal self whose reasoning relies on dialogue and memory, and if the literate self is the autonomous individual, characterized by objective, scientific reasoning as well as subjective solitary explorations of individual feelings, emotions and experiences, the virtual self is a networked self, its identity both a network of personae enacted on various platforms and contexts, and itself in turn a node in wider networks of texts and hypertexts, persons and avatars, devices and apps.

The word “religion” comes from the Latin “re-ligio”, to rebind or reconnect. I take religion to constitute the beliefs, rituals and experiences that reconnect us to what we hold sacred, that is, that point to, and in part articulate, a horizon of meaning and value that orients and defines our lives, providing them with meaning, purpose and identity. As such, religious belief and practice

often addresses threats to that meaningfulness, that is, it provides resources against the demonic that would undermine all that we hold sacred, reducing us to despair.

Threats to the emergent virtual self lies less in acting like an animal, as with the oral self, that acting like a robot; less in repressed desires or overwork suffered by the industrial literate self, than in dissociated personae, or partial selves, dispersed across a multitude of media platforms. It is not that I suppress my “true” feelings and desires, but that I split off who I am on one platform from who I am on others. In other words one of the demons of a rich and multifaceted life enabled by virtual technology is fragmentation. After all it makes less and less sense to emphasize one such personae as my “true” or “authentic” self, dismissing my others as “superficial” or extrinsic social roles I play to function effectively in society.

For digital natives fewer and fewer cultivate, let alone privilege, a private self, shaped by reading in solitude and writing in personal diaries addressed to oneself alone. Rather personal feelings, desires and experiences are increasingly articulated and processed online through public blogs and posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Privacy is being replaced by anonymity and anonymity is not necessarily the site of our “best selves” but too often the lair of lurkers and trolls. The task of the virtual self then is less about authenticity than harmony, less about being one integrated self than of assembling a rich and harmonious network of personae. So too Autonomy is giving way to connectivity as the new sacred, depth is giving way to breadth in our relational life, and linear critical reasoning on paper is giving way to creative, associative modes of thinking formed and communicated online.

Embedded in an array of networks I am less an autonomous agent than a participant in the agency of a network, at best catalyzing that agency by mobilizing its other participants and/or resources. That is, while I have a contribution to make in each of the networks that I inhabit, I cannot act alone without any of them. I am never independent of them all. So too we all know that we are under constant surveillance: by the military and law enforcement in search of terrorists and pedophiles, as well as by marketers in search of customers and even academic researchers in need of statistical data. Those who do the monitoring reassure us that we remain anonymous in their data and metadata. But anonymity is not privacy. To be anonymous means no one cares to know who I am as an individual, only as a data point. But give someone a reason to care, by matching a

profile or tripping a keyword algorithm and “they” can always track me down, even if “they” are but anonymous autonomous programs themselves.

Virtual technologies extend our agency beyond our physical bodies and our intelligence beyond our individual brains. What I can do, while dependent on my networks also extends to all the persons and resources of those networks that I can enlist and bring to bear on a given situation. Similarly what I know is not restricted to what I can remember, let alone to what beliefs I can justify, but rather my knowledge extends to whatever I can access effectively and assess critically. For example I know there are over a billion people in China, not because I have counted them myself, but because I can access reliable sources for the data. So too I know atoms are composed of protons, neutrons and electrons, not because I have a particle accelerator in my back yard to reproduce the experiments confirming it, but because I have access to books and websites that give me access to the data, at whatever level of detail I desire.

What can religion offer such a virtual self? How must Christianity adapt if it is to effectively evangelize this new, second axial age? And what do these new virtual technologies have to teach religion? What will religion in the new second axial age look like?

In the subsequent three videos, I shall address these two questions each in two ways. First I want to argue that religion offers both a refuge and a resource to digital natives as they seek to make and find meaning and purpose in their lives. Secondly virtual technologies themselves and the new worldview and ontology they open up can serve as both a foil and a catalyst for religious thought.

In the next video I shall explore the first of these questions: what does religion have to offer to those whose lives are increasingly a hybrid of online and offline activities, relationships and experiences? How might Christianity evangelize those digital natives who less and less see any need for religion themselves?

