Introduction to Virtual Theology

1. Welcome to this next video lecture on virtual religion. If religion is about reconnecting to what one holds sacred, theology is a metalevel critical reflection exploring the ontological and existential implications of the religious language, beliefs and rituals we employ to make and experience those connections. The implications of virtual religion extend to how we understand our common humanity, the world in which we live as well the nature of the sacred we embrace. Such exploration is an inherently speculative enterprise. After all, it took a millennium of argument, often heated, sometimes violent for Christian theologians to fully formulate the "right belief" or "orthodox" theological implications of the oral Gospel of Jesus into the literate categories of Hellenistic metaphysics.

2. On the other hand, as I speak, here in 2020, the internet is only twenty-five years old. Thus the explorations that follow can only be (1) the first words intended to begin an argument that will continue well beyond my death. However begin we must. The development of a virtual dogmatic theology is no less exigent for the coherence and credibility of Christianity in the virtual age than was the development of literate dogmatic theology in (2) classical and (3) modern times. If religion is not to be a split off, dissociated fragment of the virtual networked self, its language, teachings and practices must be translated into the logic of virtual life and the emergent virtual ontology of cybernetics, big science, cyborg morality and contemporary digital aesthetics.

3. *As* an exercise in speculative theology, I am not arguing that what follows is what any religion, especially my own, Catholicism, (1) actually teaches, or ought to teach. As a speculative Jesuit philosopher, I am neither a spokesman nor an ambassador but more an explorer, like a member of (2) Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery. President Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark to explore the new American frontier acquired by the Louisiana Purchase. They were to map the territory, (3) catalogue its flora and fauna, and make first contact with the oral hunter gatherer tribes that populated it. These video lectures ought to be viewed in a similar light, as musings and provocations, seeking to clarify and critically evaluate how humanity and its understanding of itself, the world and what it holds sacred is being transformed once more by this latest technological

revolution, a revolution I argue is as significant and transformative as the rise of writing which ushered in "civilization." in the first place.

4. In this video lecture I shall translate Christian dogma into the virtual ontology of evolving networked intelligence presented in earlier videos. Kevin Kelly, founding executive editor of Wired magazine, wrote a thought-provoking article entitled "Nerd Theology."

5. In it, he explored modelling divine creation along the lines of designing a video game. Now (1) Aquinas had argued that existing reality (2) pointed to a transcendent divine (3) source, and (4) end, (5) horizon, (6) ground and (7) order. All five of these ways to God, can also be applied by analogy to the relationship between a video game and its creator. The game's source lies with (8) its designer; its end with (9) his or her goals for the game; (10) its formal horizon and hierarchy of value corresponds to the coding of the game's objects and bots; (11) its sustaining ground to the energy running the game and finally (12) its order, to the operational rules governing gameplay. The existential dependence of a virtual video game on the network on which it runs parallels the traditional Christian belief in the utter dependence of creation on its transcendent creator.

6. Let us then explore an understanding of our actual world as God's virtual world, a video game in which dynamic intelligence, or smart characters, evolve within the game itself. Ironically, we have seen how some transhumanist philosophers, (1) such as Nick Bostrom at Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute have argued that for all we know our reality could be a virtual simulation, created by an alien superintelligence, running on their network in a world more real than our own. (2) Now if we were to believe not only ***that*** we have been created by an alien intelligence, but if we were to (3) believe ***in*** that intelligence and its intentions towards us, in other words, (4) if we were to hold our creator and his goals in designing us sacred, our life would thereby have a meaning and value transcending the vagaries of our own subjective desires.

7. However as the product of an alien intelligence, what assurance could we have that such meaning and value would be beneficial, let alone salvific for us? How could we have faith in our alien creator that whatever evil we endure in the game will ultimately be redeemed? Perhaps the alien intelligence is (1) running an experiment with an attitude of scientific detachment. Or, even worse, perhaps the alien is (2) exploiting his creation to produce goods external to the game itself.

a. On the other hand, if such an alien intelligence satisfied Anselm's definition of what Christians call God, (3) that is, as that than which nothing greater can be thought, we can enlist all the arguments of Christian theology to assure ourselves that (4) such a creator is not only (5) infinitely powerful but infinitely good, not only (6) infinitely knowing but infinitely wise, not only (7) in total command but infinitely loving, who ultimately who could be trusted to have our own best interest at heart. In other words such an alien intelligence, while transcending the reality of our world, would not be wholly alien, but an other in whom we ***could*** believe in, (8) a God in whom we could commit to in faith.

8. What could we say about such a gamer God? Well, (1) Christianity teaches that we are made in God's image. Thus (2) if the virtual self is a networked self, virtual theology should also understand God in network terms—which actually it already does in its doctrine of the Trinity. (3) That is virtual theology could understand the trinity as like us, a network of personae, each making its own contribution to the activity of the whole; none an autonomous agent acting independently of the other two.

   a. (4) With regards to creation as a video game, one could understand the contribution of the (5) Father, as its designer, its *demiurgos*, the Son, (6) his Word*,* as its design, its *logos* and their Spirit (7) as the divine energy (*energeia*) powering it all. This translation actually fits well with orthodox Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa, who similarly understood the Trinity in terms of (8) divine source, (9) divine intelligence and (10) divine activity.

9. Turning to theological understandings of Jesus Christ, let us explore the prospects of an avatar Christology in which the incarnation becomes God entering into and playing the game he as created through his own avatar.

10. The first question to explore is would Christ as an avatar of the divine be himself fully divine? Earlier videos on the networked self and virtual therapy have already raised the question of whether and to what extent digital natives can and should identify with their online personae and avatars. Certainly, (1) no telepresence on a media platform or in a video game can channel our full identity, but on the other hand to (2) 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. Believing that Jesus (3) acts in the person of

God, is to hold God accountable for Jesus' words and deeds. Christ as avatar of the divine would not be identical to the Father, but in the language of Eduard Schillibeeckx, (4) Christ would be "the human face of God" or in Rahnerian language, (5) God's self-communication addressed to humanity. This is thus all fully compatible with contemporary orthodox Catholic theology.

11. In fact, Christ as avatar would be to return to the original meaning of "avatar". Gamers took it from Hindu theology where it refers to an active personification of the divine in our world. Now Indian theologians engaged in inter-religious dialogue with Hinduism warns that such an appropriation of avatar is not fully equivalent. After all Hinduism and Christianity are different religions, with different understandings and approaches to the divine. In particular, Hindu avatars, typically avatars of Vishnu such as Krishna are impassible, that is, they cannot suffer. Some early Gnostic Christian theologians such as Basilides did understand Jesus to only "appear" human and to not really suffer on the cross. In fact Basilides claimed that Jesus had during the way of the cross switched places with Simon of Cyrene, and watched the crucifixion from a distance, laughing to himself at having deceived his tormentors.

12. But orthodox Christianity quickly rejected such a teaching as "divisive", the literal meaning of "heretical," in light of all the Christians who do suffer, even undergo martyrdom for their faith and who need a Christ who can identify with their suffering. Even the Gnostic Valentinus, himself a disciple of Basilides, balked at a Christ who did not suffer. On the contrary we are to imitate Christ precisely in his suffering, for it is suffering that awakens us that the creator of this world does not have our best interest at heart. That the world's God of mimetic sacrifice is not the God of Jesus Christ but an alien, demonic God against whom we must liberate ourselves. In fact, the Cross was Valentinus' name for the barrier separating us from the divine life (pleroma) wherein lies our true home. It is only thorough wrestling to understand our suffering, could we redeem it, and awaken to our true self.

13. But what would it mean for an avatar of the divine to suffer? Here it is crucial to keep our ontologies straight. (1) God the Father plays his game of creation but from outside the game, through his avatar in the game, the man Jesus. (2) Jesus the avatar is not himself playing a game with his life though. Jesus' life is part of the game within the game. (3) Thus, we can say that (4) God, in the person of Jesus, his avatar, actually suffers.

(5) Docetism, that Jesus only appears to suffer is rejected. But (6) God in the person of the Father, the inventor and player of the game, does not actually suffer. (7) Thus we can also reject patripassianism. (8) To put it in other words, (9) God suffers vicariously, through Jesus his virtual avatar, who while not identical with himself, is also not separable from himself. (10) Jesus actual suffering is God's virtual suffering. (11) But even as virtual suffering, God cannot wholly dissociate Jesus' suffering from his own divine life.

14. But a critic might still object, that if Jesus is simply an avatar of God as Father, would he not be merely a puppet of the Father. Would he have any will or agency of his own? This question also confronted literate theology under the name of monotheletism. The thought that though Jesus had a human nature he could not have had a human will of his own.

    a. To begin with, (1) if God is going to play his game, his avatar is going to have to operate by the same rules as any other character in the game. You cannot play chess by having your knight act like a rook. (2) As a character in a game an avatar's agency is both shaped and enhanced 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 have the same powers, and limitations, as any other character in the game. (3) Even as avatar of the divine, it would seem that Jesus would only have the powers common to everyone else in the game. Whether he could ever transcend his human nature, that is whether he could perform literal miracles, feats no other human could ever do, that is a question for any Christian theology, oral, literate or virtual. An avatar Christology would not be in a worse situation here.

15. But could Christ as God's avatar ever deviate from the will of the Father? (1) 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." (2) As fully human, Christ would has to have the physical, even the psychological capacity to sin. After all, he did suffer genuine temptation. But he never succumbed. His ever actually sinning remains, even for orthodox theology, a counterfactual abstraction. In the case of Jesus as avatar, (3) he would, like any other avatar, be coded to act in a wide range of possible ways. We could say that it would be possible in principle for him to act in a different way than the Father actually intends for him to act at a given time and place. But as with the Christ

of traditional theology, as an avatar of the divine he never would. Is there a difference here from accepted dogma that makes a difference?

16. 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 Jesus as an avatar of the divine be as a religious belief? 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, (1) 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 called upon his Jesuits to become instruments of God's will. (2) One could argue that to become an avatar of the divine expresses a greater appreciation for our own distinctive individuality than seeking to become an instrument. Tools are interchangeable. Avatars are individually unique through their unique histories and capabilities.

17. Now 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 an avatar of Christ, and so an avatar of the divine, too.

18. 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. For example, if a game's architecture and programming make game play (1) 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 (2) too unpredictable, 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.

19. 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 does orthodox Christianity (1) teach *is* the point of creation, taken as a whole? Is it not (2) for God to share his life with his creation? How is this different (3) from being absorbed in a video game one has oneself designed? The ultimate value of life, the video game, (4) would lie in God's engagement with its characters, his appreciation of the gameplay. Is that enough (5) to make our lives meaningful? Is it enough to make life as an avatar of the divine sacred? On the other hand (6) what more could life's meaning be?

20. As I mentioned at the beginning of this video lecture, virtual technology, and so *per force*, virtual theology, is in its infancy. The translation of literate orthodox theology into a virtual ontology of evolving networked intelligence is not the work of any a single thinker, or even a single generation. But it is high time to start. The first generation of digital natives are now young adults. Even in the United States, (1) 40% and of 2020, do not identify with any institutional religion. But 90% still (2) understand themselves to be spiritual. (3) And all are seekers after the sacred, (4) religious entrepreneurs who draw upon the sacred symbols and objects, beliefs and rituals of multiple religious traditions across the globe to craft a spirituality of their own. Their alienation from institutional religion is of a piece with their alienation from literate, bureaucratic institutions of all kinds, political and commercial, cultural and civic.

21. Christianity, and all literate religion needs to evolve new language and new rituals that can address this "New Age." Religious philosophers and theologians, especially we Jesuits missioned to the frontiers of contemporary culture, (1) need to engage and critically reflect upon the religious significance of this second axial revolution in which we live. We companions of Jesus (2) are called to become, like him, avatars of the divine. Our mission must be to mobilize our own network of apostolic works to join in the ongoing creative activity of the Trinity in furthering the building, in axial terms, the Kingdom of God, the Body of Christ. How are we to translate into contemporary virtual terms for our contemporary digital audience, that which we have always held sacred?