Demons of the Virtual Self

1. Religion is about reconnecting to what one holds sacred, to what is ultimately important, what gives one's life meaning and purpose, defining one's identity. In this video we will explore the opposite: the demonic and ask what are the demons haunting the virtual, networked self and what resources can religion offer in battling them?

2. In a previous video lecture in my series on Virtual Ontology, I discussed the nature of the virtual self as a networked self and briefly sketch out its vulnerabilities. Let me simply list them once more, expand on them a little and then turn to addressing how a virtual religion might offer resources for responding to these vulnerabilities, in religious terms, these demonic threats to a meaningful life. Subsequent videos will explore in greater depth how religion might be able to an ally in mitigating these.

3. The first vulnerability or demon is fragmentation: (1) fragmented identity, (2) fragmented attention, (3) fragmented recognition, (4) fragmented experience.

4. The second is paranoia: anxieties over being (1) monitored and (2) manipulated.

5. A third is shallow emptiness. Technology is designed to transcend our limitations. But at what point does transcending a limitation end up not so much enhancing as evacuating an activity or a whole way of life of any meaning?

6. And finally a fourth vulnerability is our increasing dependency upon the very technologies that enable our virtual lifestyle in the first place, both online and increasingly offline as well.

7. So turning first to the vulnerabilities to fragmentation in the virtual, networked self. We have always presented ourselves and acted in different ways to different audiences in different settings. (1) This is already present in oral rhetoric.

8. But in oral culture these different audiences and settings are permeable, they know one another, indeed these audiences are often made up of the same people. Oral cultures are communal cultures and movement between villages is minimal. Encountering someone who you do not already know in some setting or other and to whom you do not already have some relationship, ie encountering a stranger, are rare, and potentially dangerous. Thus in an oral culture, one's thoughts, words and deeds need to align if you are to have a good reputation, needed to survive, let alone flourish.

9. In literate culture on the other hand, public and private thoughts words and deeds are more insulated from each other. In an individual's public life in the modern city one lives and works *with* strangers. (1) And so public life and private life can be more separate, even contradictory.

10. Thus public roles are often seen as masks that hide your true self, that is, who you are in private, in the home, in the bedroom, even in dreams.

11. But in the virtual age, with the internet and social media, personae can multiply exponentially, audiences and settings may have no interaction with one another except through their link to oneself. And so how one presents oneself, the persona one adopts and cultivates on these various sites can become dissociated from each other, leaving one with a fragmented identity, and (1) with confusion over which of this array of persona are "masks" and which constitutes one's true self.

12. Multitasking and automation threatens to fragment our behavior and divide our attention even at a single moment. (1) Fragmentation endangers not just our identity but our reasoning, our very conscious awareness.

13. Dissociated self-presentation leads to dissociated recognition. And so while social media may extend the breadth of our relationships, it may do so at the cost of empathetic depth, that is, at the cost of recognition of myself as a whole, rather than simply as this persona, saying or doing this particular act at this moment with this fraction of my attention. (1) The dangers here are already playing out in the work place in the shift from lifetime employment even if in alienating factory labor, to "gig" labor by self-styled entrepreneurs who have no long term, broader institutional allegiance to a particular employer, but in return enjoy no longer term broader benefits beyond pay for performance here and now.

14. Dissociation of what one does for one's employer today from any future expectations or obligations on the part of either party may seem like ever greater freedom (1) but ironically its at the cost of ever less security and effective power, where actions take long term commitment and full attention to execute. Not that long ago, taking on a second job, was shamed as 'moonlighting," and treated as virtual theft from one's primary employer of one's full time and attention. Today it's the very definition of a gig job. It's the new normal.

15. Finally fragmentation also extends to the senses. Sight and sound can now be transmitted instantaneously across space and time, but touch, haptic technology, remains in its infancy, and while we can simulate smell and taste chemically, we have yet to invent a technology for transmitting them virtually. Virtual Reality devices or VR has become visually and aurally immersive but it is still split off from the other senses. It remains but a fragment of actual embodied experience. However stimulating, VR is still a simulation, and a dissociation from RL, "real life."

16. What can religion offer to digital natives to cope with all these varieties of fragmentation and dissociation? First religion can do what religion already does best: offer a refuge from everyday life--today, life online-- by providing (2) face to face, embodied rituals that can enhance attentiveness and inspire immersive reverence and heightened belonging.

17. Religion can offer opportunities for both solitary reflection and communal face to face support.

18. 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 axial spirituality.

19. However, religion cannot just be a refuge from virtual life. Christians must also be able to find the sacred online. (1) For if the internet and social media is dismissed as godless, then the digital natives who spend more and more of their time and attention online risk becoming godless as well. (2) But how focus attention through a medium that incentivizes multitasking? (3) How slow down for reflection in a medium built for speed? (4) how create inherently meaningful practices in a medium built for optimizing outcomes? (5) How cultivate qualitative communion in a medium built for quantitative connectivity? In the following video we will explore the prospects for virtual religious ritual.

20. Religious symbolism can also be enlisted in the service of a meaningful appropriation of the virtual self. A networked self is not a single homogenous self. In contrast to the

literate ideal of authenticity, the logic of the networked self is not to be one thing. (1) But if it cannot model radical monotheism, it can model Christianity's trinitarian God.

21. Or better put, (1) the Trinity can be seen as a sacred paradigm for the networked self, where the three persons do not undermine but rather catalyze a dynamic unity. (2) Contributions can be distinguished but all three persons of the trinity contribute towards the execution of the same creative activity. Indeed traditionally, their interrelationship is modeled not on negotiation, or even dialogue, but on dance, (3) in Greek a *perichoresis*, in (4) Latin a *circumcessio*-- A dynamic creative sacred for a dynamic, creative identity.

22. The second demon stalking the virtual self is paranoia: anxieties over being both monitored and manipulated. It amounts to a concern over network threats to individual agency and welfare. It's the dark side or risks incurred with networked empowerment. What does religion have to offer to combat and abate if not fully exorcize this demon? First with regards to monitoring: Digital natives live in a world without privacy. (1) They live knowing that they are under continuous surveillance by governmental agencies, such as the NSA and FBI to prevent terrorism and sexual predation;(2) as well as corporations in the service of personalized marketing, (3) political groups in order to incite, sway or even dampen civic participation, and (4) hackers, phishing and spearing, infecting and hijacking our virtual network of digital devices.

23. Thus, privacy has been replaced by anonymity. (1) Those monitoring do not claim to know you, or often even have any interest in knowing you as a person, merely as an IP address, or a demographic data point in their algorithms. But anonymity is no substitute for privacy.

24. Give someone a reason and those monitoring can track down the owner of that IP address, the person behind the posting of a bomb threat, underage pornography or in too many countries, political dissent.

25. Furthermore, paranoia focuses our attention on my individual ego, what religious mystics disparage as the "I, me, mine".

26. Through religion's transcendence of the individual and its stress on mimetic cooperation over mimetic competition and violence, religion can mitigate paranoia by offering and inspiring network responses to these network threats. Care for the marginal and the scapegoat amounts to creation, maintenance and repair of the communal networks in

which one is embedded. In building cooperation religion builds trust, and so **faith** in the networks upon which one is existentially dependent.

27. While religion may not be able to protect us from nefarious actors, religion's focus on social justice as well as faith, can motivate investment in and regulation of our networks. So too mystical forms of self-understanding in which the other appears less as a threat than as an ally, even as part of oneself, can be a resource in combatting anxieties over a perceived loss of privacy.

28. Concerns over manipulation are likewise rife among digital natives. Everyone is worried at the degree to which their behavior is prompted by fake news and viral advertising, how our self-esteem is affected by likes and followers, views and retweets.

29. However while digital natives may express guilt, (1) even shame at their activities over social media such self-critique rarely leads to dropping social media apps, except perhaps for a time. (2) Indeed too often, the criticism of social media usage is addressed more often to a generic other. (3) It is their generation as a whole who are addicted to social media, (4) whose self esteem is too vulnerable to online recognition. (5) The individual himself or herself often claim success at having transcended such trappings and pitfalls. More often they are worried that too many others don't bother to resist, or give up thinking resistance is futile.

30. So too, digital natives know only too well because they have experienced (1) only too often, how easily personalized marketing can nudge (2) purchases one later regrets;

31. how newsfeeds can reinforce in-group biases and trigger out-group outrage, by feeding you what you like to hear, your own personalized clickbait, and protecting you from anything that would turn you off, particularly, off their site.

32. Even worse, concerns over unknowing manipulation is recursive, able to serve as its own accelerant through (1) conspiracy theories over such malicious manipulation outside of view. (2) For the dissemination of such conspiracy theories can themselves be tools for manipulating others, fueled by those same social media newsfeed algorithms. Respond to one conspiracy theory (3) and you are apt to find a dozen more appearing on your Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, perhaps even Amazon book and movie suggestion algorithms.

33. Conspiracy theories can be compelling not only by confirming fears of unknowing manipulation but also be identifying scapegoats already suspected of such nefarious behavior, justifying mimetic responses to manipulate one's enemies. Thus fearing being a victim of malicious scapegoating, one scapegoats the suspected perpetrator in turn, leaving a trail of aggrieved victims, vulnerable to yet further manipulation.

34. How can we break out of such a vicious cycle of manipulation and conspiracy theories? Here too, mysticism offers forms of religious language, belief and practice that can help digital natives come to terms with this existential fact of life in the digital age. (1) For the networked self, our agency, even our reason is not autonomous but distributed across a network of resources and allies. And again, the network threats of the virtual age will call for network responses, a concern for one's neighbor as much as oneself, a concern to transform enemies into allies through forgiveness and reconciliation.

35. Thus our interdependence is not only a threat but can be embraced as a gift, a fertile field for grace to supply what one cannot do or learn by oneself. Religion is not meritocratic. Its not about getting what we deserve but coping with suffering one don't. Religion provides rituals to console us in our afflictions, to exorcize us from our curses, but also to express praise and thanksgiving for all the good that is too easy to overlook and simply take for granted because we can, because through no merit of our own but by the grace of God and others we are able to take such goods, and our loved ones for granted. A second video explores such virtual mysticism and its potential to redeem the evils our interdependence renders us vulnerable to and to attend to the graces our synergies can germinate and come to bloom.

36. Another, third vulnerability or demon of virtual technology lies in its power to transcend our limitations to the point where rather than enhancing meaning it ends up evacuating our activity of any real significance. There is a saying "no pain, no gain." Can we still enjoy a gain in meaning if there is no struggle, no challenge, no pain in execution? (1) Or can a technology make the mastery of a practice or skill so cheap and easy, so quick and convenient, that it spoils its meaning and value? Is a life free of challenge, free of struggle, ultimately a life free of meaning and purpose? Is the technological transcendence of all evils itself an evil?

37. On the other hand, such technological transcendence of our limitations can free up time and energy to choose where not to eliminate but to engage challenges and limitations. In this way limitations that have traditionally been seen as unavoidable burdens can be transformed into blessings as intentionally chosen crafts and hobbies.

38. In general, eliminating evil also means the loss of experiences of redemption whereby in our struggle with suffering we end up better off that we started—wiser, more compassionate, braver, more resilient. (1) For example, more and more digital natives are lamenting the loss of boredom of all things. Boredom is the feeling that there is nothing to do. But now, equipped with a smart phone at all times, this need no longer ever be true. I need never again be bored. Critics warn however that if there is always something to do then there is no time for rest and reflection, no time for imaginative play, even for daydreaming. In my view such critics confuse boredom with rest. We suffer boredom. To choose to do nothing however is not boredom, it is rather an intentional , deliberate and so meaningful act.

39. Now the danger remains that what I choose to do with my smart phone when I have nothing else to do might amount to no more than mindless scrolling or surfing. I can "veg out" so to speak. In such cases, my online activity is merely the substitution of one unpleasant experience of meaninglessness with another that is at least distracting or diverting. Indulging in mindless distractions and diversions can indeed impoverish, even evacuate any real meaning from what I am doing.

40. So too while ubiquitous access to social media and the internet means I need never suffer boredom, I need never struggle against it either. I never have the opportunity to overcome boredom by finding something to do when there is nothing to do, such as to reflect or imagine or daydream. The virtual self then is vulnerable to never enjoying what literate individuals have learned in response to boredom.

41. I wonder if something similar might also be occurring with loneliness. Loneliness is the feeling that there is no one to be with. (1) But again, equipped with a smart phone, that need no longer ever be true. Critics worry that digital natives then never experience solitude.

42. But solitude is not loneliness. As with boredom, we suffer loneliness. To choose to be alone, to withdraw into solitude, is an intentional meaningful act.

43. Again, the danger looms that how I choose to connect to others through social media when I feel there is no one around to be with, may be a shallow connection, a one-dimensional quick poke or like, or an avatar to avatar relationship which draws neither of us into our fuller lives. Such posts may constitute no more than an illusion of engagement, a pseudo-relationship that merely substitutes one relational void with another that is at least somewhat distracting and diverting. To never suffer loneliness is to never struggle with it and potentially overcome it through imaginative play or solitary introspection and reflection. In this sense then, the loss of boredom and loneliness may risk access to what wrestling with such demonic experiences can lead to—greater and richer self-knowledge.

44. Religious retreats and practices of solitary, silent meditation, can offer intentional opportunities for smartphone-free rest and solitude. An earlier video has already explored the variety of ways in which religion can offer a refuge from virtual life.

45. Finally, a fourth demon is our dependency upon those very technologies that enable us to live our new virtual lives in the first place. However, such dependency on our technologies is hardly new. Paraphrasing Latour, we have never been modern, autonomous agents. As the series of historical video lectures has explored, Humans have co-evolved with their technologies even before the rise of *homo sapiens*. Nor has such autonomous freedom ever been a religious ideal. In Christianity such an aspiration is the original sin of Lucifer. In Buddhism it lies at the heart of the illusion of separateness and the wheel of suffering that revolves in its wake.

46. Digital natives become only too aware of their dependence on technology when a device is lost, stolen, hacked, or broken. (1) The technology that is designed and purchased to enhance our power and control makes us vulnerable to feeling even more powerless and out of control when they cannot be relied upon. A hundred years ago, let alone a thousand years ago, no one could even imagine the affordabilities of a smartphone to connect with anyone, anywhere, at any time, to buy anything, to access any fact, and yet (2) now without it, the digital native can feel lost, powerless and abandoned.

47. Virtual religion can help us to better appreciate, positively as well as critically, our utter dependence not only on God but on our technologies as well.

48. A virtual examen, for example, can track (1) when, where, why, how and with whom we devote ourselves to activities that are (2) meaningful and valuable in themselves, that call upon our full attention, whose delight lies in their very performance. (3) Then to identify and track other activities whose value lies in their outcomes, along metrics of ease, cost and efficiency. (4) Then, to track what other activities we do while multitasking and finally (5) to identify those we choose to fully outsource through smart automation and the internet of things. The aim of such an examen would not be just to diagnose problematic behavior online but also to identify and assess engagement than enriches, sanctifies even and resources and allies to enlist in one's own unique life going forward.

49. As I mentioned at the outset of this lecture, in the next several video lectures I shall explore more deeply and more broadly the resources virtual religion might be able to offer digital natives. I begin with an exploration of the nature and prospects for virtual ritual, followed by virtual mysticism and virtual ecclesiology.