

Introduction to Virtual Religion

1. This video lecture begins a new series of lectures on virtual religion. It builds on earlier lecture series on the co-evolution of religion and technology and on virtual ontology.
2. In this series I shall apply insights gained in these two other series to the brave new world of video technologies. (1) I shall explore both how to understand religion in virtual, networked terms and how to understand virtual culture in religious terms. (2) I then turn to speculations over the religious needs of digital natives and how religion has already begun to evolve with them in the areas of virtual ritual, mysticism, and ecclesiology. (3) A final series of videos then turns to virtual theology, exploring how traditional Christian doctrine might be translated into virtual categories.
3. By “virtual technology” I intend to refer to any internet enabled technology, be it hypertexts, social media, big data, CRISPR, artificial intelligence, the internet of things etc. (1) The internet was invented by DARPA in the early seventies as a “hard” communication link in case of nuclear attack. It then spread among research universities as a means of sharing data from scientists. These various intranets were integrated into a single public internet, accessible to all in 1995. Thus while Al Gore did not create the technology to link computers, the internet as we now know it did emerge, was greatly enabled and first sold to the world at large by the Clinton Administration.
4. Being but 25 years old, we are still in the very early days of this technology. Projecting how it will evolve and transform society and identity, let alone the religious needs and beliefs, rituals and sensibilities of virtual selves is like trying to project the impact of the printing press on Christianity fifty years before the Protestant Reformation. However I am confident the changes will be as significant as the printing press, indeed I believe it will be of the same epochal significance as the rise of writing itself. And so I treat it as introducing the third major period of human evolution proceeding oral and literate cultures. (1) I also believe it will follow developmental stages similar to what we say with literacy. There we traced an initial scribal period in which the content of writing still remained overwhelmingly oral in character. Internet 1.0 mirrored that initial scribal literacy, serving as an improved information storage and retrieval technology for what is still largely literate content. (2) But with social media, internet 2.0, content over the internet moves beyond anything reproducible in print. (3) And with the internet of things,

internet 3.0, communication moves beyond human beings altogether to extend to devices communication autonomously amongst themselves. (4) So too new VR interfaces are beginning to immerse ourselves into virtual worlds and (5) augmented reality or “mixed VR” brings our virtual creations back home to be telepresent in our world. Through this evolution the very distinction between actual and virtual is blurring beyond recognition.

5. Now as I argued in an earlier videolecture on the ontology of the virtual, by virtual reality I mean to refer to a reality (1) that does not actually exist, but (2) neither is it simply a possibility. (3) Rather it denotes a reality that is potentially accessible. It is not immediately present but neither is it fully absent. Rather by analogy with the telegraph, writing at a distance, the telephone, speech at a distance and television, sight at a distance, (4) the virtual is presence at a distance, or telepresence, connected to the actual present, as a potential resource or ally, a node in its network.
6. Similarly, if the (1) oral self is a narrative, communal self, and the (2) literate self is an autonomous individual self, the (3) virtual self is a networked self. It is both a (4) network of personae on an array of platforms, (5) a node itself within those broader networks of resources and allies and finally (6) a link mediating between networks to create ever greater mutual understanding and cooperation between them.
7. As such it is subject to new and different vulnerabilities to identity, meaning and purpose. (1) Just as for the oral self, reputation is sacred, and (2) for the literate self, freedom, so for the virtual self, (3) connectivity has become the new sacred, giving rise to both new sacred inspirations to pursue and new demonic temptations to resist. It is incumbent on us all to begin to identify these new religious prospects and threats and begin to explore what new religious symbols, rituals and beliefs may be effective in addressing them. We have seen that the principal vulnerability to the oral self was a matter of shame, (4) with its life-threatening attendant scapegoating, ostracism, abandonment. For the literate self, the threat was a matter of guilt either from (5) feeling like a beast, or (6) acting like a robot, or (7) crippling oneself in self-absorbed narcissism and passive consumerism, in all cases betraying one’s authentic true self. For the network self the threats are threefold: (8) first concerns over fragmentation, its network of personae not merely different but dissociated from each other; (9) secondly, anxieties over being monitored and manipulated by those

outside networks in which it is embedded, and (10) thirdly, one's dependence on those very technologies that empower and liberate us from earlier oral and literate limitations.

8. Now one could object that the modern literate self already consisted of different personae, one's public face, defined by institutional roles in work and civil society, and one's domestic, private personae within the home and in solitude within one's own imagination. (1) However for the literate self the goal was to integrate these various personae into a single authentic or true self, located in one's private, interior subjectivity. (2) For the network self, personal thoughts and feelings, desires and experiences are processed no longer in solitude but online on blogs and social media sites. (3) According to the 2019 Global Digital Report, there are 230 million active social media users in the United States, 70% of the population; 88% of those 18-29, the "digital natives." Worldwide there are 3.5 billion active social media users, 46% of all humanity. (4) Overall internet usage is of course even higher: 312 million or 95% of all Americans, who spend an average of 6.5 hours a day online. Worldwide, 4.4 billion of the 7.6 billion people on the planet (57%) use the internet again an average of 6.5 hours per day.
9. Identity formation then is no longer private or autonomous, even if a given persona may still remain anonymous on a given media site. In modernity it made sense to say that one's public roles were "superficial," literally a surface appearance of a deeper, richer identity, for public roles are defined externally by the institutions they serve. (1) However with a persona online the polarity is reversed. While framed within the structure of a given site's architecture, we individually decide what our engagement in a given site will be. We are less and less institutional employees or passive consumers, but more and more gig entrepreneurs and active users.
10. This inversion is nowhere more evident than in religion. Fewer and fewer think of themselves as members of a particular institutional religion. Rather traditional churches are resources for people to draw upon in shaping their own spirituality.
11. Literate critics of contemporary spirituality worry that this can turn religious practitioners into religious consumers, churches marketing themselves in a freewheeling commercial marketplace. Ecclesiology which in print evangelicalism shifted from a monarchical if not imperial governance structure to a democratic, congregational model, is now threatening to become a capitalist model where customers are not challenged but

pandered to, and where mimetic desire is not resisted but encouraged. The rise of the prosperity gospel in televangelism is not an aberration but a paradigm for what lies ahead.

12. But consumerism, like work roles understands the participant to be passively defined by the products they purchase or the jobs they take on. The virtual self on the other hand plays a far more active contributing part in the networks in which they connect with. They are not so much consumers as users of goods and services. Indeed they do not consume them at all, for they are not purchasing property but access. After purchase one does not own an app or a software to do with however you please, one has a license for a regulated use. One cannot resell Kindle e-books. What one owns are the interfaces, the devices that mediate between you and the good you want to use.
13. And so too I would argue with religion. When a Christian practices yoga for example or Zen meditation, the Christian is not consuming them, one is using them, drawing upon their affordances for reconnecting with one's own sense of the sacred, one's own personal horizon of meaning and purpose.
14. Now another criticism is that this is but individualism on steroids. Virtual religion picks and chooses, disembedding practices from the institutions and traditions in which they make sense and draw their mimetic power. It is not religious appropriation but religious expropriation. But in an interconnected pluralistic world how else can we live together than by sharing what gives one another's lives meaning and value, learning from each other to enrich our own lives. In the virtual world, religious evangelism becomes religious dialogue. Both sides can only connect with each other if they believe they have something to share and something to learn from the other.
15. It is not that consuming one's own religious tradition and expropriating others are not demonic temptations, but they are temptations, not inevitabilities. The task of virtual religion is to discern how to learn from others without losing one's own spirituality or expropriating theirs.
16. This redefinition of evangelization as dialogue also applies with those who do not consciously profess any religious beliefs. Most often such professions really mean that they do not belong to any particular institutional religion. They are still spiritual, just not religious. They still may have religious beliefs and practices members of institutional

religion can learn from. Interaction with them still takes the form of religious dialogue.

(1) And for the still relatively few who profess to have no spiritual life, those who identify as agnostic or atheist, it is not like they hold nothing sacred nor is it that they have no language or belief or even rituals for reconnecting with what they hold sacred, whether it be nature or creativity, romantic love, freedom, human dignity or whatever. They may not talk or even think about their lives in religious terms but they are religious in the sense of these talks, as engaging in practices that bind them to others through reconnecting them to what they do hold sacred, that defines and orients their lives, giving them meaning and purpose.

17. In fact even among those who do believe in a particular institutional religious tradition, they too cultivate an individually distinctive spirituality of their own within the larger network of their church. They decide for themselves which services to attend, which preachers to listen to, which religious books to read, which devotional rituals to practice and which religious videos to watch and websites to visit. Virtual religion is a religion of and for religious seekers. Whatever their institutional fidelities or lack thereof, all must craft a personal spirituality of their own by accessing the vast network of symbols, beliefs and practices offered both within any given religious network or between those accessible to all from all traditions.
18. In my series on the co-evolution of religion and technology, I identified axial age religion with a mature literacy, where scribes independent of court and temple begin to go beyond the transcription of oral performances and subject their religious tradition to systematic criticism and extrapolate universal principles of salvation that apply beyond any particular tribe or ethnic group, to all individuals everywhere. With the advent of the virtual age I will argue that religion is at the beginning of another radical transformation, what (1) some are calling a second axial age. One of the characteristics of this second axial age is precisely this transformation of evangelization into interreligious dialogue where the goal is no longer to convert the religious other to what one holds sacred, but to broaden mutual understanding of each other, and in so doing to further understand what, how and why one holds sacred the meaning and values, the people and the rituals one has dedicated one's own life to living out.

19. What has been said up to now however, still concerns traditional religious content: mimetic, oral and literate symbols, beliefs and practices. (1) How will virtual technologies begin to transform these into (2) virtual rituals, (3) networked symbolism, (4) digital ontologies? What would a mature virtual religion look like that goes beyond merely uploading online snippets and dis-embedded bric-a-brac of past religious tradition and practice? What will be particularly important in the second axial age, is that virtual dynamics supplement to enhance rather than replace axial age and mimetic/oral religiosity. Can a religious institution reimagine itself as a religious network without losing its spirit, that is, the evocative power of face to face, mimetic contagion? Can principled, universal church teachings survive when participants use their church membership more as one resource among many than as a foundationalist, totalizing identity? That is the focus of exploration and speculation that this series of videos on virtual religion will seek to address.