

### Virtual Ecclesiology:

1. Welcome to this next video lecture in virtual religion. Today we will be exploring the communal dimension of virtual religion or virtual ecclesiology.
2. Digital natives or “millennials” are increasingly ecclesial “nones” those who when asked their religious affiliation in surveys respond with “none of the above”. They may still identify as “spiritual” but they deny they are “religious.” For institutional religions, the data is alarming. PEW ongoing polling on American religious life, report that fully 40% of Americans under 30 now report no religious affiliation. (1) Americans who identify as Protestant Christians has dipped under 50% for the first time ever. Catholic numbers have remained steady but only due to massive immigration from Catholic majority countries. (2) PEW reports that half of all US adults raised Catholic have left the church at some point in their lives; 40% of whom have never returned. Ex-Catholics now make up a full 10% of all Americans.
3. Beyond church affiliation, actual church membership is more alarming yet for institutional religion. According to a 2020 Gallup poll only 60% of those claiming a religion affiliation are actually members of a church. (1) Among digital natives that percentage drops to 50%. For the first time since Gallup began polling eighty years ago, (2) church membership among Americans is below 50%, from a steady 70% from 1940 to 2000.
4. Even those who still do enroll in churches enlist institutional religion more as a resource and an ally in their personal spiritual journey than as an authority to obey and submit to. In other words, digital natives whether religiously affiliated or not, tend to be religious seekers, ever looking to further enhance the spirituality they have cultivated and practiced up to the present. This can lead to them leaving the religion in which they were raised. But even if it does not, it leads to a more selective, critical attitude towards any religious teaching and practice. Over 95% of American Catholic women will have practiced birth control at some point during their reproductive lives. 56% believe abortion should remain legal in most circumstances. Indeed, abortion rates for Catholic women are the same as in the general population, just under 20%. Two thirds of American Catholics also support gay marriage. While identified by bishops as the “pre-eminent” moral issues of our day, quiet non-observance, if not vocal dissent is overwhelming.

5. This leads to an inversion of religious authority as it was exercised in oral and literate religion. (1) Practitioners no longer feel obligated to submit to religious authorities, adhere strictly to official doctrine, or practice dutifully prescribed rituals. (2) Rather they use such church teachings and rituals for their own purposes. In this context evangelization is more a matter of marketing than policing. On the one hand, the laity is actively engaged in their faith, on the other hand, what is on offer can be sold to meet rather than challenge the expectations of the “market.”
6. Digital natives often draw from multiple religious traditions to create their own personal spirituality. A Catholic digital native for example while (1) active in parish life, and (2) cognizant of official church doctrine, may also (3) practice yoga or (4) zen meditation, (5) find the sacred in nature or (6) incorporate elements of Native American spirituality. Take a Catholic who practices yoga. Such a practice can help ground one in one’s body and induce a state of serenity, enabling one to feel God’s spirit or rest in the presence of God at the end of an exercise. On the other hand, such a use of yoga disembeds it from its own original religious worldview and way of life. Yoga practiced by a Catholic is not used to awaken him or her to their own identity with the divine. Similarly the greeting “Namaste” originally a form of address recognizing the common cosmic divinity within both of us, can become a formulaic greeting acknowledging the other as a separate individual self. Indeed Yoga can be learned as a secular practice without any explicitly religious connotations whatsoever, and is usually so marketed. A Catholic who practices Yoga as a relaxation exercise may not even be aware of or care that it was originally a religious ritual.
7. In this sense most “nones” are better thought of as poly-religious rather than a-religious, internalizing the religious pluralism of their broader culture. Such a DIY “Do-It-Yourself” approach to religious belief and practice, while optimizing personal relevance, runs the risk of being shallow: dissociated and dis-embedded from the root contexts in which the rituals and beliefs originally drew their evocative power.
8. A second danger of adopting teachings and practices from outside one’s own religious tradition is that they lack the communal support of other practitioners. (1) So too they run the risk of being taken on “as-is”, cut off from the continual criticism and development within its native tradition of practice. In other words, the teachings and rituals enlisted

run the risk of being frozen in place, to the time and understanding of when they were originally learned.

9. In short, the danger is that rather than using religious resources to evolve a rich and inclusive spirituality, digital natives can become more passive consumers of a bricolage of practices, that never get fully integrated into a harmonious network. So too there is the danger that rituals are selected that meet expectations of the user rather than challenge them, thereby reinforcing rather than transforming its practitioners.
10. These are dangers however, not inevitabilities. Just as submission to religious authority is always open to abuse, unquestioning adherence to orthodox church teaching is always in tension with thinking for oneself, and the dutiful performance of prescribed ritual is at risk of degenerating into an empty formalism, so too religious networking across churches has its own risks and pitfalls. However for digital natives the risks are worth the potential rewards. Virtual selves are disenchanting and alienating across the board from literate institutions and their bureaucratic modes of governance. For institutional religion to be a vehicle for lives of meaning and purpose, for institutional religion to reconnect digital natives with what they hold sacred, will require a lot of work and creativity. It is unlikely to be any easier, or less fraught with conflict, than the literate Hellenization of the oral Gospel proved to be two thousand years ago.
11. So how *can* institutional churches not only attract but invest religious seekers in their congregations? And how would a religious commitment to a church's creed, code and cult look if it is not to be treated as exclusive, or pure, forswearing all others?
12. As early adopters of virtual technologies, megachurches have much to teach here. They are at the cutting edge in the use of multimedia both live and online. Indeed one key lesson learned in their use of multimedia is that it must possess the same, professional quality, production value as any other media platform used by the digital natives they hope to evangelize.
  - a. The first task for a megachurch is to attract digital natives' attention. You have to get them in the door or on the website and motivate them to explore what you have to offer. Engaging contemporary Christian rock, providing arresting visuals and graphics, creating coffee bars and fun places for the kids to play while their parents attend the service are common. Services are informal, welcoming and

engaging. They are high-energy, packed with as much singing as preaching. Sermons too are often addressed to the visitor checking them out or the recent convert, more like what one finds in a televised Billy Graham crusade than in a typical Catholic parish.

13. The cost of such easy accessibility is churning. How many welcoming services can one attend before one decides that one has learned all that a given church has to offer and that it is time to move on?
14. A megachurch's second task (1) then is to entice visitors to become (2) members, spectators to become participants in the congregation. A megachurch is defined as a congregation with over two thousand attendees on any given weekend. Yet their operating strategy is that to go that big you have to also go small. That is, the thousands who attend Sunday services need to be broken up into a myriad of small groups meeting during the week. (3) Thus visitors are not only welcomed but introduced to current congregants and immediately invited to join a group dedicated to their interests, struggles, stage of life, and/or lifestyle demographic. Studies have shown that for the human species the limit size of a group where everyone can have a direct, face to face, empathetic relationship with everyone else is 12 to 15. Not surprisingly this aligns with the size of megachurch small groups (as well as hunter-gatherer bands)
  - a. (4) But how direct and sustain dozens of such groups? The next step in megachurch evangelization is to invite participants to become leaders. And like anything on the scale of a megachurch, this cannot be left to chance. Invitations to leadership cannot be generic. Participants have to be approached individually, selected on the basis of their demonstrated gifts and talents. Megachurches have also learned that such invitations are best gradated. Not the pastor asking a member to lead a given group, but initially a group leader asking an actively invested member of his small group to help him plan or run a session. Or if a participant comes up with an idea, to ask them how the church could help them to get some people together to explore it.
15. Thus not only is the church used as a resource for its participants, but participants begin to be used as a resource for the church. The megachurch thus becomes a dynamic network in which members link together into clusters to enhance each other's cognition

and agency as well as to catalyze and steer the fuller cognition and agency of the church as a whole.

16. Megachurches of course have their own demons to confront. Whereas literate religion ran the danger of institutional bureaucracy and empty formalism, virtual religion appears already to be threatened by Silicon Valley commercialism and addictive algorithms. Facebook for example seeing a new market, has begun to reach out to megachurches offering to work with them to design websites and apps. Help in designing an app may even be free of charge, but the design is proprietary, owned by Facebook and enforced through Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDA's) and Terms of Service (TOS). (1) One of the largest global megachurches, Hillsong, has entered into such a relationship with Facebook overseen by Facebook's director for faith outreach. Thus whereas literate institutional church membership ran the risk of being merely a social status marker for virtue signaling, virtual churches run the risk of monetizing participation into a commodity.
17. On the other hand, the Catholic Church in Africa has recently adopted the model of dividing parishes into such multiple face to face communities to supplement Mass that can often only be held monthly among its multiple mission stations. (1) In this they are following the liberation theology model of local base communities invented in Latin America in the early seventies. The Vatican has recently created a new leadership position, that of "catechist," in part to recognize the work of these new lay leaders staffing such communities. Training will be local or online, rather than the years of seminary education away from home. So too catechists need not be all-encompassing, life-long commitments as required for ordination to the priesthood or even the permanent diaconate.
18. But back to megachurches. While an experimental, entrepreneurial model for virtual ecclesiology, fully online churches remain few in number. (1) Most have brick and mortar "campuses" as well. meet in brick and mortar buildings. (2) Many even have services broadcast to multiple campuses. (3) But all also create and maintain websites as well, offering video-streaming of services, podcasts of sermons, and video lectures for catechetics. A megachurch's myriad small groups most often meet in the home of their

leader or in a seminar room at church, but a growing number are also meeting online over Skype or Zoom..

19. Furthermore, early fears that online religion would erode attendance at religious services offline have proven to be overblown. On the contrary, studies have shown that those who participate in online virtual churches are also more likely to belong to an offline brick and mortar church as well . Effective online religious rituals can themselves be tools for offline evangelization, drawing participants into exploring the fuller multisensory immersiveness and relational depth possible in physical church rituals and can entice them into getting to know, face to face, others with similar religious sensibilities. Traditional church membership does continue to plummet among digital natives, but it is not due to online alternatives “poaching” members who would otherwise worship in person.
20. In short, virtual ecclesiology, like virtual ritual, is best practiced in a hybrid form. There are some purely online congregations, but the challenge in investing visitors to become members, let alone members to become leaders is exponentially greater without any face to face engagement. On the other hand, traditional brick and mortar churches are increasingly recognizing the value of some form of virtual presence online. (1) Church websites range from simply providing directions and times of services, and what could be found in a printed bulletin to the full panoply of texts for download, to podcasts, video lectures and livestreaming of services.
21. Covid as functioned as an accelerant in the emergence of online ecclesiology. For months on end, online services were the only communal forms of ritual accessible. Church leaders have been forced to learn Zoom and how to create an effective website. (1) The first thought was to simply schedule a zoom meeting with parishioners and video a regular service. Predictably few were satisfied.
22. That does not mean ritual online is impossible, only hard. Setting up a webcam and live streaming a traditional Mass online is like filming a stage play and calling it a movie. As I explored in the earlier video lecture on virtual ritual, churches will need to use the affordances of the virtual medium, doing what cannot be done offline, if online masses and other Sunday services are not to remain substitutes to be used only as a last resort in emergencies.

23. Its no longer whether, but how to create sacred space, conduct communal worship and build religious community online. Virtual religion is here to stay. The Body of Christ is becoming a smart network, embracing but also transcending material limitations of space and time, drawing one step closer to what Jesuit mystic Teilhard de Chardin envisioned as the virtual, cosmic Christ.