

Introduction to Virtual Theology

1. Welcome to this next video lecture on virtual religion. If religion encompasses the language, ritual and beliefs through which we reconnect to what we hold sacred, *theology* is a second-order, theoretical reflection on the implications of our religious belief and practice for how we understand the nature of God and the world, as well as ourselves and others in relationship to the divine. Up until now, theology has always been done in the categories of literate metaphysics, be it axial Greek or Modern print ontologies. Emerging *virtual* theology will need to translate such traditional literate theology into virtual categories, that is, in the language of nodes and networks, virtual worlds and avatars.
 2. Such exploration is an inherently speculative enterprise. After all, it took two millennia of argument, often heated, sometimes violent, for Christian theologians to formulate the right theological beliefs or “orthodoxy” for literate Christianity. We should not expect virtual theology to mature anytime soon.
 3. After all, as I speak, here in 2020, the internet is only twenty-five years old. Thus the remarks on virtual theology 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. (2) For 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 the past. 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 virtual ontology of evolving intelligence detailed in previous lectures.
-
4. *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 proposals and provocations, seeking to

clarify and critically evaluate how humanity and what it holds sacred is being transformed once more by the emergent virtual revolution.

5. In this video lecture I shall translate Christian dogma into the virtual ontology of evolving networked intelligence presented in earlier videos. I take my inspiration from a thought provoking article written by Kevin Kelly, founding executive editor of Wired magazine back in 1999 in the journal *Technology in Society* entitled “Nerd Theology,” in which he proposes modelling God’s creation of reality on the analogy of a programmer creating a video game in virtual reality.
6. Now Aquinas had argued long ago that existing reality (1) pointed to a transcendent (2) (2) ultimate source and (3) final end, (4) formal horizon and (5) necessary ground as well as a (6) providential order governing all things. All five of these “ways” to God, I argue can also be applied by analogy to the relationship between a video game and its creator. The game’s source lies with (7) its designer; its end with (8) the goals for the game; (9) its formal ontological horizon corresponds to the coding of the game’s objects and bots; (10) its sustaining ground to the energy running the game and finally (11) its order, to the operational rules governing gameplay. The existential dependence of a virtual video game upon the network on which it runs parallels the traditional Christian belief in the utter dependence of creation on its transcendent creator’s ongoing creative activity.
7. 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 already seen earlier 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 itself 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 such 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 alien creator and his goals in designing us *sacred*, then our life would thereby have a transcendent meaning and value beyond the contingent, evanescent vagaries of our own subjective desires.
8. 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 simply (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 for other purposes and contexts.

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 loving, one who ultimately 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 whose care for us we could trust and so to whom we could commit ourselves in faith.

9. 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 the 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.

4) With regards to creation as a video game, one could understand the (5) Father, along the lines of 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 ancient orthodox theologians such as Gregory of Nyssa, who similarly understood the Trinity in terms of (8) divine source, (9) divine intelligence and (10) divine activity.

10. Turning to theological understandings of Jesus Christ, let us explore the prospects of an avatar Christology in which the incarnation is understood as God entering into and playing the game he has created through his own avatar.
11. 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 a player's 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 principal 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's words and deeds would be God's words and deeds in the game. Christ as avatar of the divine would not be identical with the Father, but in the language of Eduard Schillibeeckx, (4) Christ would be "the human face (persona) of God" or in Rahnerian language, (5) God's self-communication addressed to humanity, that is, his human persona. In this respect at least, an avatar Christology is fully compatible with contemporary orthodox Catholic theology.

12. 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 Jesuit theologians in India, engaged in inter-religious dialogue with Hinduism warn that a Christian appropriation of "avatar" would not be fully equivalent. After all Hinduism and Christianity are different religions, with different histories, understandings and approaches to the divine. In particular, Hindu avatars, typically avatars of Vishnu such as Krishna are impassible, that is, they cannot suffer. They only appear to be human.
13. Perhaps the harder question for an avatar Christology then is not whether Jesus would be fully divine, but would he be fully human? Some early Gnostic Christian theologians did understand Jesus to only "appear" human and to not really suffer on the cross. But orthodox Christianity quickly rejected such a teaching as "divisive", the literal meaning of "heretical." For Christians who do suffer, let alone for Christian martyrs who even die for their faith, they need a Christ who knows what it is like to suffer ...and die as well
14. 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) However Jesus the avatar is not himself playing a game with his life. Jesus' life is part of the game within the game. (3) Thus, we could say that (4) God, in the person of Jesus, his avatar, *actually* suffers. (5) Docetism, the belief that Jesus only appears to suffer, is avoided. 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 avoid another early Christian heresy, patripassianism, the belief that the Father himself must have suffered in Christ's suffering. (8) To put it in other words, (9) God as Father suffers vicariously, through Jesus as his incarnate avatar. (10) Jesus' actual suffering would be Father's virtual suffering. (11) However even as virtual suffering, God as Father cannot wholly dissociate Jesus' suffering from his own divine life.

15. 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 early Christian literate theology under the name of monothelism-- the thought that though Jesus had two natures, human and divine, he only had one will, God's divine will. So the question on the table now is how an avatar of the divine could have a human will of his own.

Well, 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) Secondly, as a character in a game an avatar's agency is both shaped and enhanced by its history in the game. It acquires powers and tools as it ascends levels and screens in the gameplay. In all these respects Jesus would need to have the same powers, and limitations, as any other character in the game. (3) Thus even as an avatar of the divine, Jesus would only be able to have the powers common to everyone else in the game. Whether he could ever transcend his human nature, that is whether he could perform miraculous 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 any worse shape I would argue in accounting for the miraculous.

16. 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 have 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 any difference?

17. 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? Well, 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. Thus yet another Christian heresy, Pelagianism is also avoided. 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. After all, tools, such as swords, are interchangeable. Avatars, on the other hand, become individually unique through their unique gameplay.
18. Furthermore, to understand ourselves as avatars of the divine would certainly be to 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, as well.
19. 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 creator included. On the other hand, if what occurs in a game is (2) too unpredictable, no one will want to play it either. Gameplay must have consequences in the game, for good or ill, that can be relied upon. Analogously then, if we were to imagine God wanting to design a game 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.

20. 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, then, (4) would lie in God's engagement with its characters, and his appreciation of the gameplay. Is God's engagement with our lives enough (5) to make them meaningful? Isn't that just what it means to share in God's life? Is that not what orthodox literate theology identifies with salvation?
21. As I mentioned at the beginning of this video lecture, virtual technology, and so, even more, 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 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. In the United States, as of 2020, (1) 40% do not identify with any institutional religion. But 90% still (2) understand themselves to be spiritual. (3) And all are seekers, searching for something to hold sacred. But rather than followers or disciples, digital natives tend to be (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.
22. 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 over 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 is 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, of the Kingdom of God, the Body

of Christ. How are we to translate our mission into contemporary virtual terms for our contemporary digital audience? This is the theological task for those digital natives now entering our company, the Society of Jesus.