

Virtual Mysticism

1. Welcome to this final video lecture in my virtual religion series. As I have argued in earlier lectures, the virtual self is a networked self whose cognition, agency and very identity is distributed across a network of allies and resources, each of which is itself a node in a network of its own allies and resources. As such it transcends modern dichotomies between inner and outer, subject and object, self and other. From a religious point of view, the way of being in the world of the virtual self is in these respects inherently mystical.
2. Mysticism reframes our experience, both the highs and the lows, into a cosmic perspective. (1) Ecstatic mysticism, as we saw induced in early mimetic rituals and in industrial evangelical revivalism is a largely non-cognitive, emotive experience of ecstasy. Evangelical and even more ecstatic Pentecostal Christians understand themselves to be possessed by the Holy Spirit. (2) Classical mystical serenity or *apatheia* on the other hand induces a peaceful detachment that transcends all passions as well as all word and image. (3) Drug induced states of either stripe, whether ecstatic or serene, do not merely transcend ordinary everyday consciousness, but can easily be altogether dissociated from the rest of one's identity. The use of drugs as more of a shortcut than a path to such transcendent states of consciousness renders them potentially demonic rather than sacred.
3. Religious practices of mystical prayer are intended to serve as resources for reconnecting with a sense of self deeper, higher, broader and so richer than the particular persona being enacted at any given moment. Traditional axial mystical practice calls for turning away from the business of our everyday lives and turning within in solitary, wordless contemplation. This inner journey is imagined in two complementary ways. (1) One is to scale the "heights" towards that than which nothing greater can be thought, that transcendent ideal we hold most sacred that inspires our best self. (2) The other way is to dive into the "depths," from which well up our subjectively immanent feelings and desires, that which grounds and sustains our truest self. If the former can be called a spiritual ascent, the latter is a soulful descent. (3) Ultimately they complement one another in that the two trajectories ultimately coincide in a sacred divinity beyond all thought, image or passion.

4. For example, the Upanishads speak of purifying our consciousness of any illusion of separateness, (1) ultimately identifying our true self with a cosmic consciousness (*Atman*) that is at the same time ultimate objective reality (*Brahman*). (2) Buddhism on the other hand speaks of an awareness of a background emptiness (*sunyata*) within which all things co-emerge and perish. Within Christianity, (3) Augustine wrote of awakening to a divine presence “more intimate to us than we are to ourselves.” For Aquinas (4) all religious language, ultimately pointed beyond itself to an ultimate source and end, ground, horizon, and rhythm (5) that is the sacred be-ing of all beings. (6) Porete, on the other hand, sought to unencumber herself such that she might be another incarnation of the divine for her time and place, while Eckhart (7) similarly exhorts his congregation of mystics to still their thoughts and empty their minds so as to awaken to God’s ongoing creative activity welling up and sustaining us.in the very ground of our souls.
5. Virtual mysticism seeks to awaken a similar recognition of the divine not by turning within however, but by turning without. (1) It supplements the sacred heights and depths characteristic of axial mysticism with an awakening to an equally sacred (2) cosmic connectivity. It is an appreciative recognition of (3) the networks of allies and resources within which we are each embedded—(4) how they enable and entangle us, and we enable and entangle them. Virtual mystical practices awakens us to this fuller and richer awareness of our being in the world, (5) lighting up our web of connections to a luminous incandescence, (6) attending especially to those connections that in the busy-ness of our ordinary lives may be either too close or too remote for us to recognize and appreciate.
6. Or to put it in other words, virtual mysticism attends to reality’s horizontal axis rather axial mysticism’s vertical axis. It turns our attention away from (1) whatever persona of ours is foregrounded in the moment (2) towards its largely tacit background horizon.
7. Mystical techniques bring the background network that is my true self, in the sense of my complete self, into the foreground,
8. within the larger, ultimately transcendent background that is the divine.
9. Such a background identity can also be said to be atemporal, in that it encompasses all my past, present and anticipated future within a single moment of awareness . One could say it is an eternal “God’s eye view” on my life as a whole from start to finish, which blurs into the deeper past of my ancestors and into the extended future of subsequent

generations. Adopting such an atemporal perspective on myself has affinities with Buddhist “mindfulness” in which one assumes an emotionally detached observer’s perspective on the particular activities and sufferings experienced by one’s foregrounded “I” or “ego”. It also aligns with the distinction made in the Upanishads between my personal conscious subjectivity, “*atman*” with a small “a” and cosmic subjectivity, “*Atman*” with a capital “A” which is then seen to be identical with *Brahman*, the cosmos in its objective dimension.

10. Another contrast from axial mysticism is that while virtual mysticism is also universalist in scope, it is nonetheless pluralistic rather than exclusivist. (1) That is, a virtual mystic may adopt mystical practices from a variety of religious traditions. As we saw in Virtual Ecclesiology, many practitioners, especially the “spiritual but not religious” nones are “pluri-religious” personalizing an individually distinctive religious life.
11. Given that even axial mysticism claims to transcend all word or image, mysticism has already become in the last century of global transportation and communication, a particularly fruitful medium for inter-religious dialogue. In other words, like other axial dichotomies such as inner and outer, public and private so too boundaries between mystical traditions have also become increasingly porous. (1) Also as discussed in the history lectures, theosophical movements and New Age mysticism has sought to synthesize mystical beliefs and practices from an array of historical and cultural religious traditions, both axial and cosmotheistic. However, contrary to such efforts at integration, mystical truths are not best thought of as universal religious “facts” that are either true for all or false for all, but rather as performative religious rituals, symbolism and iconography that can be more or less sacred or demonic depending upon whether it draws believers and practitioners closer to or further from what they hold sacred. (2) Increasingly theologians are arguing that virtual religion is the advent of a “second axial age” enabled by virtual communication and transportation technologies, where evangelization focuses on inter-religious dialogue over the first axial age’s missionary efforts at conversion nor the construction of some higher synthesis true for all. Inter-religious dialogue aims not at universal agreement in some super-religion transcending all differences, but seeks a pluralistic mutual understanding between religions where each

can learn from the other without losing faith in their own particular sacred beliefs and practices.

12. The ultimate religious value of virtual mystical practices lies in their use as resources for resisting and remediating the demons besetting the virtual self, identified in earlier videos as fragmentation, anxieties over being monitored and manipulated, superficiality and concern over our growing dependency upon the very technologies that enable us to live our increasingly virtual lives.
13. Regarding fragmentation, axial mystical practices can be repurposed to illumine how the linkages between our various personae constitute a single network. (1) Or how our personae are mutually empower and entangle one another in a single web. It is this harmonious whole self that constitutes the “true self” for the virtual mystic. (2) In the prescient words of Heraclitus “the obscure” in regards to the self: “People do not understand how in differing from itself, it agrees with itself, a back-turning harmony like that of the bow or the lyre.” That is, the distinctive nature and value, that is, the functional essence of both bow and lyre lies precisely in the internal *tension* of the bowstring.

Regular attention to this reality can serve as a resource for resisting temptations towards compartmentalization and dissociation between conflicting personae. (3) In other words, we ought to keep our various partial selves in dialogue with each other, giving each a voice while also calling for each to listen and learn from other sides of ourselves. (4) Virtual mysticism can inspire us to seek to reconcile or live creatively in the tension between them. (5) The goal of the virtual spiritual life would then not be to purge or collapse our array of personae by identifying one alone, the private self no one else sees, as our “authentic,” “true self”, but to recognize how each of our persona are but partial and limited expressions that serves to express an identity that cannot be exhausted by any given virtue or capacity, nor encompassed by any determinate word or image. In effect, individuality for the virtual self becomes less a matter of content than of style, a distinctive way of being that colors, scents or flavors all the various personae we adopt in the various networks in which we are embedded. Harmony, not purity, is the virtual sacred.

14. Secondly, axial religious thought, symbolism and practice can serve to reframe the virtual self's anxieties over being monitored and (1) manipulated. Anxieties over surveillance assume evil intent among those watching. Indeed our fear is that having little voice in how our data is used, or even knowledge of who all are gathering it, their surveillance is precisely in the service of manipulating and exploiting us. (1) Theistic religions teach a divinity that also watches over his creation, but in an attitude of care and empowerment. In God's sight we find affirmation and inspiration, rather than domination and exploitation.
15. Similarly, the traditional concept of grace can reframe our attitude towards the inevitable influence of others in our lives as gift rather than as threat, as enhancing rather than undermining our agency. Whether such a welcoming attitude towards others is warranted or not, axial religions teach its participants to take the risk, in the hope that their faith in others will be vindicated. Adopting an alterity relationship grounded in faith in the goodness of others, rather than adopting a despairing cynicism over what others may do to us once our guard is down, holds the promise of generating a self-reinforcing "virtuous" cycle of empowering recognition for both of us within a common world characterized by cooperation over competition and exploitation. So too axial teachings favoring forgiveness over mimetic retribution can abate if not short-circuit the vicious cycle of mutual manipulation and exploitation, contributing to Christ's work of repairing our broken world (analogous to *tikkun* in Jewish mysticism)
16. Seeing ourselves as embedded in a network of allies, can also reframe ethical deliberation. In confronting a situation, in addition to asking the mimetic question "what would Jesus do?" appreciating ourselves as in-world resources in Jesus' own network, we should follow WWJD by asking (1) "and how can I help?" This question should then in turn steer our attention to our own networks to ask "what allies and resources can I enlist in helping me to help?"
17. Mysticism can also work against shallowness and superficiality. Rather than simply knowing one's resources and allies well enough to use them for our own given purposes, "contemplation in action" calls for us to be mindful in our use of things, (1) to respect their own reality and devote care for their ongoing maintenance. A mindful attitude in our use of our technologies mitigates multitasking's purely instrumental approach, where

efficiency, ease and speed are all that matters. (2) In short mysticism transforms use into an art form, finding the value inherent in the very performance of an activity rather than simply in its external result.

18. Finally as a resource for dealing with our dependency on the very technologies that enable our virtual way of being in the world, (1) mystical insight into our own utter dependence on God can school us in appreciating dependency itself as an opening for gift and grace rather than a threat of manipulation and violence.
19. So too, religion condemns modernity's definition of our individuality *over and against* others (defining myself by how I am different)
20. in favor of a networked *belonging with* others that ought to transcend dichotomies between self and neighbor, neighbor and stranger, self and nature, even self and tool. Mysticism can abate the vulnerability of dependency by awakening us to the multiple overlapping networks in which we are embedded that can ground resiliency and flexibility, or in religious terms, wisdom and grace.
21. A mystical awakening to our entangled interdependence with technological resources can also prevent the mindless adoption of whatever new technologies roll out, referred to by philosophers of technology as "technological somnambulism" or sleepwalking. As is one of the main emphases of all these lectures, the technologies we invent are never "mere means" that we can take or leave at will. (1) Rather they inform and empower our choice of goals as well, thereby shaping our very identities. Research and innovation are never value-free in themselves if we are dependent upon access to them for our own being in the world. (2) Conversely, the literate ideal of autonomy, that I alone determine who I am, is no longer true, if it ever was. In fact on this view, an autonomous perspective actually obstructs my agency by blinding me to resources and allies in my network that extend beyond my control that I can nevertheless enlist and catalyze.
22. In all these ways, as well as many others I am sure, traditional religious doctrines and practices, metaphors and insights can indeed be resources for digital natives in confronting their own characteristic demons. Quiet meditation and creative playing with these new yet evocative virtual religious symbols and empowering religious beliefs can reconnect digital natives to the connectivity they hold sacred and inform and empower their networked virtual identities. To take but one example, virtual mysticism can adapt

- the metaphor of God as light, (1) not in the sense of the roaring glow of a nighttime bonfire around a communal religious ritual nor (2) in the subjective image of a soft flame of that “candle indoors each one dwells” both of which draws our attention to itself,
23. but in the sense of a lightbulb that illumines a room. Electric lighting is not designed to be a focus of our attention, but rather to remain unobtrusively in the background, enabling us to focus the foreground of our attention upon whatever or whoever is in the room with us, all those resources and companions embedded in our networks and in whose networks we are reciprocally embedded in turn.
24. In short, virtual mysticism is a networked mysticism that ultimately extends across the cosmos and beyond to its own transcendent enabling and entangling infrastructure. Our Christian persona towards God encounters a personified sacred who *inspires* us through the empowering and entangling persona of the Holy Spirit, who “over the bent world broods;” who also *accompanies* us through the historical human persona of the Word made flesh, our Lord and brother, Jesus Christ and who finally *sustains* our ongoing existence from one moment to the next in the creative persona of the Father. In sum virtual Christianity is a religion based on the Gospel that reality is ultimately a sacred whole, both one and three, node and network, within which in Paul’s words, “ we live and move and have our very being.”