

Our Reality as God's Virtual Reality

1. Welcome to this second video lecture exploring the prospects for a virtual Christian theology. Again, I should probably remind you, this is a speculative theology, not an argument of how Christian theology *should* be translated into the categories of a virtual, networked ontology, but an earlier exploration of it *could* be so translated. In this video lecture we shall be exploring, first the God-world relationship, and then how that relationship might be translated into virtual terms.
2. Now when exploring the relationship between God and the world, the world is always the junior partner and tends to get described in terms of limitation and contingency. The world is finite and utterly dependent on God as its source and end, as well as its moment-to-moment ground, horizon and order or rhythm. Consequently, it is important at the start to remind ourselves that the universe itself is of a duration, power and size beyond any word or image, inspiring both awe and reverence in its own right. For new virtual technologies, both supercomputers and space telescopes has taught us that the universe is exponentially older and vaster than anything our Christian ancestors could have ever imagined. To even begin to get a grip on the new scale of reality, let me attempt to put the dimensions of the universe into familiar terms of measurement.
3. First regarding time: The universe is estimated to be 13.8 billion years old. But how much is a billion? If one were (1) to spend at the rate of \$1,000 every minute it would take 2 years to spend a billion dollars. It would then take (2) 27 and a half years at \$1,000 per minute to spend 13.8 billion dollars.
4. Furthermore, we are a carbon-based life form. Carbon is only formed in the heart of a star, scattering across space only when that star goes nova. For carbon to exist on earth, that would require at least stars going nova and their debris clouds drawing together to form a new sun and solar system. Ours is likely not even a second-generation solar system either. The sun is "only" 4.6 billion years old itself. Earth formed a 100 million years later. Life emerged on earth 1 billion years after that, or 3.5 billion years ago.
5. The evolution of Intelligent life further required a whole host of coincidences to boot. After all multicellular organisms are thought to have evolved only half a billion years ago, and had the trajectory of that asteroid that killed the dinosaurs, Chicxujub, had been

slightly different, they could well be still the dominant species on the planet and us mammals would still be rodents.

6. Finally, of course, as we have already seen in the Co-evolution of Religion and Technology series, hominids evolved only 2.5 million years ago, speech a hundred thousand years ago, literacy a mere 6,000 years ago, or roughly the age “young Earth” by fundamentalists who use Genesis to calculate the age of the cosmos, and finally the virtual age of the internet still less than 30 years ago. Deep time is a virtually groundless abyss, not so unlike the Godhead of Christian mystics such as Eckhart and the early Gnostics.
7. Then regarding matter and energy: (1) There are estimated to be between 100 to 400 billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy. That is a large margin of error, but even if we go with the most conservative estimate that is equivalent to spending that \$1,000 per second for 200 years. But our galaxy is not yet the universe. (2) It is estimated that there are 100 billion to 200 billion galaxies. And yet it is also estimated (3) that all the mass and energy comprising these galaxies constitutes only 5% of the total matter and energy of the universe, the rest being “dark,” that is not emitting or absorbing any energy along the electromagnetic spectrum.
8. At the other extreme of magnitude, the universe at its most elemental subatomic level is a quantum probability field of electrons and quarks. They are the materially virtual, neither fully actual nor merely possible but rather fields of potential existence. This can lead to multi-valent and “fuzzy” logic. However, it fits in nicely with the Christian understanding of the universe as the ongoing creative activity or *energeia* literally, the enactment or bringing into being of the divine. The Hindu theoretical physicist Amit Goswami has also written several books arguing that quantum physics fits with the Upanishads’ identification of being and consciousness in that quantum states only collapse into discrete ones upon measurement and observation by a conscious subject. It also fits in well with the Buddhist understanding of the universe as the dependent co-origination of all things. Thus, while the theory of evolution sidelined the design argument in the nineteenth century (at least at the level of organisms and ecosystems) quantum physics and mysticism have become fellow-travelers.

9. Finally, regarding space or size: The astronomic unit of distance is the light year. At the speed of 186,000 miles a second, the distance light travels in a year is 6 trillion miles. The nearest star, Alpha Centauri, is 4.5 light years away. The fastest probe we have launched travels now at 155,000 miles per hour. At that pace it will take 18,000 years to reach our nearest neighbor. And again, literacy emerged only 6,000 years ago. No wonder other intelligent life has yet to contact us.
10. Overall, the diameter of the observable universe is currently estimated at 93 billion light years. This is not only due to light speeding away from the big bang (which would account for only 13.8×2 or 27.6 billion of that but also due to the expansion of the fabric of space/time itself due to all that dark energy. The universe is like a spot on an inflating balloon which is not just spreading across the surface but in which the surface itself is expanding over time.
11. And let's not even talk about the multiverse hypothesis posited by string theory in part as a response to how the natural laws and cosmic constants of our universe can be so remarkably fine-tuned for even the possibility of the evolution of intelligent life within it. One image of the multiverse is foam, like soap bubbles. String theory puts (1) the number of universes at 10^{26} (2) to the 10^{50} (2) to the 16^{th} power.
12. In short, the dimensions of reality, taken as a whole are virtually infinite. Reality may not be divine, but it's unimaginable, not yet even fully comprehensible age, power and immensity can and does inspire awe and reverence. Whether or not reality in its ultimate broadest compass is ontologically transcendent, it certainly epistemologically and conceptually transcends our reasoning capacity.
13. But despite the now inconceivable dimensions of the universe, Christian theology professes that we are companions in the ongoing creative activity of its sacred, transcendent source and end, ground, horizon and rhythm of such a reality. Indeed, that it is in our relationship to this transcendent that we find our own personal meaning and purpose. No wonder God is beyond human understanding, transcending all word and image. Even more so than the universe itself, we can speak only metaphorically when exploring the nature and attributes of such a divinity. God's attributes cannot be translated into any understandable unit of measure. Christians hold them all to be infinite.

14. Now we have seen traditional metaphors for creation as the hatching of a cosmic egg, (1) as the work of a master craftsman (a divine *demiurgos*), (2) as that of an author writing a book (the book of nature), (4) an engineer designing a pocket watch,
15. or as in Genesis, by the sheer proclamation of an omnipotent monarch. But when you think about it, as Jewish mystics argued in the Kaballah, if God's power is indeed infinite, God could only act at all by foregoing his own boundless, irresistible power, so as to open a space for beings other than himself to interact with ((3) what they referred to as *tsintsum*) In other words, infinite power cannot dominate, for there could then be nothing other than itself *to* dominate. Rather God can only express his own boundless power through empowering and sustaining the coming into being, in Greek the *energeia*, of beings other than himself. Following Paul's confession of Christ in Philippians, (4) creation must be seen as "kenotic" from *kenos*, "empty," in Greek. In Philippians Paul professes, that while one with God, Christ did not take his equality with the divine something to be clung to, but emptied himself, becoming one of us humans, indeed, to become a "slave". As Eckhart argues, the logic of Creation is analogous. In short, God and the world is the expression of an alterity relationship. Creativity involves not the first-person logic of artistic self-expression but the second person logic of empathy and open intimacy.
16. Again, as discussed in the history series of lectures on early Christianity, while God is incomprehensible, beyond word and image, traditional Christian theology does still identify attributes that can be addressed to the divine both metaphorically and analogically. Such language however is religious, that is, it is (1) neither informative nor (2) normative but (3) performative, that is, it is sacramental in the sense that it manifests and reconnects us with what we hold sacred. Further, (5) Christian theology is (5) second order theoretical speculation on the ontological implications of our religious language. (6) And as we saw in Anselm, Aquinas and Eckhart, while attributes when extrapolated to infinity are literally beyond human conception, they can be triangulated to form, if not a clear and distinct concept, at least to delimit a semantic field in which all coincide. For example, (7) while infinite power, (8) infinite wisdom and (9) infinite goodness are each beyond our understanding, (10) they are coincident in the divine and so constitute parameters of our efforts to better understand what will always lie beyond our full

understanding. Thus, while we cannot understand what infinite goodness might mean, we do profess that it coincides with infinite wisdom, and that infinite power coincides with both. Or that (11) infinite justice is a kind of justice that coincides (12) with infinite mercy. In other words, (13) that is it is a justice that recognizes our unique history and circumstances, as well as a mercy that is just for all. Christianity likewise affirms that the divine is not bounded with regards to physical properties such space or time, mass or energy. In other words that God is omnipresent and eternal, immaterial and immutable, which while negative terms, also coincide with all our analogous predications of the divine nature.

17. Now in addition to awakening us to the vastness of the universe, virtual technologies and the sciences that have followed in their wake also suggest new a model for understanding God's relationship to his creation. Quantum particles are already virtual particles, in that they are in a "superposition" of multiple potential states until measured. So too contemporary ontology argues that our reality is ultimately algorithmic information processing. Like a hypertext, the algorithms themselves are virtual. They generate our actual reality as they run, interact and learn from each other.
18. What is the source of these algorithms? Why just these algorithms rather than others? And what fuels their processing when energy itself is to be included among these algorithms? As we saw in recent retrievals of the design argument, (1) philosophers like Nick Bostrom director of Oxford's Future of Humanity Institute are increasingly exploring a virtual simulation model for reality. That is that our reality has been designed and is being run by exponentially more advanced aliens, and that our actual reality is their virtual reality. (2) Kevin Kelly, founding editor of Wired magazine, in an article entitled "Nerd Theology" has proposed God as our reality's programmer, mainframe and energy source. In the rest of this video I would like to continue exploring this idea of modeling of divine creation not on crafting a pot or writing a book but on programming and playing a video game.
19. I briefly introduced this model in the previous, introductory lecture on virtual theology. In that lecture I focused on the prospects for an avatar Christology as an example of how this model might play out. In the rest of this lecture I will focus on how this model of our reality as God's virtual reality would address our understanding of creation and

specifically our understanding of our created humanity's relationship to the divine. On this model, (1) the Holy Trinity of Christianity would become a network of divine personae engaged in the programming, design and running of such a virtual world. (2) God as Father would correspond to the game's programmer. (3) God as Word or *logos*, would be the Father's game design, its programming. And (4) God as Spirit would correspond to the ongoing creative activity or divine energy (*energeia*) powering the game. (5) Finally the incarnation, the word made flesh, would become God's avatar through which he engages in the gameplay.

20. In this thought experiment, human nature would appear as emergent smartbots that emerge, grow, mature and die through the game play. Reality would be a video game that has been running for the last 13.8 billion years, that is, since the emergence of the very fabric of space and time itself in the big bang. (1) As programmer, God the creator, would "exist" outside the virtual spacetime continuum within his game. (2) The divine would thus appear eternal and omnipresent, as well as omnipotent and omniscient from the viewpoint of anyone in the game. (3) The basic laws of nature would correspond to the games root programming. (4) The result would be a kenotic divine creativity empowering analogously creative smart characters towards each of whom God would adopt an alterity relationship through his avatar interacting with the other evolving players as well as through his energy powering the ongoing running of the game itself.
21. Now in early Christian theology had divided the human being into three powers: (1) material, that is, our body, (2) psychological, our soul (*psuche*) and (3) spiritual, our own "spark of the divine" (*pneuma*). (4) Our material dimension, or in virtual terms, our material persona was governed by our mimetic desires for pleasure and status. (5) Our soul, made in the image of God was governed by the operations of our human reason and will. (6) Finally, the spirit, was considered our "true self," our likeness to the divine whose original divinity was darkened and cooled when we turned away from God. God had created the material world to break our fall and became incarnate to draw us back home to himself. Eckhart will imagine this spiritual persona (7) as God's own creative activity (*energeia*) bubbling over (*ebollutio*) into the very ground of our soul. (8) If we could but empty our souls, that is, if we could but undergo our own *kenosis*, God's Holy

Spirit would govern all of our powers and (9) we would become a new incarnation of the divine for our time and place.

22. Or in the words of Paul, the spirit within us is ultimately not our own, but God's spirit active within us, and all creation. Our task is to align ourselves with that spirit of God within us, ultimately recognizing it as our own truest self. In network terms, (1) God's Holy Spirit is a node in our network and through it, (2) we are a node in God's. It constitutes God's embeddedness in our lives as a companion in the gameplay, and our embeddedness in the divine dynamism or *perichorēsis* among the personae of the Trinity. (3) Our spiritual task is to enlist our networks of resources and allies to empower our divine person to become our dominant persona, in other words for us to become, like Christ, avatars of the divine in so far as we can. As entangled in the world and our own history of trauma and desire, such avatar enactment is inevitably achievable only in part and on certain privileged moments and places of grace. Christianity professes however that in Jesus we recognize the persona of God active fully and consistently throughout his life and death. (4) Jesus then is inherently "by nature" an avatar of the divine, while we are such only in part and on occasion by grace. (5) Christian faith, ritual practice and community life seeks to intensify and extend that divine persona within our network. In so doing we need to draw upon that entire network of resources and allies that constitute the Christian community. For the Church too is a network: a network of believers who enable and entangle us in what we hold sacred.
23. On this view we are all players in the game of existence, a game running in God's virtual reality, programmed, powered and played by God himself. The question for theologians is not whether such a model is scientifically provable. It's not a scientific model but a religious one. The question for theology is whether modeling reality on a video game religiously inspires us or rather makes everything seem rather pointless? In other words is such a theoretical interpretation of religious belief sacred or demonic? But then, as I asked at the end of the introductory video lecture to virtual theology, (1) just 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 though (5) to make our lives meaningful? Or is that not just what it means to share in God's life?

24. I suspect that today many will answer these questions in the negative. That comparing reality to a video game does trivialize reality and imaging God as gamer does turn religion into mindless escapism. However online video gaming is still in its infancy and most players are still pretty young. But as it moves beyond entertainment towards an art form, I am confident that its appeal will mature. (1) Gaming, like other sports has already become a profession to which some of the most skilled and practiced are already making a living and creating into a meaningful way of life. As gameplay becomes ever more cognitively and psychologically challenging, within ever more aesthetically creative and subtle virtual worlds, the dedication necessary to master the best games will appear less and less like an addiction and more and more like a devotion, even a calling, like becoming an Olympic athlete or even an artist.
25. Thus it is likely too early to critically assess whether modeling our reality on a video game in God's virtual reality is sacred orthodoxy or demonic heresy. As I again mentioned at the end of the introductory lecture on virtual theology, a virtual ontology of evolving networked intelligence is not the work of a single thinker, or even a single generation. After all it took half a millennium of controversy, sometimes bitter and visceral, for theologians to agree on how to translate the oral Gospel of Jesus into the categories of Greek metaphysics.
26. But it is high time to start. All religion that aspires to remain relevant, will need to evolve new models for translating into virtual categories the wisdom and inspiration of the orthodox axial theologies of the past.