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Editorial: Christianity as Material and Virtual Reality

Augustine, writing to Jerome at the start of the fifth century after release of Jerome's Latin translation of the Christian scriptures:

A certain bishop, one of our brethren, having introduced in the church over which he presides the reading of your version, came upon a word in the book of the prophet Jonah, of which you have given a very different rendering from that which had been of old familiar to the senses and memory of all the worshippers, and had been chanted for so many generations in the church, Jonah 4: 6.¹ Thereupon arose such a tumult in the congregation, especially among the Greeks, correcting what had been read, and denouncing the translation as false, that the bishop was compelled to ask the testimony of the Jewish residents (it was in the town of Oea). These, whether from ignorance or from spite, answered that the words in the Hebrew manuscripts were correctly rendered in the Greek version, and in the Latin one taken from it. What further need I say? The man was compelled to correct your version in that passage as if it had been falsely translated, as he desired not to be left without a congregation – a calamity which he narrowly escaped. (Epistle 71: 3)

There is an inescapable tension at the heart of Christianity, as there is in all religions, between the refined and abstract idealism – the virtual realities – of its theology, aspirations and religious vision; and the messy

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experience, stuff and pragmatism – the material realities – of what Christianity is in daily practice. These two perspectives, though complementary, are often in active contest with each other, to the extent that different camps will often form in a contentious way around the poles of doctrine and practicality, idealism and relevance, or over who or which more accurately reflects the true nature of the religion.

For a long time, what Christianity is seen to be and how it is studied have been shaped by aspects of its virtuality: its formal and authorised statements of belief, the nature of its religious vision (though never realised), its defined rites and its formally defined institutional structures. That these elements should be considered the markers of what the religion is reflects what has been the cultural dominance of institution-employed scholars and clergy and the power of its central institutions.

In recent decades, however, coinciding with and reflecting a wider developing interest in material studies, there has been growing interest in studying and understanding the nature of Christianity, not just from the perspective of its formal and authorised beliefs and declarations, but from the perspective of its material everyday practices that people who identify as Christian actually engage in and see as integral to their understanding and practice of faith (see for example, Arweck and Keenan 2006; Freedberg 1989; McDannell 1995; Morgan 2010a, 2010b).

The perspective of this approach is that such material practices need to be understood, not just as instances of how the essence of the religion is implemented in practical situations, nor as imperfect instances of a perfect practice and therefore of a derivative or subordinate – material practices are the reality of the religion. In this view, Christianity is more accurately understood not just through its institutionally authorised statements and practices, but through the individual and communal negotiations of the inherited and constructed ideological aspirations of the religion with the practical demands and obligations of everyday life.

The contributions to this issue explore a number of instances of these material practices of Christianity where the material and ideological intersect in the generation of religious meaning. But how does one relate the refined ideological and the pragmatic practical in any religion in a way that does justice to their complementarity while avoiding an unnecessary competitive dualism?

A number of frameworks have been explored which provide valuable perspectives on rethinking the place of physical reality in the nature of religious meaning-making (see for example Lynch 2009; Meyer 2009; Morgan 2010a). In this brief introduction to this issue, I want to explore

another through the metaphors and relationship of virtual and material realities.

REALITY AS VIRTUAL AND MATERIAL

The concept of virtual reality has become of active interest in recent years with the growth of technologically-generated computer games and applications that simulate aspects or environments of the material world, where it evokes both negative and positive responses.

A virtual reality is generally understood as something that is close to an actual situation in terms of its characteristics or effects, but is not the same as the actual situation itself (Wood 1998: 4). A virtual reality is a recreation of a life-like situation without the restrictions that are imposed by virtue of the situation being embodied in a specific time or space. A virtual reality is life free of its physical, social, or practical limitations.

When used in relation to technological virtual realities, such as computer games or immersive virtual environments, the idea of virtual reality can evoke strong negative responses, such as those of Baudrillard, who sees such instances of popular culture as television programmes, entertainment media and virtual reality games as pseudo-realities, deceptions or simulations that mimic the real and substitute the false for the true (Baudrillard 1993).

Pierre Lévy (1998), on the other hand, sees the concept of virtual reality from a quite different perspective. He sees virtual realities as indispensable aspects of the multi-layered reality we inhabit on a daily basis that is made up not only of the material, spatial, bodily and temporal demands that we deal with on day-to-day, minute-by-minute, bases, but also the disembodied imaginations, dreams, meanings, and goals that we inherit or generate from and interpose on those physical and sensory experiences. For Lévy, the reality we inhabit is a constant interaction between these virtual and material dimensions, both of which draw from and contribute to generation and transformation of the other.

The material world we deal with on day-to-day, minute-to-minute, bases provides us with significant pleasure, pain, joy, frustration and achievement in dealing with its physical practicalities, potential and limitations. As human beings we are such that in the process of dealing with these practicalities, potentials and limitations we begin to imagine the possibilities of a world that would be possible if those limitations did not exist. This is the imagined world of the virtual that does not stand apart from the material, but continually intersects with it. The reality we

inhabit is continually a dynamic intersection of these material and virtual realities, events or experiences and their meanings.

The distinctive character of virtual realities is that they provide us with a world that is like the material world we live in, but without the restrictions of the immediately material that limits our options and opportunities. It is this characteristic of not needing to be practical or specific to the physical realities of any particular situation that gives virtual realities their distinctive imaginative and regenerative role in developing ourselves beyond the specific constraints of practicality or time- and space-boundedness.

For that reason, Lévy describes the virtual as ‘a fecund and powerful mode of being that expands the process of creation, opens up a future, injects a core of meaning beneath the platitude of immediate physical presence’ (Lévy 1998: 16). While Lévy’s work was directed primarily towards digitally-created virtual realities, he names three general processes of virtualisation that have been central to the emergence of human civilisation:

- *virtualisation associated with signs*, such as language or visual representation, which enable specific material experiences to be carried across time and space;
- *virtualisation associated with technology and artefacts*, which produce a virtualisation of action, the body and physical environment in a way that extends human effort beyond the immediate situation of time and space; and
- *virtualisation associated with social relations*, such as rituals, religion, morality, law, economics and political regulations, which are social mechanisms for virtualising violence and for dealing with relations of force, impulse, instincts and desires (Lévy 1997: 97). An agreement or contract, for example, is a virtual reality: a means of defining and ordering actual situations in terms of a constructed reality that is independent of any of the actual situations to which it applies.

When we see the virtual or virtual realities in this way, it becomes apparent that, far from being mere illusions or pseudo-realities that distract from the real thing, virtual realities fulfill a number of important functions crucial to human life.

- *Creation* – it is first in virtual space, our dreams and imagination, that we generate imaginative new realities that

do not yet exist but which become the material of experimentation, testing and implementation in new actual realities.

- *Exploring potential and testing limits* – virtual reality is a de-territorialised space in which we can explore alternatives and potential in situations free from the need to be practical or realistic. Our human identity is a construction of a virtual self as a way of finding continuity in who we are across the multitude of specific situations and concrete conditions with which we need to deal.
- *A search for safety and control* – the construct of culture, for example, is a range of material practices, technical and intellectual works, individual ideas, desires and aspirations to provide us with protection against chaos, fragility, pain, wear and mortality; a shield ‘from the brute reality of certain aspects of our embodiment’ (Hillis 1999: xvi).
- *Hope* – is a virtual reality, an imagination of a situation in which the threats, frustrations and limitations of the immediate physical conditions with which we are confronted do not exist as a basis for believing that we are not determined by material realities alone. Hope offers us motivation and courage to deal with and transform immediate actual situations, not in the terms of the material conditions themselves, but on the basis of future virtual realities that do not yet exist, or may never exist.
- *Meaning* – is a virtual reality. It does not exist *per se* in any individual event, it is constructed through the creative process of theorising or virtualisation, in concept, narrative or visual representation. Though all aspects of any meaning system at different times may be contradicted in part or substantially by actual situations, the importance and tenacity of virtual meaning is such that people will frequently hold to the virtual reality in the face of at times apparent contradiction by the actual situations they are dealing with.

In common usage, the concept of what is ‘real’ is often ascribed to situations that are deeply embedded in physical or material practicalities, reflected in such expressions as ‘get real’, or ‘in real life’. But the idea that we can only describe as ‘real’ that which has actual material existence or situated embodiment in a specific time and space has never been held in human history by any but a tiny minority of thorough-going materialists.

All cultures through human history have had parallel 'other' or virtual worlds, which were not separate from but seen as continually intersecting with the material world (Wertheim 1999).

In fact, at times, these virtual worlds or virtual realities are often seen as more real and more influential than the constraining and immediate material realities within which people were living. People may be motivated to take sacrificial or purposeful action as much by virtual realities that come to them in moral principles, dreams, visions, hope or beliefs as they are by necessities presented to them in the practicalities of day-to-day living.

In practice, therefore, our 'reality' at any time, understood most fully, is not just the immediate, actual, physical or material situations we encounter and deal with, but also their accompanying virtualisations. These different realities with which we live and negotiate are linked in a dynamic process of constant movement and interplay back and forth between the dimensions of virtualisation and actualisation in any situation we find ourselves in.

When we are in an actual, specific situation, part of our engagement with the material realities we encounter is to be continually engaging with virtual realities that are stimulated by the situation. We approach any situation on the basis of anticipations or frameworks of understanding carried from our cultural roots and past experience that shape, not just our understanding but also the physical sensations of our material experiences. Stories or theories from the past, inherited in ideology, theology, images, rhythms, rituals, wisdom, concepts of time and space, become part of the material experience. In turn, the material experience becomes part of our larger virtual world through reflection, learning, and reproduction in language, story, song or visual construction.

THE MATERIAL AND VIRTUAL OF BELIEF

Christianity is not fully understood unless it is seen as such a multi-layered phenomenon in which virtual and material dimensions are constantly interacting, informing and influencing each other. Christianity is at the same time a material world and a virtual world: a virtual world that is created and preserved in its ideas, beliefs, ideals, aspirations, visions, theologies, rites, social contracts and technologies; and a material world, embodied in the day-to-day routines of the lives of those who are Christian, and inclusive of material objects, physical practices, sensory experiences, bodily movements and products.

David Morgan has been a leading figure in reaffirming the importance of material practices of any religion as being crucial to understanding the nature of the religion itself.

In contrast to textually-driven approaches, I argue that religions are not essentially ideational, conceptual, or volitional. They are all of these, of course, but they also exhibit the corporeal nature of human existence, which means that religions consist of feeling, sensation, implements, spaces, images, clothing, food, and all manner of bodily practices regarding such things as prayer, purification, ritual eating, corporate worship, private study, pilgrimage, and so forth. (Morgan 2010a)

This issue presents a number of case studies in which this interaction of materiality and virtuality is explored. Baker, in her study of the Rapture, provides a dramatic example of this virtual-material interplay in the construction of Christian practice. For a totally virtual reality such as the concept of the Rapture to become 'real' and therefore more durably embedded in people's living, a physical experience is created for people using 'a complicated system of bungees, pulleys, and a four-wheeler or truck' to lift the person rapidly in the air to embed the virtual idea of being taken 'up' into heaven by God in the physical sensation of being whisked aloft. Luka's description and analysis of the physical uses and engagement with icons to generate effective virtual realities provides another instance, as do all of the cases looked at, in different ways.

In all of these cases, in complex processes of mediation, material experiences are overlaid with theological or ideological significance, and abstract theological concepts are 'made real' by being performed and embodied in physical practices and sensations.

This same virtual-material nexus is apparent in numerous other sensory practices with which religious meaning has been associated, in both authorised and adaptive practices: the words 'the body of Christ' spoken as a communion wafer or piece of bread is placed on one's tongue or in one's hands, a virtual reality of new life associated with the physical sensations of immersion in water, a physical touching of the head, chest and shoulders with the virtual reality of divine presence, a pot of peppermint tea shared among members of a survivors of violence group as a physical embodiment of the virtualisation of hope.

So much emphasis in the past has been placed on understanding Christianity from the perspective of its ideational and conceptual character that there is an urgent need to study and understand

more widely and fully the material nature of Christianity as well. Understanding the material practices of Christianity, however, is not complete unless one understands not only what those material practices are, but also in what ways they are taking up, embodying, experimenting with, challenging, and making real the virtual realities that are there behind them.

NOTE

1. 'The Lord God appointed a bush, and made it come up over Jonah, to give shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort; so Jonah was very happy about the bush.' The dispute was over the name of the bush under which Jonah rested.

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