THEOLOGY AS A VIRTUALISING ENTERPRISE

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The conceptualisation and practice of theology today is being profoundly affected by the changes that have taken place in recent decades in technologies of textual production and consumption. While theology is embodied in a variety of forms and practices – liturgy, song, pastoral practice, preaching and ritual – in the Western world theology has been conceived and practiced largely through activities based on the printed text, particularly books, journals, the reading of lectures, and the sharing of written papers through academic conferences. Martin Marty in the late 1980's observed that

> "Technologically, economically, politically, religiously, and in respect of status, conception, and the use of time, the concept of theology expressed through a moderate diversity of books is called into question by hyper-modern and counter-modern tendencies."[1]

If Marty's observation was apposite in the late 1980's, changes in the nature and practice of publishing and textual production since then make it even more prescient. The rapid application of digital technologies since then have revolutionised the fundamental framework upon which theology in the west has drawn. The explosion of online publishing, including such things as blogs and pod casting, bypasses altogether the traditional "gatekeeping" processes of previous printing. Changes have taken place in publishing and marketing strategy towards multiple titles for smaller markets, rapid turnover and withdrawal of titles that aren't selling well, printing of individual copies of books on demand, e-books, all radically change the social, cultural and economic frameworks in which "theology" once had relevance.

These shifts introduced by digital technology are changing dramatically practices by which readers (if they can be called that) view and engage with text. The sheer

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[1] Martin Marty, "The Social Context of the Modern Paradigm in Theology: A Church Historian's View," in *Paradigm Change in Theology*,(ed. H. Kung and D. Tracy; New York: Crossroad, 1989) 174-201, 186.

volume of information available requires more extensive selectivity on the part of the consumer, not just in choosing a particular text but in what one reads of it. The interactivity of digital media means that intended meanings as produced are subject or prone to radical deconstruction and reconstruction, not just in understanding but also in actual textual form, blurring the boundaries between author and reader and undermining traditional concepts of religious authority that were based on controlling the production and interpretation of religious information. The traditional institutions of theology – particularly libraries and the religious academy – are reflecting the change, seen in the reduced status of academic teachers, the de-funding of tertiary institutions and the shift of libraries away from holding hard copies of books and journals towards electronic holdings and databases. The ready visuality and spatial construction of digital text challenges the black and white linearity of most "serious" theological works.

The consequence is therefore that theology is losing its universalising character and becoming increasingly as an idiosyncratic practice of a specific interest group of a passing culture. Marty expresses it thus:

> "It is time to say that theological expression was reliant upon the stable, purchasable, book-length literary products of theologians in community within free societies. Those were books written by people whose vocations climaxed in reading and writing them. Now they represent a fragile, endangered species." [2]

Does theology have relevance to this new cultural situation?

In his significant paper, "Information superhighway: metaphors as midwives," Harmeet Sawhney argues that in complex situations of social and technological change, new liberties of action transform past practice and present new possibilities where precise modelling is impossible. In these situations, where action is called for but not all possible consequences can be understood or anticipated, good metaphors and analogies offer "a viable alternative to formal models" by providing a new conceptual or visual coherence that enable appropriate structures, policies and strategies of action to be identified and implemented.[3] Sawhney uses the example of the early conceptualisation of radio as the "wireless telegraph," to illustrate how bad metaphors, or metaphors inappropriately carried forward from past practice, can limit the possibilities of a new situation by tying it to the constraints of the past and failing to actualise the potential of the new liberties of action provide by the new situation.

[2] Marty, "Social Context," 186

[3] Harmeet Sawhney, "Information Superhighway: Metaphors as Midwives," *Media, Culture and Society* 18 (1996) 292-314, 292.

In this paper I want to explore one possibility for the rethinking of the theological task by exploring the potential of theology as a virtualising enterprise, drawing on what has become a powerful metaphor and application of digital culture, that of virtual reality.

Virtuality as unreality?

The term "virtual" is used quite capriciously today in relation to a range of things - virtual meeting, virtual university, virtual communication, etc. – with a range of assumptions and attitudes underlying it. It's important first, therefore, to clarify the meaning of the term

The initial and most common impulse from a critical perspective is to consider virtual reality as a subordinate form of existence within a frame of unreality – illusion even. Virtual Reality is often considered a pseudo-reality, a deception or cheap variety that mimics the real, a subordinate form of the "real thing." In Baudrillard's terms,[4] a simulation, a deceptive substitution of a false for the real. This framing of the question supports the position of most academic theologians and most religious leaders. In a way that parallels religious criticisms of the growing social popularity of novels in the 19th century,[5] most religious leaders are critical of virtual realities, particularly those created technologically, as dangerous distractions from reality. From this perspective, "real" theology is the opposite of virtual reality.

But I want to argue that the "virtual," properly considered, is a critical aspect of our being human and aptly describes what theology seeks to do.

The nature of the virtual

Virtual realities are not unrealities, or illusions, or pseudo-phenomena. The term itself – virtual reality – connotes that the virtual is a form, one of the forms, of reality. We commonly talk of virtual reality, not unreal virtuality.

Webster's dictionary defines "virtual" as "being in essence or effect, not in fact."[6]

[4] See for example Jean Baudrillard, "The Evil Demon of Images and the Precession of Simulacra: Toward a Principle of Evil," in *Postmodernism: A Reader* (ed. T. Docherty; New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 194-99.

[5] M. Askew and B. Hubber, "The colonial reader observed: reading in its cultural context," in *The Book in Australia: Essays towards a Cultural and Social History* (ed. D. H. Borchardt and W. Kirsop; Melbourne: Australian Reference Publications in assoc. w. the Centre for Bibliographical & Textual Studies, Monash University, 1988) 110-38, 114-15.

[6] *The Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* (Belair: Belair Publishing, 1981).

John Wood described the virtual as "anything that is the case, though not in the fullest sense."[7] This prompts the question, what would need to be added to a virtual reality to make it "the fullest sense of reality"? Or to use the Webster's definition, what would need to be added to the essence of something to make it a fact?

The most common suggestion for the alternative to virtual reality is *physical or material reality* - where the emphasis is on what is added to an idea or essence by embodiment within the constraining boundaries of specific situations: the human body or the requirements of our physical existence and functions; the constraints of limited material resources, including time and space; and the physical demands and practicalities of dealing with a specific community or social relationships. These suggest that the alternative to virtual reality is what could be called "actualised reality," a set of conditions and experiences characterised or typified by concrete physical or material instances in time and space.

But in practice, what we commonly refer to as "reality" is more than just these actual physical and material conditions we all deal with on a day to day basis. It is these material conditions – the actual - along with the interpretations, expectations, hopes and disappointments we put on them – the virtual - that make up our lived reality. In practice, it becomes extremely difficult to identify clear boundaries between both of these and the role each plays in the construction and interpretation of lived experiences and choices.

Indeed, for most of human history, then and now, clear boundaries between the material and non-material (virtual) have never been recognised or practised. The idea that we can only describe as "real" that which has actual material existence or situated embodiment has never been held in human history by any but a tiny minority of thorough-going materialists. Margaret Wertheim, along with many others, has pointed out that throughout human history all cultures have had parallel "other" or virtual worlds, which were not separate from but continually intersected with the world of bodily experience.[8] Far from being of a lesser quality or less "real," these virtual worlds are often more real and more influential in action and decision-making than the constrained material realities within which people were living. For many religions and ethical traditions, flesh passes away but it's the spirit that lives forever: material existence is the subordinate value and virtual realities are what are real.

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[7] John Wood, "Curvatures in Space-Time-Truth," in *The Virtual Embodied: Presence/practice/technology* (ed. J. Wood; London: Routledge, 1998) 1-12, 4.

[8] Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1999).

Whenever we speak of the virtual or virtual realities, this perspective needs to be borne in mind. It's mistaken simply to dismiss anything that's "virtual" as a subordinate or lesser state by saying "It's not real" or "It's not the real thing." The virtual is more accurately seen as one of the forms of reality we inhabit, along with but also merged with the actual, physical, material conditions we need to deal with.

While theology needs to be concerned with the material conditions of life, or what can be called actualised reality, therefore, it is equally concerned with virtual reality – articulating and recommending those realities which do not have a physical embodiment but which frame and impact upon the actual or material of our lives.

Characteristics of the virtual

Calling something "virtual" suggests that what is conjectured is real enough and close enough to a set of material conditions or actual physical experiences that it is "as if" it were the condition itself. Yet the virtual is also sufficiently different from a specific condition that it needs to be qualified by saying, "but it is not the situation itself." Virtual reality has the character of being "as if" but "not quite."

This "not quite" character is the source of the distinctive contribution the virtual plays. Because it is not constrained by the limitations of a specific actual instance, a virtual reality plays an imaginative and regenerative role in our being human and in developing ourselves beyond the specific constraints of practicality or time- or space-boundedness. So Pierre 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."[9]

Reality, therefore, understood most fully, is not just an immediate, actual physical or material situation, but also its accompanying virtualities. Lévy gives the example of a seed, which is defined not just by its immediate material form but also its future potential which doesn't yet exist. What gives a seed its meaning and name are the interplay of the actual material reality and its virtual reality. What distinguishes a seed from a piece of wood the same shape, for example, is not so much difference in their materiality – what they are now - but the difference in their virtuality – what they can become.

"Reality" as we refer to it, therefore, is a dynamic process of constant movement and interplay between the dimensions of virtualisation and actualisation in any situation we find ourselves in. When we are in an actual situation, the press is constantly towards identifying a virtual reality beyond the actual situation but

[9] Pierre Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age* (tr. R. Bononno; New York: Plenum Trade, 1998) 16.

incorporating it, in order to create meaning and as a way of escaping from the mundane confines of the immediate instance fixed in time and space. We generate virtual realities in order to identify and explore other possibilities as a basis of transforming the actual or generating new actualities.

On the other hand, when we're in a virtual reality - the dreaming, speculating, reflecting or theorising - the press on us is towards wanting to actualise the virtual in acts of creation, as a way of concretising the ephemeral, converting and experiencing the mental state into bodily experience, or testing and consolidating identity.

In practice, the boundaries between what is virtual and what is actual are extremely fluid and undefined, as we move back and forth constantly between actual situations we have to deal with and virtual possibilities that are conjured by the situations.

Major processes of virtualization

Pierre Lévy has identified three main processes of virtualisation that have characterised and lead to the emergence of humanity.[10]

Virtualisation associated with signs. Language leads to a virtualisation of real/actual time through a process of detaching ourselves and events from the immediate time and space in which occur, intensifying the immediate experience through questioning and stories, and creating a virtual reality that can be carried across time and space. Realities we construct in language are virtual realities - an account of an event is not the event itself but a virtualisation of it.

Virtualisation associated with technology. Technology produces a virtualisation of action, of the body and of the physical environment. Humans have always sought means to extend themselves beyond the practicalities of their immediate situations in the process both of survival and making meaning. Fiachra Long notes this in his discussion of technology as monumental history:

> "Even in pre-capitalist cultures people have used artefacts to resist the forgetfulness prevalent in human experience concerning friends, heroes and actions and the general dissipation of one's life energy into disconnected and unrepeatable moments."[11]

Virtualisation associated with social relations. Pierre Lévy sees such things as

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[10] Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (tr. R. Bononno; New York: Plenum Press, 1997).

[11] Fiachra Long, "Technology as Monumental History," in *Technology and Transcendence* (ed. M. Breen, E. Conway and M. McMillan; Blackrock, Dublin: Columba, 2003) 82-104, 84.

ritual, religion, morality, law, economics and political regulations as social mechanisms for virtualising violence and for dealing with relations of force, impulse, instincts and desires. 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.

The importance of virtual realities

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 fulfil a number of important functions crucial to human life

Creation. It is first in virtual space that we generate imaginative new realities that become the material of experimentation, testing and implementation in new actual realities. This process works through a transformation from particular solutions implemented within a specific actual situation into a more general problematic in a virtual situation that is amenable to more fluid imagination, experimentation and transformation.[12] Creative problem-solving, experimentation, artistic creation, drama, story-telling, theology, liturgy, song and prayer can all be seen in these terms.

Exploring potential and testing limits. Virtual spaces are deterritorialised spaces in which there is freedom to explore alternatives, potential and limits in situations free of the confines, demands and requirements of the actual situation. This function is often associated with the virtual reality of cyberspace because of the Internet's particular characteristics of disembodiment and anonymity, but in the normal human processes of developing identity we all utilise imaginative constructions of ourselves (virtual realities) as a way of developing continuity of who we are across different contexts, what sociologist Ervin Goffman refers to as backstage behaviour.[13]

Safety. The virtual is a device we use in search of safety and control in the war against chaos, fragility, pain, wear, and morality. Culture, which includes imaginative conceptual theories, is a virtual construct comprising "a range of material practices and technical and intellectual works, also reflected in individual ideas, desires and aspirations" that serve to "shield us from the brute reality of certain aspects of our embodiment."[14]

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12 Lévy, *Collective Intelligence.*

13 Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

14 Ken Hillis, *Digital Sensations: Space, Identity and Embodiment in Virtual Reality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) xvi.

Hope. An important function of virtual reality is to provide a space in which we can explore the possibility of a situation in which the threats, frustrations and limitations of our actual life do not exist; as a basis for believing that our actual life may one day be free of those threats, frustrations and limitations. It is no accident that most of the religious theories of hope, for example, are strongly eschatological in character, offering people motivation and courage based not on actual realities but on future virtual realities that do not yet exist, or may never exist.

Meaning-making. Meaning does not exist *per se* in any individual event. Meaning is constructed by the distillation of selected essences from individual situations and through the creative process of theorising or virtualisation – whether that be in concept, narrative or visual representation. Though all aspects of any meaning system may be contradicted in part or at different times by actual situations, the importance and tenacity of virtual reality at times is such that people will hold to the virtual reality in the face of at times overwhelming apparent contradiction by actual reality.

Play. One should not underestimate the important role of virtual realities in human playfulness. Whether the purpose is brainstorming for problem-solving, tension release, imaginative exploration beyond boundaries, distraction or physical pleasure, playing in virtual reality space plays an important role in human coping, creation, problem-solving and development. Criticisms of technologically created, multi-sensory virtual realities that see them solely as distraction or in hedonistic terms fail to recognise the important educational, exploratory and developmental role they serve (for good or bad) through their playfulness.

It is these important functions that distinguishes virtual reality from artificial and pseudo-realities. Pseudo-realities are more imitations or counterfeit situations that simulate the real. Virtual realities do more – they are also creative. As well as an "as if" but "not quite" character, they also have a "what if" quality as well.

What makes this creativity possible is that virtual realities are not bound by the constraints of a specific time or place. It is reality that is deterritorialised and de-historicised, unconstrained by specific time-bound and place-bound demands and limits. For that reason, virtual reality plays an important role in the development of both personal and social identity. We develop a continuing narrative of ourselves through a continual process of conceiving optional possibilities (the virtual), testing those options (the actual) and reviewing those performances in relation to a continually developing virtual narrative. People are shaped by virtual realities that capture their imagination and provide them with a vision of the actual person they may become. The most effective communicators, religious leaders – and theologians – are those who can articulate effective virtual realities. When Martin Luther King gave his "I have a dream" speech, he was not talking illusion nor unreality: he was articulating a

virtual reality as a basis on which to transform existing actual reality into a new actual reality.

Theology as a virtual reality

Within this framework, the task of theology is essentially that of constructing virtual realities that give expression to shared experiences, meanings, boundaries, relationships, ethics, hopes and aspirations of communities of people, as a basis for ordering and transforming the actualised or practical realities with which people have to contend. The fundamental processes of virtualisation identified by Lévy can also be seen in theology. Theology utilises significantly virtualisation of signs, particularly language. John Macquarrie reflects this in his description of theology as "the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available."[15] It's interesting to consider that, while not naming it as such, Macquarrie alludes to the "virtual" nature of the theological task:

> "While theology participates in a specific faith and does not speak from outside of this faith, it has nevertheless taken a step back, as it were, from the immediate experiences of faith. In theology, faith has been subject to thought."[16]

Virtualisation in theology occurs through technology, in different forms of media and other material objects used in religious practice, such as visual and tangible artifacts, liturgical practices, etc.; and through social relations, in such things as religious culture, ethics, institutional membership, group belonging and discipline, etc.

Each of these forms of virtualisation are characterised by the same dynamics of virtualisation identified earlier: a constant process of movement and interplay between the characteristics of practical or actual situations in which people find themselves, and the abstracted "virtual" situations that have become part of people's total world through nurture and initiation into faith traditions, ideas and practices which constrain them and provide them with resources in dealing with, ordering or transforming the actual situations they encounter on a day to day basis. This dynamic is more commonly understood in theological terms as the dialectics of theory and praxis[17] or as the

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15 John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1966), 2.

16 Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology,*2.

17 Matthew Lamb, "The Dialectics of Theory and Praxis within Paradigm Analysis," in *Paradigm Change in Theology* (ed. H. Kung and D. Tracy; New York: Crossroad, 1989) 63-109, 65-86.

relationship between theology, worship, discipleship and ethics.

The same movement between the virtual and actual that characterises virtual realities can be seen as operating in religious practice as well. People of religious faith frequently deal with actual situations by seeking to understand their virtual theological meaning as a way of framing and transforming their actual behaviours and incorporating life's experiences into a broader virtual community. When in separated virtual realities such as theological thought or liturgies, on the other hand, the press is to take the elements of the virtual reality and try to implement them in actual situations of daily life. The preacher's frequent admonition that faith is not just for Sunday is a reflection of that dynamic: that the virtual realities of religious faith, presented in theology, ritual, liturgy, and aspirations of community should not be seen simply as an escape from the actual, but as an ongoing process in engaging, responding to and transforming the actual.

How culturally "real" or relevant is current theological virtualisation?

It has been argued above that, far from being an escape from or inferior manifestation of real life, effective virtual realities play a crucial imaginative and regenerative role in our being human and in developing ourselves beyond the specific and limited constraints or practicality or time or space bounded-ness. As such, theology may be seen in contemporary culturally relevant terms as a virtualising enterprise. How culturally relevant is theology as an effective or genuine virtual reality?

To exist as a virtual reality, the virtual needs several conditions to be present: effective similarity and effective difference. An effective virtual reality needs to be close enough to or reflective of people's material conditions or actual physical experiences that they see it is as "real," or relevant to the actual situations they're dealing with. A phenomenon that lacks this effective similarity is practically perceived as unreality, not virtual reality. On the other hand a virtual reality also needs to be sufficiently different that people see it as offering possibilities beyond what is available in the actual situation. This difference needs to be understood as content and as form: effective virtual realities need to offer a dimension of aesthetic, material, technological and sensory experience beyond the actual that makes them attractive and participatory. It is this effective difference from actual situations that enables virtual realities to become, in Lévy's words, "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."[18] Does what is understood and practised as theology today function in that way, even for its core Christian

[18] Lévy, *Becoming Virtual*, 16.

constituencies, let alone wider communities or societies?

I want to suggest that increasingly the traditional practice or disciplines of theology are losing their power to do that because they are locked into particular cultural forms of language, technology and social relations that are passing. At the level of technology, for example, the linear black-and-white textual embodiments and cognitive concerns of theology are losing out to other cultural alternatives, such as the iconographic, interactive, multi-sensory, immersive, narrative-based technological embodiments of digital virtual realities in their many forms.

Likewise one can ask to what extent the language written by theologians in books touches the actual reality people deal with in such a way that it is seen as "real," and in touching those actual realities opens them up in such a way that a real virtuality is presented that may become the source of creation, potential, safety, hope, meaning and joy. Or, as Marty suggests, in failing to make the transition into the new, has theology remained as what is now the activity of "a fragile, endangered species….books written by people whose vocation climaxed in reading and writing them."[19]

The challenges presented to theology as a religious practice today are not unique in Christianity's history. Osborn in a study of Clement of Alexandria has noted the tensions and negotiations that occurred with the widespread adaptation of writing in Christian teaching in Alexandria in the 3rd century.[20] Likewise Hans Kûng notes a paradigm shift in theology with Augustine's elaboration of the doctrine of the Trinity in the 5th century as a primarily written rather than oral doctrine.[21] Eisenstein and others have noted similar reconceptualisations of Christian faith and practice in the move from primarily manuscript to printed text with the extended spread of printing in

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19 Marty, "Social Context," 186.

20 Eric Osborn, "Teaching and Writing in the first chapter of the Stromateis of Clement of Alexandria" *Journal of Theological Studies* 10 (1959) 335-43.

21 Hans Küng, *Christianity: The Religious Situation of our Time* (London: SCM, 1994) 298.

22 Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The printing press as an agent of change: Communications and cultural transformations in early modern Europe* (2 vols; Cambridge: CUP, 1979); Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *Print culture and enlightenment thought* ([Chapel Hill]: Hanes Foundation Rare Book Collection/University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1986); Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The coming of the book: the impact of printing, 1450-1800* (tr. D. Gerard; London: NLB, 1957); *The Reformation and the book* (St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History; ed. Jean Francois Gilmont and Karin Maag; London: Ashgate, 1998).

Europe during the early Modern period.[22]

This paper has suggested that these historical paradigmatic shifts, occasioned by major changes in the fundamental technologies of cultural communication, provide a framework for the sort of changes being faced by theology again today, with the cultural shift from primarily text-dominant culture which supported the textual practices of theology, to digital culture. Theology, if it is to have a place, must reinvent itself in a way that addresses some of the key characteristics of this cultural context: the explosion of volume of information, changes in the sensory nature of communication and the rise of visuality as a significant component of textual meaning, changes in the relationship of author and reader, the increased fluidity and play of text and ideas, reader expectations of interactivity, and changes in the nature of institutional and religious authority. The concept of theology as a virtual reality may offer one potential metaphor for that reinvention.