

Getting Real in Virtual Reality

A copy right paper by Dr. Debbie Herring

I'm delighted and honoured to be here today surrounded by people whom I envy and admire. Envy because you all met and knew David Lochhead, someone whose big idea sparked off something that changed my life. Admire, because you've mostly been doing this stuff a lot longer than I have. I've read some of your papers, and it's the whole discourse that you have been developing which gave me the opportunity to do some exciting new research and to produce some results which start to answer some of the questions that David was asking in his earliest IT writings.

When I was an undergraduate theologian, I was also just getting hooked on hobby computing. Previous to that, in the late 1970s, I'd worked in tech support for ICL mainframes, and on dumb terminals on a DEC 10, but the acquisition of a rudimentary desktop, followed a couple of years later by my first PC in 1993, opened the new world of networked computing to me. But I was very occupied being a single parent of 5 children and doing a Bachelor's degree by distance learning, so time and energy were limited – and of course, in those days, you paid by the minute for time online.

In 1995, I came across David's web page. I can still remember the sense of affinity I had as I read "Have you Hugged your Computer today", which by then was a relatively old document. I'd toyed with thinking theologically about computing, but remember, I was a pretty lowly undergrad in isolation at that time. But here was a bona fide professor of theology exploring the same territory I was, and saying the same sort of things – only more eloquently and with considerably more data and theological understanding to draw on. This was something I thought I might come back to when my BTh was out of the way.

But fate has a way of shoving you gently in the right direction. I signed up to do my undergrad dissertation on Sufism. It's a topic I

knew something about anyway, and I was allocated a delightful supervisor with whom I'd shared a fruitful working relationship and several hangovers in the past. However, six months into the 18 month project, the rat got a new job in Texas and left me at the mercy of a woman with whom I'd had nothing but conflict for 4 years as his replacement. Something had to be done.

I decided to change my subject to something that she couldn't possibly supervise. I don't know how the system works here, but it's very bad form in the UK to ask for a change of supervisor. A change of topic, on the other hand, may force a change of tutor without causing offence. But what to do? With 6 months of my time wasted, I needed a topic I could research fast, and in which I already had done some work. I was thinking about this when an old US programme came on TV, and there was a bumper sticker, on the back of a car "Have you hugged your kid today?" Yes! I had my topic.

Trying to get a copy of David's book in the UK proved difficult, and I ended up borrowing a library copy that I had to wait for 8 weeks for. I chose to explore whether the (then) new phenomenon of online community could be analysed theologically, and with a bit of help from a UK based sociologist of online communities, I produced the dissertation that won me a first from Oxford University. Like all good theses, it asked more questions than it answered, so when the opportunity to undertake doctoral research into contextual theology appeared practically on my doorstep in Sheffield, I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

So, what has all this to do with this symposium? Well, I finally have some answers to share. I wish I'd dared, in 1998 when I started this, to contact David and tell him about my research, but I was too overawed to do so. So I'm telling you because I think it matters.

In the first chapter of *Theology in a Digital World* he says:

.... An analysis of the technology suggests that the world as it is seen through a computer is different in specific ways from the world as we are accustomed to seeing it in the church community. It is a world in

which the clear borderlines between the real and the possible, between work and play, between here and there, are no longer present. The computer world view will inevitably raise questions for us about the nature of God, or human nature, and of community. If I have done nothing more, I hope that I have succeeded in indicating what some of those questions will be. (1988: 24)

So my PhD research started out trying to answer some of the new questions. I looked at the nature of community, a specific community in cyberspace that *didn't* set out to be church, but instead reinvented what it is to be Christian and in community in cyberspace just be doing stuff.

I don't have time to tell you everything I discovered. I have a methodology chapter to die for, but I'm just asking you to trust me that it stands up to scrutiny. I ended up doing two things: I observed the life of the group for two years – around 120,000 posts. And I had a very high response rate to an extensive questionnaire, which revealed demographic data but which also explored aspects of life online. I've summarised some of my discoveries in a chapter in *Religion in Cyberspace*, which I'm hoping that those of you who are interested will read for yourselves. Today I want to concentrate on some of the findings which I think address some of the concerns David expressed all those years ago.

Let's start with some common misconceptions. In my experience, some people seem to think that communities in cyberspace are merely deficient normal communities: agglomerations of people who can't share body language because they never really meet. There's a tendency to apply concepts and frameworks from the study of face-to-face communities directly to online communities, and to indicate thereby that online communities are all very well, but they'll never matter in the way that real life community matters.

The other misconception goes the other way. Online communities are so conceptually different from any kind of real-life community that we can talk about communities in cyberspace without any concern for the concepts and frameworks that apply to non-virtual communities.

In this new, connected age, we are heading towards Teilhard de Chardin's vision of a noosphere where mind-to-mind communities exist without the need for physical proximity.

Both approaches, of course, have a grain of truth. Either can be used to foreshadow utopian dreams of the future forms of human interaction, and either can equally well foreshadow the end of civilisation as we know it. From the point of view of a researcher (and I'm not a minister, community leader or pastor, so I can take that slightly detached position!) what we need to do is to work in a different kind of way, neither comparing nor contrasting communities this way, but to instead talk about any community in its own terms, and this is what I did.

So...

PERICHORESIS AND FOUR KINDS OF PRAXIS

1. Introduction

When I first started researching community in cyberspace as an undergraduate in the mid 1990s, the main requirement was to justify the use of the word "community" to describe the way people relate to one another in a computer mediated environment. The work since then of people like Steven Jones and Nancy Baym have established it as commonplace to talk about "virtual community" so that today, there is no need to exegete Tönnies' long descriptions of *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft*, or to consider critically the "imagined community" of Benedict Anderson. Oddly enough, the Church has been happy to accept the principle of the virtual community for centuries: we pray at every communion service "with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven", and you can't get a much clearer description of a virtual community than that! My research has used the methods and tools of Contextual Theology to analyse the activity of the Usenet group `uk.religion.christian`. The participant observation element produced the entire transcript of the group's discourse for the period. The questionnaire, long and detailed as it was, produced a response rate of well over 60 % - perhaps

close to 90% depending on how it is calculated. It should be noted that some of the quotations from the group are taken from outside the period of study, but they do reflect views expressed during the two years of observation.

2. Perichoresis

The members of the community I was studying know one another almost exclusively through their interaction in the group. In most cases, they have never met in real life, so the way they “know” one another is constrained by the limitations of the medium. Each person who reads messages to the group constructs an imaginative image of other individuals based on what they say and how they react to other people the reader also “knows”. This constructed image mutates as other messages, and other interactions, influence the way the reader constructs the image.

Much theology has been built John 15:4, when he says to the disciples “Abide in me, as I abide in you”. Many interpret this as Jesus incorporating humankind into the life of the Trinity of God. But quite apart from any religious connotations, this phrase describes very aptly the way that people relating to one another in virtual community have their ongoing being – their existence – not in some objective way, but in the imagination of others, and at the same time, hold the existence of others in their own imagination.

As far as one can tell, each contributor to the group remains the same person in real life. Over time, people change little by little, but remain recognisably the same person. But the experience of contributors to this computer mediated community is somewhat different. An initial impression, formed, perhaps on the basis of a single post or a series of messages posted on a specific topic or over a short period of time, may be completely changed by the discovery of significant new information. For example, one poster uses a family nickname, which is often assumed to be a male name. On several occasions, others have assumed that this person is male, and the image they have constructed of this person is of a man. On discovering that “he” is actually “she”, they have had to remake the

image of who the poster is that they held to take into account a change in gender:

... until you pointed it out to me, I didn't realize you were female! Please forgive my ignorance, as in America your name isn't used (yet) for females. Apologies!

Similar situations have arisen where a recent graduate has been assumed to be young, when she is in fact in her forties with adult children:

Poster A:

I think perhaps you are taking this more personally than I had intended because you have devoted so much of your young life to this topic.

Poster B:

My *young* life?

How old do you think I am?

Other examples include where an atheist was assumed to be a Christian, and apparent confusion over the nationality of posters.

Because of the extremely wide range of approaches, views (24 denominations, including atheists and other religions, were listed in responses to a questionnaire) and personalities represented, group members may agree with one another on one topic and argue opposing cases on another. People who disagree profoundly on one subject may unite to respond positively to a request for prayer, or in affirmative support for someone undergoing personal problems. The discovery that someone lives in the same city, or reads the same books, or gets the same results to an online personality test draws people together until a doctrinal or ethical disagreement puts them apart again.

So within the boundaries of each person's perception of the community there is a constantly shifting landscape of alliances and enmities, understandings and differences, knowledge and ignorance. The precise pattern of movement will be unique to each individual, whose perspective is based in his or her own reality, and who views the group and individuals within it from that reality.

From our point of view as theologians, a model of community that adequately reflects this kind of chaotic system proved difficult. Christian models of community are, in general, based on either geographical or social proximity (the church, ecclesia, koinonia) or on notions of fellowship and common understanding ("we believe in one holy catholic church" says the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed). Neither of these apply to the virtual community I was studying, and yet the vast majority of those who responded to the questionnaire had made it quite clear that they were a community of some kind (80% replied yes to the question "Would you describe uk.r.c as a community in some way?").

An alternative model suggested itself, from the vocabulary not of contextual theology, but of systematic theology, and was suggested by reviewing the theological context of Jesus' statement described above. A little earlier in John's gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying "The Father is in me, and I am in the Father" (John 10:38). In the early years of the church, when Christians were groping for appropriate ways to talk about their experience of God, this statement prompted people to seek to describe what God's inner existence might be like. Eusebius and others dusted down the physics of the fifth century BCE philosopher Anaxagoras, who used the term "perichoresis" to describe chaotic movement in finite space. This term, to the early church, seemed to offer a way of describing the dynamic inner life of a God who was at once One, Only, Unique Unity, and at the same time, a moving, living, shifting active relationship between Creator, Redeemer and Spirit – in a word, the doctrine of Trinity.

Of course, the doctrine of Trinity belongs more properly to systematic theology than to contextual theology. Perichoresis mean literally

moving or dancing around – peri means around, and choreo is the root of our word “choreography”. The Latin fathers translated this word as “Circumincessio” – “walking around”, which is altogether more pedestrian!

Augustine, in *De Trinitate*, described it as “a trinity of persons mutually interrelated, and a unity of equal essence”. Jürgen Moltmann says this of the doctrine of Trinity:

If on the basis of salvation history and the experience of salvation, we have to recognise the unity of the Triune God in the perichoretic at-oneness of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, then this does not correspond to the solitary human subject in relationship to himself...The perichoretic at-oneness of the Triune God corresponds to the experience of the community of Christ, the community which the Spirit unites through respect, affection and love.

Revisiting the activity of uk.religion.christian with this model in hand was instructive. The shifting, churning, apparently random movement of relationships in this virtual community is well described as “chaotic movement in finite (cyber) space”, after Anaxagoras. Dancing around, sometimes together, sometimes apart, but always within the community, is a most apt metaphor for the inner life of the group. At the same time, there is an appropriateness about the connotations of dynamic life in community which the Christian use of the term suggests.

Data from the questionnaire added unexpected support for the use of this model. It has long been known that some people read newsgroups but do not contribute. These people are described as “lurkers”. Although their presence is assumed, it has been difficult to demonstrate that such people exist, and in what numbers. When the questionnaire for this project was being written, it was unreasonable optimism that led to the inclusion of “lurker” as a self-description option for respondents. But as it turned out, 22 of the 114 respondents described themselves as lurkers, and an incidental finding from another question showed that ukrc posters lurk in considerable numbers on other groups as well.

But it was lurkers' responses to other questions that provided a surprise. Four lurkers ticked the box "it has become part of my life", and two agreed "it has become an important part of my life". Several of them offered to respond by email or telephone to further questions. People who were otherwise silent and unnoticed in the community took the time and trouble to complete a long questionnaire for a community member, and were willing to follow that up if asked; and more than a quarter of them were claiming that this community was part of their life! I believe that this is strong support for a model of community that is based on subjective, dynamic relationships with envisioned others: a vision of humanity where the object is actualised in the imagination of the subject.

The idea of mutually indwelling relationships between self and others, dancing around chaotically but remaining in community, has for 1700 years been used by Christians to describe the inner life of God. Community in cyberspace reflects this profoundest concept of community that Christianity has discovered. At the risk of enraging those systematic theologians who prefer to reserve all religious language for their own use, it is entirely appropriate to liberate the term perichoresis into secular language for the use of those exploring new forms of community, acknowledging that Christian theology has done us all a service by preserving it as a model of community which resonates so richly with contemporary experience.

3. 4 kinds of Praxis

If the notion of perichoresis owes everything to systematic theology, the concept of praxis owes everything to contextual theology, especially the liberation theologies of Latin America. For them, it was not enough to merely allow belief to inform practice: Christian living should be about "doing" faith in every human activity. The choice of the word "praxis" was intended to ground this approach to faith in the language of classical theology, where orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right action) are complementary values in Christian life.

All contextual theologies are more concerned with community practice than with details of doctrinal agreement, and liberation theologies especially privilege praxis above belief as the sign of authentic Christian expression. It would be odd indeed to find an exploration in contextual theology without a focus on praxis, and so one of the aims of this research into community online was to determine the praxis of the community. The obvious finding is that a text only, computer mediated community, whose mode of existence is perichoretic rather than physical is not concerned with praxis. This finding, though superficially true, does not do justice to the rich community life of the group, and there was a niggling suspicion that praxis might be identifiable if it were only possible to extrapolate the concept of praxis into a virtual environment. The question was how to separate out text that corresponds to thought, views and beliefs from text that might correspond to action.

The breakthrough came unexpectedly. A regular poster – let's call him Mr X – posted the following message:

On the whole, no. At the risk of offending my Catholic friends, I have observed that where the Catholic church is the majority denomination, you do find a lot more of what we Protestants would regard as superstition. Where the situation is otherwise, these things are toned down, doubtless in deference to the majority opinion.

Such a post was very much contrary to the normal intercourse of the group, which usually extends respect to those from all religious traditions. Another regular poster, Mrs Y, replied:

On Thu, 16 Dec 1999 06:52:22 BST,. enlightened us all with:

>On the whole, no. At the risk of offending my > black friends, I have observed that where the

> black church is the majority denomination,

> you do find a lot more of what we whites

- > would regard as superstition. Where
- > the situation is otherwise, these things are
- > toned down, doubtless in deference to the
- > majority opinion.

May I please disassociate myself from bigotry

The outcry was immediate and heated. Although the majority of the group agreed that what Mr X had posted was unpleasant and showed unacceptable prejudice, Mrs Y's misrepresentation of his views to portray him as racist was intolerable. Usenet posts are normally publicly archived, and this misrepresentation would make permanent a slur on his character. Some people agreed that such a parody of his views would have been entirely acceptable if she had made clear that it were a parody by annotation or comment, but as a straight ascription to him of views he had not expressed, a great wrong had been done.

This incident showed where a line might be drawn to separate thoughts, views and opinions from "actions". The content of posts, the text and its meaning, were not "action". But making a post in a particular way could be construed as "action". With this in mind, a survey of other posts produced plenty of evidence of purposeful posting made to achieve specific effects. Once these were identified, four very clear elements of praxis emerged.

a. Inclusion

First, posts that are purposefully welcoming and set out to draw in those who might otherwise be seen as marginal to the community show a praxis of inclusion. It is a sad fact that newcomers to many Usenet groups are treated poorly by regular contributors. If a new poster asks a question that has been previously answered, or makes a comment that challenges widely held views on a group, the common response is a process known as flaming: numerous

aggressive, offensive and belittling messages are posted in order to remind the newbie that he or she has no status in the group. In contrast, new posters to ukrc are generally welcomed, offered "virtual jelly babies" and invited politely to conform to the conventions of the group if they have not already done so: Welcome out of the lurking shadows S, join the fun, pull up a chair and have one of these jellybabies that Neil left when he went on holiday

Although many groups mention and acknowledge the presence of lurkers in their midst, few take into account the effect posts may have on lurkers. In contrast, members of uk.religion.christian may invoke the known presence of lurkers to remind people to temper their comments: What concerns me is the view of Christianity that a casual lurker gets when he or she reads J's posts. At least a rebuttal shows that we don't all think like that.

People who have lurked and then make it known that they have done so when they post for the first time are welcomed not as newcomers, but as familiar members of the community.

b. Personal Connection

Second, there is a determined culture of engaging with people as individuals. Most posters use their real names and offer identifying information which is remembered and referred by others. This produces what I have called a praxis of personal connection. Posters consciously and deliberately deal with one another as individuals, rather than treating the group as an interactive broadcast medium. There is also recognition that each individual has personal connections outside the group and in real life:

BTW, I'm not (...) trying to prove anything here about the RC church; your own church is also the source, for you, of your interpretation of Scripture.

The darker side of this is that some people conceive personal dislikes and enmities towards others and express these as freely as they

express friendship and affection. Unregulated personal connections are not always positive! c. Common Purpose

The third kind of praxis identified is a praxis of common purpose. Most posters value greatly the diversity which is evident in the community. People of several religions and none, and those of a wide variety of denominations within Christianity, post to the group and read it, indicating that they share a view that discussion of the Christian faith in the UK, and general discussion between UK Christians, is a purposeful way to spend leisure time. No-one is excluded from the community on the grounds of faith or lack thereof, and membership is not limited or withheld on the grounds of belief. The following response to the question "Why do you read and/or contribute to ukrc?" is typical:

To converse in a moderated environment with people from a wide range of traditions. All of which are considered to be of equal value.

d. Expression

Finally, there is a praxis of expression. Members of the community are committed to putting their beliefs and opinions into the public domain by expressing them in this UK-Christianity orientated community. The decision to post a message to the group is a decision to express views, thoughts or ideas in words that will be read as text by members of the group, and by anybody who choose to explore the archives kept by Google.

This latter kind of praxis is evident in all posts to the group, and helps to support the view that there is indeed a kind of contextual theology operating in uk.religion.christian, since it is clearly common commitment to praxis rather than any kind of doctrinal consensus that holds the community together.

4. Conclusions

The themes I've talked about are drawn from the findings of a long term, in-depth exploration of one particular community in

cyberspace. First, the nature of the community existence of the group may be usefully conceptualised as perichoretic: that is, members of the community relate to one another by dynamic mutual interpenetration on an intellectual level.

Second, the analysis of the religious life of the community showed forms of behaviour which could be described in terms of four kinds of praxis.

This isn't, by any means, a comprehensive response to David's thoughts: "The computer world view will inevitably raise questions for us about the nature of God, or human nature, and of community" But he was asking the right questions, and asking them some 15 years before anyone else was articulating them. Today I've shared with you my own exploration of the nature of God, human nature, and community as it looks in a computer world. This is the reality of virtual spirituality – what really happens in virtual environments.

So, where do we go from here? Well, doing a project on this scale has forced me to develop a set of theological tools and research methodology robust enough for this kind of exploratory work. It would be good to share these with others working in similar areas: we don't need to keep reinventing the wheel. I'm writing much of this up as a book, but meanwhile, I'm happy to share these with anyone who'd like to know more about them.

Second, I have a huge amount of primary data. I used it for my work, but it forms a corpus that could easily stand up to much more scrutiny. It's bound in with my thesis, and again, I'm happy to make it available to other researchers.

It seems to me that we best honour David Lochhead, not by merely celebrating his memory, but by continuing to keep theology right on the leading edge of the unfolding future of computer mediated communication. Ecunet, VST and you, my new friends here, are doing just that, and I'm looking forward to working with you all as we keep his vision of theology in a digital world alive.

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