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Virtual Religion in Second Life

Why do I need to go to church? Can't I just worship God
everywhere, anywhere I want?

Pat Robertson

Introduction

In his book *Bring It On: Tough Questions. Candid Answers,* the
controversial evangelist Pat Robertson invokes the above question as the subtitle
of his forth chapter: "Christians and 21st Century Problems." His question turns
out to reflect a position shared by many Americans. According to a survey in
2008, people in the United States feel less inclined to continue to attend church,
turning increasingly to nondenominational and even Internet-based forms of
religious community (Pew Research Center). With the development of modern
communication and information technology, people have begun practicing
religion online—and in some extreme cases, purely online. In the United States
alone, some 28 million people have used the Internet for religious purposes;
indeed, a daily traffic of over three million has been reported accessing religious
material online (Larsen 17), including visits to online churches. Though unable to
perform every task that a real life church performs, online churches meet the
textual prerequisite for worship by providing members with sacred texts, prayer

requests, Bible studies, sermons, and announcements regarding community events.

Nevertheless, lacking a physical community and face-to-face communication, online religion has shaken the fundamentals of Christianity and has left many critics, priests, and theologians uneasy. While Lorne L. Dawson overgeneralizes regarding online religion by saying "literally, nothing (online) is sacred" (Dawson 22), well-argued skepticism about the authenticity of online religion abounds among experts in human communication. These scholars claim, for instance, that real physical surroundings are indispensable to authentic religious communication—"How could a cyber-temple ever replace the actual walls of the real one?" (O'Leary 42). Valid as this criticism might be, a special form of online religion stays intact in the face of scholarly and theological attack: the virtual religion in the 3-D online world of "Second Life" (SL). Instead of offering religious materials and services that people might obtain offline, SL churches provide in-world[1] citizens first-hand religious experience, creating a "virtual reality" in which people can "sit" in a "church" and "talk" to a pastor "face-to-face." Different from other online churches in essence, the virtual communities in SL seem to be a valid and effective substitute for real life (RL) churches, and in some aspects, even a better manifestation of Christian values. An examination of SL worship is therefore warranted.

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[1] Being inside or online in a virtual world; often refers to Second Life

Online Communities, A Multi-layered Debate

When comparing online communities with offline communities, scholars often focus on traditional, text-based online communities, which include E-Mail exchanges, BBS[2] conversations, MOO[3] interactions, and SNS[4] postings. Scholars of sociology, religion, and cultural studies (among others) criticize these traditional, text-based online communities from social and psychological perspectives, claiming that these communities fail to meet three prerequisites for authentic communication: "time, location, and body" (Kallenberg 28). On the Internet, information is exchanged at the speed of light, leaving no time for rumination and reflection. Conversations taking place in chat rooms, BBS, and E-Mails neither shed light on nor take their cues from physical surroundings. And—perhaps most important—online participants are completely "disembodied" (Dawson 32). With his expertise in social psychology, Lorne L. Dawson argues that the disembodied communication in an anonymous textual environment strikes people as impersonal, and therefore inauthentic (32).

Despite all the drawbacks associated with online communication, Facebook reported a 145% growth of US users in 2010 (corbett3000). With most of its features being text-based, Facebook has become the epitome of a traditional online community. Its success has led some scholars (Zhang, Lövheim and

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[2] Bulletin Board System
[3] MUD (Multi-User Dungeon), object oriented
[4] Social networking service

Linderman) to revise some of their critiques of communication and information technology. These scholars argue that the "impersonal" setting of the internet can actually benefit online communities, because the "instantaneous, anonymous, and global" (Zhang 5) features of these communities "transcend the borders of time and space" (Lövheim and Linderman 125). Going further, these scholars claim that online communities "make possible the forging of relations between individuals from a diversity of cultural and social settings" (125). As scholars revise their understanding of what comprises communication in modern society, they marvel at the many possibilities that online communities afford.

Although Facebook has played a major role in promoting and shaping online communication, its success is mainly celebrated for its non-religious uses. Indeed, according to an online survey, Facebook users are generally unfriendly to religious organizations, declaring these pages to be among the "least liked types of Facebook pages" (Zarrella). It's interesting to consider why. In contrast to Facebook, specialized online religious communities are more organized and introspective, but are also more exclusive. The religious communication that these communities require is not the casual and often superficial chatting people participate in on Facebook. Nor do religious users consider the people they socialize with mere "Facebook friends." Rather, unlike their non-religious counterparts, some existing online religious communities adopt an exclusive hierarchical system with a strict process of membership application. Information, along with authority, is enjoyed by leadership only, while non-members and

newcomers are denied permission to either read or write posts (Krogh and Phllifant 211). These online religious communities are characterized by Robert Howard, a professor teaching Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin, as "enclaves" that harbor a significant danger of isolation (Howard 147).

Clearly these sorts of religious online communities—text-driven and enforcing strict hierarchies—continue to generate concern from scholars of communication. Lacking both the "time, location, and body" prerequisites and more inclusive policies, these religious online communities have failed to conceptualize and communicate the often profound religious experience, and have turned the expected dialogic, dynamic communication of worship into a one-way flow of text. These communities, while "valued sources of information," do not offer "a typical place for community life" (Krogh and Phllifant 218).

Second Life, A Second Thought

As traditional online religious communities failed in their mission to generate authentic religious communication, a new form of online community emerged to take up the challenge. This new generation of online religious communities was born in Second Life (SL), a 3-D virtual world both built and owned by its residents. Launched in June 2003, SL has been around for more than eight years and has more than 10 million registered "citizens" (Strickland and Roos). The company also reported some 15,000 daily registrations in 2011

(Linden Lab, The Second Life Economy in Q2 2011). Compared to the 845 million active users on Facebook (Protalinski), the SL community is relatively small. However, the activities in SL are designed to be substantial. People are attracted by the various social, economic, and educational opportunities provided in this virtual world. Harvard and Yale have in-world campuses. BMW, Adidas, and IBM have opened in-world stores (yes, they sell virtual products!). Many famous places, including the Eiffel tower, the Great Wall, and even the deck of the Titanic, have been replicated in SL. Among the many bedazzling features of SL is the possibility for creating an avatar[5] in any appearance you want. According to the official website, "you can create an avatar that resembles your real life or create an alternate identity" (Linden Lab, Avatar). Allowing ultimate freedom for each individual, SL is the birthplace of many vibrant online communities, both religious and non-religious. In SL, people make friends, dine out, go to clubs, have sex, get married—and of course, practice religion. Whilst sharing some characteristics with both online and offline religious communities, the SL religious communities are developed in a unique environment. Therefore, they pose a unique set of problems and questions to the scholars: What does community mean in a virtual world? How do SL communities adapt to the 3-D setting? Who comprises the congregation? Do churches make any ecclesiastical compromises in order to virtually practice the religion? How do SL communities

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[5] In a virtual world, an avatar is a digital persona that you can create and customize (Linden Lab).

differ from RL communities? To answer these questions, we will examine a SL community called "Anglicans of Second Life."

Anglicans of Second Life–A Case of Virtual Religion

The group Anglicans of Second Life (AoSL) was founded in November 2006 by Rocky Vallejo[6] (Wright 12). Its Charter is as follows:

> A Christian community for those who call themselves: Anglicans, Episcopalians or members of the Church of England, Episcopal Church or any of the other bodies of believers who share the Anglican heritage (12).

Though the Charter makes AoSL appear to be a relatively exclusive community, it is actually a community that accepts all and serves all. Although I am neither a member of the Anglican Church nor a Christian, I attended several services in the Anglican Cathedral of Second Life,[7] socialized with other community members on an ice rink,[8] and had an interview with a lay pastor from AoSL at her home.[9] My experiences and observations, along with other written sources, will unpack at least some of the questions regarding SL religious communities.

As previously mentioned, authentic, meaningful communication is a problem that many online religious communities are unable to solve. AoSL, however, meets all three of the prerequisites for authentic communication—time,

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[6] Second Life name
[7] A virtual place in SL owned by AoSL
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

location, and body. First we should examine "time" and how it functions in SL worship. While Kallenberg disapproves of communication by typing—he argues that words appear at too fast a pace (29)—Wright, the lay pastor I interviewed, had a completely different perspective. She points out in her self-published paper that by allowing typing in a service, she has to "wait for responses to be typed by those participating." Contrary to scholars' prediction that typed words lose their power, the "slowing pace of worship ... allows the power of the words to re-emerge" (Wright 16). In terms of the objections regarding location: while scholars like Brad J. Kallenberg might denounce SL as a "non-place" (26) and criticize its virtual setting, in fact the Anglican Cathedral in Second Life is an ideal place for people to socialize, study, and worship. The Cathedral, partially modeled on the Durham Cathedral in England, took Monty Merlin, the chief "architect," two months to build. While other SL churches "had been modern buildings or like small parish churches of medieval design" (Wright 12), the Cathedral is traditionally designed so that it contrasts with the modern technology of much of SL and thus attracts more people (12). Moreover, the church provides a quiet and sacred atmosphere for virtual worship and Bible study, which scholars tend to overlook (Kallenberg 33). Finally, regarding the necessary body in communication: computer scientists and animators have made painstaking efforts to model the avatars in SL so that people can take full advantage of their "bodies." They can dress up their avatars for Sunday service, apply gestures and animations when talking, and worship God piously by kneeing

on the floor. For those who do not have an ideal real body (e.g. the disabled), having a virtual healthy body could mean a lot. Disabled in RL, Seshat Czeret reflects her SL experience:

> Because of the nature of my disabilities, a wheelchair is insufficient. However, SL permits me to do things without leaving the protected environment of my home … From my computer chair, I can teach, run a business, have an active social life, and be a functioning member of a community. Second Life is my wheelchair. (qtd. in Epstein)

Considering the easy access to SL and the feature of creating avatars in any appearance, the freedom Seshat enjoyed was an unparalleled experience that neither a RL community nor a traditional online community could provide.

Not only does SL bless the disabled with, literally, a "second life," it also enables the able-bodied to interact with their virtual environment in a much more immersive way than traditional text-driven online communities do. During one Friday night social event, members of AoSL went figure skating by manipulating their avatars gracefully on the ice rink. One member of AoSL told me she spent four Linden dollars[10] on her special skates so that she would look more beautiful. Cookies and hot chocolate were also served on the ice rink. Avatars could hold the cocoa in their hands when they were chatting and skating. Clearly traditional online communities, limited by their text-based technologies,

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[10] Money used in Second Life. Buying rate is L$/USD = 239.9 (6:30PM EST 02/05/2012)

do not permit the same level of interactivity and therefore cannot achieve the same authentic sense of community.

While satisfying communication is certainly possible in SL, users may still question whether or not another user is being honest or authentic. The anonymity in Second Life not only makes online communication "impersonal," but also generates "pseudonymous identities" and even fake priests (Wright 8). Ailsa Wright mentions in her paper that some members of the community encountered an avatar who posed as a "priest" and taught heresy to them. Although Wright warns the community against future deception, she still regards anonymity as an opportunity, rather than a danger. During our interview, she ironically concluded that "the virtual brings something more real of each individual," adding that while in RL we talk face-to-face, in SL we talk heart-to-heart (Wright, Interview on Second Life and AoSL). From her perspective, the "masks" that people wear in modern society are more likely to prevent them from honest communication than are the avatars they create in SL.

AoSL is a prime example of a virtual religious community that bonds people within and beyond religion. Established among a diverse online population, AoSL provides a safe and unbiased environment for "damaged people" (Wright, 2012), who have lost their faith in RL, and special groups (e.g. LGBT) who are rejected by some RL churches. In her paper, Wright mentions several AoSL members, some of them non-religious, who have had a life-altering

experience with virtual religion that they would not have sought in RL churches. One of the people Wright mentioned was a girl who had been sexually abused by her father since she was eleven. Troubled by her past, the girl lost her faith and couldn't go to a RL church. However, through an SL church she restored her faith and found her way to an abundant life (Wright 21). Examples like this have RL implications. It is worth considering why an SL virtual community can achieve something that RL churches fail to.

Back to Reality

Christianity is facing several problems in today's society. According to an online survey, Americans are seeing a decline in Church attendance—the Catholic Church alone lost nearly 400,000 members in 2006 (Burke). A Hong Kong scholar attributes the decline to the development of science and technology, and to the awakening of individuality (Zhang 2). Empowered by science and technology, people have become increasingly disenchanted by religion. Individualism, being a core value of modern life, redirects people from the obligation of going to Church to the freedom and privacy they find in personal practice. Ultimately, as more and more modern believers see ordained priests, Christian creeds, and Sunday services as mere formal exercises, the secularization and marginalization of the Church seem inevitable (3).

Given such circumstances, the SL communities offer some meaningful solutions. First of all, AoSL works with technology rather than against it. All

members benefit from the convenience of modern communication and information technology that AoSL employs. Second, by practicing religion on the Internet, a more private space than a RL church, AoSL arguably can foster a personal relationship with God. Third, instead of basing the church on the combination of "building + priest + Sunday service" (Wright 15), AoSL employs a combination of "community + faith + action" (15). "[If] the people worshipping are genuinely worshipping," Wright believes that their faith and action, though virtual, are more important than "rigid conformity to a norm" (17). For instance, AoSL members, controversially, went to virtual communion in which no wine or bread were consecrated or shared. Although AoSL failed to resolve the fundamental difference between physical and virtual communions, their "spiritual communion" (Wright, Personal interview) was a brave attempt to practice religion online despite the "norm." Therefore, in Wright's view, AoSL has a mission that is more pragmatic than dogmatic, and thus perhaps more convincing to the portion of the modern congregation who tend to favor practicing their belief to following the doctrines per se.

In conclusion, the virtual community AoSL has achieved three goals that some RL churches fail to achieve: personal relationships with God that employ rather than resist technology, an inclusive congregation, and the perception of genuine worships among believers, regardless of the form that worship might take. Consider the achievements of AoSL through the lens of biblical text:

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. (KJV Romans 10.9-10.13,)

We find that, according to the Bible, salvation is promised to whoever confesses to Jesus directly with his own mouth, rather than through an ordained pastor or religious rites. Moreover, anyone who believes with his or her heart is righteous and will therefore be saved, no matter (for instance) what his or her sexual orientation might be. By rejecting people based on their sexual orientation, or by insisting on the irreplaceable role of ordained pastor and many other formalistic "norms," RL churches may end up contradictory to the teachings of the Bible. Not only do they fail to minister to part of the congregation, worse still, by discriminating and rejecting certain groups of people, RL churches add to the alienation from society that these people have already felt. No wonder Wright claims in the interview that AoSL is "closer to Jesus' idea of ministering to the sick, not the healthy" (Wright, Personal interview), leaving the mission of many RL churches in question.

Concluding Remarks

After watching a recorded evening prayer held by AoSL, Pastor P.,[11] a local Anglican priest, gave me a short comment, after which our E-Mail correspondence came to an abrupt end:

> I don't really know what to say. It's difficult for me to believe anyone would find this a good substitute for a true worshiping community, Anglican or otherwise. Do people actually think this is a viable way of being Christian?
>
> P.

The brevity of Pastor P.'s reply suggests a position that many RL churches seem to take—they reject SL religion without giving any concrete reason. For those who have managed to provide a reason, the reason is as uninformed as embracing geocentricism in the 21st century. Francis Maier, Chancellor of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Denver, says "Second Life spirituality, however inventive, perpetuates the blasphemous idea that people control creation" (Grossman). Following Chancellor Maier's argument, whatever is creative becomes blasphemous, and users of SL would be no more blasphemous than people who produce fiction novels, Hollywood movies, or Disney cartoons, all of which control God's "creation" in one way or another.

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[11] pseud.

Along with Pastor P. and Chancellor Maier, many RL churches view virtual religion as totally unacceptable and even blasphemous. Does the condemnation arise simply because these religious men fear science and technology? If so, perhaps we should travel back to the early 16th century and learn a lesson from the church that first banned Copernican Heliocentrism and later apologized for its mistake. Or does the condemnation of SL worship arise because Christian doctrines are violated by SL churches? If so, the RL churches should better point out what, exactly, the SL churches are doing wrong, and the answer should at least be more concrete than "people shall not control creation." Ultimately, RL churches need to justify their reserved practice of Christian beliefs, which SL churches better manifest by promoting love, equality, and tolerance.

For the past three years, many virtual "industries" in SL have suffered from a decline of population (Collins), concurrent with the decline of RL church attendance. Intriguingly, the religious sector in SL, as Wright points out, has always been active. When I investigated the AoSL in 2012, they still had an average of 20 people[12] attending their services, while other SL "attractions" were empty. What has made SL churches so resilient in the face of the site's overall decline? More importantly, what has made the SL churches so resilient in the face of the decline in RL church attendance? And finally, will SL religion (or some version of it) gradually replace RL religion? Lacking in-depth analysis, this research is not intended to answer these questions. More research on virtual

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[12] The church has a full capacity of 25 people. Limit controlled by Linden Lab

community and virtual religion needs to be done in order to fully explore the dynamics between SL and RL churches. As for Pat Robertson's question in the very beginning—"Can't I just worship God everywhere, anywhere I want?"—I personally think the answer is "yes," as long as he's got a computer, a modem, and an avatar in Second Life.

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