A Sacred Cyberspace? Towards the Ontology of Virtual Worship

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Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Orthodox Church was compelled to move its worship to online platforms. What does such a shift mean in terms of liturgical theology and ontology? To what extent, and in what sense, is participation possible online? How does the virtual space function as a liturgical space? What kind of ontological and aesthetic problems are involved? Orthodox theologians have not yet developed answers to such questions. This paper approaches the problem in the light of Pseudo-Dionysian ontology, supplemented by Alexander Schmemann’s ideas, proposing that virtual worship offers a new sub-category of liturgical reality that reflects the higher forms of reality. To paraphrase the words of Pseudo-Dionysius, cyberspace constitutes a medium in which “like represents like,” though it uses formations that are “even entirely inadequate and ridiculous.”

Keywords: Orthodox Liturgy, Virtual Space, Cyberspace, Ontology, Pseudo-Dionysius, Schmemann

The dawn of the third millennium witnessed the emergence of a completely new field of theology. Studies on religion and cyberspace began to explore themes such as the evolution of communication culture, the democratisation of information management, the global ethos of the internet, and the nature of cyber religions and virtual participation.¹ The Orthodox theologians showed little interest in these topics, and the concept of virtual liturgy was perceived as distant and irrelevant to the Orthodox Church.²

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¹ One of the most significant early works on these topics was Morten Hojsgaard and Margit Warburg, eds., Religion and Cyberspace (London & New York: Routledge, 2005).

² This paper is based on the lecture given at the international conference “Orthodox Theology in the 21st Century” at Joensuu, Finland, on June 1, 2022. A Finnish-language article on the same theme, entitled “Jumala kyberavaruudessa 2: virtuaalinen tila liturgisena tilana,” based on a lecture in symposium “Ortodoksisuus ja rajat” (Joensuu, Nov 1, 2021) was recently published in Orthodoksia 62 (July 2022), 69–84.
At the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, worship services worldwide were suddenly compelled to move to cyberspace. This marked a significant turning point, as virtual liturgy became an essential aspect of religious practice also in the Orthodox Church. Therefore, it is pertinent to inquire into the ontological implications of the transfer in the Orthodox context. This raises the fundamental question of what virtual liturgy truly signifies in ontological terms.

Within the context of Western scholarship, virtual liturgy has been studied with two main areas of focus: the theological implications of online Eucharist, and the communal aspects and social dynamics of virtual encounters. More recently, studies have focused on exploring the experiences and attitudes of individuals in relation to online services. However, in religious terms the primary question is about the spiritual essentials: What remains of sacredness? What happens to the experience of the sacred in the virtual liturgy? Is there God in cyberspace? Given that the theological authorities of the earlier eras never faced such issues, the transition to virtual space inevitably raises unprecedented questions for the liturgical theology. The relationship between spirituality and social communality requires new forms of analysis and definition; the categories of participation require updating and reinterpretation. The nature of the sacred space unfolds to a new dimension, the spiritual status of which demands definition and elucidation.

Within the context of Orthodox Christianity, matters related to worship are approached, conceptualised, and structured differently from the Western approach, which tends to view worship primarily as a verbal activity. Some western scholars have even asserted that there is little

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3 Though “cyberspace” and “virtual space” are widely used synonymously, they have slightly different emphases: in “virtual space”, the focus is on the virtual reality as experienced and received, while “cyberspace” refers to the entire digital realm which makes such experiences possible.

4 For a Protestant discussion on the possibility of remote communion, see Charles Andrew Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy: Virtual Reality and Liturgical Theology in Conversation* (New York: Church Publishing, 2021). The author is a bishop in the Episcopal Church.

5 The situation in the Orthodox and Lutheran Churches of Finland was recently analysed in Pekka Metso, Laura Kallatsa, Sini Mikkola and Talvikki Ahonen, “Kokemukset hengellästä yhteydestä ja hengellisyyden muutoksesta korona pandemian aikana Suomen ortodoksissa ja evankelis-luterilaisessa kirkossa,” *Diakonian Tutkimus*, no. 2 (December 2021), https://doi.org/10.37448/dt.109489.
substantial difference between “online services” and “offline services.” In terms of transmission of the word, remote service is of course an effective tool. However, it seems odd that some scholars have written about virtual services without paying attention to the significance of physical presence in a sacred space, even failing to consider the concept of sacred space altogether.

Evidently, there is an urgent need to investigate the theological kernel of the problematics related to the remote service as a liturgical event. The present study aims to delineate the ontological nature of virtual worship, the focus being on the character and essence of the virtual space as a liturgical space, which in turn opens further questions concerning the degrees and dimensions of human and divine presence. To accomplish this objective, the analysis will use the ontology of Pseudo-Dionysius as a point of reference, complemented by the ideas of Alexander Schmemann, perhaps the most important figure in modern Orthodox liturgical theology. However, the study will not delve into Eucharist-related liturgical activities, but instead concentrate on the most basic liturgical settings such as vespers and matins. Curiously, Schmemann’s liturgical theology was so predominantly centred around the Eucharist that he may appear to have relatively little to say about the ordinary common prayer or the phenomenology of being-in-sacred-space.

It is noteworthy that Pseudo-Dionysius and Schmemann can be understood as representing two opposing poles within Orthodox liturgical theology. The former embodies the cornerstone of Byzantine symbolism and mystical allegorical understanding of the liturgy, whereas the latter represents modern sobriety and practical pastoral orientation. Schmemann’s approach shares similarities with Robert Taft’s interests, albeit with weaker historical erudition. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assert that Pseudo-Dionysius and Schmemann exhibit strengths precisely where the other is at weakest. Therefore, one may say that the ultimate objective of Orthodox liturgical theology is to synthesise these perspectives to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the liturgy.

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7 Berger, “@Worship” failed to discuss the concept of (physical) sacred space in her analysis.
Advantages of the virtual space

To begin with, one may note that the perspective on the matter at hand is to a large extent shaped by one’s generation. The fast-paced visual culture of the virtual realm is the native language of the younger generation, while the older generation has transitioned from the liturgical space to the virtual realm and is now reflecting on the significance of this shift. In contrast, the younger generation may be transitioning from virtual spaces to liturgical ones, and their question may be related to the ways in which the church space modifies the virtual liturgical experience.

Nevertheless, it is evident that virtual space surpasses traditional time-space reality in many ways. Not only does it alleviate numerous practical difficulties related to travel, distance, time, and contagion, but it also contributes to certain theological or spiritual challenges. As the bishops and patriarchs continue to struggle with realising the universal unity of the Orthodox Church, remote services provide a tangible opportunity to experience living Orthodoxy as a global reality. The ease of accessing worship from all corners of the world not only exposes various specific cases but also reveals the whole in a new light.

At present, there exists a need to surpass a certain attitudinal threshold in relation to the use of cyberspace. The churches are currently using virtual connections mainly to substitute for various everyday functions, such as service broadcasts and meetings, but the potential of virtuality extends far beyond the ordinary activities. Virtuality has the capacity to foster the formation of new global communities, without the limitations of distance, and to expand and enrich our social and religious experiences. In fact, virtuality holds even some spiritual and mystical potential, as the global ethos of the internet may provide completely new perspectives to the liturgical life, akin to an “angelic” view. The universal nature of Orthodoxy can hardly be experienced in a more illustrative way than by opening the same service live from several different countries simultaneously.

However, the abundance of choices created by virtuality creates a competitive setting where individuals may choose their vespers based on the quality of chanters and audio-visual impression. For instance, during the pandemic the Isidoroi Church in Athens could have up to 30,000 spectators on ordinary weekday mornings, while other Greek churches streaming on YouTube were unable to compete with the Isidoroi’s
magnificent singers, cave church acoustics, unique interior, and spectacular surroundings. The charismatic priest paid attention to the home audience in his speeches at the end of the service. Even the controversial iso-n-engine works well in Isidoroi’s virtual space, amplifying bass sounds that tend to be weak on remote devices. The success of the Isidoroi church indicates that online services should be planned in a recipient-oriented manner.

What, then, is this all about in spiritual and ontological terms? We face an empty table. As there is no Orthodox liturgical theology about remote worship, it must be constructed of existing bricks, and some new ones are to be developed. As far as ontological status is concerned, there is no better — that is, more Byzantine — foundation stone than the contemplative vision of Pseudo-Dionysius. In his view, the purpose of life is to “strive always to be uplifted in a sacred fashion toward the ultimate perfection of the deity,”8 so that one could “glimpse the contemplation” (ὄψόμεθα θεωρίαν) of the noetic things reflecting the “original beauty” (τῶν ἀρχετύπων κάλλος).9 The vision is optimistic and bright: all existing things have their own share in beauty, and any existing thing may serve as a “help to contemplation.”10 This is not without parallel in Schmemann, for whom the eschatological nature of the liturgy is expressed in the liturgical beauty that shows something of the Kingdom of God.11

In virtual liturgy, beauty shows up in an apparently distorted form, but it does appear. Accordingly, when watching remote services and experiencing liturgical beauty through them, the fundamental intention of one’s inner movement is oriented towards the heavenly realities, and the broadcast serves the purpose of offering “help to contemplation.” However, there is no lack of deficiencies and problems.

**Ontological problems**

The phenomenon of virtual service, as an experienced and perceived actuality, constitutes an ontologically peculiar form of reality with numerous

9 Pseudo-Dionysius, Eccl. hier. 3.3.2. PG 3, 428c.
10 Idem, Coel. hier. 2:3–4. PG 3, 141c.
fundamental problems. The key issue is the deficit in participation resulting from the physical distance between the service and the recipient. The distance is apparent also between the viewer and the screen, creating a sense of detachment that cannot be overcome even by touching the screen.\textsuperscript{12} The service, as it manifests to the viewer, suffers from a partial reality deficiency. While the service’s content is perceptible, it is detached from the material substance that conveys it. In that sense, a remote service is an excellent alternative for a Manichean or dualist: it seems to provide pure content detached from corporeality and material dimension.\textsuperscript{13} However, the question remains as to whether spiritual content can genuinely be conveyed without the material substance that embodies it.

At this point, one should consider what a liturgical ritual ultimately intends to deliver. Is the aim of a liturgical service to transmit content, or to create a prayerful connection between man and God (and people), the actual “content” of the service being only a means to enable that purpose? In that case, the aim and function of the broadcast would be mainly to inspire the viewers to pray. I leave the question in the air, but the problem by its very existence shows that one cannot get a theological grasp on the nature of virtual service without profound reflection on the essence of worship; how do the word, sound, and movement work, and for what purpose.

The size of the service on the screen generates a further reality deficit, as it provides only a small-scale reflection of the actual service. Likewise, the sound is not that of human prayer but a reproduction, and the awareness of this affects one’s experience. The virtual vespers appear as an object, which functions as an audio-visual symbol of vespers, a living symbol transmitting its content. However, what we perceive is not the thing-in-itself, but a reproduced version which embodies reality in a parallel dimension, in the manner of the classical \textit{analogia entis} principle.

The change of scale poses not only practical difficulties but also profound philosophical issues. The human thirst for truth and the nature of

\textsuperscript{12} However, those who have analysed cyber spirituality may speak about “entrance into an online sacred space” (Berger, “@Worship,” 270). This space is not only psychological, for Berger underlines the bodily aspect of virtual experience, arguing that to use the internet, one needs fingers, eyes and body. However, she fails to comment on problems related to the nature of sacred space or meaning and function of being-in-the-sacred-space, not to mention the ontology of virtual worship.

\textsuperscript{13} Certainly, a computer is of material substance, but not of the same substance that generates liturgical content.
humanity itself suggest that the human will and mind are inherently oriented towards Being as a whole, as David Bentley Hart has recently speculated.\footnote{Hart offers an innovative and illuminating discussion on the transcendent horizon of the mind, “phenomenology of the mind,” which concerns the “rational mind’s absolute preoccupation with being as a whole.” According to him, the mind is intentional towards the whole and towards God: “the very structure of thought is an essential relation to God as its ‘natural’ end.” Therefore, “the world comes to us as the beautiful and glorious and hideous and terrible interval that lies between the mind’s indivisible unity of apprehension and the irreducibly transcendental horizon of its intention.” See David Bentley Hart, \textit{Theological territories} (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 263.} A church space presents itself as a unified whole to the senses, and one could draw a phenomenological parallel between this experience and humankind’s ultimate longing for the eternal and infinite.

In the context of online worship, the participant’s experience and perception are limited to a narrow range of sensory inputs, rendering the divine worship a fragmentary aspect of their awareness. Such a condition bears a kind of resemblance to idolatry, which involves the worship of partial or distorted aspects of reality. From an ontological perspective, the problematic implications of fragmentariness become apparent.

The problem of wholeness is further reflected in the question of perspective. In the church space, one can choose his own perspective, which remains practically uniform and unbroken, but in remote worship the viewer is dependent on the director’s varying angles that do not represent the liturgical flow itself but the director’s version and construction of it. This may further diminish the sense of reality and the phenomenological degree of participation.

On the other hand, the use of different camera angles can provide informative and edifying value, allowing a liturgically sophisticated director to capture the most essential elements of the liturgical flow. However, the use of television-like directing techniques results in discernible divergence from the normal liturgical presence, potentially leading to a sense of detachment and reduced participation among viewers who feel like outside observers rather than active participants. While a simpler directing approach may alleviate this issue, the absence of visual variety can also create a distancing and detaching effect by eliminating the possibility of exploring the physical space, which is always present within the building.

In either case, the fundamental issue is that the recipient lacks the freedom to choose his/her own perspective. This poses a challenge to the
liturgical ethos, as the sacred space is a holistic structure of sacredness intended to engage all aspects of human consciousness and perception, touching both the conscious and unconscious mind. Liturgical experience aims at a sanctified state of being through multisensory means, for it is precisely the sensible aspects that are to be sanctified. Therefore, the potential for sanctification seems to remain essentially lower in remote worship.

Moreover, the online service further distorts the ontology of the liturgical experience by transmitting the image and sound separately and from slightly different directions. This once more contravenes the principle of completeness and the concept of holistic perception, even if it may not be consciously discerned as problematic.

This does not imply that the act of worship cannot be authentic in terms of the human-divine relationship. However, the role of remote service broadcasting itself may be questionable in this regard. While it can provide genuine inspiration, the presence of the Spirit does not necessarily equate to that experienced in a physical church setting. Furthermore, worshipping in front of a laptop is not only imbued with ontological issues, but the entire undertaking is also impaired in aesthetic terms, as it is challenging to evade the perception of “kitsch adoration.” In Pseudo-Dionysian terms, this can be precisely defined as cyberspace serving as a medium in which “like represents like,” albeit utilising forms that are “wholly inadequate and ridiculous” (ἀπεοικός καὶ ἀπεμφαῖνον πλαττόμενος).

In terms of knowledge of God, the replicated nature of the service does not pose a problem since all knowledge of God is restricted, mediated, reflective, figurative, or analogous in some way. Similarly, it is not problematic for private prayer since one may pray at home in any case, even without internet connection! Likewise, the ontology of Pseudo-Dionysius is merciful in this regard, emphasising that wherever there is a

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15 Pseudo-Dionysius argues that divine revelation is conveyed through sacred images in which “like represents like,” as Luibheid translates διὰ τῶν ὁμοίων in Coel. hier. 2:3 (PG 3, 140c). This principle reflects the belief in the unity and coherence of creation and the idea that the material world can serve as a gateway to the spiritual realm. The liturgical symbols and rituals are intended to represent the spiritual realities they signify, and this is possible because there is something in them that reflects the structure of the spiritual realm.

16 Pseudo-Dionysius, Coel. hier. 2:3. PG 3, 140c.
“distorted echo of real love and reality,” there is some share of the Good.\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, “distorted echo of reality” is a functional definition for the virtual liturgy.

However, cyberspace has several issues that impact the authenticity of worship.

The mere awareness of the fact that a service can be paused restricts its degree of authenticity. The problem can be illustrated by comparing a live broadcast of vespers with a recorded one. While the visual and auditory contents of these two may be identical, phenomenologically there is an enormous difference. A live broadcast may appear to the consciousness as “real” prayer, while an old recording is merely a documentation of past prayers with informative, aesthetic, and perhaps inspiring value, but it does not represent authentic presence. Therefore, it feels that a certain “invitation to attend” is lacking in a recording. When one starts to pray with a YouTube stream and suddenly realises that the worship is not live but a recording from the past, the most probable reaction is that of disappointment or even shame. It turns out that the situation is parodic, a kind of caricature of what should happen. The peculiar tension of truth and parody is typical for virtual cults and cyber-religions in general.\textsuperscript{18} The sense of disappointment highlights the importance of a live transmission. This in turn suggests that spiritually the essential aspect is that there is genuine praying taking place somewhere else; how much one sees and hears it himself/herself, is a secondary question.

Furthermore, there exists some degree of delay in live broadcasts, meaning that what one sees now actually has happened a moment ago. In principle, this further reduces the level of reality. Although the delay may not be experienced as problematic in practice, it remains a theoretical concern: one is praying with something that is not precisely current in temporal terms. On the other hand, this problem intriguingly challenges our conception of time: does the present moment truly have a monopoly on valid prayers in liturgical reality?

A more critical issue, however, is that virtual space alters the ontology of the power relations of the liturgical event. By power relations I do not mean the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but one’s approach and positioning

\textsuperscript{17} Pseudo-Dionysius, Div. nom. 4:20. PG 3, 720c.

\textsuperscript{18} For discussion, see Lorne L. Dawson, “The Mediation of Religious Experience in Cyberspace,” in Hojsgaard and Warburg, Religion and Cyberspace, 20–22.
to the liturgical flow – in Schmemann’s terms, “rhythm.”¹⁹ In Pseudo-Dionysian terms, liturgical flow is the state in which the celestial hierarchy functions in relation to the participants. However, the recipient of the stream has a curious authority over the liturgical flow; even if it is only unconscious and subliminal, it challenges the liturgical ethos and rearranges the inward setting. The remote participant is de facto above the service, which is not in harmony with the attitudinal coordinates of liturgical participation. In the church, one cannot stop the priest to fetch something from the fridge; nor can one adjust the scale to his/her liking. In the church, we are naturally situated below the liturgical flow and adapt ourselves to it, not the other way around. This is particularly problematic for the Orthodox worship, which is essentially hierarchical not only in terms of authority but also in the ontological sense of the word.²⁰

The traditional understanding of the ontological status of Byzantine worship is based on its relation to the celestial hierarchy. The liturgical flow serves the function of anagogic ascent towards celestial realities, and this process is first and foremost ontological. However, this function becomes more difficult to grasp and experience, or adjust oneself to, if the flow of the service is under the participant’s control and interruptible for virtual participants. In other words, the essential function of the worship is inner exaltation and elevation of the heart, but attempting to achieve anagogic ascent through cogitation of a reproduced service in a restricted form controlled by the recipient is no easy feat, to say the least.

In other words: if a mediaeval man entering Hagia Sophia did not know whether he was in heaven or on earth, the modern man at his laptop knows very well that he is not in heaven, facing not the sacred realm but an audio-visual product. Orthodox literature is replete with accounts of experiencing the sacred spaces, and not only during the time of Hagia Sophia and Prince Vladimir. For example, Finnish Orthodox layman

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¹⁹ Schmemann, Church World Mission, 139.
²⁰ Pseudo-Dionysios presents his hierarchical ontology in De coelesti hierarchia (PG 3, 121–369), vision of God in De divinis nominibus (PG 3, 608–996), and the ecclesiastical applications in De ecclesiastica hierarchia (PG 3, 369–585), all of which are translated in Pseudo-Dionysius, Complete Works. A highly recommended introduction to Pseudo-Dionysius’ thought is Andrew Louth, Denys the Areopagite (London: Continuum, 1987). Despite Pseudo-Dionysius’ enormous influence on the development of liturgical understanding in the East, he has somewhat fallen out of fashion in the late twentieth century Orthodox liturgical theology dominated by the pastoral orientation and liturgical realism championed by Schmemann.
Nikolai Saiki in his memoirs recounted his first entry to the main church of the Valaam monastery in Lake Ladoga (part of Finland prior to World War II). As he beheld the central dome of the church, he felt as though he were “being drawn into the kingdom of God.”\textsuperscript{21} In the context of remote service, the possibilities for this kind of experience are essentially limited. The absence of solemnity is not merely an aesthetic issue, but something closely intertwined with the most profound spiritual aspects of liturgical life. Schmemann used to highlight that the liturgy situates us “at the beginning and at the end of all things, revealing thus their meaning and destiny in Christ.”\textsuperscript{22} It is hard to see such profound intuitions developing at laptop, except in the most shadowy and nebulous forms, even though the global perspective of cyberspace has some potentiality to serve such aims.

Undoubtedly, in the virtual space the level of participation is far from full, regardless of how one defines “full participation.” The situation bears resemblance to the distinction between pilgrimage and tourism, two divergent modes of experiencing sacred spaces. While a pilgrim engages fully with the spiritual content of the site, a tourist tends to focus on the external features and surfaces, maintaining internal distance, and thus feels like an outsider even while being physically present.\textsuperscript{23} Similarly, remote worship can lead to a sense of being a virtual tourist rather than a pilgrim, lacking the width and depth of engagement with the sacred. However, this differentiation is not absolute, as some degree of participation and involvement can still be experienced remotely.

**Emanations of reality: heavenly, earthly, virtual**

Despite the reality deficiency, but also because of it, the virtual service is well-suited to the Byzantine hierarchical ontology and the underlying Middle or Neo-Platonic assumptions. Namely, the Pseudo-Dionysian principle asserts that “all beings, to the extent that they exist, are good and come from the Good.”\textsuperscript{24} In other words, virtual worship can be seen as a manifestation of the Good, albeit in a limited form. Therefore,
the question is not about the goodness of virtual service, but about the amount of existence: to what extent does it exist? In the Pseudo-Dionysian ontology, the degree of existence is defined by the distance to the ultimate Good, which is God. This is related to the traditional Byzantine understanding of liturgy; the earthly worship, with all its symbols and veils dimming the divine glory, reflects higher, heavenly realities. The virtual space represents a further level of reflection of that reflection, creating a new ontological level of the liturgical reality below the higher ones. The virtual service works much like the shadows of Plato’s parable of the cave: it is not the actual thing itself but a reflection of it.

The ontological status of worship can be illustrated by drawing a parallel with icons and visual imagery. Both worship and iconography involve a heavenly reality, its physical reflection, and a less tangible reflection of that reflection:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ontological status</th>
<th>Visual</th>
<th>Liturgical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ultimate reality</td>
<td>Christ</td>
<td>Heavenly liturgy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Icon of Christ</td>
<td>Earthly worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image of image</td>
<td>Virtual icon</td>
<td>Virtual liturgy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In more exact terms, the setting can be arranged in relation to the Neo-Platonic ontology shared by Dionysios:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neo-Platonic ontology</th>
<th>Substance (Ps.Dionysios)</th>
<th>Liturgy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>The Uncreated Hyperousia (God)</td>
<td>The adored one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nous, noetic</td>
<td>Angelic</td>
<td>Heavenly liturgy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psykhē</td>
<td>Soul</td>
<td>Inner aspect of earthly liturgy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matter</td>
<td>time-space continuum, physical body</td>
<td>Outer aspect of earthly liturgy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–</td>
<td>Electric$^{25}$</td>
<td>Virtual liturgy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^{25}$ Electricity is indeed a part of material reality in terms of physics; the bits and bytes that make up digital files are subject to the laws of physics and exist within a physical system. However, as they lack a stable physical substance and tangibility, their existence is unsteady and volatile in comparison to physical objects such as wooden icons. However, the difference is not absolute, as physical objects are also subject to decay and deterioration, and thus are not perpetual either.
In the Dionysian ontology, being precedes the entities which participate in it;\textsuperscript{26} to exist means to participate in the higher form of existence. As virtual service is characterised by a certain reality deficiency, the virtual participation in worship is indirect and restricted by nature, but certainly not totally unreal.

As being is participation in the highest forms of being, and since being is beautiful, all being is participation in beauty; “there is nothing which lacks its own share of beauty.”\textsuperscript{27} If the material images of heavenly realities reflect a share of essential beauty, then electric reproductions of these material images certainly reflect this share, albeit on a lower level. For Pseudo-Dionysius, liturgical and sacramental rites are “precise images” of the heavenly realities,\textsuperscript{28} the preciseness being in ontology rather than in the form of appearance. Virtual reality, then, is essentially an ontologically imprecise image. Although the visual surface of virtual reality may be technically precise, its ontological reality is imprecise due to alterations and deficiencies in distance, proportions, perspectives, power relations, and presence.

Furthermore, Pseudo-Dionysian ontology is characterised by the notion of existence as emanation of life. “Life itself is the source of everything alive,” as he has it.\textsuperscript{29} If we consider the hierarchy of being to consist of noetic (angelic), human, animal, plant, and lifeless matter, the virtual liturgy appears to reduce the liturgy into the level of lifeless matter, consisting of electric particles on the screen. However, Pseudo-Dionysius affirms that the one who “desires the lowest form of life still desires life,” assuming that each being desires the type of life that seems good to him/her.\textsuperscript{30}

Though the virtual liturgy seems to belong to the lowest possible ontological level, it still participates in being in its own extent, and therefore it participates in beauty and goodness. For the viewer this means that it is able to move him/her towards the good.

However, there remains one serious concern, which is related to the possibility of other distracting elements during the broadcast, perhaps even on the same screen. According to the principle espoused by

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Pseudo-Dionysius, \textit{Div. nom.} 5:5. PG 3, 820a.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Idem, \textit{Coel. hier.} 2:3. PG 3, 141c.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Idem, \textit{Eccl. hier.} 3:6. PG 3, 401c.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Idem, \textit{Div. nom.} 5:5. PG 3, 820b.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Idem, \textit{Div. nom.} 4:20. PG 3, 720c.
\end{itemize}
Pseudo-Dionysius, “one cannot participate in contradictory realities at one and the same time,”\(^{31}\) indicating that one cannot proceed at opposite directions simultaneously. Therefore, one who seeks true participation in God must avoid leading a divided life with disparate orientations. In a liturgical event, this principle is manifested and realised in the total orientation and submission to its perceivable contents. Correspondingly, “all sustained effort” to reach God implies dissolution of what is opposite to this aim.\(^{32}\)

Despite all the deficiencies and oddities of virtual reality, the Pseudo-Dionysian vision provides a valid ontological justification for the existence of virtual liturgy. As Pseudo-Dionysios himself suggests, “there is nothing absurd in rising up, as we do, from obscure images to the single Cause of everything.”\(^{33}\) For the individual in front of the laptop, this means that he is to rise from observing perceptible things to contemplate things beyond the cosmos and their harmonious unity.

**Schmemann and virtual liturgy**

Alexander Schmemann used to underline that theology should be based on the liturgical experience of the Church. Moreover, the Church fulfils her mission by “being always and everywhere the epiphany.”\(^{34}\) In today’s world, this epiphanic experience is transmitted also in cyberspace, perhaps in a diluted manner and with ontological faintness, but it still serves aims that are genuine and authentic.

Certainly, the reality deficiency involves especially the communal dimension of worship, given that unity and sense of communion are at the heart of the authentic liturgical experience, as highlighted by Schmemann. The liturgical prayer is “supra-individual”, and in this respect virtual worship is doomed to a substantial lack of communion. Remote services do offer some communality, but in a very dilute form (“Probably others are watching this, too”). In this respect, the view count may become relevant.\(^{35}\)

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32 Idem, *Eccl. hier.* 2.3.5. PG 3, 401b.
34 Schmemann, *Church World Mission*, 146.
35 A detailed discussion on communality and remote services in Metso, Kallatsa, Mikkola and Ahonen, “Kokemukset hengellisestä yhteydestä.”
Virtual participation in worship in many ways represents an extreme expression of individual piety, abhorred by Schmemann.\(^{36}\) However, for many people it is the only possibility to participate in liturgical life in some way. Notably, the globality of cyberspace may serve the universal and eschatological aims championed by Schmemann. According to his emphasis, the divine liturgy is essentially more than a cult: for him, \textit{leitourgia} is ultimately an “all-embracing vision of life” which intends to “transform the whole of existence” and to shape all our ideas, attitudes, and actions.\(^{37}\) It seems reasonable to suggest that this process, however utopian it may appear, should also extend to the virtual realm of reality.

In underlining the difference between cult and \textit{leitourgia}, Schmemann emphasised that cultic acts are not an end in themselves, but rather a means to achieving cosmic and eschatological fulfilment in the Church. However, the practical implications of this differentiation remain somewhat obscure, as the church continues to live and function precisely through her cultic acts. Curiously, virtual space is a dimension which does not enable participation in the concrete sacramental acts, but one may still have a distant taste of the “cosmic fulfilment” taking place elsewhere.

Virtual liturgy is a peculiar challenge for Schmemann’s intention to construct theology not from data or propositions but from experience yet excluding individual “religious feelings”.\(^{38}\) Though virtual liturgy appears to be merely a cheap reproduction, it can provide a mediated experience of genuine liturgical reality, although this takes place mainly in the category of individuals. As Schmemann was sceptical of propositions, he did not always articulate his own propositions clearly. However, he believed that all “understanding and power, knowledge and joy, contemplation and communion” stem from the paschal event, which illuminates all fields of theological thought.\(^{39}\) This must apply to analyses of virtual liturgical space as well.

In authentic theology, as understood by Schmemann, “liturgy of time” provides the initial encounter with the genuine content of Christian cosmology and eschatology; this experience can then be further explicated

\(^{36}\) See Alexander Schmemann, \textit{The Eucharist} (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 142–413.
\(^{38}\) Schmemann, \textit{Church World Mission}, 141.
\(^{39}\) \textit{Ibidem}, 142.
and interpreted.\textsuperscript{40} However, Schmemann failed to elaborate “liturgy of space” comprehensively. Nevertheless, his ideas about the emergence of authentic theological intuitions through the liturgy of time can be applied to the peculiar case of the virtual liturgy, which prioritises time over space. For Schmemann, the content of liturgical time is “antinomical” in relation to time,\textsuperscript{41} which suggests that liturgical sacred space is also antinomical in relation to ordinary space.

\textbf{The Future: Metaverse? Interactive rituals?}

Some of these problems, especially those related to perspectives, may be partially solved in the multidimensional \textit{metaversum},\textsuperscript{42} which will further reduce the reality deficit, though this does not imply that the degree of participation will genuinely improve. In the future, individuals may be able to move through virtual churches in their own living-rooms and wander around the choir during a live 4D broadcast. While this could provide a more varied and immersive experience of presence, it could also make the sense of unreality and outwardness even more apparent (in authentic worship one would not walk around the choir). As the consciousness and intention of the mind are focused on outward forms and in their visual observation, the deepest nature of the service, grounded on presence within the sacred space, remains unattainable. In other words, some of the inconveniences may be adjusted, but the presence remains absent.

It is not surprising that the Orthodox Church has not taken steps towards developing interactive rituals like those found in cyber-religions. However, in this regard one may note the possibilities of the comment fields provided by social media platforms, for they reveal some interesting cultural differences. For example, Greek YouTube streams are filled with personal names and intercession requests, whereas in the Finnish Orthodox services the comment field is typically closed, due to the

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibidem}, 143.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibidem}, 145.

\textsuperscript{42} Metaversum, or metaverse, can be defined as a “shared virtual environment” or “digital intersection of social media, augmented reality, virtual reality, and actual reality.” According to the current definition in Wikipedia (“Metaverse”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaverse, accessed October 26, 2022), it is a “hypothetical iteration of the Internet as a single, universal and immersive virtual world that is facilitated by the use of virtual reality and augmented reality headsets.”
Finnish inclination to negative commenting. However, in Facebook streams, Finns often use emojis extensively.

What could be an “interactive Orthodox ritual” in the first place? For instance, if an interactive virtual poll were added to the end of the Easter service asking, “Did Christ rise from the dead?” with alternatives “Indeed” or “Not”, would this generate genuine Easter joy, or merely a parody of it? Even if the Paschal joy was real, as it certainly would be for many, the mere meaningfulness of the question highlights the tension between authenticity and parody that is typical of cyber-religions. This tension is not only related to the method of implementation but also to the fundamental ontological nature of virtual space. In cyber-religion, traditional dichotomies like truth–falsehood give way to new ones like genuineness–parody.

**Conclusion: Is there God in cyberspace?**

Finally, we may return to the question we started from: the presence of God in cyberspace. “Where was God during the tsunami?” asked David Bentley Hart in his renowned work *Doors of the Sea*. Seeking a sovereign answer, he asserted that since God is the source and purpose of all being, no being can exist independently of God. However, the present time in its entirety is only a shattered reflection of divine beauty, and the same can be said about the category of space as well. In every moment and beyond time, God is everywhere and nowhere.

Is virtual space, then, included in that “everywhere”? Can God be present in a state which represents a lower form of reality, an ontological reflection, a mere reproduction? Furthermore, is this query even relevant if God is everywhere, permeating and encompassing everything and at the same time is beyond perception? If this be the case, then something is wrong with the question. To compare: if two lovers are talking on the phone, is their love within the phone?

The question is perhaps more aptly formulated as follows: to what extent is an authentic experience of sacredness possible in a virtual space? Alas, sacredness and its authenticity cannot be objectively determined. However, if even the visual surface which is being experienced does not exist in a fully authentic way, a similar ontological doubt remains.

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concerning the sacredness it conveys. Perhaps we do not experience genuine sacredness but merely a reflection thereof, as the capacity for experiencing elevation and solemnity in a virtual space is inherently limited.

It appears that the hierarchical ontology of Pseudo-Dionysius has gained new relevance in the era of cyberspace. According to this perspective, a virtual experience of sacredness is situated at a lower ontological level, characterised by a lesser degree of participation in the sacredness than in sacred spaces situated in the space-time continuum. The latter represents a higher degree of reality, and thus has more capacity to reflect heavenly reality in a more direct and substantial way than online reproductions.

However, the emergence of virtual space presents a unique challenge for liturgical theology, which must reconsider the categories of participation. The Orthodox worldview, rooted in the patristic worldview of late antiquity, rejects the separation of the visual, musical, and verbal content of the liturgy from the physical matter carrying it, which resembles a Manichean fantasy. Nonetheless, the detachment of content from matter is no more than a phenomenological problem for the recipient, as the material dimension of the liturgy remains intact within the Church.

For my part, I cannot say that I would have encountered God online. Instead, I have found strong hints that his existence is having an impact elsewhere. After all, perhaps we should ask whether we ourselves fully exist when we are merely observing representations of reality that are taking place somewhere else.