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The Virtual Pilgrimage

The Disappearing Body from Place to Space

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenological and metaphysical implications of the increasing abstraction of online religion away from place into space within *tecbgnosis* – a form of Gnosticism inherent in modernity. In the phenomenon of “virtual pilgrimages” the location of the religious is transposed from its location in “body and place” to the “mind in space.” Drawing on theology and philosophy, the author concludes that this phenomenon is a consequence of capitalist modernity. While pilgrimage has traditionally been fastened to a “center,” the *virtual* pilgrimage emerges, from utility-driven *space*. Echoing Marx’s critique, the solid sacred center (place) melts into air (space).

Introduction

The great spirituality of our age means that we are all physically repulsive to one another. The great advance in refinement of feeling and squeamish fastidiousness means that we hate the *physical* existence of anybody and everybody, even ourselves. The amazing move into abstraction on the part of the whole of humanity – the film, the radio, the gramophone – means that we loathe the physical element in our amusements, we don’t *want* the physical contact, we want to get away from it. We don’t *want* to look at flesh and blood people—we want to watch their shadows on a screen. We don’t *want* to hear their actual voices: only transmitted through a machine. We must get away from the physical (Lawrence: 420).

[1] There is a popular trend in online religion that pushes away from the idea of the sacred as embodied socially and in place toward a notion of the sacred constituted by the individual mind within space and accessed through technology. What I argue is that this concept of the individual in contact with the sacred suggests alienation from traditional ideas about the

sacred, driving it toward the sacralizing of space and individual consciousness. When place is diminished and the body interacting within place is removed, there is a dissolution of the sacred into space and the *merely* cognitive self. The works of Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, and Victor Turner each deal with the notions of the absence of place in modernity – place defining physicality and sensuous experience and presence within objects. Karl Marx sees that the force of religion in modernity moves away from the sensuous, Benjamin sees place dissolving with the condition of artistic replication and mediation in the modern age, and Turner reminds moderns of the historical significance of ritual as embodied within Catholic notions of place and sacramentality. Using these theorists, I will discuss two “Virtual Pilgrimage” sites on the Internet. The first is a devotional site for Our Lady of Guadalupe, www.sancta.org. Online pilgrims (or pilgrimoids) can visit her site and leave virtual roses and post prayers. The second site is a popular prayer site maintained by the Jesuits, *Sacred Space*, www.sacredspace.ie. In both of these sites, I deconstruct the notions of sacred space versus sacred place, while reflecting on the absence of reflective distance, mediation, and embodiment. Each of these elements plays an essential role in traditional definitions of pilgrimage.

Theories of Presence, Mediation, and Place

[2] Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction,” suggests that with the oncoming of advances in technology that allow us to replicate life easily, the presence and place of the object represented are destroyed. One of the consequences of mass culture is to diminish experience and our ties to place and substance. Technological reproduction removes the experience of the artist in a work of art. Originally, according to Benjamin, the experience of an artwork was one of contemplation and distance; we waited for the object of contemplation (the artwork) to reveal itself to us and we always maintained a distance from it. The presence of an *original* and *hand-constructed* art object was maintained by the unique phenomenon of a distance between the observer and the artwork – an interpretive distance between thing represented and representation. Presence and place presented themselves within the distance. With mechanical reproduction, like the technology of the Internet, distance and presence are eliminated in that mechanical reproduction brings the object closer to “reality” through photography, cinematic projection, and modern reproduction techniques. This allows for multiple copies to be easily manufactured and distributed. To further Benjamin’s thesis, with the electronic technologies of radio and television, and I add with the Internet, experience becomes abstracted and filtered and under the consumer’s control. This is especially so with the Internet.

[3] The distance of contemplation is eliminated when the unlimited machine replaces the limited body. This grants unmediated access to “the sacred” without the boundaries, confines, and limitations of place. With religion on the Internet, the sacred, once bound to place, is limitless and therefore dissolved into space. Nowhere in the categories of religious phenomena is this dissolution of place more detrimental than in the experience of pilgrimage. This is because in pilgrimage place is the substantial reality of the sacred toward which the pilgrims collectively journey. Reproductions of the “place” in “space” carry significance. Benjamin distinguishes between the original and the reproduction on the basis of authentic social experience. The original has an aura that is derived from two factors: its

position in a particular *place* and the tradition that constitutes this place and connection. This implies social and “placed” experience. The reproduction of the holy site in manipulated images, a complete *simulacrum* (Baudrillard) of the original presented in a space-continuum, taken out of “place and time,” removes the object from its original setting (what is sacred) and brings it to the individual in space. This is beyond the mediations of place, body, and tradition. This eliminates the important element of distance and makes the reproduction available at anyone’s disposal. If at any time one wants or in any way wishes to use the reproduction, it is available; the consequence of this for the Internet, so profoundly extending beyond Benjamin’s original observations about photography and film, is that the only “limit” to experience is the “limitless” human mind. Where Benjamin was concerned with political manipulations and de-traditionalization, this paper argues that the displacement of the sacred center and its re-placement into cyberspace eliminates the “place” dimensions and the natural limits and boundaries of body, place, and ritual object. These are elements traditionally constitutive of Catholic definitions of the sacred. The suggestion of “sacred space” undoes the sacramental when it is abstracted from place and embodiment into mere “mind” and “space.” Sacred, as *sacra*, suggests limits and boundaries and embodied contact. Space suggests no boundaries, no limits, and escapes embodiment. Modernity – which places an intrinsic value in increasing technology and automation – presents a tendency, which, as theorists like Tönnies described, pulls away from the inherence of place and body.

[4] Erik Davis has explored this characteristic of modernity’s “sacralization” of technology as a kind of Gnostic limitlessness – *techgnosticism* – which contrasts with the Catholic notion of the sacred as hidden and limited (Davis). Sociologists within the sub-discipline concerning religious phenomena in the United States have also observed the significance of place as central in the theological conceptualization of the sacred, devoting an entire issue of a top journal to the topic (Williams). I will discuss these “theological” conceptualizations further below.

[5] The nature of representation for Benjamin – whether it be through word or symbol – is that it is defined by a reflective distance between object and subjective interpreter. For the pilgrim to recount her story there is a distancing between her experiences, as they are embodied in the actual trek of the journey, and her telling of them. The category of the sacred, however, is strictly bound to the experience of the *place* of the pilgrimage, but not her recounting of the story according to Catholic teaching. In Catholic tradition, the story of the embodied journey acts as a symbol, an indicator of the sacred experience. But it is clear that at least in Catholic terms, the location of the sacred is tied to place, to ritual movement within place, and to the sacredness of relics or ritual objects. It is connected to the physical substance and material of body and place: by its conditions and physical limits. Lindsay Jones’ monumental compendium on sacred architecture emphasizes the role that “place” plays as an ecstatic experience: place engages the spectator corporeally and empirically. Building on and critiquing Jones’ thesis, Harrington explores Eliade’s and Heidegger’s fascination with place, and the way space is a uniquely modern construct (16). Heidegger reminds us that place (versus space) is, since Aristotle, defined by the limitations of its surroundings. Eliade explores how modernity defines space in a way so that there is “no longer any world” and space renders persons and houses “without distinctiveness and homogenous” (Harrington: 15). Harrington explores the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the

Areopagite (5th century) and Saint Maximus (d. 662), Christian Neo-Platonists, to demonstrate that place is limited, which defines its sacred quality. For Pseudo-Dionysius the altar of a church is “the center grounding the Christian world,” and for Maximus the “walling in of a sacred place enhances its symbolic significance” (203). Maximus also expresses how this limitation defines our “creatureliness” and that given the nature of cosmos we do not have the ability for unmediated access to the sacred. We can only be in touch with the “part” not the whole because place is limited and mediated by the body: “Even though by nature we can participate in a cosmic liturgy, our sin has made us incapable of it. We can only enter into the Church – part symbolic of the whole – and overcome the divisions of nature there” (Harrington: 204). Place’s sacred character is defined by presence – and distance – not immediacy. Though this might be true for other traditions, I will limit my discussion of the importance of place in a Catholic context (which values the definition of sacrament and embodiment as it relates to the sacred) for the sake of brevity and coherence of argument.

[6] Victor and Edith Turner, as anthropologists and historians, assert the primitiveness of Catholic culture, establishing the sacred in body, place, and tradition – this perhaps also pulls on Benjamin’s concern with place coming out of a Marxian schema. As a result, their accounts of Catholicism reflect and confess an inner essence sustained by its primitive nature and physical connection to the world. But this sacramental perspective, as physicalist, might reinforce both the sacramental materialism of Aquinas as well as the sensuous materialism of Marx. As the Turners note:

Catholics have always held that the supernatural is not a theoretically derived conception, but a positive fact, which can be known only as a result of initiatives taken by beings or powers from beyond the sensory veil. It is manifested through revelation, miracles, prophecies, and apparitions . . . the mark of the True Church is that it is electrically charged, so to speak, with the potential of miracle (Turner and Turner: 205-206).

In this sense, miracle is a substantiated, physical, positive fact: a substance-thing that has a sacred value wherein it is defined within the realm of place. A theology of place is common in strains of Catholicism and the Anglo-Catholic traditions. According to popular Catholic mystic Thomas Merton, what conditions the modern secular world is exactly its opposite: placelessness. For Merton it is a “space” wherein “everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within” (Simsic: 569). It is also a time of the uprootedness of war, famine, and mass globalization. Burton-Christie, an Anglican theologian, also draws on the theme of rootedness in place, echoing the work of the “Christian” Platonist and mystic Simone Weil (in her *The Need for Roots*, discussed by Burton-Christie: 59). Burton-Christie and Merton both argue that a notion of spiritual centeredness in the living world of the sacred (note here the sacred is constructed as a living, positive fact with supernatural efficacy and substantial material reality) emanates not from a notion of space that carries with it the characteristic of utility but only from a grounded rootedness in the sacred quality of place. In his conclusion, Burton-Christie associates the living spirit not as a “disembodied idea” but a “real presence pulsing in the living world” (69). This “real presence” evokes the incarnation of spirit enfolded, emplaced within the world that is communicable through the act of

transubstantiation within the Eucharist. By using the term “real presence,” the sacred quality of place is connected with sacrament. The real positive fact of the sacred, in Turner’s terms, is present within physical objects and place. And as Aristotle, the Christian Neo-Platonists, Heidegger, Eliade, and Weil suggest, our rootedness in place is confirmed by its limitation and not its immediacy.

[7] The Turners describe place as vibrating with “supernatural efficacy.” This also has a corporeal reality – in both senses of the word corporeal – that it is marked and located on the body of self, as well as on the body of the community:

This is not just magical thinking, for it refers to the theological doctrine, ethical in nature, that salvation or ‘justification’ (the passage from a state of sin to one of sanctifying grace or ‘justice’), is linked to the communion of saints, the reciprocal action of soul on soul in a corporate circulation of blessings – a view clearly opposed to the Protestant notion of justification through faith alone, which is essentially individualistic (206).

Though the Turners’ argument sounds theological in tone, it is actually based on an analysis of pilgrimage accounts and writings: it reflects theological tendencies, but it was gathered through anthropological and historical methods. I argue that in online religious spheres the locus of the sacred is no longer place, but space – cognitive space visited alone by the individual, much like it is illustrated in the Jesuit prayer site mentioned above. At the time of composition of this essay, *Sacred Space* had been visited over twenty-two million times since its launch during Lent of 1999. This site will be described in detail below. There are more than one million other Catholic prayer and pilgrimage sites on the web according to recent Google searches. Most of these sites have interactive point-and-shoot prayer or guided pilgrimages through images of holy places. With emphasis placed on the cognitive dimensions of experience – and not experience as fully embodied – the notion of “sacred space” points to what D. H. Lawrence suggests as the trajectory of modern experience: the removal of the body, or at least the decreasing emphasis on the essential character of embodied experience. This connects to Marx’s notion of the force of abstraction in modern religion. Other texts have explored the “abstraction” of religion, wherein the sacred (once in place) is driven into cognitive “space.” In their volume observing Catholic parishes’ implementation of the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, once a ritual and embodied practice, as articulated by reforms in the second Vatican Council, Yamane and MacMillen observed an over-emphasis on classroom *information* rather than ritual or action *formation*. Akin to Luther’s assertion of *sola scriptura*, the new Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, at least in these observations in an American context, suggests *sola Catechisma*, or Initiation through the passing on of information and doctrine alone. This is perhaps a symptom of what D. H. Lawrence warned of in his prescient essay: we are moving away from the body.

Virtual Pilgrimages

[8] Religion on the Internet is characteristically individually oriented. The examples I use will purposively accentuate the individualistic ways in which consumers of these sites interact with the sacred. The sacred – here online – is not enwrapped in the substantive quality of bodily-experienced place, but rather it is found dissolved into space. Space is simultaneously cyberspace and the inner space of the mind alone. The body and senses such as sound, taste,

smell, touch, are removed. The only sensory element of interaction comes with the machine. This adds to the mechanistic dimension of the experience of space. What does this mean for pilgrimage, given how Christian and anthropological figures have defined it? Describing the phenomena under consideration – Guadalupe’s site and *Sacred Space*, two very popular online “pilgrimage” sites – there are consequences for the meanings of “pilgrimage.” The Guadalupe site is primarily a place for individuals to interact with a virtual Guadalupe: to offer prayers of thanksgiving and place a virtual rose at her virtual feet. The pilgrim can learn about the history of her apparition to Juan Diego, a poor indigenous Aztec who was converted to Christianity by Franciscan missionaries. The significance of this revelation to Juan Diego was her appearance to the “small and meekest of persons” and Mary’s uttering in the indigenous language, Nahuatl. Mary called him “Juanito, Juan Dieguito,” “the most humble of my sons,” “my son the least, my little dear.” The appearance to Juan Diego signifies Mary/Our Lade of Guadalupe as the champion of “little” and oppressed people.

[9] On the site, one can visit pictures and mass schedules of the Basilica as well as directions to the holy site in Mexico City. The pilgrim can be taken to a site to “Say a Rosary” (a prayer invoking Mary) by clicking a link on the main page. Each part of the Rosary prayer has a place to point and click for the text, with check-boxes afterward, “Make the sign of the Cross,” “Say the Apostle’s Creed,” “Say the Our Father [the Lord’s prayer],” “Say three Hail Marys,” “Say the Glory be to the Father.” Then the seven mysteries are guided by meditation images depicting events in Mary’s and Jesus’ lives (for example, the Annunciation of conception from the angel Gabriel; the Visitation with Elizabeth, carrying John the Baptist in her womb; Jesus’ presentation at the Temple) with intermediary “Our Fathers” and “Hail Marys” – with a box to check after each one.

[10] The most popular pages of the site – those that have the highest number of hits – are the “Thanks” and “Petitions” pages. There are links to these pages from the main page, and on them pilgrims write prayers of thanksgiving or petition for the Mother’s aid. Pilgrims write in English, Portuguese, and Spanish. The prayers of thanksgiving, written by online pilgrims, offer a simple “Thank You!” or “*gracias por tu amor.*” Petitions, or prayers of entreaty, call for aid with a variety of requests, such as help with examinations or even for the Holy Mother to use her power to create love in a beloved.

Dearest *Madrecita*, I ask of you in a very selfish way, for myself, that you grant me this one very special wish. I want to have Christopher XX’s heart and soul just as he has mine. May we both have the opportunity to share a love so pure and be blessed with a forever after union. I know I can make him happy and only want what is best for him. May he resolve all his problems very soon so that we can start to enjoy what we have together. May both families be in agreeance [sic] with our union and his children accept me not as a replacement mother but as a friend. . . Give me this opportunity *Virgencita* and I know I won’t let you down. . . I will make you proud of me and will love, honour [sic], care, for Chris the way the lord meant for us to love our partners. Please make Chris trust me enough to give me the chance to make him happy. This I wish with all my heart and hope you will grant it to me. . . Is it wrong to be selfish this once *Virgencita*?

Here is a woman who pours her heart out to the *Madrecita*, a Spanish language term of endearment for Mary used by those in Latin America. She shares her very private emotions and intentions and vulnerability about her beloved, Chris. A site of communication with Mary, the center, is brought to her, but one has to ask how communing online might remove the important intimacy of the private devotional experience, while ridding the distance between bodies and the sacred. One might also wonder how she needs the machine to mediate the sacred. It is valuable, methodologically for ethnographers to see these private moments revealed, but Benjamin and Marx might see a diminishment in the private revealed (sensuousness profaned) or the immediate communication and saturation of experience without mediation or distance – distance and mediation being important elements in the dispensation of the sacred into place. In this *techgnosis*, the ascension toward the sacred is not marked by limitation. The machine mediates her experience. Also, is she aware of the publicity of her petition, or perhaps that this Christopher might be aware of it?

[11] The site also indicates a vacuum of *communitas*, or community (Turner) – an important element of the ritual process involved with pilgrimage. The site does not offer an opportunity for pilgrims to interact, there is no “site” for blogging or on-going communication between pilgrims nor does it seem to display any testimonials about the communal experience of Christians worldwide visiting the site. Primarily it is constituted by individual visitors offering prayers, or going through the movements of the rosaries, isolated and mediated by the machine (based on observations on hit numbers at the bottom of the pages). The process of pausing to check the box of a completed spiritual action seems like a machine interruption to the flow of the embodied action of ritual. In the emplaced version of devotion, pilgrims or other devoted would have to learn these ritual actions by mimicking others, and then the body takes up the memory and enacts almost in a *flow*-like movement, a term which Csikszentmihalyi has used to describe athletes playing a sport or the devoted within ritual and prayer observance or meditation. Csikszentmihalyi suggests that one dimension of ritual is that it connects the body to the transcendent, or to the group, beyond the conscious mind. “Flow” represents this “utter-” and “un-” consciousness and deep connection to the body and community. To leap out of a Western context for an example, this is exactly the goal of Zen meditation. With Internet ritual, there is always the mediation of the machine to interrupt this “flow” of the body’s connection to the transcendent, (mediated by the moment taken to point and click). Also, the body is not experienced communally or corporeally in the way rosaries are typically said in small groups of congregants. In this the body in prayer is mediated by machine.

[12] As Paolo Apolito has described in his investigation of Marian devotion on the Web, the Internet suggests a form of techgnosticism about technology, “imposing the wonder of itself, enclosing and delimiting every other wonder within its on/off switches” (6). From this quote, one can ask, has the sacred, when presented online, become something easily controllable and accessible? Is it something one can turn “off and on” with the flick of a switch? Apolito’s investigation also shows how the virtual apparitions seem to be replacing “place” with space as sacred quality. Along with that comes the imperialism of Western/Anglophone American connotations as globalization constricts the efficacy of pilgrim experiences outside the hegemonic sphere (73). Places, people, and indigenous languages become secondary. “Even the famous visionary [or person who has the beatific

vision] sees his or her individual substance dissolve. Proliferating through various diverse Websites, visionaries become icons of themselves, devoid of subjectivity and capacity to act, other than merely representing ‘the one who sees the Madonna.’ Or they become fragmentary, contradictory, faded” (Apolito: 74). One important point about the Guadalupe site: at the original “emplaced” site, one would make embodied contact with relics and tombs, such as the remnants of the physical body of Juan Diego. Online, a reproduction of Diego is merely contemplated.

[13] Apolito continues by discussing how the Internet reduces the opportunities for new religious visionaries, while it also depersonalizes and encourages a shift “from persons to information, from experience to digital” (77). Apolito also argues that in pilgrimage place is “irreplaceable,” in that it promises to cure physical ills (77). In the Guadalupe site, there might be a distancing away from the body as communal, but there seems to be an increase in accessibility of the “sacred.” In this popular Marian example, it seems that the unit of experience for the pilgrim online is indeed the individual, but Guadalupe is accessible to more individuals, or at least her image is – *communitas* seems secondary, if not altogether absent. The comments left by visitors for petitions and thanksgiving prayers all suggest individuals interacting with Our Lady, but make no note of the value or function of the site connecting devotees or visitors to each other worldwide. Where scholars advocate the “community” argument in Internet culture, as Steve Jones’ edited volume explores and reflexively critiques, it seems that for this particular website, the targets are individuals who experience the “sacred” at independent moments in time and space. The primary function of this website seems to be for individual spiritual experience. Where the site might open access to hundreds of millions worldwide, the notion of this large community of the body of Christ seems lost to visitors, or at least it is not mentioned. Within traditional pilgrimages, one realizes the dimensions of community by those bodies that interact “along the road” and in the sacred place: the bumps, bruises, fatigue, and blisters shared by the group create *communitas*. On the Guadalupe site, the individual makes contact with Our Lady of Guadalupe, but nothing really suggests the relations with other physical members of the Body of Christ itself. Though the Guadalupe site makes the sacred more accessible, there is an important point about the suspension of place and the experience of disembodied and limitless space, and the easy accessibility and individuation of the sacred.

Abstraction

[14] Wherein can we find this locus of abstraction? Technology seems only to be a symptom of something deeper. R. H. Tawney suggested that within Luther’s and Calvin’s Reformations, an emerging individualism was an incontrovertible force (Tawney). Perhaps “personal technologies” are only one reflection of deeper forces within religion itself, which reflects a tendency towards individuation and abstraction into “space.” Perhaps the undoing of the sacredness of “place” was within religion itself.

[15] There is a sense in which Marx sees religion as a force of abstraction and objectification that alienates the body and human sensuousness from itself, that religion is a part of the estranged world of human thinking and objectification:

. . . religion, wealth, etc., are but the estranged world of human objectification, of man’s essential powers given over to work and that they

are therefore but the path to the true human world . . . sense, religion, state power, etc., are *spiritual* entities; for only *mind* is the *true* essence of man, and the *true* form of mind is thinking mind, the logical, speculative mind (Marx 1978a: 111).

[16] Commenting on Hegel in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx writes, “If I know religion as *alienated* human self-consciousness, then what I know in it as religion is not my self-consciousness, but my alienated self-consciousness confirmed in it. I therefore know my own self, the self-consciousness that belongs to its very nature, confirmed not in *religion* but rather *annihilated* and *superseded* religion” (emphasis in the original; 1978a: 119). Because of the human’s tendency to pull toward abstraction in capitalist societies (and the dominance of the theoretical over the material), religion becomes a reflection of this alienated form of consciousness. One could make a case for a Catholic materialist position by fusing Marx to his Scholastic and Hegelian heritage; however the force of religion moves in a direction unto itself. Therefore, for Marx (commenting on his (mis)interpretation of Hegel’s tendency toward abstraction), religion’s fullest expression is found in the cognitive abstraction, philosophy of religion:

Hence my true religious existence is my existence in the *philosophy of religion* If however, the philosophy of religion, then, too, it is only as a *philosopher of religion* that I am truly religious, and so I deny real religious sentiment and the really religious man. But at the same time I assert them, in part within my own existence or within the alien existence which I oppose to them – for this is only their philosophic expression – and in part I assert them in their own original shape, for they have validity for me as merely the apparent other-being, as allegories, forms of their own true existence (i.e., of my philosophical existence) hidden under sensuous disguises (1978a: 119).

The man estranged from himself is also the thinker estranged from his essence – that is from his natural and human essence.¹ His thoughts are therefore fixed mental shapes or ghosts dwelling outside nature and man. This negation of the negation is in part the restoring of these fixed forms in their estrangement:

It is precisely abstract thought from which these objects are estranged and which they confront with their arrogation of reality. The philosopher sets up himself (that is, one who is himself an abstract form of estranged man) as the measuring rod of the estranged world. The whole history of the alienation process and the whole process of the retraction of the alienation is therefore nothing but the history of the production of abstract (i.e., absolute thought) – of logical, speculative thought (1978a: 110).

[17] Marx reveals that built within religion, like any ideology – perhaps even Marxism – is a particle of alienation. This particle grows and grows, like an abstraction looming large. This

¹ I prefer to keep the gender term here because Marx uses “man” and means “man.” To protect the historicity of the text, Marx is speaking of the male as suffering from abstraction. It loses something to suggest the female or gender neutral because she, who is not prone to the slips of *theoria*, is less likely to fall prey to this force of abstraction. Woman as connected more to her body is naturally more sensuous.

presents itself as *ideology*, moving away from the *truly* religious – which in this example is a connection between the sacramental, embodied, and ethical. Alienation is signified by the ideology pushed to the limit carrying us away from original truth. As Schaff observes in *Alienation as a Social Phenomenon*, “an ideology, created for specific social aims, can become transformed into its opposite” (137). Schaff’s example is the Grand Inquisitor’s approach to Christ in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. This literary episode is a great rendering of this logic of alienation that lies precisely in the fact that “man’s spiritual creation stands before him as a power threatening his existence” (Schaff: 138).

[18] Thus we see that with the virtual pilgrimage – as the abstraction into space – touch, smell, and taste (all sensory experiences important to pilgrims) are removed. Place becomes completely removed, or at least as Apolito suggested “irrelevant.” In the shifting from place to space, the center, once important, is lost: to borrow a Marxian phrase, in capitalism all that is solid melts into *space* (1978b).

The Loss of the Center

[19] The chapters in Eade and Sallnow’s volume discuss a displacement of the center; in this example, the center dissipates into space. The very *raison d’être* of the pilgrimage is the holy place, the center. They discuss Eliade, for whom every shrine “is an archetype of a sacred center,” an axis where exists “the possibility of breaking through to the realm of the transcendent” (6). However, Eade and Sallnow suggest that place-sacredness has been deconstructed and the center dissolved, partially as a consequence of modernity. Eade and Sallnow examine competing discourses in pilgrimage and Stirrat’s chapter in their volume suggests that “place-centered sacredness” has been deconstructed in favor of a construction of the inherent sanctity of a “holy person.” Place-centered sacredness gives way to the bodily holiness of the living personality, the saintly mortal or god incarnate. What happens when the sacredness dissolves in a place and place is secondary to space? Similarly in the West, what happens when the place itself becomes limitless as space, as it does on the Internet? As Apolito suggested, with religion and apparitions on the Internet, the substantiality of the saint, the relics of Juan Diego for example, seem to lose their importance.

[20] With online religion, the sacred has become transportable, and in its transportability, the communal dimension and quality of the “real presence” of pilgrimage have become diminished, or unnoticed, as illustrated by the testimonials on the Guadalupe site. Visitors to the page can post intimate innermost dialogue with the Great Mother herself, but seem not to notice any others surrounding them. This, I argue, diminishes the significance of place and makes the “sacred” possible without it, a realm reachable through the cognitive and the point and click. It is without physical confines and embodied boundaries.

[21] The virtual pilgrimage diminishes place and makes the sacred accessible in space. Thus what was once defined as locations of place, are now accessible in cyber-*space*. By deconstructing the websites that one can visit as a “virtual pilgrim” at the popular Virgin of Guadalupe’s site we find that these sites, by making the claim for sacred space, signify a diminishment of the sacredness of the place. But why is it so? In what dimension of Christian pilgrimage does the particle of alienation reside? What allows for the atomization of the charisma of the sacred? Turner and Turner suggest that one meaning of the sacred as objects, “*sacra*,” and encounters with the bodily dimensions, trials, tribulations, and

temptations is that the sacred pertains not to saturation and democratization of access, but by things kept secret and withheld, and an experience of limitation (8). The pilgrim as in “the embodied” experience faces boundaries, limitations, things kept secret and then revealed. The logic of the Internet is to diminish boundaries and limitations and to make the “sacred” universally accessible: space is not defined by boundaries, nor is it hidden. Space is universally accessible and unmediated. Perhaps with the emergence of the online pilgrimage, there is an important quality of the sacred lost in a process of democratization or the increasing of access. *Sacra* are no longer hidden. There is no mystery.

[22] To reflect on the significance of these popular examples of online religion in general – and whether it is a source of community, or if it suggests dissolution of the center and the disappearance of the important elements of body and place – I will move now to examine a very popular Jesuit prayer site called *Sacred Space*. The Guadalupe site was a “website of a pilgrimage *place*” in the world. The Jesuits’ site is a popular “online prayer site,” for Internet pilgrims: it is not constituted by *place* or referring to a specific place. It exists for itself as a *sacred space*. Sponsored by the Irish Jesuits, it claims to offer a collective experience with the tagline, “When we pray, we are never alone,” which of course suggests how Catholics are always and already praying with others worldwide, and also with the Communion of Saints. But could it have a double meaning, extending far across the world, internationally? The site offers a form of prayer, based on St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, which is structured to move the prayerful through readings from scripture and meditations on experience. A typical prayer session has six sections:

I pause for a moment and think of the love and the grace that God showers on me, creating me in his image and likeness, making me his temple . . .
[CLICK FORWARD]

“Leave me here freely all alone. In cell where never sunlight shone should no one ever speak to me. This golden silence makes me free” (part of a poem written by a prisoner at Dachau concentration camp). [CLICK FORWARD]

Help me Lord to be more conscious of your presence. Teach me to recognise your presence in others. Fill my heart with gratitude for the times. Your love has been shown to me through the care of others. [CLICK FORWARD]

Now I turn to the piece of scripture set out for me this day. I read slowly over the words, and see if any sentence or sentiment appeals to me: Matthew 7, 21-29 [text of scripture provided on the website] What are you saying to me, Lord? [CLICK FORWARD]

Jesus you speak to me through the words of the gospels. May I respond to your call today. Teach me to recognise your hand at work in my daily living. [CLICK FORWARD]

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end
[Gloria]

With a link to AMEN at the end of this session of Ignatian meditation, one is taken back to the main page and the daily prayer. This prayer printed on the page in the Easter season is, ironically for the topic of this paper, on the body:

At Easter we meditate on the body, my body. This flesh is not distinct from me. It is me. The faces we see around us are lived in, showing the signs of love, suffering, pride, tenderness, arrogance or indulgence. As the proverb says: The face you have at forty is the face that you deserve. So too our hands are shaped by the skills we give them, our limbs by the exercise we offer them, our lungs, heart and stomach by the use or abuse we show them. This is a time to converse with this loved but mortal flesh: Do I listen to you? Have I the freedom of you? Do I respect you, my temple of the Holy Spirit? You will indeed grow old and die with me, but that is not the end. You are sacred, and Easter opens a ravishing prospect for both of us.

[23] The daily prayer expresses the importance of the body as sacred, reflective of the analogical imagination: the power of the sacred within the body, within place, within substantiated reality (see Greeley). This daily prayer is available in several different languages – French, Spanish, Croatian, German, among others. The site claims we never “pray alone”; however, if one examines the testimonials, the evidence shines forward that the prayer site is individualized, not about contact with the Body of Christ: individuals are guided through the prayer and called to imagine Jesus in front of them, sitting with them and fusing their experience with him. One pilgrim to the website imagines Jesus interacting with her, instead of feeling the comfort or presence of Christ in the body of a neighbor or priest. Jesus is “imagined.” “I truly did feel like I had Jesus sitting next to me. I even imagined Him holding my hand. I leaned my head against Him. I told Him I was angry with Him as well. I listened. I prayed. I cried” (January 2006). Another person states that the site helps her to talk to Jesus: “Thank you for this wonderful site. I have metastases breast cancer and I was so in need of a better relationship with Jesus and God. Your site has opened up a new and wonderful world for me. After being on your site ONE time I was able to actually talk to Jesus” (May 2006). If this online “pilgrimage” can constitute our contact with Jesus, what is the need for Catholics going to their priest for counseling or reconciliation, in this role *in persona Christi*, or finding Christ in a friend or other human being? In maintaining an argument for the need for the sacraments of Reconciliation (formerly called the familiar “confession”) or Anointing of the Sick in the face of the Protestant objection that we can “confess to or be healed by God at any time,” one can say there is a *human* and embodied element to these sacraments dispensed by a fellow human being. But here the machine and the “imagined” Jesus replace the person of the priest and the physical act of the sacrament.

Space and Loss of the Incarnational

[24] The important role that a priest or deacon plays in the sacraments dispensed by an institution is displaced by the reception of healing or counseling on the Internet with an imagined Jesus. From a Catholic perspective, because of the incarnation, as the theologian and sociologist Andrew Greeley argues, we experience meaning not abstractly in thought but in the real personhood of Jesus Christ mediated by sacrament dispensers (clergy) or in other human contact. If we can interact with an imaginary Jesus and ask for forgiveness, where is

the place for this *human* and embodied/sacramental experience of the priest connecting as *in persona Christi*? Who needs any form of personal or institutional mediation with an exercise of this kind? Who needs the Incarnation? The site provides a reduplicated center, as Benjamin might observe. This type of pilgrimage may not be about *communitas* as we know it: the testimonials do not reflect an experience with others or connecting worldwide – but rather the sacred “space” is contained individualistically and one communes with God through the computer as machine. As Marxian theory has observed, the significance of the machine is that it is a medium of alienation. What a Marxian interpretation suggests is that though we think we control the machine, in the end the machine has redefined the sacred. It “produces” the objects, and individuals become alienated from sensuous and communal experience. The computer offers individuals endless possibilities of interacting with what is in cyberspace. Testimonials on the site, gathered over the last six years, reflect how the experience is not in the collective or in *communitas*, but of individualized communion with Jesus. One American visitor states, “It lets me experience, truly, God and myself together” (February 2006). Others extol how the website offers “self-knowledge.” Others see it as “a window to heaven”; it offers an alternative world, perhaps like a chat-room or an online “heaven.” A number of users suggest that their sacred space is actually a replacement for even *online* interactions with others. One respondent from Lima, Peru states, “You don’t need chat rooms or anything else – that would distract you from the whole purpose of listening to God and communing with Jesus. Thank you” (August 2005). In this way, communing with Jesus online is an *alternative* to not only community outside, but also the *online* community.

[25] From a Catholic perspective, if one can commune with Jesus online, where is there need for Eucharist? Usually celebrating Mass at the holy site is an important part of the pilgrim’s experience, and a moment when Catholics intake Jesus sacramentally, experiencing union. After an examination and aggregation of all the testimonials, the most common image reflected on that experience of closeness is an image of Jesus who appears sitting next to the computer – not closeness to other *persons* that one would experience in group prayer or in Eucharist. This is the imagined constitution of the feeling of “never being alone” when one prays. Jesus is there next to the computer.

[26] In the website one feels bonded to an imagined Christ conjured up through the machine, not one’s neighbor on the pilgrimage journey. Capitalist culture, with its focus on individual experience, might anticipate this ultimate development: the individual communing with the sacred privately on a computer, and mediated by the machine with no suggestion of the significance or presence of one’s neighbor. Perhaps the online pilgrim or person in prayer communes with an imagined Jesus sitting next to her desk, or an online Guadalupe, instead of the members of her local parish at an 8:30 a.m. Mass or prayer meeting. One can reflect on the capitalist culture’s emphasis on productivity and its consequences: instead of providing time for persons to gather communally, we are forced to experience God independently online, without emplaced community. And in this both intimate and public space, persons reveal private intentions and meanings for the world to see, as the woman who prayed for Chris to be her beloved on Guadalupe’s site.

Sociological and Theological Implications

[27] The transition from “place” into “space” – which these popular sites reflect – has philosophical and metaphysical implications. Why is the metaphysical important? The French author Guy de Maupassant stated: “*Tous les mots sont des âmes*,” or all words have souls, which offers a kind of cultural sociology. Shifts in word usage from “place” to “space” might suggest subtle transitions in meanings of the sacred. Kenneth Stickers describes modernity’s ambivalence in moving from place to space; he argues that the history of modernity can be fruitfully read as a history of the movement of peoples out of confining, life-communal “place,” into the “open space” of modern society (1996: 88). Following the arguments by Tönnies, Scheler, and Royce, he draws the distinction between community (*Gemeinschaft*) and society (*Gesellschaft*): community is a form of association that grows out of tradition and a history of living together and sharing place. In community there is presence, matter (*topos* in Aristotle’s terminology), and “enchantment” in Weberian terms. On the other hand, society is a cognitive space, a form of association constituted by calculative and instrumental rationality. Community is a place, but society is a space, or open container, for the workings of a market. Though this offers us “ideal” types, it importantly suggests contrasts and tendencies comparing place and space. It also outlines consequences of the shift of the sacred into cognitive space, a force suggested by Marx as the essence of modern alienated religion as an abstraction of an abstraction. Stickers also discusses how space becomes a measure of utility – how space must be filled. He states, “Our technological mind in general seems to abhor a space which remains empty; it feels compelled to fill such space, to develop it, to conquer it; for example to conquer the ‘emptiness’ of outer-space” (1978: 175). But in this conquering, the end result is loneliness. Stickers is evoking the work of Scheler. In this over-colonization of the virtual world – the Internet – we are catapulted into another kind of dense space: into a vast emptying of lived-body experience. This emptiness is also addictive, and sexualized – not only in Internet pornography sites, but also in the sense that the allure of the Internet is connection on a vast scale (the experience of saturation), but the reality is one of emptiness (since it is regarded as cyber-*space*, and space is ultimately empty). It is the allure of the saturation of infinite possibility, but the reality of emptiness and loneliness for Westerners and those touched by Western culture (including Internet technology).

[28] Edward Casey also discusses the importance of body in place and not space. In *Getting Back into Place*, Casey describes how place “ushers us into . . . the environing subsoil of our embodiment, the bedrock of our being in the world”; it defines human experience (1993: xvii). The “connection with place is first and foremost corporeal . . . In the order of knowing, place comes first, not the mind, as for Kant” (1993: 110). Even Casey, who challenges Merleau-Ponty’s radicalization of Kant’s spatiality in the experience of body as body, suggests the importance of the place itself in determining experience (Morris: 39-40). So in response to those who assert that the Internet is somehow “embodied,” Casey would underscore the consequences of space versus place. In *The Fate of Place*, Casey explores how modern science sees space replacing place: place becomes a location within space (Morris: 46). What I suggest is that the Internet, with its unlimited possibilities, cannot be spoken of in terms of place, which has boundaries and limits. In space without bounds our minds need no reflective distance or limits of body-in-place (Casey 1997: 102). And similarly there are no

limits for the Internet traveler: space is more accessible, more democratic. Space is available to “all”; it does not remind us of our finitude. As one visitor to *Sacred Space* from Australia says, one can access the sacred “at any time” through, and with, the machine: “Congratulations on the site, it is so refreshing and relaxing to be able to go there when one needs to. It is also very comforting just to know that it is there. I imagine Jesus standing or sitting beside me, I turn and share my feelings with him. Wow, such simple advice yet it is effective when you do it! Thank you” (June 2003). We live as unlimited consciousnesses in the hyper-reality of the Internet – a space where our limits as bodies are unconscionable. We can be “all we can think” (paralleling the U.S. Army’s motto, “all we can be”) (Turkle). And we can be at all the spaces we can click. So at the same time we experience space as empty of place or even conventional dimensionality, we experience it as having an infinite number of links, an infinite number of communicators.

[29] The value of utility dominates our age when we are located in “space,” which is infinite because in this context we face our identity (or lack thereof) in and through the Enlightenment; we are all structural functionalists to some extent, in that we see the value of an object or “space” in relation to its function and utility. The Internet rejects our notions of having been constituted by location and sociality. It reflects the trajectory of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment consciousness sees location and locality not as constitutive, but relative. It is ultimately an obstacle to moving between boundaries or moving “forward.” Place becomes merely “a moment or point within infinite space.” Space sees no boundaries. As Stickers outlines the argument of Scheler, who draws on Weber and Durkheim, we see that the experience of space, much like the experience of knowledge, is socially conditioned and governed by the group’s ethos, or value comportment. The Internet, as a modern phenomenon and revolutionary product of technology relocates the sacred from place to space, and as a modern phenomenon it is characterized by the instrumentality of *Gesellschaft*. So the definition of the value of space is tied to its density, degree of saturation, or in other words, it is tied to utility. Space on the Internet is valued by how many pictures you find on the website, or the amount of written material on a given page, or the number of links to different pages. The value of space is defined in terms of how many visitors come to the page.

[30] Place, however, is quite different. When we talk of place we do not necessarily see it as empty, but as full. The notion of place carries with it a certain enchantment, a certain presence, sacredness. At the monument in Gettysburg, we do not refer to the space where Lincoln gave the famous address, but rather the place. The value of this place is not spoken of in terms of its utility – for the site where Lincoln made his memorable speech would not make a very good playground. But rather the place ushers with it a certain meaning or symbolic value in attachment to a presence of the past.

[31] Place is also fundamentally tied to the body, and body tied to place. As the philosopher Gabriel Marcel has stated, “My body is my *place* in the world” (emphasis mine, in Stickers 1978: 181). Dahlberg in Eade and Sallnow discusses the important role that the body – especially the ill or weak body – plays in pilgrimage. But should a disembodied “pilgrimage” on the Internet be properly called pilgrimage? It seems that the categories introduced by the Turners and Eade and Sallnow – such as place and body – define the reality of pilgrimage. Also, in what Casey and Scheler warn against, along with Catholic and Anglo-Catholic

voices, are the risks inherent in modern experience: *exactly* the reification of space over place. As embodied creatures this has psychic and metaphysical effects. If the meaning of the sacred has been transmogrified into “space” as these “sacred web spaces” suggest, serious cultural shifts have occurred.

[32] In conclusion, Marx and Benjamin would suggest that virtual pilgrimage and virtual prayer are not essentially about the claims of pilgrimage, but rather are explorations of space seen for its *utility* on the Internet. And in one way, the utility of the sacred on the Internet is suggested by its *convenience*. The “virtual pilgrimage” is a great example of two cultural phenomena: 1) an increasing individualization and compartmentalization of the notion of place into space, and the increasing abstraction (removal of the body) and alienation of religion into the cognitive away from the sensuous experiencing human; and 2) the growing profusion of “art” in a mechanical age of reproduction, where “reality” is dispensed into dimensionless visual, spatial forms that do not provide interpretive distance or presence of craft as found in older forms of representation. The emergence of the Jesuits’ prayer site and the online pilgrimage as a form of “online religion” (Helland: 207) reveals a moment of Gnostic searching, moving away from the realm of the true sacred as it is connected to body and place, into the realm of the consumption of space on the Internet, defined by *Gesellschaft*. Where Helland argues that this presents a new opportunity for community to be redefined, I suggest that it actually causes the dissolution of the bounded and corporeal notion of community. With the infinite possibilities of the “virtual pilgrimage” or “sacred space” comes the self-through-machine experience of the unbounded sacred. Once the essence of Catholic pilgrimage and prayer – the finite body, located in place and in contact with sacred material objects – the experience of real substantiated community is dissolved. Pilgrimoids – online pilgrims – are consumers of space, abstractors of experience. The location of the sacred is in cognitive space, contained within the self. The emergence of the virtual pilgrimage is yet another example of the state of the body’s continual disappearance amidst the loss of place in modernity: “While in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterized by absence. That is, one’s own body is rarely the thematic object of experience” (Leder: 1). The body becomes an obstacle instead of a vehicle in Internet spirituality, a trajectory the D. H. Lawrence quote suggests. In modernity, where place is subordinated to space (Casey 1997: 8), the locus of the sacred is contained within cognitive space, and a disembodied notion of the self attached to the machine emerges; the result is that religion becomes another strain of consumption and narcissism – narcissistic in the sense that the locus of the sacred is no longer extended in matter, in real presences, but rather in the self-enclosed space of the mind, and available to be consumed at any moment.

[33] This follows other forms of narcissism in religion reflected in the current popularity of religious Gnosticism, where the locus of the sacred is independent of institutions, even of God, but in the self. The location of the sacred from place into cognitive space associated with the machine is another example of the disappearance of the body and the narcissistic appearance of the sacred within the self and constituted by space and mind. All that is solid melts into air.

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