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MiT6: Media in Transition 6

Religion of the Book, Religion of the Screen

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." So begins the Gospel of John. Christianity, like its sister religions Judaism and Islam, revolves around its sacred texts. Even the word for those texts, "Bible," derives from a Greek word meaning simply "books." Young Protestants are taught that their schism from the Catholic church stemmed from the question of whether or not laypeople should read and interpret the Bible themselves. The act of engaging with the Biblical text, reading the words or having them read to you, interpreting the words or having them interpreted for you, is a central act in Christian practice. In virtual spaces, traditional textual formats no longer apply, auditory inputs and outputs may not be available, and all interaction is complicated by the need to manipulate keyboards and mouses in order to move and speak. The act of viewing a text is not necessarily congruent with one's virtual body, one's avatar, appearing to view a text. The experience of discussing that text is far more mediated than similar experiences that take place face-to-face, in churches or in homes. Moving into virtual spaces, then, creates challenges for Christians, particularly Catholics. How should Biblical exegesis be conducted? On the most basic level, how should the Bible be represented? How should the act of *reading* the Bible be represented?

Over the course of the 2007-2008 academic year, I observed a weekly Bible study that met in the Campivallensis Catholic Meditation Center in Second Life. The owner of the Meditation Center, Gonzo Mandelbrot, and the leader of the Bible study, Grizzy Griswold, are living out their own answers to my questions about the Bible's representation in virtual reality. Gonzo created the Campivallensis Catholic Meditation Center in 2006 as a "casual drop-in centre where interested or

curious people could meet to discuss religious topics from a Catholic perspective, but without any liturgical trappings."[1] When Gonzo began holding a formal Bible study during the 2006 Advent season, it was so well-attended that one of the participants, Grizzy Griswold, offered to continue leading it beginning in January 2007. Gonzo agreed, although Grizzy was not Catholic but rather Anglican; later, he reported that "I like that the discussion is led by an Anglican, not a Catholic, and that is accessible to anyone, whether or not they are Christian."[2] By the time I first attended the Bible study, it had been in existence for nearly a year. Weekly attendance varied; during my observation period, it typically had more than three but less than thirty participants (who refer to to themselves as "Campivallensians"). These participants were mostly non-Catholic; some even referred to themselves as non-religious.

FIGURE 1 *The meeting space for the Campivallensis Bible study.*

The Bible study met (and still meets) on a treehouse platform in the Meditation Centre. The platform appears to be suspended many feet in the air, wrapped around the trunk of an unfathomably large tree. Fortunately, since Second Life avatars can fly and teleport, the enormous scale poses no challenge. The meeting space features virtual beanbag chairs and virtual tie-dye lawn chairs, a sign that reads "Free Tibet," a collection plate, a teleporter to transport one's avatar to the ground, and a sign that dispenses commemorative virtual shirts from the Pope's 2008 visit to the United States (fig. 1). It also

features a view of Qoheleth, a sort of Second Life religious district: from the platform's edge one can make out the cupolas of a virtual mosque, the red lines of a Shinto Torii, and any number of smaller shrines and chapels in what is known as the "Koinonia Interfaith Garden" (fig. 2).

FIGURE 2 *The view of Qoheleth from the Campivallensis treehouse platform.*

Because of the platform's height, it is difficult to look straight down and observe the rest of the Meditation Centre's grounds. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, most Bible study attendees never ventured into the rest of the Meditation Centre. However, there is space at the foot of the treehouse for a small chapel and garden area, inspired by the Notre Dame de Lourdes shrine in Rigaud, Quebec (Gonzo Mandelbrot's hometown). The chapel is a more traditionally structured area. It is ringed with signs bearing images of the Notre Dame de Lourdes shrine and with virtual greenery. It has walls of stained glass, and it contains kneelers and a traditional pulpit. Yet, in my time at Campivallensis, the pulpit was never used as a site for preaching. Instead, one could walk up to it and read the papers on it: a meditation on Scripture, taken from an official Catholic website outside Second Life. This meditation changed daily. I was intrigued by these papers, or rather, these links to e-texts: who reads them and why? They clearly were not intended as notes for a preacher, since the pulpit was not used for that purpose; nor did I ever observe another avatar in the chapel, or heard a story about an avatar spending time in the chapel. The ac-

tivity in Campivallensis was all far above the chapel's roof, in the treehouse where the Bible study met. What, then, was the purpose of the pulpit and the simulated papers on it?

I was equally intrigued to discover that in the weekly Bible study itself, the Bible did not appear. That is, members of the Bible study certainly read scripture, but the scripture they read was not encased in a virtual object that looked like a book. Instead, the day before Bible study was scheduled, they received "notecards" with the scripture reading in English - usually the New International Version's translation. In Second Life, notecards are just what they sound like: short snippets of text that one can call up or put away in one's "inventory" as one chooses. The notecards with the week's scripture were offered again at the beginning of each Bible study, in case there were visitors. Viewing the scripture this way was very different from pulling out a paper Bible, thumbing through its onionskin pages and feeling its heft in one's hands. Furthermore, a notecard's presence or absence on one's screen does not change what one's avatar appears to be doing. During Bible study, generally speaking, most avatars appeared to be sitting in the provided beanbag chairs and twiddling their thumbs - but sometimes attendees would multitask, editing their avatars' appearance while they discussed the passages and making their avatars' figures' change shape and size before my eyes. Other times, the figures would behave in ways that would be difficult or impossible with a Bible in their hands, trying to carry on a substantive conversation: dancing, blowing kisses, striking poses.

In addition to freeing the avatars' hands from holding Bibles, the notecards also altered another aspect of Bible study: they decontextualized each passage. Rather than seeing that a passage from Matthew 5 was preceded by passages in Matthew 3 and 4 and succeeded by a passage in Matthew 6, members of the Bible study merely received a notecard reading

> You have heard it was said, "love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be

> sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.[3]

In practice, this treatment seemed to encourage members of the Bible study to develop highly personalized readings. That tendency was heightened by the questions that guided discussion each week: 1) What strikes you about the text? 2) What bothers or troubles you about the text? 3) What does the text call upon you to do? While any of the members of the Bible study could easily have had physical Bibles open on their laps at the computer, or had a separate window open in which they accessed the full Biblical text or even commentary on it, I never observed evidence of such a thing. The external references and context that Campivallensians cited were casual, off the cuff. Although the virtual space did not *require* them to limit their readings to the given notecard and whatever they could recall at the spur of the moment, they typically limited themselves. The Campivallensians frequently drew their interpretations of Scripture from their own lives, both online and offline. They seemed to feel free to speak about their experiences in both the virtual and the real world, relating stories of childhood bullying and stories of griefers harassing them in Second Life in the same metaphorical breath.[4]

Nevertheless, the Campivallensians' apparent openness about their lives masks some real disjunctions between appearance and reality. Most intriguingly, the leader of the Bible study is a female avatar - but in the offline world, "she" is actually a man.[5] "Grizzy Griswold" is a beautiful woman with a penchant for wearing fanciful fashions. The person who controls Grizzy is male; he also has another avatar, "Jayson Kangjon," who does not appear at Campivallensis Bible study; this avatar echoes his offline appearance. In interviews, Grizzy/Jayson made a strong distinction between

the Grizzy avatar and his offline persona, although he also stated that he felt just as morally responsible for acts he performed as Grizzy as acts he performed as Jayson or himself. "For some reason this persona I've made up takes away my shyness and inhibition, I guess because it's not me," he typed in a private interview, "but regardless of which av[atar] I use or which life it is, I have the same opinions, morals, values, likes and dislikes, and sense of humor."[6] In *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle described behaviors like Grizzy/Jayson's as purposely exploring "slippages – places where persona and self merge, places where the multiple personae join to comprise what the individual thinks of as his or her authentic self."[7] Yet in Grizzy/Jayson's case, exploring these slippages was not - could not be - a purely personal act. Although Grizzy made it very clear and public that he was, in real life, *very* different from his avatar, he never explicitly stated that he was male outside of our interview. Neither he nor any of my other interviewees cited difficulties in the Bible study based on the differences between their online and offline personae; however, it is difficult not to wonder if it is only a matter of time. Even after I knew that Grizzy was, offline, male, I found it difficult to think of him as male or envision him as male; his ultra-feminine, begowned and bejeweled avatar had firmly cemented him in my mind as female. What might happen if a Bible study member chose to self-disclose, then regretted it once they realized Grizzy was, in fact, not a completely feminine presence? Is this situation materially different than if Grizzy/Jayson were a trans person, or a person who enjoyed cross dressing, rather than a gender-normative man choosing to appear female for other reasons?[8] How does Catholicism, which is hardly gender blind, fit into this equation? In "Cyberstudies and the Politics of Visibility," David Phillips asks, "How do we even know 'where we are' in online contexts, and how do we know who is sharing that space with us?"[9] Grizzy/Jayson's case illustrates the reality of this question.

Thus, while it would be hyperbolic to describe Campivallensis as "illusory," they could certainly be regarded as unstable or potentially deceptive. Everything in them can be changed, remade, at the push of a button. Certainly this is a common critique of virtual reality among the religious.[10] Yet Campivallensis' residents are resistant to the idea that their community could be considered anything less than that - a stable, real community. They felt strongly that what made their virtual, online community tick was that they gathered together, having human interaction *despite* how heavily mediated that interaction was. "I experience God whenever I interact with another human being," typed one of the Campivallensis Bible study attendees.[11] Another wrote, "If I log on SL and none of my friends are on... unless I have some building or something to do... I log off and do something else."[12] They cited Matthew 20:18, writing, "where two or three are gathered, God will be among them."[13] The members of the Campivallensis Bible study firmly believe that when they gather in Second Life, that gathering is just as "real" as any that might take place offline – despite the intense mediation that allows Grizzy Griswold to appear female despite presenting as male offline. It is impossible to say whether the Campivallensians are right in their belief that they are making real, powerful, personal connections with each other – ultimately, it is just as difficult to put one's finger on what "really knowing someone" means as it is to prove or ex-

FIGURE 3 *The Campivallensis treehouse viewed from the air.*

plain a transcendent religious experience.

More concretely, the Campivallensis example of religious practice online presents a challenge to orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The Campivallensian attitude towards Biblical interpretation and the role of the Catholic church might be symbolized by the way the chapel nestled at their tree's roots and the Bible study met in the branches, far above (fig. 3). In the chapel, one could access an orthodox interpretation of Bible verse; above, however, the Bible study cheerfully took verses out of context, mashed them around, reinterpreted them, and read them through the lens of modern life. People rarely bothered with the chapel and its distanced, conforming interpretations of scripture; on the other hand, they joyfully joined the personal conversation in the treehouse. The Catholic Church, in fact, expressed concern about this type of behavior in *The Church and the Internet*, published in 2002:

> It is confusing, to say the least, not to distinguish eccentric doctrinal interpretations, idiosyncratic devotional practices, and ideological advocacy bearing a 'Catholic' label from the authentic positions of the church. ...Data suggest that some visitors to religious websites may be on a sort of shopping spree, picking and choosing elements of customized religious packages to suit their personal tastes.[14]

Their concern seems well-founded. The Campivallensians are not afraid to suit their personal tastes, and they certainly feel free to create their own eccentric doctrinal interpretations. While *they* are open and free with the information that their Bible study is not sanctioned by the Catholic Church, other groups might not be so ethical. Furthermore, misunderstanding is easy: when one searches the Second Life directory for "Catholic," Campivallensis is one of the first results. An inexperienced or incurious Second Life denizen might simply assume that it had been created with the sanction of the Church proper. In this way, the very presence of non-sanctioned spaces labeled

"Catholic" in Second Life represents a challenge to orthodoxy, even if they do not claim that they speak for the greater Catholic Church.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, despite the amount of time, effort, and money he pours into Campivallensis, Gonzo Mandelbrot has not discussed its existence with his priest. "The problem is that my parish is entirely French-speaking, and my work in SL has been entirely in English," Gonzo explained, adding, "I've also found in general that it can be a tough sell to get people to look into S[econd] L[ife]."[15] The fact that Gonzo's French-speaking, Quebecois priest would literally not understand the language of the Campivallensis Bible study has a pleasing resonance with the difficulties that a non-initiate might have in recognizing the body language, the avatar language, of the Campivallensians. Of course, the affordances of Second Life are different from those of the real world - avatars in Second Life can fly, can teleport, can levitate objects, can change objects with the greatest of ease. But more fine-grained rules are different too, down the the purpose of a book. In reality, a person without a Bible in their hands cannot be reading the Bible. In Second Life, the figure of a book is merely window dressing; the text itself exists on individual screens, invisible to others, its presence or absence unrelated to what each person appears to be doing. Gonzo's priest, upon trying Second Life out, would enter into a world where signifiers and signifieds have shifted, where objects have no more weight than words and people are literally not what they seem. Yet there is a logic to this world too, and the Campivallensians believe they have mastered this logic well enough to communicate and truthfully self-disclose across all the layers of mediation that separate them.

> In *The Gospel in Cyberspace*, Pierre Babin and Angela Ann Zukowski write,
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> While some segments of the [Catholic] Church continue to question the orthopraxis of televising Mass, cyberspace is expanding the reality. It may be pos-

> sible that some elements of traditional ritual may be lost without physical presence. Yet, what happens when participants gather synchronously on a regular basis for cyber rituals, cyber prayer meetings, or cyber paraliturgies? Can we say it is not an authentic religious experience or prayer?[16]

That question is largely open. There is little theology written on the topic of religion in virtual reality; there is only slightly more serious academic work about it, although interest seems to be waxing. Most of it focuses on Christianity, as my study did; there is little exploration into the multitude of other religions that are carving out spaces for themselves in virtual reality. I hope that other projects, both my own and others', will continue exploring this peculiar - and particularly problematic - part of our (virtual) world.

Endnotes

[1] Gonzo Mandelbrot, interviewed by M. Flourish Klink in "I Type the Amens and Think the Rest: An Ethnographic Look at Religion in Virtual Reality" (undergraduate thesis, Reed College, 2008) 21.

[2] Ibid., 21-22

[3] Matthew 5:43-48

[4] Campivallensis discussions are conducted entirely in the form of typed text. This is partially for the benefit of those with disabilities; at least one frequent attendee is deaf.

[5] In "I Type the Amens and Think the Rest: An Ethnographic Look at Religion in Virtual Reality," I chose to refer to Grizzy Griswold/Jayson Kangjon as "she," because I was primarily discussing the Grizzy Griswold avatar's actions. In this paper, I have shifted between the two pronouns, depending on whether I am discussing the actions of the Grizzy avatar or the statements of its offline owner.

[6] Grizzy Griswold, interviewed by M. Flourish Klink in "I Type the Amens and Think the Rest: An Ethnographic Look at Religion in Virtual Reality" (undergraduate thesis, Reed College, 2008) 96.

[7] Turkle, Sherry, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the age of the Internet* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 185.

[8] Grizzy Griswold, interviewed by M. Flourish Klink in "I Type the Amens and Think the Rest: An Ethnographic Look at Religion in Virtual Reality" (undergraduate thesis, Reed College, 2008) 97.

[9] Phillips, David J, "Cyberstudies and the Politics of Visibility," in *Critical Cyberculture Studies*, ed. David Silver & Adrienne Massanari (New York University Press 2006), 216-227.

[10] One example: Tobias, Jonathan. "No Life in Second Life." Orthodoxy Today. `http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles?/TobiasVirtual.php` (accessed 17 April 2009).

[11] "Nigel Mindes," interviewed by M. Flourish Klink in "I Type the Amens and Think the Rest: An Ethnographic Look at Religion in Virtual Reality" (undergraduate thesis, Reed College, 2008) 67.

[12] Grizzy Griswold, interviewed by M. Flourish Klink in "I Type the Amens and Think the Rest: An Ethnographic Look at Religion in Virtual Reality" (undergraduate thesis, Reed College, 2008) 67.

[13] Klink, M. Flourish, "I Type the Amens and Think the Rest: An Ethnographic Look at Religion in Virtual Reality" (undergraduate thesis, Reed College, 2008) 67.

[14] *The Church and the Internet* 8-9

[15] Gonzo Mandelbrot, interviewed by M. Flourish Klink in "I Type the Amens and Think the Rest: An Ethnographic Look at Religion in Virtual Reality" (undergraduate thesis, Reed College, 2008) 23.

[16] Babin, Pierre, and Angela Ann Zukowski, *The Gospel in Cyberspace: Nurturing Faith in the Internet Age* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2002) 169.