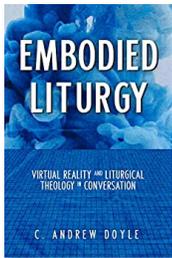


# [Review] *Embodied Liturgy: Virtual Reality and Liturgical Theology in Conversation*, by C. Andrew Doyle



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The 1991 film *Until the End of the World* tells a story about an inventor who creates a camera that can record audiovisual content and then translate it directly into brainwaves that allow blind people to see. As the story progresses, the inventor further modifies the technology, enabling it to record people's dreams. The people who allow their dreams to be recorded become addicted, eventually unwilling to do anything else during the day than sit alone and stare at small video screens, watching their own dreams over and over. Technology that was originally intended to bring people together through visual imagery ultimately pushes people apart, destroying family and community.

For filmmaker Wim Wenders, this musing on the power of images has been a common theme throughout his work. In his films, from at least as early as *Alice in the Cities* (1974), we often see characters struggling to reconcile images with their memories and their present circumstances. Behind all of this lurk questions of identity and personhood. Does a Polaroid photograph or a video clip represent the sum of who I am? What does it mean when an image contradicts what I know of myself through other means? Wenders contemplates the state of the world and, in a way that seems almost contradictory for a filmmaker, laments,

For a moment, I imagine the world without the invention of photography.

(And then film in its wake.)

What a difference that makes!

Things are only *there* if *we* are there!

If we want to see people, we have to actually go and see them. . . .

An impossible (and useless?) idea in our age, for sure,  
since our world has long turned into (and finally become)  
the BIG PICTURE OF THE WORLD.

There's no way to reverse that any more.

We have to accept to live with all these images, more so:

we have to learn to live more with the images of people and things

than with people and things themselves. (Wenders and Zournazi 2013, 63)



These questions about the way we engage with ourselves, others, and the world through mediated images came to the forefront for many people in the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. For churches, mandates to shut the doors of the buildings and shift to online, virtual worship gatherings present ongoing concerns about what such basic concepts as “gathering” and “community” mean when in-person contact is not allowed. “Things are only *there* if *we* are there”—but are we *there* when each of us is sitting at home, watching a screen? Is congregational worship an image that individuals can pause, play again, watch at 1.5x speed, or remix?

For C. Andrew Doyle, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, these questions needed answers. In response to the shutdown early in the pandemic, parishioners began to demand their “right” to Eucharist and other aspects of worship—even people who prior to the shutdown were not particularly frequent attenders on Sunday mornings. With churches across all traditions moving to prerecorded or livestreamed service options, Doyle needed not just a quick reply that would satisfy the urgency of the moment, but a carefully reasoned, robust response that addresses the fundamental question of what the Eucharist *is*, and whether some kind of virtual participation in its celebration is in any way less than the full, in-person participation. *Embodied Liturgy* is a result of that research.

The “embodied” in the title is a unifying theme for the whole book. Doyle approaches the question of virtual liturgy from a philosophical, and especially a phenomenological, perspective. The question of what the liturgy or sacraments mean is inseparable from the question of what we are as people, divine image-bearers in relationship with one another, the rest of creation, and God. And so Doyle brings together Michael Arbib and Mary Hesse (1986), Jean Baudrillard (1994), David Chalmers (1997; 2010), Shawn Copeland (2009), John Polkinghorne (1998), Erich Przywara (2014), Charles Taylor (2018; 1992), Rowan Williams (2014), and many others, setting them in conversation to determine the proper way to conceptualize the self and its many relationships.

The basic assertion that results from the dialogue is that a person is not primarily a consciousness; we are something more than a kind of neutral, linguistic perspective that happens to be housed in a body in a world. Doyle here rejects Taylor’s notions of *immanent frame* and *buffered self*, which imply that the spiritual, if it exists, is inaccessible, and therefore what we can know as real is only what we can each glean from the mediated reality of this-worldly sensory inputs. For Doyle, then, a primary danger of virtual worship is that it leads participants to unknowingly accept the conclusion that we are each simply a consciousness that creates an individual understanding of meaning in the world. If we don’t believe we lose anything by not being together in person, then we affirm a secular Enlightenment view of existence—which, Doyle convincingly argues, would render the created world and the Incarnation itself pointless. “There is hardly room in such a world for sacrament, which is matter imbued with spiritual grace,” writes Doyle (15); instead, “We reject the notion of meaningless matter or meaningless physiology” (2).

*Global Forum* readers may particularly resonate with chapters 4 and 5, in which Doyle considers language as a human activity that is inherently relational. Language is more than just the grammar and mechanics of *how it works*. “Most human communication,” Doyle asserts, “is

naturally embodied” (32). Sharing a discourse by interacting with other people in the real world is a way of “participating in the mutual act of being ‘recognized’” (31). Rowan Williams writes that “The world we inhabit is already a symbolized world, a world that has been and is being taken up into a process of speaking and making sense together; and what we say cannot be understood except as an event that requires further speaking, ‘following’” (Williams 2014, 69; qtd. in Doyle 2021, 28). This reminds me of what Kyle Horton has written about what “knowledge” means in oral cultures:

people who depend on the spoken word, and do not depend on the written word, live much closer to the “human lifeworld” and show a more situational, less abstract perspective. Powers of rationality are directed towards the concrete problems of life without the need for abstract classification systems. Without abstract analytical categories, knowledge is maintained via apprenticeship and not stripped from its locality. Further, knowledge professed is rooted in experience. (Horton 2015, 353)

The point for Doyle in this book is that we need to resist the idea of the liturgy as “just words.” If language is only words, then it shouldn’t matter whether we receive those words live in person or mediated through a recorded transmission. But language and knowledge are relational, interconnected with the world in which we live. The liturgical words and forms are not isolable entities distinct from the world in which they are enacted, time after time.

As part of this discussion of language, Doyle considers some ways that virtual worship restricts access to full community and personhood. If we tacitly consent to virtual worship as acceptable because what’s important is the words that are spoken and received, which can as easily be done through a screen as through an in-person gathering, then what does that mean for certain community members, such as the deaf? How does screen-mediated worship affect blind worshippers? These people miss out on sensory input that is not extraneous but integral. But it’s not just certain people who benefit from certain inputs—all of us need to be immersed in in-person togetherness, a community that can’t be paused or rewound but must be fully lived each moment. Mediated, buffered worship risks diminishing the full, embodied, engaged humanity that God intends for both celebrant and congregation. As Andy Crouch said in a recent podcast,

When you put a device in the middle, between people, you distance us from one another. And this is actually the power of media. The more I can control the mediating channel, the less you really know about me. And I can practice at getting so good. . . . The better I get at controlling this medium, the more powerful it becomes . . . and the more distant I am from you in reality, and the less you see of the fullness of my life. (Cospers 2021, 42:41–43:28)

Doyle thus argues that the liturgy is not at all *just the words*; rather, it’s the words *within* the full-sensory context that is shared with other people. “Liturgies speak to the church and the world about what it means to be a just community,” he says (101). “Embodied liturgy (wherever it is taking place) is an incarnational act of Christ’s continued presence in the created world. It breaks open the false divisions of private and public space, sacred and secular time, and it undermines the belief in a God who is objectified and distant from the creation itself” (77). I appreciate that in

*Embodied Liturgy*, Doyle carefully reasons his way to a conclusion that matches what other writers intuitively affirm—writers such as Lisa Sharon Harper, in *The Very Good Gospel*:

I believe the call of God to the church in these days is to. . . . [r]eturn to worshipping communities rooted in place, where power is shared. In such places, the image of God and the capacity to exercise dominion in all cultures and languages are affirmed and cultivated. (Harper 2016, 144)

This brief overview of a couple of Doyle’s main points only scratches the surface of the complex, compelling case he builds through the book. He also considers artificial intelligence and “amplified humanity” (discussions that I felt were too brief), liturgical time and space, surveillance and ownership of online activities, and tradition and meaning-making. In addition, I should mention that though Doyle is confident in his conclusion about in-person community in the liturgy, he acknowledges that the discussion should be ongoing and that there will be certain situations in which virtual worship and other accommodations may enable rich connections—for example, Deanna Thompson’s fresh experience of “the Church universal” following her stage IV cancer diagnosis (Thompson 2016). A recent themed issue of *Religions* includes articles that consider cases in which full intellectual assent and physical participation in the liturgy bring challenges for some worshipers (Moon 2021; Yogerst 2021). Such special cases don’t nullify the value of Doyle’s general conclusion, which provides a necessary foundation from which to continue the conversation.

I found much to ponder in this slim yet weighty volume. Doyle is of course primarily concerned with virtual liturgy as it applies to the Episcopal celebration of Eucharist (chapter 11 is particularly Episcopal-centric), but leaders and laypeople in any Christian tradition will find a lot that is relevant and valuable here. Be aware, however, that this text is best with some prior grounding in philosophical and phenomenological writing; it is not a quick, easy read, but it amply rewards the time spent with it.

Near the finale of *Until the End of the World*, as he sees his friends losing themselves in addictions to their dreams, the writer Gene Fitzpatrick says,

I had always cherished the beginning of the Gospel According to John: “In the beginning was the Word.” I was now afraid the Apocalypse would read, “In the end there were only images.” I didn't know the cure for the disease of images.

In fact, he proves that he does know the cure, and it’s the same conclusion Andrew Doyle reaches in *Embodied Liturgy*: in-person, fully sensory, immersive community. Gene rescues the film’s protagonist, Claire, by staying near her, offering her love that he knows won’t be returned, bringing her back into the created order and all of its relationships. At the end of the film, Claire has moved from the most isolated, self-focused, micro-level perspective to the biggest, widest picture possible (gazing at the world from an orbiting space station). I agree with Doyle that we need to be aware of what virtual gatherings are good for, and also what they can never replace. It’s an assertion that is always fresh, and never more so than during and after a pandemic.

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