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[Review of] C. Andrew Doyle, (2021) Embodied Liturgy: Virtual Reality and Liturgical Theology in Conversation

C. Andrew Doyle, (2021) *Embodied Liturgy: Virtual Reality and Liturgical Theology in Conversation*. New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, xxvii + 171 pp. ISBN 9781640654358 (pbk), $24.95.

During periods of the coronavirus pandemic, in-person public worship has been illegal in many countries as part of public health measures to limit infectious disease transmission. By necessity, many churches have offered virtual worship instead. This has often been positively presented, including in recent studies by Teresa Berger, Katherine Schmidt and Richard Burridge, as maintaining church community, engaging new worshippers and fulfilling theological expectations and requirements.

Drawing on a wide range of theological and philosophical reflection, the Episcopal Church bishop Andrew Doyle sounds a more cautionary note. His study opens with an extended preface by his fellow bishop William Franklin, which surveys the history of liturgical change in Europe over the past two centuries. Although much of this material is only tangentially relevant to what follows, it signals that the study is going to adopt a traditionalist approach.

Doyle affirms a classically incarnational Anglican theology. Opposing the Gnostic notion, which was to some extent endorsed by Paul, that Christ liberates the spiritual from the material, Doyle passionately contends that Christianity is physical. Further reflection on the Johannine imagery of fleshly communion could strengthen this case. Virtual reality, in contrast, is always mediated and is heavily reliant on language, and tends to construct the self as conscious rather than as embodied. It is also ocularcentric, disengaging the senses of taste, smell and taste, and, according to Doyle, constructs the clergy as liturgical specialists on whom others spectate, rather than enabling eucharistic celebration as a communal activity.

Doyle's book consists of fourteen short chapters (the shortest comprising just four pages) plus an introduction and conclusion. Because of this, and because Doyle often speaks through sources rather than critically engaging them, the book feels like a series of vignettes rather than being

characterised by a strong thread of exposition and argument. Nevertheless, two chapters merit special attention. In the fourth, on 'liturgical language within the frame of language-making', Doyle persuasively argues that liturgical language is not primarily a means of conserving and conveying information but emerges out of the practices and routines of lived, in-person liturgical celebration, including objects, architecture, movement and gestures. Liturgical language describes a complex embodied environment. Virtual liturgy, in contrast, is shared in by a 'buffered' self that inhabits a private space rather than participating in a shared space in which community is build. This may be overstating the case. In my own experience, camera angles have allowed new close-up views of the interior of a church building, such as the details of high clerestory windows and stone carvings. These have presented a familiar space to me in new ways—although this is admittedly only because I already knew the space in person.

The other striking chapter is the eighth, titled 'Who does the virtual sphere belong to?'. Doyle here exposes virtual media platforms and social media networks as tools of advanced surveillance capitalism, likening them to a public library that sells 'both the content of the books and information about who checks them out' (p. 62). They are driven by the monetization of compulsion and the commodification of users and their behaviour. Most churches urgently need to develop a robust Christian ethical critique of the agendas of the platforms and networks on which their mission increasingly depends. These platforms and networks are not bottom-up user-led communities but controlled by huge global corporations. Other ethical concerns raised include the availability of reliable connectivity. Many individuals, especially the elderly and those in rural locations, may lack fast reliable broadband, and even some large organizations have found during the pandemic that their network capacities are inadequate when systems are heavily used. Although, again in my own experience, virtual liturgy may promote inclusion by engaging people unable to attend in person due to infirmity, its countervailing exclusionary dynamics need to be acknowledged with action taken to minimize them. It is also refreshing to hear a civil liberties critique of social distancing. In 2019, few

would have imagined that citizens of liberal democracies would have so readily accepted this great restriction on their historic freedom of association.

An important theological issue raised concerns remote 'consecration', in which a virtual liturgical participant places the elements in front of their television screen. This is certainly problematic because the priest cannot intend to apply the words of consecration to elements of which they are unaware. Yet considered strictly, the distinction between in-person and virtual Eucharists is not clear cut. For example, if I attended a papal mass in St Peter's Square I might see the proceedings only on a screen and the elements would remain on a credence table when consecrated rather than being placed on the altar. However, if I lived next door to my parish church but participated 'virtually', I would also rely on a screen to follow the proceedings but might be closer in distance to the altar, on which the elements would have been placed for consecration.

As a church leader, Doyle has clearly had much to contend with during the pandemic and we should be thankful for his ministry in demanding times. He writes: 'We should not be surprised that people are demanding Eucharist, threatening clergy and bishops if they don't get it, and shaming clergy as eucharistic hoarders.' (p. 58) It should perhaps be recognized that virtual liturgy has helped clergy like him maintain community and has undoubtedly performed important pastoral functions. It is likely to have an ongoing place in liturgical provision, such as by making liturgies available to those unable to participate in person, especially for pastorally significant occasions such as Christian initiation, weddings and funerals.

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