DIDASKALIA

THE JOURNAL OF PROVIDENCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

WORSHIP

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"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching (*didaskalia*), for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim 3:16–17).

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Clarifying the Grammar of Cyber-Eucharist: An Inquiry into 'Presence' as a Condition for Online Celebrations of the Eucharist

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Abstract

With the onset of COVID-19, regular church gatherings around the world ceased in an effort to avoid gatherings where the virus could spread. Very quickly, worship moved online, and soon, questions about the propriety of various cyber liturgies began to surface across denominations. This paper looks at the practice of cyber Eucharist, first by situating the debate within Anglican liturgical theology and offering insights from digital theologians about the broader history of online liturgical practice. Within the Anglican context, controversy around the adoption of cyber Eucharistic practices centers around questions of place and presence. This paper interrogates the spatial logic of various understandings of the Eucharist and suggests that cyber Eucharists can fulfill the requirements of these logics by acknowledging that there is no stark divide between "cyberspace" and "physical space", rather we live in the hybridity of "cybernetic space." Ultimately, this paper argues that, insofar as we can understand the Eucharist as a speech-act, different ecclesial communities will require different felicity conditions to be in place in order for the practice of cyber Eucharist to be well received, and that some Eucharistic theories will be more and less amenable to its adoption.

In the case of Anglicanism, this paper argues that a version of cyber Eucharist known as "spiritual communion" should be acceptable at this point in the liturgical understanding of the church.

COVID-19 and Virtual Worship

With the onset of the novel coronavirus, responsible for the disease known as COVID-19, many people found themselves under a state of lockdown as social-distancing measures were put in place around the globe to slow the spread of the pandemic. There are countless ways that this has disrupted daily life for everybody, and the church has been no exception to this rule. Most churches quickly cancelled services and began moving to various forms of distanced modes of ministry. In my own diocese of Rupert's Land, the bishop suspended all services as of March 16. Very quickly this resulted in a huge move to various forms of online services. My church opted to offer a live-stream audio-only service. My brother's church put out a weekly liturgy that involved recorded scripture readings, reflections from the pastors, and music, as well as elements to be done off-line with one's household. Other churches provided a combination of recorded and live-stream elements. But in this rush to move church online, debates began to emerge, about the propriety of moving everything online.[1] On March 20, Ephraim Radner, argued that the church should not stream its worship, arguing that it would lead to the "siliconization" and "maternalization" of the church. Instead, Radner suggests,

> When it comes to worship, we might learn to pray alone. We might learn to use the prayer book with our families, aloud, regularly — using an actual book, turning pages, touching

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[1] The present paper will deal primarily with Anglican sources and debates, as that is where I am theologically located, though the framework that I develop could, in principle, be adapted to fit other ecclesial traditions. For a helpful overview of a number of contributions to the online debate that go beyond Anglicanism, see Peter Phillips, "Bread and Wine Online? Resources and Liturgies for Online Communion.," Medium, April 27, 2020, https://medium.com/@pmphillips/bread-and-wine-online-resources-and-liturgies-for-online-communion-34b80972a068.

paper. We might learn to sing hymns together, rather than listening to them broadcast through the computer. We might learn to become lonely (or finally to admit that we already are) and to cry out. We might learn to *hunger* and *thirst* even for the Bread of Life, for the Body of Christ, as many have done over the centuries in this or that place of desolation or confinement.[2]

Soon after Radner's opinion piece circulated, the Ontario Bishops declared a 'eucharistic fast' during this pandemic, effectively banning any eucharistic service, digitally mediated or otherwise giving as their reason: *"Sacramental celebrations are the work of the whole People of God and require a gathering of people who can be physically present to one another."*[3] The Director of Faith, Worship, and Ministry, for the Anglican Church of Canada Eileen Scully, further endorsed this move writing:

> Whereas musical and theatrical performances can be moved online, the Eucharist is not about performance by one for the many, and cannot move into that mode. The sacrament is made such in and through the gathering of people with a presider, in a place and time, in the physical presence of what we can touch and taste, together, as well as hear and see.[4]

At least in the Anglican Church of Canada, no other ecclesial province made such a drastic move, though certain diocesan bishops, including my own, followed suit by declaring a season of fasting from the Eucharist until things would return to normal.[5] While

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[2] Ephraim Radner, "Should We Live-Stream Worship? Maybe Not.," *Covenant* (blog), March 20, 2020, https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2020/03/20/should-we-live-stream-worship-maybe-not/.

[3] "Letter to the Diocese from Bishop Andrew," *The Diocese of Toronto* (blog), March 25, 2020, https://www.toronto.anglican.ca/2020/03/25/letter-to-the-diocese-from-bishop-andrew-3/.

[4] Eileen Scully, "On This Eucharistic Fast" (March 2020), https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/On-this-Eucharistic-Fast.pdf.

[5] Geoffrey Woodcroft, "April 1 Update to March 31 Bishop's Directive," April

many jurisdictions have not gone as far as the Ontario bishops, their reasoning for declaring a eucharistic fast serves as a helpful starting point to begin interrogating the issues around a "virtual communion" or "cyber-communion" and its suitability for both regular ministry and ministry in extreme circumstances.[6] In what follows, I set out a framework for understanding the Eucharist as a speech-act in order to explore what role, if any, physical presence needs to play in various ecclesial traditions' conception of a valid Eucharist.

Eucharist as a Speech-Act

The sacraments have been understood as visible signs that communicate invisible graces since the patristic era.[7] But insofar as sacraments are signs, that makes them subject to the regular rules of semiotics and human language. As Jay Zysk has observed, Anglican controversies around the Eucharist have been plagued by competing semiotic theories from the beginning.[8] What is a sign, how does it sign, in what way do sacraments fit within the semiotic economy?[9]

1, 2020, http://www.rupertsland.ca/wp-content/uploads/April-1-Update-to-March-31-Bishops-Directive-1.pdf.

[6] 'Virtual communion' has emerged as the catch-all term for various accounts of digitally mediated Eucharistic practices. I outline the various options in more detail below.

[7] Augustine, "Catechizing of the Uninstructed," §50, accessed May 14, 2020, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1303.htm. See also *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 550.

[8] Jay Zysk, *Shadow and Substance: Eucharistic Controversy and English Drama across the Reformation Divide*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 20–21.

[9] Some liturgists follow Saussure in assuming a divide between world and sign, and thus prefer 'symbol'. See Lizette Larson-Miller, *Sacramentality Renewed: Contemporary Conversations in Saramental Theology* (Liturgical Press, 2016), 88; Louis Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Liturgical Press, 1995). However, as I am analyzing the Eucharist through speech-act theory, I am situating my usage of the term 'sign' within the frame of ordinary language philosophy which assumes no such gap. See Toril Moi, "'They Practice Their Trades in Different Worlds': Concepts in Poststructuralism and Ordinary Language Philosophy," *New Literary History* 40, no. 4 (2009): 801–24. Furthermore, it is debatable as to how consistent liturgists have actually been in drawing a sharp distinction between the words sign and symbol throughout Christian history, see Sr Albert Marie Surmanski, "Sign and Symbol: Sacramental Experience in Albert's De Corpore Domini," *New Blackfriars* 97, no. 1070 (2016): 479–91.

Insofar as this question has not been adequately settled within Anglican theology, or indeed, among Christian theology more broadly, agreement on how the Eucharist functions as a sacrament will elude us.

A helpful way of conceptualizing the semiotic issues involved in the Eucharist is as an elaborate speech act. "Speech-act" names that feature of language that does not only mean something (locutionary content), but also, accomplishes something (perlocutionary effect). In Austin's classic example, a minister declaring a marriage is a piece of speech that performs an action, that is, it marries two persons.[10] To do this, a given locution must satisfy various felicity conditions, which are the various conditions that must be in place for a speech-act to *do* anything. In the case of a marriage, the speaker must be appropriately licensed, there must be witnesses, the parties in question must consent, etc. I cannot declare two persons married here, alone, in my study, and expect that the declaration will have any real effects.[11] Understanding the Eucharist as a speech-act is helpful because it is a communicative action that does not primarily *mean* something, but rather, accomplishes something – namely, signifying and enabling our participation in the presence of Christ. For a speech-act to have perlocutionary force, it must satisfy various felicity conditions.[12] The Eucharist, as a speech-act, must meet a number of different felicity conditions. Different traditions have different levels of strictness around what conditions are necessary, for example, do the elements have to be bread and wine? Can the bread be gluten-free? Can the wine, in fact, be grape juice, or perhaps something else altogether? Different ecclesial communities have come to different conclusions on this at different points in Church history, but

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[10] J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1962), 5.

[11] A well-worn critique of Austin's example here is to suggest that it is in fact the signing of the marriage registry, or some other act that actually 'creates' the marriage. For a response to this kind of criticism, see Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of PhilosophyL Autobiographical Exercizes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 88.

[12] Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 18.

what is significant here is that these determinations are undertaken by the community, and once determined, become the felicity conditions that must be met for the Eucharistic sign to be effectively received in the community.

Modes of Eucharistic Presence

As Scully's comments above noted, the reason given for a eucharistic fast was because of a theological question about the significance of *presence* as a felicity condition for a valid Eucharist. While there are countless understandings of how the Eucharist, as a sign, mediates Christ's presence, these mostly fall into three categories that I will call memorialist, substantialist, and spiritualist,[13] though of course, in the liturgies used by each of these rough positions, there are substantial overlaps in language, this is at best a typological heuristic.

In the memorialist account of the Eucharist, often associated with Zwingli, Christ's presence is mediated to us in mental-space. As the faithful receive the host, they do so "in remembrance of me." This symbolic anamnesis makes present the narrative of Christ's passion in the minds of the faithful and re-constitutes them as the people who are formed and sustained by and as the Body of Christ. Due to the mediation of divine presence through mental-space, many critics deny that there is any presence mediated at all, but suggest that it is a theology of real absence. Zwingli clarifies, however, that "in the holy Eucharist, i.e., the supper of thanksgiving, the true body of Christ is present by the contemplation of faith."[14] What is denied is that "the body of Christ in essence and really, i.e., the natural body itself, is either present in the supper or masticated with our mouth and teeth."[15] Ultimately, what we find in the memorialist eucharistic theology of

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[13] By choosing the term 'spiritualist' I am emphasizing Calvin's point that we are made present to God in the Eucharist through the Spirit, this is not to be confused with other 'spiritualist' accounts of the Eucharist, particularly Anabaptist spiritualists, see Lee Palmer Wandel, ed., *A Companion to the Eucharist in the Reformation* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 129.

[14] Ulrich Zwingli, *On Providence and Other Essays*, trans. Samuel Macauley Jackson and William John Hinke (Durham, N.C. : Labyrinth Press, 1983), 49.

[15] Zwingli, 49.

Zwingli is an attempt at conceptualizing presence such that physical presence is not the only legitimate form of presence.

The substantialist view of the Eucharist is characterized by a belief that in some way, the presence of Christ is truly found in the Eucharistic host. Roman Catholics understand this through the doctrine of transubstantiation and Lutherans express this through their doctrine of consubstantiation. On the surface, these views are quite different, but as T. F. Torrance has observed, they share a "receptacle spatiality" that suggests that the direction of divine presence is one that comes *here* in the creatures of bread and wine.[16] This spatial view sees the created world as a finite receptacle into which God has to enter in order to act upon creation, and according to Torrance, this can lead either to a collapse of God's transcendence or can lead to a potential violation of divine simplicity.[17]

Finally, the spiritualist view holds that in receiving the Eucharist, it is we who are made present to God as we participate in the humanity of Jesus and are thus brought into the throne-room of God, by faith, where the risen Christ sits at the right hand of the Father. This view relies on a relational spatiality that rests on a non-competitive conception of the relationship between divine and creaturely action.[18] Torrance identifies this view with the bulk of patristic teaching, as well as a number of medieval theologians and Karl Barth.[19] On this view, God is utterly transcendent from creation, yet this transcendence is not maintained by a degree of distance, but rather by the utter discontinuity of being between creaturely and divine existence. As Tanner notes:

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[16] Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London, New York [etc.]: Oxford U.P, 1969), 62.

[17] Torrance, 63; For an attempt to rescue the Lutheran view from some of these problems, see Richard Cross, "Incarnation, Omnipresence, and Action at a Distance," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 45, no. 3 (2003): 293–312.

[18] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity a Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 3.

[19] Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 64–65.

> A radical transcendence does not exclude God's positive fellowship with the world or presence within it. Only created beings, which remain themselves over and against others, risk the distinctness of their own natures by entering into intimate relations with another. God's transcendence alone is one that may be properly exercised in the radical immanence by which God is said to be nearer to us than we are to ourselves.[20]

On a relational-spatial account of divine presence, God is not entering the finite receptacle of creaturely spatiality as in the Catholic/Lutheran view, nor is God simply the container in which all things exist, but rather God is uniquely God and the world is brought into God's own space through the mediation of Christ's risen body. So, while it is right to affirm God's omnipresence, it is also right to say that in the reception of the sacrament of the Eucharist, we participate in the reality of Christ's physical presence to the Father in a "spiritual" way that is at the same time a "real" presence.

Divine Presence and Felicity Conditions

Before everything, we should confess that it is God that makes a valid Eucharist. I think this is an important emphasis to dwell on in the context of virtual communion because, as Teresa Berger has noted,[21] and as I already observed from Scully, one of the primary objections to virtual communion tends to arise first because of the strong commitment to the physically gathered community that the post-Vatican II liturgical movement strongly endorsed. Hans Boersma, in a recent *First Things* article, makes the point even stronger, suggesting that if we are merely gathered virtually, we have succumbed to a theology of real absence:

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[20] Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 79.

[21] Teresa Berger, *@ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds* (London, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 37.

> In truth, the bodily presence of Christ in the wafer and the bodily presence of the believers in church are two sides of the same coin. Eucharist via Zoom evacuates the (ecclesial) body even while confecting the (Eucharistic) body. It's a practice that puts asunder what God has joined together.[22]

Notice what is going on here, there is an elevation of 'bodily presence' as a felicity condition for a valid Eucharist. This is assumed to be a necessarily physical presence, as Boersma argues earlier in the article:

> Eating and drinking in front of the screen usually indicates a theology of real absence: Neither consecrated bread nor epicletic invocation of the Spirit is required if communion is a mere mental exercise. Indeed, a memorialist communion celebration is virtual by definition, even if it takes place in a church.

Of course, precisely as a felicity condition, it is one that is located in the particular genealogy of the recent history of liturgical changes in the twentieth century.[23] It should be noted that the changes brought about in this century were the result of admirable research into the ancient forms of Christian worship, but nevertheless, the re-appropriation of old resources is never simply a return to a repristinated church, but is always an adaptation made in the context of contemporary debates.[24] Boersma rightly notes elsewhere in the article that the post-Vatican II emphasis on the physically gathered communion was a correction to the problems associated with a too individualistic Eucharistic piety in the early part of the century. Emphasizing the

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[22] Hans Boersma, "A Wafer-Thin Practice" *First Things*, accessed May 15, 2020, https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/05/a-wafer-thin-practice.

[23] Within Anglicanism, this emphasis generally follows the Parish Communion Movement whose ideas were first most clearly articulated in A. G. Herbert, *The Parish Communion - A Book of Essays* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1937).

[24] Edward Foley, *From Age to Age: How Christians Have Celebrated the Eucharist*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2009).

relational physicality of Eucharistic worship is undoubtedly a good thing, but this must not make the gathering, as such, the end of our Eucharistic practice.

Ratzinger, writing on the debate about which direction the priest should face in the celebration of the mass, *versus populi* or *ad orientem* [towards the people or to the East, that is, facing the altar], notes that our practice should maintain the initiative of God's action in our liturgical life, as it is not ultimately the genius of the presider, nor the preference of the congregation that makes this ritual efficacious.[25] Ratzinger continues, "Of course, we cannot simply replicate the past. Every age must discover and express the essence of the liturgy anew. The point is to discover this essence amid all the changing appearances."[26] For Ratzinger, forms and practice *can* change, but they must do so in a way that maintains the link between the essence of the liturgy and the symbols and practices we use to express that.

Regarding the present debates around how to perform the Eucharist online, I would argue that by focussing on the necessity of the physically gathered community as the determining felicity condition of a valid communion, we run the risk of losing sight of the divine initiative at work in the liturgy of the Eucharist. Indeed, we may be tempted to believe that it is physicality itself that guarantees God's presence, instead of being in awe of the grace by which God, in God's utterly transcendent freedom, nevertheless wills that God's presence is mediated to us in these creatures of bread and wine.

Nevertheless, while we must absolutely affirm the priority of divine initiative in the communicative efficaciousness of the Eucharist as a sign, we must simultaneously insist that this is not done outside of the rules of human language. While in this paper I have focused quite narrowly on the communication of divine presence, it should also be affirmed that what God communicates to the world in this sacrament is not exhausted in this one aspect, but is nonetheless

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[25] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco, CA: IgnatiusPress, 2014), 79–80.

[26] Ratzinger, 81.

an inseparable part of the overall communication of divine goodness to creation that is the history of God. To insist this participation in human communication is not a limit on divine omnipotence or freedom, but rather a correlative of our belief in precisely the transcendence of the God who is free to be so mediated. As Rowan Williams has noted, "we can see that 'revelatory' action, including whatever events allow us a closer conscious share in infinite agency… will be, not an interruption of the finite sequence, but a particular configuration of finite agency such that it communicates more than its own immanent content."[27] In other words, the revelation of divine presence in the Eucharist is an apprehension of, in Williams's phrasing, "infinite agency" that is fundamentally not in competition with the finite agency of our completely free creaturely communicative processes. We always and only come to know God through the configurations of finite particularities, not because of some univocal relation of being, but precisely because God is radically other, and so, has no need to compete with our creaturely language.[28] The Word is always and only known to us from within the finitude of our many words.

So, what does this mean for virtual communion? Simply this, that while it is the case that the Eucharist is an efficacious sign of God's gracious presence to us by virtue of God's divine initiative, it is also the case that insofar as the Eucharist is a sign it must be a fitting one. If the sign is stretched too far, it will fail to signify anything, as it simply will not be received as the kind of sign that is meant to be communicating what we take the Eucharist to normally be communicating to us. Thus, when it comes to the question of virtual communion, we have to ask whether or not there is a way in which the type of "presence" that cyber-space allows for sufficiently

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[27] Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 3.

[28] This principle of non-competition that Williams is drawing on was originally expounded by Austin Farrer, but has become a common theme in contemporary postliberal christologies. See Austin Farrer, *Finite and Infinite: A Philosophical Essay* (Glasgow: Glasgow University Press, 1943); Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity a Brief Systematic Theology*; Ian A. McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2019).

satisfies the felicity condition of "presence" that seems to be at issue in the push-back against the practice. As Michael Curry, following Rowan Williams, observed at the start of the pandemic, "The real (and much more productive) question for a sacramental people, he said, was not simply whether a given practice was 'right or wrong', but rather 'How much are we prepared for this or that liturgical action to *mean*?' How much are we prepared for it to signify? Sacraments effect by signifying."[29]

Cyberspace and Eucharistic Presence

What seems to be operating as a fundamental assumption of those who reject virtual communion is that cyberspace is somehow fundamentally different than physical space and therefore, whatever kind of 'presence' we might have in cyberspace is not the kind of presence befitting the Eucharistic celebration. But is it actually the case that cyberspace is fundamentally different than physical space? Furthermore, do religious practices like a "virtual communion" truly "take place" in cyberspace, or is it more helpful to think of the totality of the cybernetic space in which the entire ritual operates?

The genealogy of the philosophy of space and place is a complicated one,[30] but for the purposes of this paper, it is enough to acknowledge that spatiality usually has to do with ideas of bodily extension, movement, and location.[31] Spatiality has to do with how bodies interact, as Kant observes in his *Critique of Pure Reason,* "Space is nothing but the form of all appearances of outer sense. It is the subjective condition of sensibility, under which alone outer intuition is possible for us."[32] Prior to Kant, space was thought to be a thing in itself, something that exists in the world, and, in the early modern period, something that was the basic infinite sub-structure of

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[29] "Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's Word to the Church: On Our Theology of Worship," Episcopal Church, March 31, 2020, https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-currys-word-church-our-theology-worship.

[30] See Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

[31] Immanuel Kant, *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan and Co, 1929), 72.

[32] Kant, 71.

the universe.[33] Picking up on this, Spinoza would identify the infinite space of the universe with God in his univocal assertion that all being emanates from the one true *esse* of divinity.[34] Kant's achievement in conceptualizing space as an aspect of being was to reject Spinoza's univocalist attempt at collapsing God into spatiality, preserving God's transcendence as noumena, or being "beyond" the conceptual knowability of this-worldly phenomena.[35]

So, following Kant, space came to be understood in one strand of modernity not as a thing-in-itself, but as a category of the intelligibility of phenomena. In recent phenomenological treatments of space and place, this emphasis on intelligibility has again risen to prominence. Philosopher Jeff Malpas has argued that spatiality is inextricably bound up with questions of hermeneutics, indeed, that the very language of "understanding" carries with it a spatial sense.[36] When considered as a category of intelligibility, it is possible to think of cyberspace as not just metaphorically space, but as an actual space in which intelligible actions can be taken. As Malpas observes, "we understand a particular space through being able to grasp the sorts of 'narratives of action' that are possible within that space."[37] In other words, for us to have intelligible action requires that we are located in place, just to the extent that we stand in some sort of spatial relation to our action such that it can be narratively described as a unified series of discrete yet causally related things.

If Malpas is correct, that space has to do with our ability to identify intelligible 'narratives of action,' then there is no reason,

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[33] Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 103–29.

[34] Baruch Spinoza, "The Ethics," trans. Tom Sharpe, Project Gutenberg, Prop. XIV, accessed March 10, 2020, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm. Isaac Newton's positing of infinite space followed a similar trajectory, with Newton going so far as to declare "God *is* space," see Casey, *The Fate of Place*, 148.

[35] Michela Massimi, "Kant on the Ideality of Space and the Argument from Spinozism," in *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. James R. OShea (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 65.

[36] Jeff Malpas, "Placing Understanding/Understanding Place," *Sophia* 56, no. 3 (September 2017): 379–91.

[37] Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2018), 189.

on this account, to exclude cyberspace from consideration as "real" space. An objection might here be raised that Malpas's phenomenological account of space is dependent on an account of embodiment that would exclude the kind of purely virtual or mental ordering of intelligibility taken to be occurring in cyberspace.[38] One possible response is to observe, as I did at the outset of this section, that cyber-space is not simply diametrically opposed to physical space, but is in fact a part of a more holistic cybernetic space. 'Cybernetic space' names the spatiality which increasingly dominates our society in which physical space is full of portals to cyberspace and cyberspace is increasingly impacting what happens in physical space, even so far as shaping physical space itself. Consider the example of a local ice-cream shop that provides an "Instagram frame" for taking pictures of ice-cream that fit the Instagram minimalist aesthetic. With the rise of smart gadgets, wearable tech, and smart homes, we increasingly live in a world that seamlessly transitions between physical and cyberspace in an increasing amount of our actions.[39] This increasingly digitally mediated world is best described as cybernetic space.

Cybernetic space problematizes the physical presence objection to virtual communion just to the extent that the space in which this ritual occurs is not a simple binary of cyber or physical space, but rather an amalgam space. Cybernetic space exposes the reality that our physical bodies are quite capable of being extended and mediated through cyberspace in ways that allow us to intelligibly order the actions we take in a ritual act, like virtual communion, in such a way that is formally similar to the kind of spatial ordering of our actions in a physically gathered communion.

Obviously, some traditions will have an easier time accepting this than others. Memorialist and Spiritualist accounts of the Eucharist already have a more flexible understanding of what counts

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[38] See for example, his discussion of Merleau-Ponty on embodied knowing, Malpas, 95.

[39] Ananda Mitra and Rae Lynn Schwartz, "From Cyber Space to Cybernetic Space: Rethinking the Relationship between Real and Virtual Spaces," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7, no. 1 (2001) §15–16.

as presence, and, correspondingly, may be more willing to adopt versions of virtual communion.[40]

Conclusion: Spiritual Cyber-Communion as a Legitimate Path Forward

I have been using "virtual communion" as a catch-all term for various forms of cyber-mediated Eucharistic liturgies, but there are at least three different practices that this term names. Paul Fiddes, in 2009, argued for the possibility of a virtual communion done with avatars in some sort of cyberspace like Second Life.[41] The idea would be to create a virtual church, and take an avatar into that space to do the whole liturgy virtually. This would be an entirely digital Eucharist, with the entire liturgy taking place within cyberspace, beyond, of course, the necessary movements of our bodies at each computer terminal that would make such a thing possible. Thus even this strong version of 'virtual communion' spills out into cybernetic space in ways that potentially problematize objections to it on the grounds of space and presence we have been discussing.

More recently in 2016, Pope Francis performed a Mass in Juarez, Mexico, that was simulcast across the border into El Paso, Texas. *The New York Times* headline read "Pope's Presence Crosses Border Into U.S., Even if He Doesn't,"[42] which was a powerful statement of the reality of the shared Mass that had taken place, spiritually, via digital technology, in two locales that are separated

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[40] Some denominations have even openly endorsed online communion practices during this pandemic, see Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), "Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) - Virtual Communion: Church Leaders Say It Can Be Done" (Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), March 25, 2020), https://www.pcusa.org/news/2020/3/25/virtual-communion-church-leaders-say-it-can-be-don/; "Online Communion in The United Church of Canada," April 6, 2020, 1. https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/online_communion_in_united_church.pdf.

[41] Paul Fiddes, "Sacraments in a Virtual World," *Me Liturgy, You Drains...* (blog), 2009, https://www.frsimon.uk/paul-fiddes-sacraments-in-a-virtual-world/, accessed July 21, 2020.

[42] Manny Fernandez, "Pope's Presence Crosses Border Into U.S., Even If He Doesn't," *The New York Times*, February 17, 2016, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/world/americas/popes-presence-crosses-border-into-us-even-if-he-doesnt.html.

by an international border. As Pope Francis declared, "With the help of technology, we can pray, sing and together celebrate the merciful love that the Lord gives us and that no border can stop us from sharing."[43] This kind of "spiritual communion" operates along the logic identified by Peter Damian over a thousand years ago, that when the church prays or performs the Eucharist, it does so with the entire catholic church – we are never alone in these rituals.[44] Pope Francis's extension of the spiritual presence and benefits of the Mass, via technology, was thus able to extend "presence" across an international border such that the faithful gathered in the stadium in El Paso truly participated in the rite, albeit spiritually, alongside their Mexican counterparts. This understanding of a spiritual virtual communion has been widely practiced during the pandemic and is the position that the Anglican Church of Canada has begun to pivot to after taking time to rethink the earlier posture of a Eucharistic fast.[45]

The final form that virtual communion has taken, particularly during the pandemic, is a sort of bring-your-own-elements "Zoomcharist" in which people bring their own bread and wine and have it blessed over Zoom by the president. This option has proven more controversial in some areas,[46] but again, this largely has to do with the implicit felicity conditions of the particular communities that determine what a valid Eucharistic liturgy entails. Churches across the three different types of Eucharistic understanding outlined above will combine their understanding of what kind of space

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[43] Berger, @ *Worship*, 29.

[44] Berger, 24; Peter Damian, *St Peter Damian Selected Writings On The Spiritual Life Translation With An Introduction*, ed. Patricia Mcnulty (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959), 11th Treatise, http://archive.org/details/stpeterdamiansel012952mbp.

[45] Christopher Craig Brittain, "The Eucharist and Coming out of Lockdown: A Tract for These COVID-19 Times," *Anglican Journal* (blog), May 14, 2020, https://www.anglicanjournal.com/the-eucharist-and-coming-out-of-lockdown-a-tract-for-these-covid-19-times/.

[46] Dana Delap, "How We Shared the Bread and Wine on Zoom," accessed May 21, 2020, https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/17-april/comment/opinion/how-we-shared-the-bread-and-wine-on-zoom.

constitutes real presence with other more pragmatic decisions like access to technology, by-laws, etc. in making their determinations.

It seems that, at least within my own tradition of Anglicanism, the form of virtual communion that could be theologically fitting is the second one, some sort of live-stream of the Eucharist that the faithful may receive spiritually. While there will inevitably be Anglicans who disagree, there is strong precedent for this type of extension of Eucharistic practice already provided for in the rubrics of the Book of Common prayer:

> *But if a man, either by reason of extremity of sickness, or for want of warning in due time to the Curate, or by any other just impediment, do not receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood: he shall be instructed that if he do truly repent him of his sins, and stedfastly believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the Cross for him, and shed his Blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefor; **he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth.***[47]

It should be noted that this rubric assumes that the physically gathered Eucharist will continue to be the normative practice of the church. But, in extreme circumstances such as time of plague, which indeed is what we find ourselves in due to, extending the benefits of the Eucharist out to the faithful through the virtual space assumed by the logic of spiritual communion meets the felicity condition of "presence" that I have suggested is key to the current debate around virtual communion. The Church of England has even created specific guidelines around how to adapt this ancient practice to our present circumstance.[48]

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[47] *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge University Press, 1962), 584

[48] Church of England, "Guidance on Spiritual Communion and Coronavirus," March 2020, https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Guidance%20on%20Spiritual%20Communion%20and%20Coronavirus.pdf.

Different ecclesial traditions will have to work out for themselves what Eucharistic practices meet the felicity conditions of validity within their communities. But I hope that what I have provided is a framework for thinking through how such a determination might be made, particularly in emergency pastoral situations like the current pandemic, and how virtual communion is not necessarily a move to individualize, or commodify, or 'siliconize' the practices of the church. Through this framework, virtual communion, in its various forms, may be considered by various ecclesial traditions as a valid extension of Eucharistic practice by way of interrogating the theological assumptions regarding the nature of signification, space and divine presence as necessary components of a valid Eucharist.