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4. The Real Self and the Imaginary Self in Virtual Reality

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For 9 years (1986-1995) John McDade was Editor of The Month, a Review of Christian Thought and World Affairs, and wrote extensively on a range of issues affecting Christian faith and the modern world and on contemporary cinema. He is President of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain (1999-2005).

This evening I have questions to ask of modern technology. I am not an expert in this area. I am not someone who specialises in the Internet or Virtual Reality. It is a world I am viewing from a distance; but I have questions about it, because of the concern I have about the impact of this powerful technology on our sense of identity, on our religious sense and on the kind of people that we are and the kind of people that we can become through this technology or against this technology. I'm asking questions with you this evening rather than telling you how to think about things.

First of all, some terms. One of the terms which is used is MMO: 'Massively Multi-player On-line' games which you can access on the Web. Secondly: 'Facebook', 'MySpace' and 'Cyworld'. These, particularly for young people, are places where they communicate very publicly and very intimately with their friends and the Network.

Avatars

One of the terms that's used is 'avatar'. Now originally 'avatar' referred to the visible forms adopted by Hindu gods: ways in which they presented themselves to the creation; to the world. But online culture uses it to name the forms that represent *us* in the digital world. What you will see is that a number of these games encourage people to construct avatars of themselves. You can construct a version of yourself that will interact with other versions created by other people in a virtual world. Now what is fascinating for me is the question of the relationship between the person and their avatar. The old question of what your 'persona' is – how you present yourself to other people – has been given an enormous boost by the technology now available to us, because now we are the makers and constructors of our identity in ways that were unimaginable before.

And we can interact in this virtual world with other people who construct their identity in ways that they find appropriate.

For example, here is Serge Creola, who lives in Brussels. His game is called '*City of Villains*' and is set in Glasgow. He spends twenty hours per week playing this game. He says: 'When I switch on '*City of Villains*', I am there with my own personality'; the real and the virtual blending together. I simply step into a void bringing me to that 'Otherland'.

Would you like to meet Serge's avatar? He would like you to meet his avatar, because he's constructed it. This is 'Megatox'. And he says:

'Megatox is me and I am Megatox. One does not go without the other. The face is not like mine, but I wouldn't mind it in the real world. Megatox is all that I would like to be: strong, respected, feared by some, daring, the talk of the town. That is why we complement each other. Together we make one complete person.'

How interesting; because if I could comment respectfully of Serge, it's as though it's only by projecting this avatar that he is able to feel complete: that the avatar is somehow a necessary part of his complete identity, in a way that without this he is incomplete. What does that tell us?

'Second Life' [SL]

One of the best known of these websites is *Second Life* - an online, three-dimensional digital world, imagined, created and owned by its residents; which presents itself as a 'Metaverse' : a user-defined world in which people interact, play, do business and communicate with one another.

The number of registered users is over 4 million - up from 100,000 in early 2006, making *Second Life* a world-wide cyber phenomenon. It is growing, it is said, at 20% a month. 'We are competing with the real world,' said one of its founders, 'to create a better place for your mind to live.'

You can buy land in *Second Life* and you can buy and sell things that only exist in this imagined world. Recently there was a ceremonial opening of a 'Church of Elvis' in *SL* in which an avatar decided to construct a church of Elvis, employed an architect, builder and internal designer to construct a church, announced the opening of the church in *Second Life* on a particular day – and other avatars came along to take part in it. [By the way, the Jesuits have established a presence in *Second Life*. We like doing these kinds of things!]

Virtual money to buy things in *SL* can be exchanged for US dollars and *SL* has just produced its first dollar millionaire. She is from China and she's made her money selling virtual land and property. There are support centres for stroke victims, corporate centres for companies and a replica of the Darfur refugee camp. It is said now that there are Mafia-style groups on *SL* that offer protection to new members that enter *SL* through their avatars. This is beginning to assume a sense of familiarity and reality about it!

The prediction by one of the research firms in this area is that by 2011 four out of five people

who use the Internet will participate actively in *SL* or something like it. A recent Dutch study found that 57% of Second Lifers spend more than 18 hours a week in *SL*. And 33% spend more than 30 hours a week. To me this is a question about addiction.

Cyworld

Now *Cyworld*. In South Korea it is reported that 43% of the population is a member of the virtual space *Cyworld*. It is said it is threatening to swallow South Korea. Four years after its launch, 15 million people – a third of the country's population – are members. Among those in their late teens and early twenties, 90% are members. Users decorate their rooms with digital furniture, art, TVs, even music. And since other avatars drop by, the idea is to make your space as cool as possible. And instant messaging is included in the service, so you can chat with visitors. You can access *Cyworld* from a mobile phone, and an average of 6.2 million photographs is uploaded to *Cyworld* every day, many of them directly from mobile phones.

A young engineer called Kim Joon said: 'I use *Cyworld* as the photo archive for my family.' He met his wife through a *Cyworld* club for virtual families, in which he first played her husband in *Cyworld* and then in reality formed a loving relationship. He says: 'Our one-year old son will have a photo log of his life in *Cyworld* 20 years later. And this world is therefore expected to accompany the young child as the child grows.'

One of the senior managers in the company that runs this has an interesting statement: 'Our goal is making users' online activities entwined with their offline life.' Just as, for example, mobile phones have become essential (can you remember the world before mobile phones?), the idea is that these particular developments are creating a similar parallel world that becomes necessary for people.

By the way, mobile phones are essential for teenagers. My experience is that they really cannot live without them. I speak as the director of college where we have a lot of teenagers.

Entropia Universe [EU]

Another one: *Entropia Universe*. It's a Swedish game. At the end of the 21st century mankind is engaged in the 'Odysseus Project' – Ulysses, in other words – to find a planet that can sustain life, because we've devastated our own Earth. They settle on a new planet – Calypso. And the economy of Calypso has been seamlessly connected to the economy of Earth. And this means that the *EU* currency has a fixed rate exchange with the US dollar. We might recommend this to Alistair Darling as a way forward. The annual turnover of *EU* last year was 356 million dollars. This is big business and it allows hunters to hunt for strange wildlife, art galleries, societies, beauty pageants, etc: a balanced life of atavistic battles and early 21st century indulgence.

So where are we? Well, try this quotation:

'The world in which we increasingly live our social lives is a complex of simulated contexts, which have no real meaning in terms of our experience of being in the world; for the real world is superseded by a world of simulations which we inhabit and subscribe to as its consumers.'

M C Lemon

Let's go back a little bit. In the 1920s, the Czech-German writer Franz Kafka, who wrote *The Trial* and *The Castle*, those great parables of modern life, met Friedrich Thieberger in the street. Thieberger was carrying a big box for making photographic enlargements and Kafka said to him: 'Taking photographs? That's really rather sinister.' After a short pause he continued: 'And you enlarge them as well?'

Now we have no idea what it's like to feel surprised by photographs; by images. So far as Kafka was concerned, there was something very odd being done to human beings. And WG Sebald – the great German writer who died in this country a few years ago, has this comment:

'Kafka's books contain too many indications of the vague horror he felt at the impending mutations of mankind as the age of technological reproduction opened. Mutations in which he probably saw the imminent end of the autonomous individuality by bourgeois culture'

[Quoted in *Campo Santo*, Penguin 2006, p.163].

If Kafka has this sense of discomfort with regard to this, we are further down the line of technical reproductions. We've actually got technology which enables us to construct completely imaginary versions of the self. Now my puzzle is: what does that do to our sense of 'groundedness', of reality, of God, of truth, of value, and the cohesion and integration of the self? Because the imaginary world accompanies us all the time and we need that imaginary world increasingly, apparently. These are my questions. You don't have to answer them.

One of the commentators on this, Julian Dibbell, has this to say:

'We fall in love there. We lust for power and wealth. We seek adventure and escape. We say they're only games, these little worlds, but often we end up devoting more time to them than to any other realm of our existence - until it starts to make less sense to think of our avatars as fictional characters than as second selves.'

First and second selves

Then the puzzle is: the relationship between the 'second self' and the 'first self'. Do you really have a first self any more? Or do you have this multiple self in which the imaginary accompanies you all the way through?

Now let me give you some examples of this. This is taken from a book called *'Alter Ego: avatars and their creators'*, by Robbie Cooper (2007). On the left hand page you have a photograph of the person who plays the game and on the right hand page you have the avatar that they create.

Meet, first of all, Matt Bedford, who spends 35 hours a week in a game called *Final Fantasy XI*. His ability is 'to summon beings for the purpose of attacking, healing, enfeebling, using elemental, dark and enfeebling magic'. What does he look like? His avatar is 'Matokun', reflecting his real-life studies, in which he is majoring in Japanese. He groups with Japanese players on 'dungeon crawls' (whatever they would be). Whereas American players think nothing of shouting, a Japanese player who has to shout, says 'Excuse me for shouting'.

This nice couple – I think we only have one name – is Auralien Capdecombe, from Toulouse in France, playing MMO *City of Heroes*. 'Our characters, Clelia and Velkan, in *City of Heroes* are a couple, as are we. We sometimes play separately but it's very rare.' And the avatars they have created aren't so different from those holding the Mouse: enjoying life and laughter. Velkan is often subject to the mockery of friends, who point out that he looks like a fish. He has a complex about his tights, which are too tight. Clelia is known as the 'pompom' girl, because of her fists. The energy released from her fists covers them in a halo of light, making them look like pompoms.

Here is an avatar called 'Gaenank'. 'I play a tank. I shield the casters and deal out the damage to the MOBs.' (I'm afraid I don't know what the MOBs are.) 'I'm a fighter. My job is to protect the weaker classes and kill monsters.' 'Gaenank' is created by Lucas Shaw, who spends 55 hours per week on MMO *Everquest* in Texas. Very interesting human aspects come through. 'For a while I'll be playing up to 12 hours a day. I wanted to win respect from the people in the game; to be somebody in the *Everquest* world. Everything else in my life started to suffer – my social life, my schoolwork, even my health. You can't go on for too long like that. I've cut back a bit.' There's a human story there; but clearly this is of value to him.

Even more interesting, and very human, is that of Jason Rowe. You perhaps think from his very small frame that Jason is a child, but in fact he is 32 and very severely handicapped. He plays 80 hours a week. 'I play online games because I get to interact with people. Online it

doesn't matter what you look like. Virtual worlds bring people together. Everyone is on common ground.' And when Jason plays on *Star Wars Galaxies*, he is 'Rurouni Kenshin': 'I can ride an Imperial Speeder bike, fight monsters, or just hang out with friends at a bar.'

Online you get to know the person behind the keyboard before you know the physical person. The Internet illuminates how you look in real life. So you get to know a person by their mind, their personality – and clearly that is a very important thing for Jason. To be able to achieve that through this virtual reality.

Let's meet Charmaine Hance from Ashford in Kent, who plays 8 hours per week. 'I'm a full-time housewife and mother, but being at home with the two little ones it's difficult to socialize. *Second Life* allows me to go places and hang out with other people. It fits in well with my life and gives me a creative outlet.' And on *SL* she is 'Joua Song':

'One of my first friends in SL got this idea to publish a collection of avatar erotica and sell it on game. I wasn't embarrassed to be nude. Nudity in SL is one thing most people are not embarrassed about. In SL the basic skin you get when you start the game is pretty unrealistic. And if you are able to make your skin look good, you certainly want to show it off. My avatar got recognised a lot. It made me proud of my avatar.'

There is an issue about the use of erotic material on these sites. There have been instances, for example, reported in the press, of female avatars being raped by male avatars in these games, and the impact upon the real woman is felt to be considerable, even though it only happens in the virtual reality, but presumably the personal investment in the identity of the avatar means that when something happens to the avatar, something happens to me. It's an indication of the significance avatars can develop for people.

Let's meet Thierry Te Dunne, from Anger in France, who spends 21 hours per week in MMO *Guild Wars*. His special ability is: 'elite swordsmanship, a hundred blades elite axe mastery and evisceration'. There aren't too many people around like this these days. We must treasure Thierry. Online he is 'Naemie Theud':

'She is my digital spirit, perfectly realised in her striking image – red-headed, savage, generous and lethal, and with a strong resemblance to my feminine side. She was not created in a rush or borrowed from someone else, but fought over, polished, cherished.'

Now here is a group of people around a lady called Mary Boucher. Clearly they are people with considerable difficulties, mobility and so on. They play together; each of them can go on line with an avatar called 'Wilde Cunningham'. 'You never know which of us Wildes will be online at a given time. Our virtual island on *SL*, *Live2Give* is an educational spot where people can come and learn about physical challenges, and see the people who may look and sound different, are really no different at all. They can fly and walk and run and drive and basically experience everything that life has to offer.' So it's a very important focus of their presentation of themselves for other people. In real life, 'Wilde Cunningham' is a group of people debilitated by cerebral palsy. Clearly something very important is happening for them which is enabled by these technologies.

Let's meet John Palmer, from Dorset. I find these examples fascinating, because clearly there are important realities coming through here. He plays *SL* for 20 hours a week:

'My life was a struggle that got worse when I realised I had generalized anxiety disorder and social phobia. In my late twenties I had a severe episode of depression. I vowed to help others in the same situation. I created the 'Support for Healing' network which has grown to 900 members. In my thirties I came into contact with Buddhism and realised that we are all on this earth to fulfil a purpose.'

And it will be no surprise that on *SL* his avatar is 'Zafu Diamond'. 'Zafu' is a meditation

cushion. 'Diamond' is symbolic of the Buddhist concept of the inherent emptiness of existence.

'I decided to buy an island on SL to fulfill two needs: a place where we could hold support meetings in a secure environment and a place of beauty for anyone wanting a respite from the malls, shops and clubs that proliferate.'

So there is a religious mission 3839 being expressed through SL.

Let's meet someone you might be familiar with. Canon Lucy Winkett of St Paul's Cathedral in London, who has a character in her game called 'Church of Fools', sponsored by the Methodist Church. I don't think this is still active. You can find it on the Web but it doesn't look as though it has been a success. But she has a version of herself. She gave a sermon to 'Church of Fools' virtual church. Her text on this is very interesting – it's a sermon about the Syrophenician woman in the Gospel of Mark.

'It seemed like an imaginative way to reach people. I was surprised by how fast you start to identify with your avatar. I think the most moving part of the experience was seeing the Lord's Prayer being typed out in so many different languages.'

Hyper-reality

Can I introduce you to some of the terminology which is being used to describe this kind of thing? You may come across the term 'hyper-reality' – which is a blending of reality and representation where there is no clear indication of where the former stops and the latter begins: the blurring of boundaries between the real person (whoever that is) and the constructed imaginative creation. And simulation replaces the real. It becomes difficult to tell the difference between true and false, real and imaginary.

I don't know whether you've noticed, but around us is this huge cult of celebrities: if you really take an interest in *Heat* magazine – every Jesuit gets his copy these days – it's really quite addictive. Have you lost count of the number of times that Madonna has reinvented her body, her image, her avatar? What are we to make of Jane Goodie – the *Celebrity Big Brother* participant who built a media career on relentless self-promotion, until it all came to grief with some racist remarks on one of these shows.

Take an interest in the trouble of Kerri Katona the 'Atomic Kitten', whose marriage to Westlife star Brian McFadden and whose destructive demons of drugs, drink and breast enlargement has been the core of her self-presentation in *Heat* and other magazines. She's now married to a taxi driver. You can see I don't waste my time! (*Laughter*) This is serious research. Kerri's troubles are never concealed from us. We will never know how real they are, because we deal all the time with Kerri's projected image. And of course what we see is a figure mediated to us by a press agency that reports drippingly on a continuing saga of personal tragedy and imperfect redemption. She is a modern *Madonna Addolorata* – the suffering woman and mother whose weeping never ends and we need her never to be healed of her wounded heart. You can see that what I'm suggesting is that in this popular culture someone like Kerri Katona has taken on the role of the Suffering Madonna. There's an archetype there that's been transmitted.

The meaning-giving function of religion

And perhaps the meaning-giving function of religion at a popular level is being replaced by digital versions of the real. At many stages of the Church's life, Christianity must have functioned as the parallel image-laden version of life: its possibilities and terrors – the Metaverse that peopled the cosmos with images of heaven and hell and invited participation in a cosmic drama of the end time. This is what's being acted out in so many of these sites.

And now when sensual fulfillment can be ravishingly displayed digitally (and by the way I think there's a real issue about the impact of digital on men's sexuality and fantasy that we're only just beginning to glimpse - there's something happening there that's very significant),

and when cosmic battles with unmatched horrors can be engaged in hour after hour after supper, do we really need to think about dull things such as impending heaven and hell and judgement? Is religion being squeezed out, in other words, or is religion being replaced in its imaginative capacity by this?

That's my question. And how do you function religiously in such a powerful imaginative universe? The prediction is that in a few years the quality of animation in *SL* will become equivalent to the quality of animation in Disney cartoons at the moment; that the sense of realism and quality of manipulation is going to be so considerable, its impact is going to be even stronger.

Infidelity through the constructed self

I travel on the tube in London, and like every other commuter I read the *Metro* newspaper religiously every morning. On 18th September, I read the story of a married couple who are divorcing after they chatted-up each other on the Internet using false names. Using the names 'Sweetie' and 'Prince of Joy', Sana (27) and husband Adnan (32) poured out their hearts to each other in an online chat-room, thinking that they had found a soul mate. But they turned up for a date and realised their mistake, because the person they thought they were meeting turned out to be their spouse. Now the pair from Bosnia are divorcing after accusing each other of being unfaithful.

How interesting! They were unfaithful through their constructed selves, who were interacting adulterously with another constructed self in a chat-room. Sana said, 'I was so much in love it was amazing. We both seemed to be stuck in the same sort of miserable marriages. Indeed they were! When she found out what had happened, she said 'I felt so betrayed!' (*Laughter*). Adnan said 'I still find it hard to believe that 'Sweetie' who wrote such wonderful things is actually the same woman I married and who has not said a nice word to me for years' (*Laughter*). So interesting. There are really pastoral issues about the grip on reality that people have when they marry. It takes people a long time to grow up and in the course of that they are making decisions before they're actually in a position to make those decisions.

Let's not get too intellectual on this. Do you know the difference between Postmodernism and the Mafia? The Mafia makes you an offer you cannot refuse; and Postmodernism makes you an offer you cannot understand (*Laughter*).

The disappointment of the Real

Plato's myth of 'The Cave' in *The Republic*; that humanity is locked into chairs viewing shadows on a screen and 'the Real' that is projecting the images is behind us and we cannot have contact with the Real because all we have contact with are the *images* of the Real. One of the modern thinkers, Deleuze, thinks that with the arrival of hyper reality, any of the truth of ideal forms that provided the anchor for representation have been permanently lost in the reproduction of *simulacra* – *versions* of the Real – under the construction of a hyper reality without any connections to the Real.

The wonderful literary and cultural critic Susan Sontag makes very simple points. If you go to Loch Lomond, if you go to Niagara Falls, you will be disappointed; because you will have seen versions of these places in photographs and when you get to see the real thing, you say 'Is that it?' Equally, we all feel disappointed by photos taken of us; because the image is assessed of the Real, in the light of the *image* of the Real. So which is more real? Which is more important? The image! It's taken over. It's become the criterion by which reality is assessed. You will not get a job reading the News on television unless you look good.

I was in the Louvre Museum once and there was an American woman behind me who said to her companion, 'We don't need to see the *Mona Lisa* – my sister's got it on the wall at home.' You don't need to see the real thing because you already know the image and your head is full of images of paintings and photographs already. So you don't have to go to museums. Don't go anywhere near the National Gallery – view the pictures on line!

Let's go back to the 17th Century and a very interesting statement from Pascal:

'We are not satisfied with the life we have in our selves and our own being. We want to live an imaginary life in the eyes of others and so to make an impression. We strive constantly to embellish and preserve our imaginary being and neglect the real one. How clear a sign of the emptiness of our being that we are not satisfied with one without the other and often exchange one for the other.' [Blaise Pascal (1623-62): *Pensées*, L806/S653].

It's as though Pascal, in the pre-modern period, is diagnosing something built in to the human self; and all that's happened is that in this 21st century we've developed the technology that intensifies this and makes this factor more vivid, more effective in its impact on us.

'Imagination – it is the dominant faculty in Man, master of error and falsehood, all the more deceptive for not being invariably so. This arrogant force, which checks and dominates its enemy Reason, for the pleasure of showing off the power it has in every sphere, has established a second nature in Man.'
[*Pensées*, L44/S78].

That's what SL is enabling us to do. Pascal agreed with Jean Baudrillard, the very provocative French postmodernist thinker. He's famous for saying two things: one of them's here, the other is 'The Gulf War did not take place – what took place was a digital version of the Gulf War.' Because that is how the reality of the Gulf War is conveyed to us. The other is this little remark about Disneyland: that Disneyland exists to conceal the fact that the whole of America is now Disneyland. It's pervaded with fantasy and everyone is leading a fantasy life, no one will admit it. So we say 'Our fantasy life is in Disneyland, which is over there, and here we're real. And Baudrillard is saying, 'No we're not. Fantasy has invaded everyday life.'

What's he saying:

'[Disneyland] is presented as unreal and different from the rest of America in order to conceal the fact that what is supposed to be real is becoming increasingly unreal.'

It may be a little pessimistic. I'm not a postmodern fan at all, but when I read something like this, there is something in it. He is on to something about ourselves, our culture, the way we are – a kind of mutation or transformation is happening in us.

Our questions: Is ordinary life becoming hyper-real? I'm very interested in the way in which people now increasingly are influenced by soap operas. Soap operas are meant to reproduce real life. What may be happening now is that real life is modeling itself on soap operas.

What does it do to the sense of the self? What affects the self affects the self in relation to others and the self in relation to God. If we're unable to distance ourselves – and this is my question – if we cannot distance our self from the groundless reality spawned by our culture – now that may be too pessimistic – our sense of identity will be swallowed up by the cumulative impact of simulacra and hyper reality. It will take over. One of our teachers at Heythrop a few years ago came up with a very crisp saying: 'If you do not think postmodernism, postmodernism will think you.' What he's getting at is: if you don't get a perspective on how the culture is making you feel and think, then all that's happening is that you are reproducing the values of the culture. And that's a real issue for Christian witness.

Christians think we are shaping the society around us, what is actually happening is the reverse: that we are being reshaped by the culture around us. So we carry on continuing our sense of dedication and mission, etc, we must do this but we need to get some sort of perspective on the ways in which we are being reshaped as individuals and as people by the culture. And the culture is a far more dominant force, I suspect, than we actually recognise.

But my puzzle is this. What I've given you tonight is a little taster of a certain aspect of our

culture. In what way can Christianity now be an imaginative option for people? Because the sources of imaginative living are so powerful in their impact, how can the Christian thing hit people imaginatively? You know, Billy Connolly with his cynical remarks: 'we don't want to go back to Galilee' – well, why would you want to go back to Galilee when you can go to all this? How do you connect with the culture? Does the imagination come so stuffed with its products that nothing real or important can get in? What are people finding in these sites rather than the Christian site? In some ways the old Jesuit principle: 'You've got to start where people are', and if you don't know that and connect with it you will never be able to lead them to Jesus Christ. So how do you connect with this in a way which enables you to bring people to Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ to these people in this culture?

That's our question.

Finally, two little statements about God. We should mention God this evening somewhere. 'God is missing and is not missed.' Does this characterise our contemporary culture and experience? Many people live in a de-sacralised landscape in which God is not mentioned, but in which digital versions of reality are increasingly pervasive and these features are not unrelated.

The second question (getting a little darker) is about idolatry. The principle issue for human beings is idolatry, by which the self constructs its imagined avatars.

The prohibition against images in the *torah*, the law of Moses, is the prohibition that you must not worship anything other than God; because the tendency will be to construct the thing that you create and worship. I like the comment from Simone Weil (1909-43), this very interesting young Frenchwoman who died in the 1940s from a disease related to anorexia. Picking up Plato's image of the Cave, she makes what I think is a very compassionate statement:

'Idolatry is a vital necessity in the cave, for if this is where we are, there will be idolatry.'

Now we have to do something about it, but we need to understand the natural emergence of the worship of idols here and all the time. The worship of false gods, in whom we invest our attention, is only to be expected; and in a de-sacralised age the idols that we worship will not be called gods, but will simply be those we create and to which we become addicted.

What I've really been suggesting to you is that question that the cumulative impact of this kind of virtual reality in fact becomes addictive and necessary for our sense of selves and how do we handle that? How do we live in relation to that reality that is ours? So these are my questions. I'm looking to you for answers.

In answer to a question from Ian Lindsay:

'We're in a culture where the dominant character is a sense of fulfillment. I do not think people have a sense of sin; but there is concern about what it is to be human and how to be a fulfilled human being. So wholeness and therapy are very much the dominant tones. That would make me, as a slightly old-fashioned Jesuit, the way you approach it is not to hit people over the head with sin, because there is a psychological resistance to this. In the first letter Pope Benedict issued, '*God is Love*' published just over a year ago; all the way through it there's hardly any reference to sin. And it was a deliberate decision. If he wanted to talk to the world, he had to talk in ways that are positive.'

On law-based religions:

'The situation is so complex. On the one hand there is little religion, but in other ways there is too much religion – a multiplicity of religions: some of them very formal. I think there are very important questions about Islam and law-based religion. When Christianity has moved away

from being a law-based and law-focused religion, with the emergence of Islam in our culture and with Jewish Orthodox concentration on the law, we are confronted with the fact that law-based religions are a very strong force that have the potential to counter an invasive culture. Now I think there may be some lesson for the Christian community of establishing boundary markers of identity to enable us to belong to this kingdom in identifiable ways.'

In answer to a question from Chris Hurley:

'You get a cult of celebrity when people stop believing in the community of saints.

'We've talked too much about God. Europe is tired of speech about God and it's in part because we've led people to think that you can deal with question of God by considering rather doubtful arguments for or against God's existence. We've developed a rational apologetic that makes 14 year-olds in school judge that they're in a position on a Wednesday afternoon to decide for or against God's existence on the basis of certain arguments. Now I believe very strongly that this is a mistake that Christian thinkers made in the early modern period where they marginalized religious experience; they marginalized Jesus Christ and they marginalised prayer and the life of the Church. And the life of the Church, I think, is the primary witness to God. So I think: renew Christian discipleship deeply. We don't need to speak as much to people about God as we used to, but we need to find ways of witnessing. The truth of God cannot be thought – it can only be lived.'

In answer to a question from David Foreman:

'I'm interested in the question addiction. I don't have the resources to understand it properly. I think there is a question about the identity of the self – an important, probably necessary part of it. The whole tradition of Ignatian meditation encourages people to enter into the dramatic sights of Christ's life, to stimulate all the aspects of the self. We mustn't allow the religious to be disconnected from the imaginative self.'

In answer to a question from Penelope Morse:

'There's no doubt that community is being created in important ways through this media. There is question about the quality of community and whether it corresponds to what we need.

'Martin Buber tells of a man so depressed and upset that he goes to the gates of heaven to find God's presence; to speak to God directly. God says 'You have come to the wrong place, for I have sunk my hearing in the deafness of mortals'. What God has done is turn his attentive ear to a world where human beings are deaf to one another and where their communication keeps failing – in our failure to communicate properly.'

In answer to a question from Keith Jillings:

'There's a way in which we have made our religion so complex and so inaccessible to people. At the end of the day, Christianity is a very simple monotheism with a pattern, an avatar, Jesus, a teaching that is primarily narrative, based on parables, direct and profoundly ethical and communitarian. Now I spend most of my time teaching Trinitarian theology and Christology – the more difficult ends of Christian theology. But at the end of the day, if we want to make an impact, it needs to be in ways that are simple and effective and connected. We've talked too much about God; too much.'

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