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Living Religion: The Fluidity of Practice

Abstract

This article highlights the contemporary relevance of Macmurray's work for the turn in philosophy of religion towards living religion. The traditional academic focus on belief analyses cognitive dissonance from a distance, and misses the experience of being religious. Alternatively, in an astute move ahead of his time, Macmurray emphasized emotion and action over theory and cognition; he examined religion as the creation and sustenance of community, over and above doctrinal division and incompatible beliefs. From an understanding of humans as embodied and relational, Macmurray critiques individualism and self-sacrifice for failing to result in other-centred action and the promotion of social justice and equality. Using Macmurray as a springboard, this article considers the new speech acts of digital media and the possibility of community in online religion, finding that the virtual world holds both the risk of threats of violence and hate, as well as advantages for women and other marginalized groups to have a voice and explore diverse religious practices and identities, including reimagining metaphors and symbols to have relevance and meaning in changed social circumstances. In conclusion, this article finds that online communities are significant for the spiritual practice of the religiously affiliated and religious 'nones', as such, online religion is relevant to the understanding of living religion aimed at in philosophy.

Keywords

living religion, Macmurray, agency, emotion, belief, religious practice, digital media

Introduction

Within the academic disciplines of philosophy of religion, philosophical theology and systematic theology, the focus of study is doxastic. Students are taught to engage in analysis of doctrine and conceptions, looking for internal coherence and rooting out inconsistencies. As an intellectual exercise, this approach is valuable; it trains minds and encourages critical thinking. Yet, in relation to religion, it contains a fundamental flaw; it examines belief from a distance, as a purely cognitive exercise that is, at least, one step removed from the religious practice of believers. Numerous texts in the field examine, for example, the doctrine of God, whereby, in Cottingham's words, 'The aim is an impartial investigation of questions about the existence and nature of God that can be tackled by intellectual argument alone'.[1] By producing a list of conceptions employed by notable philosophers and theologians across the centuries, philosophers of religion and their students identify incompatible pairs; if God is

eternal, God cannot begin or continue to do anything, which compromises God's agency, as does the notion that God exists outside of space and time; similarly, if God is immutable and impassible, the Christian practice of petitionary prayer seems futile. Outside of the academy, however, theists do not spend their waking moments agonizing over the contradictions inherent in the traditional conceptions of God; likewise, Christians continue to engage in the practice of petitionary prayer. Since philosophy, Cottingham asserts, 'is about more than skill in evaluating arguments, or the accumulation of knowledge about various moves and countermoves in an intellectual debate',[2] philosophy of religion needs to reconsider its approach. He continues: 'At its deepest and most rewarding level it [philosophy] has always aimed not so much at increasing our *knowledge* . . . but rather at enriching our *understanding*'.[3]

In order to understand how religious beliefs function in everyday life, we need to look to the practice of religious persons. Believers do not weigh the propositional truths of competing faiths and choose one over the other free from any influence by culture or society; rather, Hurd states: 'Religious affiliation in an everyday, lived sense has always involved more than a choice between belief and disbelief'.[4] If we do not take practice into account, we assume that religion is a fixed entity that exists outside of the people who practise it, as if religion has a life of its own and is not a human construction. Such an approach mistakenly responds to extremist terrorism by asking, for instance, whether ISIS (Daesh) are Muslim or whether Anders Brevik was a genuine Christian: to put the question in this way is to assume that religion is static; it is to focus on ideas and belief as the most important aspects of a religion and to miss the significance of experience and identity. On the contrary, a living religion is fluid; its beliefs are in constant flux, renegotiated and reinterpreted to make sense in light of the experiences of those who hold them. Philosophers of religion, such as Cottingham, are only beginning to catch up with religious studies in this respect; as Hurd

notes, ‘most scholars of religion departed some time ago from an exclusive focus on belief as the essence of religion’.[5]

A religion is what those who claim to be religious say it is; hence, despite the commandment not to murder or the principle of non-violence, Christianity as a living religion includes the right-wing extremists who murder doctors at abortion clinics; Islam includes jihadis and Boko Haram; Hinduism includes nationalists; Judaism includes Zionists and Buddhism includes those who murder Hindus in Sri Lanka. Macmurray, however, was ahead of his time in arguing decades ago that the search for the essence of religion needs to look to human behaviour rather than catechisms.

Macmurray on Being Religious

Emotion as Motivation for Action

For Macmurray, the purpose of philosophical refection is to understand ‘the wholeness of immediate experience, not . . . partial and isolated aspects of it’[6]. Philosophy of religion, therefore, in its reflection on religion, needs to acknowledge that religion, as a human activity, is not solely a function of the intellect; it is an activity of embodied persons, which is bound up with emotional responses as much, if not more than, reasoning about belief. Moreover, the motivation for action, whether founded on religious or secular principles, ‘belong[s] to our emotional life’.[7]

In other words, in the absence of emotion, we have no grounds for desire and cannot make choices based on preference, as illustrated in the account of Elliot, following ‘damage to the frontal lobes of his brain as the result of a tumour’.[8] Brooks explains that: ‘Elliot was intelligent, well informed, and diplomatic. . . But, after surgery, Elliot began to have trouble

managing his day'.[9] In an attempt to get to grips with the problem, Elliot underwent a series of tests:

> They showed that Elliot had a superior IQ. He had an excellent memory for numbers and geometric designs and was proficient at making estimates based upon incomplete information. But . . . never showed any emotion . . .
>
> A series of further tests showed that Elliot understood how to imagine different options when making a decision. He was able to understand conflicts between two moral imperatives. In short, he could prepare himself to make a choice between a complex range of possibilities.
>
> What Elliot couldn't do was actually make the choice. He was incapable of assigning value to different options.[10]

Hence, contemporary neuro-science confirms Macmurray's claim that 'What we feel and how we feel is far more important than what we think and how we think'.[11] Contrary to Kantian deontology, we cannot blindly follow duty if our inclination is at odds with the laws of duty; we need to 'feel' that the rules are worth following in the current circumstances. In Macmurray's words: 'It is the things that we really feel, not think worth while that are worth while *for us,* and it is no use trying to substitute our idea for our feeling'.[12]

Since the practice of psychoanalysis implies that human beings are not always best placed to identify their own feelings; we must look to our action as that which indicates our underlying emotional motivation. In the absence of any diagnosed illness, for instance, we would doubt the person who claimed to love another and paid them no heed, or, conversely, claimed to feel no fear of sharks but trembled and shook in their presence; notwithstanding the possibility of feigning emotions and exhibiting corresponding behaviour. In so far as

religion is concerned, the emotions play a crucial role that is obscured by an academic discipline bent on the interrogation of belief; rather, a proper examination of religion requires us to take account of the behaviour of religious people.

Religion as an Expression of Human Nature

First of all, the persistence of religion, despite orthodox beliefs that are outmoded and unpalatable, flies in the face of the secularist thesis that religion would be eradicated over time. Sociologists are now disputing that thesis, instead, grappling with the resurgence of religion,[13] and humanitarian aid organizations are finding that a purely secular approach is less successful than one that engages with the religious practices of displaced communities.[14] Macmurray's work explains that the continuance of religion over time is inevitable, because, he insists, religion is an 'expression of human nature'.[15] Furthermore, as a personalist philosopher, he argues, that human nature is inherently relational. He states: 'It is in and through my consciousness of other persons alone that I can know myself as a person. . . To be a person is, therefore, to live as a member of a personal reality, in dependence upon it'.[16]

That is, by employing a definition of the person that is built upon agency rather than isolated cognition, the self exists in necessary relation to that which is not the self. As agents, we have an immediate and empirical awareness of that which we act upon as both a source of support and a source of resistance. In short, 'Without an other there can be no self . . . the Self is the correlate of the Other';[17] this is especially true of human infants who cannot survive without the care of a more mature human being. Relationality is about more than mere survival however. Clearly, newborn babies are unable to satisfy even their most rudimentary biological needs and will die unless someone else provides for them; yet, as child development studies report, even newborns mimic the tongue and limb movements of their

primary carer.[18] In addition, within a few months of birth, the human infant plays a part in strengthening the carer-infant relationship beyond the satisfaction of basic physical needs, by smiling and gurgling when in the presence of his/her carer(s). For Macmurray and Trevarthen, amongst others, a baby's happy noises indicate that s/he enjoys human relationality beyond that which is necessary for survival. Macmurray states: 'It seems impossible to account for it except as an expression of satisfaction in the relation itself . . . evidence that the infant has a need which is not simply biological but personal, a need to be in touch with the mother, and in conscious perceptual relation with her'.[19] Whereas as non-human animals exhibit growing adaptation to the environment, the human infant's helplessness is bound up with a need for intimacy that is satisfied through a fundamental 'impulse to communicate',[20] with early gurgles developing into complex language and speech patterns. Language, even in a germinal form, is the means not only for self-expression, but equally for comprehending the expression of the other; it is 'the capacity to enter into reciprocal communication'.[21]

Reciprocity is not merely the hallmark of childhood; it remains throughout human life. Much like Buber and Levinas, Macmurray views adult humans as interdependent as opposed to independent beings. He states: '"I" exist only as one element in the complex "You and I"'[22] and this mutual coexistence is the foundation of an ethical system that incorporates religion. As agents in relation, the morality of human action is to be found in the underlying intention in respect of the relationship between self and other. We can act with complete disregard for the intentions of other agents, thereby inhibiting their freedom to act, or, we can be cognizant of the impact of our actions upon others. Once we acknowledge the extent to which our actions restrict and constrain the actions of others, we can choose to act so as to maintain positive relations with our fellow human beings, or we can act in ways that strain

and curtail mutual relationality. Consequently, Macmurray asserts that 'a morally right action is an action which intends community'.[23]

In order to define the notion of community, Macmurray compares the different groups in which we find ourselves and their means of operation. Organizations in which we become members for the purpose of pursuing a specific goal, such as a political party, a trade union, a sports club or a charity, are markedly different in their orientation from family and friendship groups in which the members have no ulterior function beyond mutual support and the sharing of experience. Admittedly, friends and family also cooperate to achieve particular objectives, but this is not the defining characteristic of the relationship. Family and friends 'are bound together by something deeper than any purpose – by the sharing of a common life'.[24] Friendships can and do develop amongst trade union members, political activists, sporting team mates and charitable volunteers, but the overarching aim of the group is its political identity, its sporting or unionist success, its charitable works. Further clarity of the different types of relationality in groups is to be found by examining the manner in which these relationships come about; an organization is deliberately engineered as a means to an end; whereas friendships are an end in themselves. In the former case: 'We are compelled by our necessities to cooperate with people who do not attract us, and whom we should not choose as our friends or associates if we could help it'; whilst in the latter case, 'we are drawn into relationships by the need to share our experience, by the need for mutual companionship'.[25]

Political systems, then, are the bedrock of communal relations, inasmuch as a welfare state, for instance, provides for the basic necessities that make it possible for citizens to gather together for reasons other than survival. In addition, it is the role of the State to ensure fairness rather than exploitation in trade relations and to punish abuse and promote justice making it possible for citizens to meet as equals under the law. Nevertheless, human persons

are more than mere citizens and political authority is ultimately limited by a person's freedom of thought and freedom of conscience enabling them to meet as persons of equal value and to give each other equal consideration provided that the government does not overstep the limits of its control. Moreover, since, for Macmurray, humans flourish in community: 'I need you in order to be myself',[26] individual rights are not the root of individual freedom if accrued at the expense of others; this would damage the community essential to flourishing and so would be self-defeating.

Despite the emphasis on community over individualism, though, Macmurray is not a communitarian in the strict sense of the term. Macmurray does not emphasize duties to the community over and above the rights of the individual, nor does he speak of duties to the community as that which must be performed before benefits can be accessed, but he is countering individualism by portraying community as the arena in which responsible action is voluntarily engaged in on the basis of love for others. He states: 'Human freedom can be realized only as the freedom of individuals in relation; and the freedom of each of us is relative to that of the others'.[27]

Consequently, communities of friendship are essential for the fulfilment of the relational aspect of human nature; they are founded and maintained on the basis that other persons are respected and treated as persons, unlike organizations in which a person's utility is the principal criterion of membership. Places of work and other economic and political relations amongst persons are predominately, therefore, not constituted as communities; Macmurray reserves the term 'society' for such groups. Moreover, since the chief concerns in economic relations are pragmatic issues of efficiency, productivity and cost effectiveness, the regulation of working relationships is the business of politics. By contrast, communities of friendship are 'spontaneous and intrinsic'[28] and cannot be forced into being by political effort

and should not be regulated by government; they are 'The kind of unity that religion seeks to express'.[29]

Religion as the Celebration of Community

On an initial reading, the inclusion of 'religion' and 'unity' in the same sentence may sound like a contradiction in terms; history is replete with illustrations of religion contributing to war, exploitation, abuse, sectarianism, disunity and exclusion. Concentrating on Christianity as the foundation for his investigation, Macmurray suggests that, even when infected with individualism, the central tenets of this religion are relational: the ritual of communion, the concepts of forgiveness, atonement and reconciliation are, despite appearances to the contrary, essentially directing the believer towards positive personal relationships. At its root, therefore, he argues that 'The religious activity of the self is its effort to enter into communion with the Other',[30] which is both a universal and an inescapable human experience.

Thus, any activity in which humans engage together can be imbued with religious significance, if the activity is one in which the participants recognize and reflect consciously upon their membership of the community of which they are a part. Humans must all eat to survive, for example, but the fact of eating becomes a sacred meal when the focus shifts from sustenance to conversation, empathy and closeness. It is through religious activity that the fact of relationality is made intentional, failings in relationality are addressed and future possibilities enhanced. If Macmurray is correct, the primary purpose of religious activity is to sustain and develop communal bonds; it is 'the celebration of communion'.[31] Accordingly, religious rituals, symbols and metaphors must engender a sense of belonging that results in social action. Conversely, a religion which aligns itself with State power, or concentrates on

the spiritual over and above concerns for social justice has lost sight of its other-centred focal point.

For Macmurray, therefore, ritual must take priority over doctrine; he states: 'The validity of a theological doctrine . . . cannot be determined merely by asking whether it is true . . . Its validity depends also upon the valuation with which it is integrated in action'.[32] To be effective, religious ideas need to refer to reality as experienced by current practitioners of the religion. Symbols must be fluid and flexible; if once meaningful metaphors have become meaningless, due to changing social circumstances, they must be reimagined and redrawn so as to have meaning. This aspect of Macmurray's work has been welcomed by feminist theologians who argue that male God-language is outmoded and discriminatory, but as metaphorical, can be reimagined more inclusively.[33]

Hence, a living religion is progressive rather than conservative, challenging rather than sustaining the status quo. To be a living religion and an expression of community, action towards freedom and equality must take priority over idealism and the consolation of an afterlife in which each receives his/her due. Consequently, the reality of death must be faced and not denied; a religion that seeks to maintain a sense of community by appeasing the fear of death with fallacious claims results in illusion and inaction. When a religion denies death by stating: 'Fear not; trust in God and He will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you',[34] it has lost its connection with real world community and become, Macmurray claims, 'irreligion' or 'pseudo-religion'.[35]

By defining religion as the expression of human relationality, then, Macmurray is able to concern himself with the efficaciousness of religion in the pursuit of greater equality for all persons, instead of becoming embroiled in doctrinal divisiveness. In essence, he insists, religion must show itself to be 'a creative force in material human life'.[36] Therefore, he does not analyse specific religious beliefs for veracity or falsity in and of themselves; their

significance lies in the actions of those who profess to hold them. According to Macmurray, belief is 'an attitude to life which expresses itself in our ways of behaving'.[37]

On the one hand, a conception of religion that ties religious experience to human fellowship is ultimately accessible to all persons; it does not require mystical visions or conversion experiences; on the other hand, without engaging with conceptions of God or other aspects of belief, Macmurray's perception of religion sounds like humanitarianism. Nevertheless, this weakness is also a strength: the contention that religious belief should be measured against the action that flows from it requires that belief avoids exclusivity, superiority and atavism in favour of practical social action and a fluidity of belief that keeps pace with scientific knowledge and the changing reality of social circumstance.

Christianity as Living Religion

In an attempt to grasp the meaning of possessing a religious consciousness, Macmurray sets out to discover what Christianity look likes if denominational distinctions are set aside. Unconcerned with historical accuracy, he turns to the biblical accounts of the reported sayings of Jesus of Nazareth searching for practical principles to guide human life. He finds that Jesus parables concur with his view of human nature as essentially relational; the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, promotes community over against racial prejudice.

Moreover, Macmurray finds a usable contrast between faith and fear that contributes to his view of the religious person as one who approaches human relationships with a positive confidence in the possibility of reciprocity, in contrast with those who are fearful of persons different from themselves.[38] He cites biblical phrases such as 'why are ye fearful' and its counterpart 'O ye of little faith' (KJV, Mt. 8:26) to demonstrate that fear is akin to pessimism in human relations; whereas, faith is an attitude of optimism and openness to others that is

necessary for mutuality. Furthermore, fear of others is overcome by love, and damaged relationships are overcome by forgiveness, which explains Jesus' reported saying in the New Testament Gospels: 'This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you' (KJV, Jn 15:12) and the recommendation to forgive one another 'seventy times seven' (KJV, Mt. 18:22).

Faith, then, is this-worldly rather than otherworldly; it is about reaching out to others in practical ways; it is not primarily about belief in the divinity of Christ, or a triune God or eschatological events. Faith leads to action that is outward-looking, concerned with the well-being of the other; Macmurray refers to this as 'heterocentric' action.[39] Even so, Macmurray, ahead of his time, agrees with contemporary feminist theology that the Christian motif of self-sacrifice is damaging; it creates a master-slave hierarchy and prevents the mutuality which is integral to human flourishing.[40] Jesus selects his followers from the working class rather than the ruling class, he addresses the poor and the destitute, allegedly stating 'whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant' (KJV, Mt. 20:27), and he enacts equality by washing the disciples feet, naming them his 'friends' (Jn 15:15) rather than his servants. Friendship, for Macmurray, implies a relationship that is chosen voluntarily; it may include sacrifice at times, but it is not built on obligation or subservience of one to the other.[41]

Finding Community through Digital Speech Acts

Yet, Macmurray's account of a communally focused religion is at odds with the majority of institutionalized Christianity that has formed an alliance with political powers, or that stresses dogma and orthodox belief over social action; thus, demarcating membership on the grounds of assenting to certain creeds instead of accepting our common humanity and a willingness to

embrace diverse persons. For these reasons, the official church hierarchy is out of step with its parishioners; its doctrines are antiquated and rigid rather than hypothetical and variable, and its membership is in steady decline. As Woodhead's polls reveal, Christians leaving the church cite the official positions on women, sexuality, contraception and abortion as reasons for their departure.[42] Despite decades of feminist and queer theologies, the majority of Christian churches have stalled on gender and sexual equality; a Pew Research Center report entitled 'The Divide over Ordaining Women' revealed that in 2012 there had been no increase in the eleven per cent of female church leaders in America since 1998 (Pew Research Center, 9 September, 2014). In the Church of England, the numbers of female priests remain low: analysis following the consecration of the first female bishop in 2015 - more than twenty years since the approval of female ordination in 1992 - affirmed that less than two thousand of the total number of priests, which is nearly eight thousand, are women (BBC, 26 January, 2015). Legislation to allow female bishops was not passed by the General Synod until 2014; even then, it still included a concession for those who refused to serve under a female, which, in the first few months of 2017 allowed for a proposal to promote Philip North to the position of bishop of Sheffield. Reverend North does not believe that women can or should be priests and yet he was offered an appointment as bishop in a city where he would oversee the spiritual lives of clergy, a third of whom are women. If the Anglican church had paid more attention to Macmurray's work, it might have been quicker to relinquish state power and to update its symbols and metaphors to keep pace with changes in society and to address social needs.

Decreased membership, however, is not equivalent to irreligion. Rapidly growing numbers of persons unaffiliated to a religion – the religious 'nones' – are accessing new and more flexible forms of living religion through the development of technology. The growth of screen-based living has it made it easier to belong to a religious community or communities

without believing wholesale in official doctrinal statements. In 2001 Pew Research into 'cyberfaith' found that more Americans had searched for religious or spiritual information on the Internet than had gambled, traded on the stock market, used online banking, online dating services or Web-auction sites (Pew Research Center, 23 September, 2001).

In 2010, Campbell found Christianity to be the most dominant religion on the internet, embracing the possibility of expansive evangelism and active searching for information and contributing to discussion forums, including attempts at interfaith debate or 'religious internetworking'.[43] Just as our lives have become a blur of offline activity and online sharing and filtering of those activities through social networking media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, religion online – the one-way dissemination of content – is combined with online religion – interactive religious practice; this presents the user with several advantages over real world religion and is a critical aspect of, part of the behaviour and activity, of living religion.[44] When religion moves online, church leaders no longer have control over the message as the user becomes co-creator of Web content; the user has access to a plurality of voices and searchable material so that traditional authority is usurped by relevance. We have entered an era of 'post-traditional religious identity'[45] in which the user is empowered to construct a religious-self online, combining diverse religious affiliations that would be considered incompatible or unacceptable to orthodox religious leaders. A 2011 survey of social media profiles discovered that nearly two-thirds of users self-identify as religious, with a further quarter preferring the term 'spiritual' and more than half of those connected with Protestantism choosing 'Christian-other' rather than an officially recognized denomination.[46] In other words, religious interests can be pursued online even in cases where the user holds negative views towards mainstream institutionalized churches and does not wish to be aligned with a particular brand of Christianity.

A positive reading of online religiosity, then, is that it rejuvenates Christianity freeing it from oppressive structures and inherited beliefs handed-down from generation to generation, giving way to bespoke renderings adapted to the individual. Seemingly innocuous hashtags, such as #TOF (Twitter of Faith) and #pray4 encourage and enable instant communication of Christian messages and support for those requesting prayer, creating a sense of a global community across timelines and geographical boundaries.[47] More critically, hashtags such as #blacklivesmatterSunday and #whitechurchquiet have defied the Christian churches in America to take a decisive political stand on police brutality and on President Donald Trump's sexist and racist statements.

In addition, for those who have not received a warm welcome in an offline church, or who simply find attending offline church services inconvenient, the greater accessibility and the possibility of anonymity are crucial benefits of online religion. For women, in particular, Aune affirms, attending a physical church involves doing battle with norms of 'Christian womanhood', whereby single women are overlooked for leadership roles and are under pressure to find a husband.[48] With online religion, socio-economic status, gender, marital status and sexual orientation are not instantly visible; thereby, contributing to the sense that online religion is more egalitarian than its offline arena. The convenience of logging in from home alleviates the burden of having to be in a specific place at a specific time, which relieves tension for parents of young children, those who find travel a chore, those who have caring responsibilities for the elderly or work in paid employment at the weekend, and anyone uncomfortable with the compulsion to wear one's 'Sunday-best'. Moreover, online religion can give a voice to those not permitted to speak in a physical church. Bagnall's study of women participating as avatars in the virtual Anglican cathedral in Second Life identifies an increased measure of confidence and exercising of agency in online religion. That is, she finds women prepared to critique the hermeneutics in online biblical discussion and offering

to step-forward to lead prayers in the virtual church, even though they admit to being talked-over and filled with self-doubt in offline biblical studies and worship services.[49]

Religion as community may seem more likely in real rather than virtual settings. Online communities are more dispersed, pseudonymous and geographically distant than offline communities, challenging the very notion of community as face-to-face gatherings of people who know each other intimately. Virtual communities are both easier to join and easier to leave than real world communities that demand loyalty, time-served and shared narratives and commitments. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that face-to-face gatherings more truthfully reveal a person's inner thoughts or level of commitment to the group; an individual sitting in a pew in a physical church could be surrounded by others persons to whom they have no attachment, experiencing loneliness and disconnection. Hence, according to Wagner, it is appropriate to use the term 'community' when referring to digital connectivity, since, it is 'at least potentially capable of nurturing relationships and creating a sense of community'; in essence, the extent of community is determined by the 'emotional investment' of the user.[50] Indeed, in Bagnall's study, worshippers at the Anglican cathedral in Second Life relay a greater sense of closeness and intimacy from 'from being alone with your device, instead of being in a room surrounded by others'.[51]

A negative reading of online religiosity would highlight the increased opportunity for radicalization, fundamentalism and sectarianism; in fact, rather than exploring contradictory and disparate beliefs, Mahan finds that adult users seek out groups that confirm and reinforce the beliefs they already hold.[52] Users are validated by the sense of belonging and support that comes from connecting with like-minded individuals and groups online, but such validation may also legitimize the online suppression of individuals and groups with contrary beliefs and opinions. For women, voicing opinions online carries with it the risk of being subjected to rape and death threats; threats which cannot simply be ignored because they draw on and

reinforce the gender-based violence that women navigate daily in their offline lives. Consequently, targeted women have their freedom of speech suppressed as they delete digital accounts and open posts. From online harassment data collected by *The Guardian*, Soraya Chemaly affirms that: 'Women are more frequently targeted . . . with gendered slurs, hateful commentary, and pornographic photo manipulation'; she highlights 'the intent of the harasser to denigrate women on the basis of their sex, race, religion, gender, sexual identities or disabilities' (*Huffington Post*, 15 April, 2016).

Furthermore, in terms of religiosity itself, the integrity of users accessing prayer and confession apps may be called into question even in the absence of abusive and disruptive posts. The physical acts of kneeling to pray, reciting prayers aloud in unison, or confessing 'sins' to a priest requires more effort than typing a prayer or confession into an app and receiving an instant reassurance of a prayer heard or forgiveness granted. Apps remove the necessity of visiting a priest to have confession heard, but also give the user a false sense of having been heard, imagining a 'real' person typing a response and believing this is more effective than thinking or uttering a prayer or confession on their own, and yet they may be communicating with sophisticated 'chat-bots' and not real people at all. The speed with which a prayer or confession can be typed and then sent at the click of a button gives the user a rapid absolution without challenging their behaviour or requiring repentance in the shape of improving that behaviour.

Technological developments have brought with them a new form of speech acts: digital speech acts, or typing as a performative utterance, where the intention behind the typing and clicking is what gives the activity its integrity, but is profoundly difficult for a philosophy of living religion to assess. As with Macmurray's example of eating for sustenance versus eating as a sacred meal, simply clicking for information or out of curiosity does not constitute confession or repentance; the intention and the seriousness with which a

user engages with an app or an online religious activity determines the authenticity of their religious experience. In Helland's words:

> As ritual studies recognize, it is not merely the action that makes an activity religious, rather it is the intent behind the action that gives it its religious significance. For example, lighting a candle may or may not be considered a religious event; it is dependant upon the situation and also the interpretation of the participants. The same holds true for clicking hyperlinks on websites. People may or may not be undertaking the activity to obtain a true religious experience. In many ways, evaluating the activity focuses upon the authenticity of the event and this is something that is extremely problematic to determine.[53]

Conclusion

Macmurray could not have predicted the virtual world when he set out his critique of institutionalized Christianity. He recognized, nonetheless, that a religious community, a living religion, is not pinned down by doctrinal assertion and creedal construction; the significance of a religious community is the expression it gives to human relationality, and the outworking of that expression in social action for justice. Technological developments offer, where access to the Internet is available, more democratic, more convenient and less hierarchical structures of engagement. In out screen-based world, a living religion intertwines the virtual and the real; the possibilities for anonymity and pseudonymous membership give a voice to the voiceless and enable rapid dissemination of information and almost instant real world gatherings of activists. Alongside these advantages, the detriments of using digital media to galvanize trolls, to lend legitimacy to real world violence, to spread

fundamentalism, misogyny, racism and other forms of hate, are also present. Inclusion and exclusion are being fought out on the virtual stage as much as in the physical world. 'Netizens' have a new public space in which to participate; a sphere that offers the promise of community, but also fuels 'flaming'. A philosophy of religion that takes practice as seriously as belief could employ Macmurray's 'heterocentric' outlook as its first principle, inspecting online religion for activity that is the backbone of action for social justice and is not merely encouraging platitudes in response to prayer requests and easy 'clicktivism' in response to real world injustice.

Macmurray's understanding of religion as the celebration of community is more appropriate in a religiously plural world than a religious community bent on foundationalism and religious proof-texting. As Reza Aslan writing for the *New York Times* (8 October, 2014) puts it: 'If you are a violent misogynist, you will find plenty in your scriptures to justify your beliefs. If you are a peaceful, democratic feminist, you will also find justification in the scriptures for your point of view'. Clearly, the practice of ISIS, Boko Haram or Anders Brevik is not about inclusive community, but their identity as Muslims or Christians cannot be denied; more importantly, by examining the wider religious practice of a living religion we discover examples of extremists countered by those who are liberal and progressive, fostering community on- and offline.

In agreement with Macmurray, Cottingham states: 'it is the job, the legitimate job, of the philosopher to probe the human epistemic condition'[54], and, in the case of religion, this is to investigate spiritual praxis as 'an *epistemology of involvement*';[55] that is, to shift the focus from belief as a purely cognitive enterprise to an understanding of belief as that which is inseparable from the culture and lives in which it is worked out in spiritual practice. Patriarchal, dehumanizing and oppressive elements of religion are still open to criticism in such an approach, and such criticism will have more traction than a rational demonstration of

objections and responses to isolated doctrine, since 'a properly enriched philosophy of religion can help us to see more clearly what is at stake'.[56]

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[1] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 9.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid. (italics in the original).
[4] Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom*, 56.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Macmurray, *Interpreting the Universe*, 34-5.
[7] Macmurray, *Reason and Emotion*, 3.
[8] Brooks, *The Social Animal*, 17.
[9] Ibid., 17-18.
[10] Ibid., 18.
[11] Macmurray, *Freedom in the Modern World*, 142.
[12] Ibid., 144 (italics in the original).
[13] See, for example, Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain*.
[14] See Ager and Ager, *Faith, Secularism, and Humanitarian Engagement*.
[15] Macmurray, *Reason and Emotion*, 129.
[16] Ibid.,134.
[17] Macmurray, *The Self as Agent*, p. 142.
[18] Trevarthen, 'Proof of Sympathy'.
[19] Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, 49.
[20] Ibid., p. 51.
[21] Ibid., 60.
[22] Ibid., 24.
[23] Ibid., 119.
[24] Macmurray, *A Challenge to the Churches*, 22.
[25] Ibid., 23-4.
[26] Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, 150.
[27] Macmurray, *Conditions of Freedom*, 24.

[28] Macmurray, *A Challenge to the Churches*, 23.
[29] Ibid., 24.
[30] Macmurray, *The Structure of Religious Experience*, 47.
[31] Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, 162.
[32] Ibid., 173-4.
[33] See McIntosh, 'The Possibility of a Gender-Transcendent God'.
[34] Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, 171.
[35] Macmurray, *Creative Society*, 48.
[36] Ibid., 57.
[37] Ibid., 19.
[38] Macmurray, *The Philosophy of Jesus*, 8.
[39] Macmurray, *Persons in Relation*, 71.
[40] See McIntosh, 'The Concept of Sacrifice'.
[41] Macmurray, *Ye Are My Friends*, 4.
[42] Woodhead, 'Religion and Public Life'.
[43] Campbell, *When Religion Meets new Media*, 35, 24.
[44] An early distinction between online religion and religion online was set out by Helland, 'Religion Online/Online Religion'.
[45] Woodhead, 'Practical Theology and Public Life'.
[46] Bobkowski and Pearce, 'Baring their Souls'.
[47] Cheong, 'Twitter of Faith', 198-200.
[48] Aune, 'Singleness and Secularization', 60-65.
[49] Bagnall, 'How Does Women's Usage', 34-9.
[50] Wagner, *Godwired*, 127, 134.
[51] Bagnall, 'How Does Women's Usage', 36.
[52] Mahan, 'Religion and Media', 22.
[53] Helland, 'Online Religion as Lived Religion', 6.
[54] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 24.
[55] Ibid., 23 (italics in original).
[56] Ibid., 176.