A Virtual Sacred Space
Some Theological Considerations

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ABSTRACT
The growth of technology in the last few decades has made the church opts for technology to comply with the social distancing policy during the Covid-19 pandemic that forbids worshipping on-site. Technology allows churches to worship, conduct church events, and have fellowship online. That situation leads to the ongoing theological discussion on the possibilities of having a virtual sacred space for the people of God to experience His presence. This topic has sparked a growing interest among theologians and since this topic connects faith issues and technology, it might open further interdisciplinary discussions among scholars from various expertise. This paper argues that to join and contribute to the discussion, the topic of sacred space for worship should be addressed theologically. From a systematic theology point of view, this paper attempts to elaborate that there is a wide opened possibility for Christians to worship through a virtual sacred space. That position does not mean that this article advocates uncritical usages of the internet; it rather affirms that while the internet could be used for devastating negative causes, it could still also be used for the glory of God. Since there is nothing in the creation that God could not consecrate for His sacred purpose, there is no legitimate theological reason to invalidate the possibility of a virtual sacred space.

Keywords: Christianity; Online Worship; Technology and Religion; Theology; Virtual Sacred Space.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has made the church unable to gather physically to worship. This situation leads to the continual virtual worship for more than a year in many parts of the world. Reaction towards online worship is also varied. Some agrees to it to the extent that it should continue even in the context of the post-pandemic church, some others argue that virtual worship could never be an ideal condition since the fellowship of the church is always embodied in nature, thus it is always done in a particular physical place. The emergence of online or virtual worship widely affects the understanding of how embodied is Christian spirituality [1, pp. 36-8].

What is crucial to address the discussions related to online or virtual worship is the issue of sacred space for worship. Can a holy God interact with His people virtually? Or can a virtual space be consecrated thus become a virtual sacred space as it has been done by God to certain physical places? For some people, the internet might be to profane to be used by God for his sacred purpose, but for some others, nothing is too profane that

cannot be used by God for His purpose. One Christian tradition that strongly opposes that understanding is the Neo-Calvinist tradition. This theological tradition even believes that sacred-profane distinction is non-exist in God's created world. This theological position will be elaborated below.

While showing sympathy to those who accurately point out the devastating negativity that the internet might bring, this article would also argue further, that it is not impossible for God to use it for His sacred purpose. It is unfair to theologically consider the possibility of a virtual sacred space by referring to the abuse usage of the internet. The internet is just like many other things in the world, that could be abused or used for the glory of God. Besides, the Bible clearly says that there is no place that is too profane for God to consecrate in the physical reality, thus, that would also be the case in the virtual reality. God's holiness is always all-encompassing in relationship with the creation. Internet, technology, science and many other developments of human civilization is part of God's creation that might be used for His sacred purpose.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This article employs library research as a method with systematic theology as the main theological perspective. Systematic theology is defined by Smith as an attempt to study the Bible systematically on particular topics [1, p. 139]. In order to engage theologically in discussing the possibility of a virtual sacred space, this article will first deal with the theological concept of sacred and profane; second, worship and sacred space; third, the (online) presence of God; and fourth, end with a conclusion.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Sacred and Profane

The profound sociologist of religion, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) argues that the religious view would divide the world into two categories of the sacred and the profane. The profane here refers to the ordinary things in life, which is distinguished from things that are related to God [2, p. 853]. Although this view is popular, that is not always the case in every religion, especially not from a Christian point of view. This understanding radically separates creation and redemption, ordinary things and spiritual things, and so on; a separation that does not fit the Christian theological framework that God has redeemed the creation.

A Christian theological tradition that would vehemently oppose sacred-profane distinction is the Dutch Neo-Calvinist tradition that has Abraham Kuyper as its spiritual father. Kuyper was a theologian, pastor, scholar, politician, parliament member, and also prime minister in the Netherlands. He had also founded a newspaper, a university, a political party, and a church denomination. He was a Christian with remarkable public achievements [3, p. x].

It is the core conviction of Neo-Calvinism that God's majesty extends to all creation and even though the creation has fallen into sin, it will be restored by God to its original plan by God's holy redemption [4, p. 191]. This conviction has led Kuyper to express Christian faith in public and has inspired many generations after him to apply the Christian vision of societal transformation to the society. Kuyper was firm that the reign of Christ should not be limited to the church alone, but should be over all spheres of life [5, p. 488]. Thus, if something such as the virtual reality do exist in life, Christians should seek to bring about God's transformation in that sphere as well, for nothing lies outside Christ's reign, thus, God can use everything as a means to reveal his Glory.

3.2. Worship and Sacred Space

The conviction that God is the Creator of heaven and earth, thus He is the Lord over all cosmos makes worship not an option but an obligation for human beings. Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, which means humans are capable of being in communion with God through worship. Bavinck states that the true religion is a matter of the heart that is willing to worship God as the only Lord over all aspects of one's life [7, p. 54].

The Bible has a special emphasis on the place of worship. The people of God could not just worship anywhere they like, but only in God's designated place. Throughout the Old Testament, the place of worship was in the Garden of Eden at first, then in the land of Canaan, in the Tabernacle, then in the Jerusalem temple. The Israelites could not worship God in Egypt; therefore, they were called by God out of Egypt to worship Him in the promised land (Ex. 7:16). The Old Testament shows how significant it is to be in the sacred space, the place that God consecrates, where it is pleasing to Him to show His glory.

In the New Testament, Jesus proclaims that the time has arrived that the people will not worship God in Samaria nor in Jerusalem, but they will worship Him in the spirit and truth (John 4:23). That signifies what happens later in the Pentecost, where the indwelling of God's Spirit would no longer be restricted to any particular place but would be in the life of every believer. Those who believe in Christ are indwelled by the Spirit, thus they themselves are the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17). The significance of this theological position is that God's presence will not be confined to any particular nation as it was in Israel or in any particular place. As Christ said that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to Him, thus the disciples are to reach out to all nations, to the ends of the world (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

To proclaim the Lordship of God in Christ Jesus is itself an act of worship, and it is in no way limited to any specific geographical boundaries. It is the will of God Himself, to not restrict His presence in the Jerusalem temple or in Israel as it was before, but to reach out to all nations and for His Spirit to indwell believers from all nations and tongues. For the contemporary situation, this understanding would mean that the people of God should seek that His presence be manifested in all spheres of life, until all the earth is full of His glory. Thus, the possibility for Christians to worship in a virtual sacred space is widely opened.

3.3. The (Online) Presence of God

The concept of the presence of God and the sacred space for worship in the New Testament is not restrictive at all to anything, thus, it is not to exclude the possibilities of God consecrating the virtual reality for His own sacred purpose. After experiencing the spiritual benefits of the virtual church, Thompson argues that God could presence to His church virtually, and that is not necessarily a new case that happens only during the Covid-19 pandemic. While Paul was not physically present from the churches that he planted, he was virtually present through his letters. It is interesting to see from that case on how the embodied body of Christ could

actually be fostered and nurtured through virtual connectedness [8, p. 18].

This position is not to agree with uncritical usage of the internet. It is true that there are many negativities in the internet, things such as cyberbullying, hoaxes, online prostitution, and many other negative things are really there. However, this article would see those negativities not as the original purpose of the internet. For human nature is sinful, there is always a thousand ways for people to abuse things. It is not just limited to the internet, but any kind of science and technology, arts, money, and many other things in life could also be used in abusive ways. Yet it is never right to judge something by its abuse. When this article argues for the possibility of a virtual sacred space, such a possibility presupposes the right and ethical way of using the virtual world. God is present while His people worship Him truly and in a way that is in accordance to His Word, be it virtual or physical worship.

The internet and other developments of science and technology are part of God's creation. They are not things foreign to God. As Abraham Kuyper insists, that the world of thought or science could not be isolated from the other creation [6, p. 614]. Furthermore, Kuyper sees science as the creature of God that should develop freely in its sovereign sphere. From the Medieval until the early modern time, science developed dependently to the support and guidance of the church and the government. But the later development of science will be more and more independent, and it will eventually reach self-sufficiency as an independent sphere of human life [7, p. 3]. And if God could use many things from His creation such as gold, wood, linen and other materials for the purpose of creating the Tabernacle as God's sacred space, there is nothing that hinders the virtual space to be used as a sacred space for worship purpose.

4. CONCLUSION

It is absolutely necessary to have a solid theological basis to join the contemporary discussion on the possibility of a sacred virtual space. From the perspective of Christian systematic theology, creation and redemption are never been sharply separated for God Himself redeemed the creation through Jesus Christ. More specifically, the Neo-Calvinist tradition has strongly opposed the concept of sacred-profane distinction. Abraham Kuyper strongly proclaims that Christ is the King of all spheres of human life, thus, there is nothing in the cosmos that is not reached by God's glory. In the Bible, there is an absolute correlation between the sacred space and worship. The people of God of the Old Testament should not worship anywhere they want, but it is always in the place that is consecrated by God: the garden of Eden, the promised land, the Tabernacle, and the Jerusalem temple. However, in the New Testament, the sacred space is extended to all the earth for God has commissioned His people to reach the very ends of the earth with the indwelling power of His Spirit (Acts 1:8). While the theological concept of sacred space might still be retained in the New Testament period, the idea that it has a geographical restriction is no longer tenable. That makes a virtual sacred space possible for today's worship. All things within God's creation, including the internet, could be consecrated by God to fulfill His sacred purpose.

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