

Article

Finding Wholes in the Metaverse: Posthuman Mystics as Agents of Evolutionary Contextualization

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Abstract: The Metaverse is a pervasive expression of technological culture whose impact will be global. First, through knowledge, then through social, and now through geo-spatial, AI (the foundation of the Metaverse) will connect all entities on Earth through digital means thereby creating a three-dimensional informational and experiential layer across the world dubbed the Metaverse. The Metaverse has four characteristics: augmented reality, lifelogging, mirror worlds, and virtual reality. From the standpoint of Christian cultural engagement, a contextual theology has yet to be developed. In the work that follows, the Metaverse is engaged through a combination of contextualization and wholemaking from the standpoint of posthumanism and mysticism. The study focuses on evolutionary wholemaking as identified by Teilhard/Delio, while being guided by Bevans' five (early) models of contextualization. The method of contextual wholemaking enables new ways of seeing, embracing, communing, complexifying, and creating within the four spheres of the Metaverse. After exploring the nature of the Metaverse in the first half of the paper, insights were gathered from the dialogue between contextual theology and culture and discussed in the second half of the paper.

Keywords: metaverse; wholemaking; posthuman; mysticism; augmented reality; lifelogging; mirror worlds; virtual reality; avatar; contextualization



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“It is the attraction of the whole that has set everything in motion in me, has animated and given organic form to everything. It is because I feel the whole and love it passionately that I believe in the primacy of being . . . nothing in the world is intelligible except in starting from the whole”. Teilhard de Chardin, as quoted by Ilia Delio (2013, Loc 33)

1. Introduction

The Metaverse is a pervasive expression of technological culture whose impact will be global (Hermann and Browning 2021). From the standpoint of Christian cultural engagement, a contextual theology has yet to be developed. In the work that follows, I will engage the Metaverse primarily through contextualization (influenced by Teilhard) to begin to identify what a fruitful engagement between traditions might entail.

A Metaverse (Smart et al. 2008, pp. 1–28) may be understood as a three-dimensional transparent space or sphere that will encompass the entire Earth. Humans will live inside it: it will always be on, always sense human presence, always ready to answer any question, always ready to conduct business, to play, or to arrange a meet-up with friends (Ball 2020). In the Metaverse, everyday life will switch back and forth between virtual and augmented realities seamlessly.

Contextualization brings together the experience of the past—namely, the biblical tradition as it has been lived in Scripture and throughout history, with the experience of the present, i.e., a particular context or culture (Bevans 2018, p. 2). Contextualization (or inculturation, local theology, or contextual theology) puts these two experiences in dialogue. These dialogues are the means through which Christian faith has renewed itself in its repeated novel expressions in cultures throughout history.

In contextual work, it is prudent to lean into the commonalities between the two dialogue partners while honestly noting differences. Consequently, for our study here,

what streams of the Christian tradition might be most closely aligned with the culture of the Metaverse? For reasons I will make clear below, I will engage the Metaverse with the evolutionary wholemaking tools the Christian Teilhardian tradition provides, as represented in the work of Ilia Delio.¹ Her work is compelling in this particular instance of dialogue, as she currently pioneers a stream of the Christian tradition that pays close attention to evolution, technology, posthumanism, and spirituality, all key tools for engaging the Metaverse. When approached with the sensibilities of the posthuman mystic, the method of evolutionary contextualization enables new ways of seeing, embracing, communing, complexifying, and creating within the Metaverse.

2. Creating a Method of Contextual Engagement

In this section, I created a method of social engagement through combining wholemaking activities as rooted in Jesus and continued in the writings of Teilhard (through Delio) with a contextualization model developed by Stephen Bevans. In addition, I bring together these two facets of engagement with the proposed agent of change: Delio's posthuman mystic. Through the convergence of these threads, I explore how the posthuman mystic is equipped to engage in contextual wholemaking in the Metaverse.

2.1. Wholemaking and Contextualization as Modes of Engagement

How Jesus performed his mission in ancient Palestine serves as exemplar for how to engage with others in any context (Wright 1999, pp. 175, 182) and, specifically, for this study, the Metaverse. Jesus experienced oneness with God, and he extended this love into the sphere of relationships through granting forgiveness, drawing people together, and through healing all who came to him (Delio 2013, Loc 2761). He built on people's everyday experiences to demonstrate how God abides in the mundane (Loc 2780). Connecting Jesus' language to Teilhard (Loc 3154), Delio characterizes Jesus' kingdom activities as wholemaking (Loc 2796). Through his life and ministry, Jesus created wholes where previously there was separateness and division (Loc 2804). Jesus' practice of wholemaking expressed an instance (of the highest degree) of how the mission of God might be embodied in the world. In kind, how might those who seek to follow the pattern of Jesus practice wholemaking in the Metaverse?

To situate the practices of Jesus in an evolutionary world, and relying on Teilhard (Delio 2013, Loc 2696), I looked at four dynamics that are constants for evolutionary change and that serve as key facets of wholemaking.² The first pattern is attraction. "God is the energy of wholeness and the irresistible lure to greater wholeness. God is the integral whole that attracts every whole toward greater wholeness (Delio 2013, Loc 3780)". One must pay close attention to how the Spirit attracts one forward into the future (and one must respond) if one is to participate in wholemaking in a culture. Second, the Spirit continually draws all entities to commune with others—to unite and to become whole (Loc 1659). Humans are to fully join in this process. Third, having experienced communion, each entity is empowered to differentiate and complexify, to become even greater and more unique expressions of themselves both communally and individually (Loc 2719). Fourth, beyond complexity, there exists emergent occasions of absolute novelty and creativity that are utterly unpredictable that arise in many contexts, not only currently but historically (Loc 660). Consistent with the patterns of the life of Jesus, this process of evolutionary change not only forms a fourfold pattern of human convivial life today, but it also describes the very basis by which the universe has been wholemaking from the Big Bang onward (Delio 2013, Loc 1151).

In addition to wholemaking, I then explored contextualization as a sphere of engagement. Stephen Bevans originally identified five different models that Christians used throughout history to engage new cultures.³ The translation model (Bevans 2018, pp. 8–12) describes an approach where the agent brings content (usually the gospel) and inserts it into the receiving culture. The anthropological model (pp. 12–15) reverses the approach—rather than bringing in something from the outside, the anthropological model describes how the

agents serve as “treasure hunters (p. 123)”, finding the incipient gospel that exists within the recipient culture, e.g., the “seeds of the word” (p. 13). The praxis (or liberation) model (pp. 16–19) works through a praxis–theory–praxis approach, i.e., one first engages the local context, which is then followed by going to Scripture and other resources, and the final step involves a return back to the culture for theologically informed social action. The synthetic model (pp. 19–22) is a dialogical process between the agent and receiver that, in various ways, integrates elements of the three contextualization models already listed. The final approach, the transcendental model, (pp. 22–26) describes a subjective approach whereby either the agent or the recipient connects to God within and describes that experience as particularly revelatory.

2.2. Agents of Contextual Engagement

Through her creation of the posthuman mystic, Delio brings together two very different patterns of engagement and merges them into one: her mystic is not only deeply connected to, permeated by and empowered by the divine, but is also posthuman. Posthuman is not to be confused with transhuman, i.e., going beyond one’s biology and improving oneself through technology (p. 115). Instead, the posthuman is much more relational. The posthuman moves beyond the paradigm of the liberal autonomous subject of modernity (p. 115) as well as what is normally considered human (which in Western history established the white male patriarch as normative). For Delio, the posthuman represents a decentered, highly relational mode of reality giving agency to everyone, not only to all other humans, but to natural and technological subjects as well.

The posthuman mystic is well suited to be a dialogue partner with the culture and residents of the Metaverse. “The posthuman mystic is the one who has the courage to live in the God-ing moment, connecting and creating the art of life. Every moment is an opportunity to become more conscious of the divine depth in our midst. To participate in God-ing energy means to be aware of the ineffable divine presence and to act from the energy of this presence, to participate creatively in God’s becoming (Delio 2020, p. 200)”.

2.3. The Posthuman Mystic and Contextualization as Wholemaking

Before beginning the action of evolutionary contextualization, the posthuman mystic must first inculcate a new mode of experiencing reality. They must first see that they are wholes all the way down (Delio 2020, p. 220), i.e., they are made up of wholes, from the energy that exists at the quantum levels inside their bodies up through the elements, molecules, and cells that make up their organs, to the very connections they maintain to all of life (Delio 2020, p. 223), including social groups, societies, the planet, the solar system and the galaxy, to the rest of the universe, and, ultimately, to God (Delio 2020, p. 224). Through an ever expanding body of Christ, each one is deeply connected with the heart and center of the evolutionary universe. As a full participant in God’s work of evolution today, the posthuman mystic sees that “there is nothing profane (Delio 2020, p. 183)” (Teilhard quoted by Delio 2020)—that God is immersed in all of creation (xxiii). Posthuman mystics understand that all reality has God as its deepest essence, that God is to be vividly experienced, and it is God who serves as their energy source to engage day-to-day realities (Delio 2020, p. 200). Equipped with these dispositions, the posthuman mystic is better able to see rightly and discern the Spirit’s work in recipient cultures.

I will now bring the three previously discussed modes of engagement together. For the posthuman mystic, all five of Bevans (2018, pp. 8–26) models play a role in the contextual wholemaking task. In terms of translation, there is a word that the posthuman mystic carries forward (consistent with what was stated above about the posthuman mystic’s disposition)—that each subject is created in wholeness, is connected to wholeness, and is carried forward in wholeness. The posthuman mystical agent utilizes the anthropological approach when they recognize that God’s Spirit has been at work in the residents of the Metaverse: the messenger is the one who sees the wholeness in the context and gives name to that implicit reality. The posthuman mystic recognizes no secular space, and even the

Metaverse, as part of God's connected creation, is undergirded by holiness. The posthuman mystic listens for where God's Spirit, from within the Metaverse, might be whispering for the agent to join in its wholeness. In terms of the Praxis model, wholemaking has dynamics of praxis and theory in its repertoire, and it is that agenda which particularly connects to the dispositions of the posthuman mystic (especially in the prophetic sense). In terms of the transcendental model, it is the subjective experience of the transcendent that one brings to the encounter with the other: neither bringing content nor finding content nor taking action is the pattern for the transcendental model, but it is simply about sharing authentically from one's experience of God. The agent or recipient shares their process of relating to God and that "message" communicates significantly more than the communication of any static presentation of the gospel (Bevans 2018, p. 25).

Following Teilhard's dynamics of wholemaking leads the postmodern mystic to come to the context with empty hands while looking for invitations into wholeness. Questions that drive their contextual encounters might be the following: What does the posthuman mystic feel called to embrace? What is the posthuman mystic attracted to? With whom does the posthuman mystic unify? After unification, how might the relationships give rise to new complexity? Finally, what creative novelties might the posthuman mystic engineer or facilitate as a consequence?

2.4. *Towards a Method of Engagement*

What are the tools through which posthuman mystics might serve as agents of evolutionary contextualization in the Metaverse? Posthuman mystics will follow Jesus' pattern of wholemaking as illuminated by the evolutionary wholemaking of Teilhard/Delio, while being guided by Bevans' five modes of contextualization. Just as Jesus served as a whole-maker in ancient Palestine, posthuman mystics seek to conduct similar work in these new realities. Having received God in one's very depths, they realize that all reality shares the same source. They come to the context with the stance of a whole-maker as they seek to find and listen for wholeness in the four spheres of the Metaverse. As posthuman mystics, they share common cause with wholeness efforts that liberate humans and cultures from historic Western perspectives on whiteness, patriarchy and the notions of the detached liberal subject. For the posthuman mystic, the Metaverse provides unique opportunities for contextual wholemaking through fostering new ways of seeing, embracing, communing, complexifying, and creating. Having developed appropriate tools for engaging the Metaverse, I must first explore exactly what the Metaverse is.

3. The Context of the Metaverse

3.1. *Foundation of the Metaverse*

AI (Artificial Intelligence) is the foundation of the four spheres of the Metaverse. What is AI? AI are those "digital technologies that perform tasks that traditionally required human intelligence, such as visual perception, speech recognition, decision-making and language translation. Until recently, only developers could develop AI. More recent breakthroughs allow computers to teach themselves by observing and collecting data, without the bottleneck of programming (Scoble and Israel 2017, Loc 352)". It is, also, "the simulation of human intelligence using software and accompanying apps or machines" (Cronin and Scoble 2020, pp. 62–63). There would be no Metaverse without AI, as AI is now the foundation of each of the three iterations of the web.

In recent history, AI continues to gain more knowledge and establish human connections. Less than 25 years ago, Google⁴ set up a question-and-answer algorithm for AI to acquire all human understanding (through its search engine) (Kelly 2010, p. 37). Today, and every day, humans "volunteer" to teach AI through their 3.5 billion searches.⁵ Less than twenty years ago, Facebook⁶ set up a platform to capture social network data for AI to understand human relationships. Similar to Google, almost four billion people "volunteer" each day on social networks to teach AI all the details of their relational networks.⁷ Moving into a third era of Internet and AI, the next task of AI's development will be to understand

the physical Earth (Kelly 2019). Right now, various initiatives exist to capture current global mapping efforts (6D.ai, now part of Niantic Labs, being the most significant).⁸ It is expected that in the next few years, users will upload photos of all geophysical spaces to the web in three dimensions so that AI will create a digital twin of the Earth. With such a mirrored world in place, there will be a seamless connection between physical and digital realms. Both worlds will be connected at all levels for all people, information, creatures, things, and spaces, and “from now on, we will live parallel lives in both the physical earth and the digital earth (Kim 2021, p. 5)”. One name for this integrated physical and digital world is the Metaverse (Smart et al. 2008, p. 1).

AI cannot support robots, automation, or self-driving cars until digital maps are made of the entire Earth. (Cronin and Scoble 2020, pp. 54–55). AI cannot support a three-dimensional world until a digital twin of all reality is created. As with prior iterations of teaching AI through Google and Facebook, it will not be corporations that upload massive amounts of data, but it will happen in mundane ways as people upload pictures freely on their own (Cronin and Scoble 2020, p. 156).

3.2. The Metaverse

The term Metaverse was coined in the novel, *Snowcrash* (Stephenson 1992). In that novel, the Metaverse is a follow-on to the internet, a three-dimensional space where one’s avatar is a stand-in for one’s actions in a simulated world. In 2007, through the facilitation of the Accelerated Studies Foundation, scholars and industry leaders across disciplines developed a 28-page document on the future of the internet which they called the Metaverse (Smart et al. 2008, pp. 1–28). In that study, the authors develop four aspects of the Metaverse: augmented reality, lifelogging, mirrored worlds, and virtual reality.

3.2.1. Augmented Reality

Augmented reality is that aspect of the Metaverse that gives new eyes to see the material world in an entirely different way. It is similar to lifelogging in that it seeks to add an additional layer of perception to the current experience of reality, and it is similar to mirror worlds in that it continually communicates with sensors in the environment and faces outward to an external world.

Augmented reality occurs when an individual receives an enhanced view of the physical world through the use of an AR-capable device such as a phone, headset, or glasses. These enhancements most frequently consist of information or virtual items appearing on top of what is seen as physical reality. Moreover, these layers of information can be communicated through sound, and if some of these entities are part of the Internet of Things, they may be addressed through voice.

AR seeks to bring humans closer to the world that surrounds them (Fink 2019, p. 31). “Augmented reality . . . has its historical antecedents in tools. Humanity has always sought tools to make people stronger, faster, and smarter. AR is the ultimate expression of man’s (*sic*) quest for mastery. It is a tool, like a club (Fink 2018, Loc 328)”. AR has three components: (1) it is primarily real and has virtual components, (2) the virtual components can be interacted with, and (3) the virtual items are connected to the three-dimensional real world (Fink 2019, p. 27).

Smart phones will continue to develop more and more AR capability, but this particular part of the Metaverse will not fully come of age until people use smart glasses. It is thought, at the time of writing, that these will emerge, likely by Apple, in 2023 (Cronin and Scoble 2020, p. 45). After that time, what is stored on phones today will likely move to headsets or glasses (Fink 2019, p. 79). Other companies have introduced versions of AR glasses in the recent past (most notably, Google Glass in 2013), but those product rollouts failed for a number of reasons. Typically, it is not until Apple comes out with its signature technology that large public adoption occurs (Cronin and Scoble 2020, p. 148). “The lenses of smart glasses will look a lot like simple eyeglasses . . . These will contain tiny nano-technological screens that will appear as 90-inch TV screens six feet in front of you,

creating an image density eight times greater than HDTV They can take something that is really in your field of view and replace it with computer-generated images that you will be able to actually touch and manipulate (Scoble and Israel 2017, Loc 285)".

AR includes the Internet of Things. The IoT connects home electronics to the internet by adding technology to them. Every item will have small amounts of AI for communication purposes. "The Internet of Things (IoT) is the rapidly expanding network of physical objects such as devices, vehicles, buildings and other objects that contain embedded electronics, software, sensors and network connectivity. This enables things to collect and exchange data (Scoble and Israel 2017, Loc 2868)". These "things" are, frequently, addressed through smart assistants in the home such as Amazon's Alexa, Google's Assistant or Apple's Siri.⁹

Smart assistants are increasing in their ability to successfully complete commands, be it to talk to the lights, the thermostat, the door, or appliances connected to the Internet of Things. Some features include actually doing commerce through voice as well. As these assistants become smarter through AI, they will make more and more decisions. "An intelligent agent (IA) is a software agent capable of making decisions on behalf of users. Intelligent agents learn from each task they perform, thus becoming smarter over time, and eventually understanding user patterns so well that they can anticipate requests before users actually make them (Scoble and Israel 2017, Loc 2865)".

AR truly offers a new way to see and interact with the world. The complexity of every item is now on display. It is through AR that objects talk and become part of the home (some speak to Alexa as a family member).¹⁰ Everything becomes a subject through AR. There is an opportunity here to raise the value of what was previously considered an object, as each object now has information on it—and in some situations, can now speak. One's divided way of seeing the world can now be overcome through experiencing communication with all things.

3.2.2. Lifelogging

As with augmented reality, lifelogging is augmented as well, meaning that technologies are utilized to enhance the current practice of reality—tools are given to build on the current experience of everyday life. Moreover, lifelogging is similar to AR in that wearables will likely be worn (in unobtrusive recording devices) to capture what is going on in people's lives (Kelly 2016, pp. 278–79).

Where augmented reality is externally focused, lifelogging is personal and intimate (Smart et al. 2008, p. 14). When people record their lives for their friend and family networks, they upload how it is they want their lives to be perceived by the world (Kim 2021, p. 11). These "documents" are not purported to be a fair and accurate rendering of their lives, but social media affords them a way to add another angle on reality in regard to their personal lives, hence, lifelogs are not a simulation but an actual representation of their lives. Because lifelogging is subjective, it is an internal view of each one's life rather than an external one as in AR. With VR, lifelogging is personalized; however, lifelogging coincides with one's personal identity in the real world, whereas agency in VR is mediated through other-worldly avatars.

Lifelogging, as a term, has a recent history. Vannevar Bush, Director of the National Institute of Science in 1945, created the term to describe how people may begin to record, through technology such as cameras and recorders, many parts of their lives (Lifelogging 2021). The most common use case of lifelogging is simply uploading elements of one's life for the world to see. Lifelogging occurs when one creates a video in YouTube, shares pictures in Instagram¹¹, posts an update on Facebook, mouths a lip-sync video on Tiktok¹², or writes their own blog post. One growing platform that has become much more significant recently is Twitch.¹³ Designed primarily for (video) gamers who want to broadcast and narrate their gameplay, Twitch is a platform that allows users to "life stream" their day-to-day lives for others to follow. These presentations are not necessarily a 1:1 map of the

reality of their lives—they unveil the version of themselves that they want the world to see (Kim 2021, p. 11).

Many people are starting to conduct live streams¹⁴ of their everyday lives (closer to non-stop recording), and it is likely that this trend will continue. In the near future, people will likely record everything with a small wearable device (could be their AR glasses, could be a small lapel-like camera). The public is not currently ready for these changes, as there was reluctance to adopt earlier versions of this technology¹⁵. However, live streaming one's life as the norm is forecasted to grow.¹⁶

In social media, people share very freely about their own lives. The draw for connecting to others is huge, and the amount of self-disclosure is unprecedented. After posting comes the waiting. First one records their life, through words, images, videos, and this is followed by posting these contributions, and, then, after the posting, they wait for their community to comment on these same words, images, and videos. Anticipating the responses of one's friends and followers plays a significant part of many people's lives today (Kim 2021, p. 66).

Another way people record their lives is through "tracking" apps.¹⁷ There are apps that focus on fitness, nutrition, wellness, meditation, sleep, overall health monitoring, to name a few. People track themselves typically through a mobile device such as a digital watch or phone. The recording, tracking, and analysis of all data about themselves has become a regular routine for many.

Lifelogging is a core part of the Metaverse going forward and is full of "sacred hotspots" (Delio 2020, p. 180). It truly is a watershed for humanity that so many people have the ability to disclose intimate details of their lives with such a wide global community. Any medium that allows one to see the world through the eyes of another and offers a glimpse of how others see their day-to-day reality is a potential gift to all. For that reason, posthuman mystics see lifelogging as seeds for the creation of holy spaces.

3.2.3. Mirror Worlds

Mirror worlds are that part of the Metaverse that create a digital twin of the Earth for immersive experiences. Mirror worlds are similar to virtual worlds in that they are modeling a world as accurately as possible, to be experienced in three dimensions. The only difference is that mirror worlds are modeling the Earth, and VR is modeling an alternative world. A similarity is that both are immersive simulated worlds. In VR, each one's avatar does not represent the real-world version of them, but in mirror worlds each one's avatar does represent their real-world self.

Up to this time, Google Earth, presented in 2005, has been the most significant effort to map the Earth digitally (Smart et al. 2008, p. 9). Google maps have conducted a huge portion of the work in regard to mapping the world in both two dimensions and in visual aspects of three dimensions, especially helping drivers on the roads (Kim 2021, p. 104). Just as with body tracking apps, geographically based apps are constantly updated and offer the latest information. For many, apps such as Waze¹⁸ and Google maps give constantly updated information on the world.

Mirror worlds are primarily built on Earth maps, and so, similar to AR, the focus is on connecting to a real external world (Smart et al. 2008, p. 9). Mirror worlds are where the real world is mapped in such a way that a three-dimensional rendering can occur. Some call this AR Clouds¹⁹, others call it "digital twins", "ubiquitous computing", "onlife", and others call it mirror world (Floridi 2014, p. 43; Kelly 2019). However, the key aspect of it is that all global public space will be mapped in a three-dimensional representation, and from that, everything digital, in regard to AR, can be built on this layer (Cronin and Scoble 2020, pp. 155–57).

There are companies such as 6D.ai (now Niantic Labs) that plan to map everything in the world. They have a technology that can receive photos from a phone and add to the rendering of space already given by many others (Fink 2019, pp. 23, 145). "Soon every stop sign, tree, pole, lane marker, restaurant sign, and far more insignificant details, will

be mapped by many companies. Apple alone drove four million miles with 360-degree cameras and 3D sensors, in an attempt to make its maps better (Cronin and Scoble 2020, p. 56)".

Mirror worlds are any type of activity online that mimics something similar in the face-to-face world. Therefore, there are online schools that completely lack physical classrooms, a physical campus, or, in some cases, teachers. These schools may be described as campuses or classrooms, but in essence, these are two-dimensional online versions (twins) of a physical school (Kim 2021, pp. 16–17).

The same goes for food apps—people order as they would at a physical restaurant, but what they are doing is ordering from a simulated two-dimensional version of a restaurant. Other two-dimensional "twins" include online fan clubs, or Zoom (for a meeting), or Airbnb (as a hotel). These businesses mimic three-dimensional reality with two-dimensional apps (Kim 2021, pp. 16–17). Airbnb is similar to a hotel that hosts unlimited rooms for two million people a night—in reality, it is a digital twin of what a physical hotel might be (Kim 2021, pp. 110–11).

With mirror worlds, object-aware sensors will be in all sorts of public spaces so as to constantly update the three-dimensional twin of the world (Smart et al. 2008, p. 17). Self-driving cars will constantly upload actual images of what is happening, street by street (Cronin and Scoble 2020, p. 55). Autonomous cars rely on highly accurate three-dimensional maps—e.g., the cars interact with the map, not physical reality per se—to conduct their actual driving. Each time they drive, and they see something that does not match the map (a new flagpole, road sign), these sensors update the mirror world (p. 55).

Mirror worlds are invisible without special glasses. With AR glasses, one sees a three-dimensional space with coordinates that one can manipulate (Cronin and Scoble 2020, p. 52). What if someone wants to leave a note on a park-bench? They might write the note through verbal commands to their glasses, or even write a digital note on their phone, and then leave the digital note on the digital twin of the bench. No one will physically see it, unless they are wearing AR glasses too (and how you keep that note secure is another issue!).

Currently, warehouses and factories are being scanned with three-dimensional imaging so that everything can be placed digitally. Factories are using AR glasses in significant ways as well, e.g., put on the glasses (e.g., Microsoft HoloLens) and see where to put the box (arrows on floor, arrows on shelf . . .) (Fink p. 14). Even workers are scanned by sensors as to their locations. Even before they start work, new employees may be trained on a three-dimensional digital twin of the actual factory floor. Robots and automation will work off of the digital twin to conduct their work. Everything will be updated with sensors that track what has been moved since the last images were taken (Cronin and Scoble 2020, p. 194).

As the real world becomes mapped (as in a three-dimensional digital twin), each person will be able to go anywhere in the mapped world through their VR headset. They may visit any mapped city, or they can visit any mapped private space if that has been mapped (such as a living room of a distant friend). Imagine when storefronts gain immersive footholds in mirror worlds—instead of visiting a web page on a browser to place an order, one would enter that store (through their avatar) stroll around, look at things, and make purchases in three-dimensional space. In addition to shopping, the idea of going to work and conversing with co-workers, etc., all the while as one's avatar (and never leaving one's living room) is difficult to comprehend.

3.2.4. Virtual Reality

Virtual reality (or the virtual world) is the fourth building block of the Metaverse (Smart et al. 2008, p. 6), and it is both simulated and internally focused. Similar to lifelogging, it revolves around people and their relationships: it is internal—everything works from each one's point of view and where one has agency. Similar to mirror worlds, it is

an immersive simulation, the only difference is that this is gameplay that is based on an alternative world.

Virtual reality involves both gameplay and storytelling in an immersive environment. “Virtual reality is about humanity’s quest for immersion. It provides presence and agency in other worlds, in stories and myths, and it stretches from Plato’s cave to religious rituals, theater, dark rides, theme parks, film, television, and video games (Fink 2018, Loc 328)”. Through their avatar, one exists within the game and plays a key role in how the story develops (Smart et al. 2008, p. 6). These types of experiences were reflected in MMORPG²⁰ games (such as World of Warcraft)²¹ that allowed millions of people across the world to join and participate in online gaming. With virtual reality, it takes those dynamics that much further, and puts one in an environment so vivid and so real that one has the experience, with one’s whole body, that one is in the game, that one is a real part of the story. VR requires people to suspend their disbelief, just as one does for TV, movies, novels, etc. That suspension allows one to immerse themselves in the story itself (Fink 2018, Loc 328).²²

In the VR world, most VR games focus on goal-oriented tasks, but there are others that are more focused on the social world (Smart et al. 2008, p. 6). These VR experiences do not contain a story—one simply “hangs out”, as their avatar, with others in their spaces. Online platforms, such as Second Life²³ and Roblox²⁴ and, increasingly, Fortnite²⁵, allows one to spend time with friends as an avatar in addition to any gameplay. Facebook, among others, is creating social VR experiences, where avatars hang out with avatars.²⁶ In VR, interactions are limited by the avatar one chooses in the game (Smart et al. 2008, p. 6). It governs how one can play and chances to win are determined by their working within the capabilities of an avatar.

Roblox is an online game incredibly popular with 6–16 year olds (Kim 2021, p. 155). Children are spending more time in Roblox than any other platform, and what they are doing is “hanging out” together and playing (and creating) games. YouTube, the number one platform for Gen Z (1997–2012), lags far beyond Roblox for younger Gen Z and Gen Alpha (2012) (Kim 2021, pp. 155–56).

What is different about Roblox is that it is not one game, but hundreds of thousands of games, created not by companies, but by users. The platform itself makes it very easy to create games, and these creators may then charge people to play. Similar to social media before it, Roblox does not make the content, it just hosts the platform and offers tools for regular users to make content. Some envision that this particular platform may soon provide storefronts for an entirely new type of economy, one that would not only impact the gaming world but real world economies as well.²⁷

VR is a venue that breeds cooperation as gamers freely choose to go into another world with many others. They perform things together, as teammates, or as friends, or acquaintances in virtual games. Although every program has rules and constraints, many of these programs are designed to give as much latitude and flexibility as one needs to go in the game, while keeping to the primary story line. As mentioned, some platforms, however, will be just for socializing and so the constraints are set to a minimum.

4. A Contextual Response to the Metaverse through Wholemaking

Having briefly established the characteristics of the four spheres of the Metaverse, I will explore what a posthuman mystic who utilizes contextual wholemaking might discover through engagement in the Metaverse.

4.1. *Seeing the Metaverse in New Ways (There Is Nothing Profane!)*

Before engaging the Metaverse with contextual wholemaking, the first act of the posthuman mystic is to see rightly. Just as the posthuman mystic would understand that God lives at the depths of each person (Delio 2020, p. 183), filling each with God’s own self, the posthuman mystic would understand that God abides in the Metaverse as well, removing any sense of secularity. In AR, through the persistent and (now) observable physical connection of all reality, the augmented life might reveal that all reality is of a

whole, and, similarly, for those who can see, that it is God-drenched (Delio 2013, Loc 1866). As posthuman mystics listen to the call of wholeness in AR, they would see an animated world filled with God as opposed to a profane technological world. The posthuman mystic would see that reality, both physical and augmented, are of one piece consisting of interrelated wholes. Through AR, the wholeness and holiness of all reality becomes more accessible as all things are sourced in God - connected and filled with intrinsic worth.

A posthuman mystic would come to lifelogging prepared to receive the gift it has to offer, moving themselves towards social media with anticipation (Kelly 2010, p. 173). Just as one might participate in God-ing (Delio 2020, p. 200) in offline spaces, the posthuman mystic would realize that social media offers each person the opportunity to serve as witnesses to God's presence. While recognizing that social media inequitably amplifies some voices while diminishing others, one cannot simply dismiss social media as profane and godless, and returning to Teilhard, "there is nothing profane below here for those who know how to see (Delio 2020, p. 183)". The posthuman mystic realizes that at the base of all things they are one with all others.

Just as the physical world oozes with God (Delio 2020, p. 194), three-dimensional simulated worlds may ooze as well. For the posthuman mystic, God dwells in all of reality—including mirror worlds. Having re-trained themselves to see beyond dualism, posthuman mystics will perceive that God inhabits both physical and digital reality—they are of a whole. Therefore, posthuman mystics will understand that these three-dimensional alternative spaces can truly be sacred spaces, even if the interactions are avatar-to-avatar. Posthuman mystics see mirror worlds as "pregnant with God" (Angela of Foligno) (Delio 2013, Loc 1872).

When posthuman mystics engage in meditation, the inner spaciousness (Delio 2020, p. 181) they develop with God engages the entire universe (Delio 2020, p. 199). They do not leave that expanse when they join another world, such as in VR. The posthuman mystics' inner freedom would fill their avatar(s) as well, and through their avatar they would see and experience God in all things. Through virtual worlds, posthuman mystics learn to see how they are connected and related to everything. Through these mythic spaces, one observes how each thing is its own "I am", i.e., has its own identity and even its own being of some sort. It might be easier for a posthuman mystic to see the interconnectedness of all things through their avatar within a VR experience and, then, when they leave the virtual world, they might see their own world a bit clearer: all things connected in God.

4.2. *Embracing, Responding to Evolutionary Attraction in the Metaverse*

Having acquired a new way of seeing, the posthuman mystic is now ready to engage the Metaverse with the skills of a contextual wholemaker. The first task of wholemaking is to respond to the attraction of the whole. Being attracted to AR might feel a bit similar to magic. If a person can now talk to the stove—what to say when it talks back? What will the conversation be like? These invisible connections to all creation will feel surprising and new. Already humans have a real attraction to technological objects, e.g., to Alexa, to Roomba, and to other automated products in American homes, but these only represent the very beginning. There will be no limit to human communication with material reality in the home, and increasingly elsewhere. The number of things that will have interfaces for communication will continue to grow with no end in sight. The task of posthuman mystics, in these AR contexts, will be to discern where wholeness might be leading them, through technological interfaces.

Lifelogging, through social media, draws people to one another as each one yearns for more wholeness in their connections. People share intimate details from their personal lives with the hopes to create new relationships and deepen others. When people are attracted to social media with the hopes for friendship, novelty, connection, and compassion, they are actually being invited into a deeper wholeness by the Holy Spirit.

Posthuman mystics may listen to how wholeness might be leading them into these very familiar yet foreign spaces. Mirror worlds resemble their physical locales, but they are

distinct because these spaces are accessed through their avatars. Posthuman mystics must ask to what and to whom they are attracted, and how are they being drawn by the Spirit. Do they seek to encounter a people, a culture, a space that is completely unknown? Who is it that may offer them wholeness in the mirror worlds, and to whom may they return the favor?

When posthuman mystics are drawn into VR, searching for novelty and camaraderie, they are being drawn into wholeness. It is the Spirit who leads them to connect with others—even if those others are simulated creatures of one kind or another. They need to listen to what or to whom they hope to encounter, and to pursue these invitations from the virtual worlds. The postmodern mystic must ask, what is it that I am allured to in this alternative world? Where is wholeness calling me?

4.3. Communing/Uniting in the Metaverse

Having experienced a new way of seeing as well as a new way to listen for wholeness' call, the posthuman mystic is now prepared to unify with others in the Metaverse. God becomes more, when, through AR, each one becomes more closely unified with others (Delio 2020, pp. 180–81). Posthuman mystics may be filled with God and then extend that grace to all the beings with whom they come in contact. Each one who they encounter in their space is an “I am” and worthy of respect for what they are in themselves. Posthuman mystics commune with others through the technology that is available to them.

To participate with evolution in lifelogging through social media is to celebrate the diverse peoples of the world and one's newfound connection to them. God has not brought people to this place to reinforce differences, but for each to hold these differences in a new way as one experiences wholeness with others in a true community. A sense of wholeness is created through telling stories that inspire, through healing, through loving their enemies, and by peace-making, bringing people together, speaking against oppression, opposing hierarchy, and more. Once unified, each one might celebrate the many gifts they have experienced through their many diverse connections. Each one is invited to achieve an expanded consciousness (Delio 2020, p. 178) with others as they enter the space of the other through technology.

The mapping of the entirety of the world gives humans access to the Earth in a way that has never been experienced. Through mirror worlds, posthuman mystics will be able to travel to anywhere in the world—through an immersive environment—and experience that space and other people through their avatars. These are locations and peoples that they may never have met in the real world. It will be different than their physical lives, of course, but their experience of diverse peoples and locales through their avatar will be much more meaningful than they ever imagined possible. They will see that, through mirror worlds, they can learn to overcome difference in a way that gives them a wholeness they have never experienced before. Posthuman mystics may conceive of mirror worlds as spaces where God creates a hospitable environment for them to grow and to become one with the world through their avatars.

In virtual worlds, team play is paramount. Although there are countless solo games, many of the most impactful games are the MMORPG games of the last twenty years. Players form connections around a quest, and are given certain tools, possible pathways, and specific skill sets, which together engage players at a level of community that many have never experienced in the real world. It is through these connections, avatar to avatar, that one might experience wholeness (Delio 2020, p. 183) through the shared experiences of camaraderie and friendship in virtual worlds.

4.4. Complexifying the Metaverse

Having learned to see anew, listen anew, and commune anew, the posthuman mystic is now ready to experience a new level of their own being as they travel more deeply into wholeness in the Metaverse. As each mystic becomes more unified within their AR space, their own consciousness becomes more complex, and they can witness their own

evolution as a person here, a wholeness beyond wholeness. In AR, posthuman mystics connect and unify with other humans and machines at all levels, seeing them as extensions of themselves. Posthuman mystics celebrate the joint becoming and complexification of technology and themselves, together.

Just as with AR where posthuman mystics unify with all things, in lifelogging each one seeks to make deeper and more complex connections with people. Through each loving connection that is created from person to person, through technology, the posthuman mystic shares “more being” with God (Delio 2020, p. 191). Complex consciousness is formed when people share the depths of their lives with one another. Through these more compelling interactions, God is born in their midst. When people notice, through their connections, that something more is appearing, an overflow of some kind that they cannot explain, they can be sure that God has complexified these relationships and is creating something new: God is that unaccounted for overflow (p. 191).

Mirror worlds make room for a different kind of friendship, connection, and novelty through one’s avatars. Through the experience of unity and wholeness that they feel amidst the diversity and beauty of mirror worlds, posthuman mystics awaken to the depths within one another, and they recognize that where diverse peoples, through their avatars, connect and make room for one another, there is God with them. Through these experiences, something new is born among them—they have experienced a shared communion as avatars with those who were formerly strangers—and they have become a new kind of complex people.

In VR, one is drawn to experience wholeness with team members as they take on new challenges to go beyond what was previously thought possible. It is in these peak experiences that one is invited into the new that brings a whole way of being to any world. Once a posthuman mystic has collaborated with their team, inhabiting alternative worlds becomes a part of their overall identity. Even as an avatar, God works through the team as they participate in God-ing the space. Depending on the constraints on the platform and the individual avatars, one’s team may be able to lean towards inclusion, towards the marginalized, towards generativity, creativity, generosity, and, when they connect to another avatar in love, Christ is born. These encounters broaden their world, and they evolve through these life-changing events. One’s team may self-empty on behalf of another whether it is part of a game or simply in a social VR space. Giving oneself over to another in love and creating that hospitable space for the other to be themselves fosters a kind of complex community that extends the deep sense of shared life even further.

4.5. Creating in the Metaverse

Having experienced a new way of seeing, hearing, communing, and complexifying, postmodern mystics in AR will co-create as wholemakers in God (Delio 2020, p. 210). As each posthuman mystic personalizes their AR space through creative pursuits, they watch as God creates beauty with and through them in these new digital spaces. These posthuman mystics live out their ultimate purpose in communion with AR, now that all these new tools have become a part of their very identity. Having found their new complex voice, posthuman mystics serve as wholemakers who inspire others to begin a similar path.

Having experienced a complex unity in social media through lifelogging, posthuman mystics will then personalize and create freely in that space. Wholeness manifests when people have freely loved, especially across existing social divisions. Through their lifelogging, posthuman mystics might share creatively in these spaces through art, photos, videos, live streaming, or in some other way. They may also inspire the creativity of others through their newfound identity and freedom. Posthuman mystics know they are working as wholemakers when they enlarge the possibilities (Kelly 2010, p. 349) for others to experience their true creative selves.

Having experienced wholemaking with diverse avatars in mirror worlds, posthuman mystics will then consider how they might create as they build on their newfound identity. These mystical avatars might create entirely new kinds of art or new kinds of service to

others (or even new kinds of churches)? Their creativity will recognize and welcome God's actions in these spaces as they serve and support the diverse avatars in their midst.

Once one has experienced the very depths of trusted team play in a VR game, players move from that of a new user to that of a creator. Going further, players might align themselves more fully with the game, giving themselves to areas of the world they may have skipped or ignored before. They become more committed to the game by learning more skills and taking on more responsibilities. They might explore the outer limits of the platform, possibly creating new things not considered possible. At some point, they might even learn the platform so well that they figure out how to modify the very structure of the game, or even how to break it, in a sense, for their own purposes (for example, finding a way to socialize in a game that is very story driven, or writing a "mod" for the game that changes its very structure and makes it "whole" in a new way). In some of these worlds, and in the gaming world in general, moving from an apprentice to a master is the ultimate path, and again is a type of experienced wholeness.

Through the method of contextual wholemaking, posthuman mystics embrace AR, and they discern how wholeness is drawing them into unity and more complexity, as everything is connected and communicates with one another. New creations emerge from these complex AR connections, as posthuman mystics are equipped and ready to be agents of wholeness in these hybrid spaces. Posthuman mystics embrace lifelogging as they hear where wholeness is calling them to share themselves deeply with one another so that they become unified and begin to acquire a complex consciousness with their greater community. After losing themselves in community on behalf of others, creativity is born for all who make the journey. As with the other spheres, posthuman mystics embrace mirror worlds as wholeness invites them to make their home in these spaces as new complex relationships emerge through their avatars, ultimately creating a new reality together. Through these new synergies, posthuman mystics are equipped to discern how this particular sphere of the Metaverse may emerge going forward. As with the other Metaverse spheres, posthuman mystics embrace virtual worlds as they transform these spheres from within. Posthuman mystics love virtual worlds, seek community there, fully give themselves to their team to gain an even deeper and more complex community, and then are empowered to create new expressions of life.

5. Conclusions

In this study, I created a contextual method to engage the four characteristics of the Metaverse: augmented reality, lifelogging, mirror worlds, and virtual reality. Building on Jesus' pattern of wholemaking with the evolutionary paradigm of Teilhard/Delio, while taking cue from five of Bevans' modes of contextualization, the tool enables the work of the posthuman mystic. The posthuman mystic is one who, having received God in one's depth, realizes that all reality shares the same source. The posthuman mystic comes to the context with a message of wholeness as she seeks to find and listen for wholeness in every space embedded in the Metaverse. Having developed these appropriate tools for engaging the Metaverse, I engaged the Metaverse in dialogue with evolutionary contextualization—after exploring exactly what the four features of the Metaverse are. Through this brief study, I have demonstrated how posthuman mystics, using the method of contextual wholemaking developed here, and by joining with machines and avatars in diverse worlds and by giving themselves over to new ways of seeing (nothing profane!), responding (to evolutionary attraction), uniting (in community), and complexifying (inspiring a depth of creativity), reveal an evolutionary approach of Christian engagement to the coming Metaverse.

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Notes

- 1 Beginning as far back as 2008 (Delio 2008) with *Christ in Evolution*, but continuing with *The Emergent Christ* (Delio 2011), *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being* (2013) (among several others), Iliia Delio established herself as the preeminent scholar of Teilhard de Chardin, most specifically, in the arenas of science, technology, religion, and Christian spirituality. Her more recent book, *Re-enchanting the Earth: Why AI needs Religion* (2020) goes beyond de Chardin as she explores religion, spirituality, and the church in light of Artificial Intelligence.
- 2 Louis M. Savary notes this pattern inherent in Teilhard (Savary 2014).
- 3 Bevans' revised book in 2002 added a sixth model, the Countercultural model (Bevans 2018, pp. 27–28). The countercultural model that looks to create a completely set apart community through non-conformity within a (possibly corrupt) culture. I do not see that applicable to this particular context, so I chose to use the five models the first edition offers (1992).
- 4 <https://www.google.com/> (accessed on 4 July 2021)
- 5 <https://www.internetlivestats.com/google-search-statistics/> (accessed on 3 July 2021).
- 6 <https://www.facebook.com/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 7 <https://backlinko.com/social-media-users> (accessed on 3 July 2021). 3.96 Billion people use social media, 2.7 billion of those are on Facebook.
- 8 <https://nianticlabs.com/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 9 <https://www.wired.com/story/best-smart-speakers/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 10 <https://vux.world/alexa-part-of-the-family/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 11 <https://www.instagram.com/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 12 <https://www.tiktok.com/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 13 <https://www.twitch.tv/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 14 <https://www.dacast.com/blog/66-must-know-live-streaming-statistics/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 15 <https://www.wired.com/story/google-glass-reasonable-expectation-of-privacy/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 16 <https://danielmiessler.com/blog/lifecasting-what-it-is-and-how-it-will-change-society/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 17 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/742448/global-fitness-tracking-and-technology-by-age/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 18 <http://www.waze.com/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 19 <https://medium.com/super-ventures-blog/mirrorworld-v-ar-cloud-or-how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-the-spatial-future-59de8fe8538f> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 20 "A massively multiplayer online role-playing game "consisting of role-playing elements such as levels, player classes, guilds, quests, etc. (Fink 2018, Loc 3872)".
- 21 <https://worldofwarcraft.com/en-us/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 22 A recent movie by Steven Spielberg captured some of the potentials of VR through his movie *Ready Player One*. In addition, a novel that perhaps revealed most closely what the virtual aspect of the Metaverse might be, is "Snowcrash" by Neal Stephenson. What also fills one's imagination regarding VR and the Metaverse is the holodeck based on *Star Trek* (Stephenson 1992).
- 23 <https://secondlife.com/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 24 <https://www.roblox.com/> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 25 <https://www.epicgames.com/fortnite/en-US/home> (accessed on 4 July 2021).
- 26 Facebook recently came out with the Oculus Quest II, and this has given VR technology access to the masses for the first time, and sales of these units are significantly climbing. Facebook has quite a commitment to seeing networked VR grow.
- 27 <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/roblox-metaverse> (accessed on 4 July 2021).

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