

Virtual spirituality: A programmable friend

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 5, 2005](#) issue

Because I have on occasion spoken critically of current fashions in spirituality, I am asked: “What have you got against ‘being spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’?” This is a good moment to respond.

Two kinds of spirituality receive attention today. The first and less popular kind was invented at least as long ago as when the Psalms were written. It received a boost in the New Testament and has been a main expression of Christianity ever since. It has counterparts in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. There are good and bad versions of this kind of spirituality, but the various forms have this in common: they are communal. Even the monastic hermits drew on the texts, prayers and vitalities of a communal life. They understood that biologically, socially, politically, ecclesiologically and theologically “we are members one of another.”

The second kind of spirituality became prominent in the 1970s. The most popular forms focus on the ego. The seekers and finders of this “Spirituality Two” operate apart from community. They are interested in expressing themselves. Good things can arise from that quest: there can be adventure, mystery, poetry, imagination. But . . .

The problem with Spirituality Two is identified by Vartan Gregorian of the Carnegie Foundation, who commented recently (*Wall Street Journal*, March 7) on the declining attendance at art museums and concerts. “It’s ironic . . . that while the Internet has made it possible for us to have more contact with more people in more places than ever before, this ‘contact’ is not face-to-face but virtual, made by individuals acting in isolation, staring at lonely computer screens” or listening to iPods.

A good symbol of this trend is Vivienne, who is “a virtual friend who can be programmed to go almost anywhere with you” (*New York Times*, Feb. 7) Vivienne is a three-dimensional figurine who can converse on 35,000 topics from philosophy to movies. She can handle 78,000 questions on banking alone. “People will see that

they can't have sex with her, but they'll try to." Produced by a Hong Kong firm, Artificial Life, Vivienne "loves to be given virtual flowers and chocolates," can translate six languages, and can serve as a virtual mother-in-law. She is "the product of computerized voice synthesis, streaming video and text messages." She will soon have a boyfriend, and Artificial Life will also offer a gay partner, virtually.

I don't know whether "spirituality" is one of Vivienne's 35,000 topics yet, but how can the inventors miss that field? She is perfect for it. Surely she's "spiritual" and not "religious," and so would be programmed to avoid "the institutional church" and "organized religion," which she will say are stultifying. She will never link up with fallible humans to address issues of justice or have dealings in mercy.

Vivienne would speak from the standard theological base for Spirituality Two, programmed to say "I give expression to the god within me." Her vocabulary need not be too vast. She simply has to know how to speak about "energy" and "connections" and "the cosmic." She'll be eclectic and will be able to draw a little bit from religions and philosophies insofar as they do not connect with living, breathing people. In other words, Vivienne is perfect—until her batteries wear down.

Since she's spiritual and not religious, virtual and not communal, there'll be no tithing or offerings involved. But you can buy her virtual gifts, charged to your phone bill, with the yield going to Artificial Life. If the bill gets too high, some users may be ready to revisit Spirituality One.