

PRESS & MEDIA

Poll Perversity

THE SOURCE: "Of Polls, Mountains: U.S. Journalists and Their Use of Election Surveys" by Thomas E. Patterson, in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 2005: No. 5.

WHEN THE NEWS MEDIA REPORT the results of public-opinion polls during presidential campaigns, they rush to explain the latest ups and downs in terms of the flaws and strengths of the candidates. That may seem natural, says Thomas E. Patterson, a professor of government and the press at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, but in reality it's peculiar. Why not look for explanations in the voting public itself?

The focus on candidates and their campaigns "derives from the age-old definition of news as events," Patterson says. "Candidates' activities are events. Voters' attitudes are not. Although voters' partisan loyalties and policy preferences are the major influ-

ence on the vote, these influences are complex and not easily analyzed or reported. Moreover, because these influences are relatively stable, they are poorly suited to journalists' need to say something new each day."

When news reporters explain poll results, they tend to say unfavorable things about a faltering candidate and favorable things about a surging one.

When a candidate is doing well or poorly in the polls, reporters have relatively free rein to explain why, and "the temptation to say unfavorable things about a faltering candidate," and favorable things about a surging one, is hard to resist. "When

George H. W. Bush languished in the polls during the 1988 campaign, reporters said it was because he looked weak. *Newsweek* ran a Bush cover story entitled 'Fighting the Wimp Factor.' However, when Bush took the lead in polls after the GOP national convention, *Newsweek* declared that Bush had 'banished . . . the wimp factor.' No doubt Bush's convention performance helped, but anybody who studied the polls more closely would have seen that the surge in his support came mainly from Republican-leaning voters who simply hadn't been paying much attention to the campaign before.

By using the polls to focus so intensely on politicians as poll-minded strategists, and then pinning "flimsy, poll-derived images" on them, the press not only misses the bigger story of the underlying forces at work in elections, says Patterson. It also adds needlessly and destructively to Americans' disenchantment with the presidential candidates who would lead them.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Fuel for Fantasy

THE SOURCE: "Angels and Engines: The Culture of Apocalypse" by Marina Warner, in *Raritan*, Fall 2005.

IN THE AGE OF MASS MEDIA, THE Book of Revelation is reaching far beyond the church pulpit. Revelation's lush numerology and colorful charac-

ters—consider the Whore of Babylon astride a scarlet beast, or the famed Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—prompted George Bernard Shaw to dismiss the book as "a curious record of the visions of a drug addict which was absurdly admitted to the canon under the title of Revelation." But Revelation's

ridiculers can no longer "mock it out of meaning," writes Marina Warner, professor of literature, film, and theater studies at the University of Essex, England, for the visions and violence that drive this final book of the Bible are tailored for a culture in which the line between reality and fantasy has blurred.

Revelation's symbolic violence—its rivers of blood, mass slaughter, and bodies eaten and torn limb from limb—invites us to dissociate atrocity and its flesh-and-blood consequences. In part, this is because that

violence is done to evil-doers, while a blessed few, with whom readers identify, are saved. But it required modern technologies for these themes to find their fullest expression.

The advent of photography and “moving images” has distanced us from the true effects of violence even as it has disseminated apocalyptic culture. “The distinction that used to seem so clear between fantasy and memory, actual and imaginary events, has been fading,” Warner writes. “Technological media act as the chief catalysts of a new phantasmagoria masquerading as empiricism. They wrap us in illusions of monsters and angels, turning myth into history and vice versa.”

Consider the big-screen incarnation of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* fantasy novel series, which depicts apocalyptic battle between the forces of

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good and evil. A “terrifying number” of people in a recent British poll thought that Hitler was imaginary and that the orcs’ defeat at Helms Deep in the movie version of Tolkien’s *The Two Towers* actually occurred.

Revelation exerts a political influence as well. A book about an engulfing conflict and a remnant of chosen survivors offers tempting tropes for the makers of foreign policy these days. In his 2002 “axis of evil” speech, President George W.

Bush drew on apocalyptic phrases. In his second inaugural speech, he referred to September 11, 2001, as “the day of fire.” Meanwhile, Tony Blair explained his decision to go to war in Iraq as prompted by the “revelation” of September 11, and warned, “We are in mortal danger of mistaking the nature of the new world.” Meanwhile, the hugely popular books in the *Left Behind* fiction series identify the Antichrist as the new leader of the United Nations and unfold a present-day apocalyptic final battle, encouraging readers to connect real-world events with Revelation’s prophecies.

In the recently released photos of Iraqi captives at Abu Ghraib prison, in which prisoners were forced to stage punishments and degradations for the



The movie versions of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* saga, depicting an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, show the Book of Revelation’s cultural stamp.

camera, Warner discerns the damage that cinematic realism has wrought in the age of apocalyptic culture. The perpetrators, when caught, defended themselves by saying that the violence wasn't real.

But in the public's revulsion at the Abu Ghraib photographs, Warner sees hopeful evidence that "affectless disassociation hasn't altogether triumphed."

Still, Revelation's "phantasmagorias" have never been as fully conceptualized as they are today. And unless the public redraws the line between artifice and reality, and decides to "keep faith with the laws of time and the flesh, with the reality of pain and suffering, . . . we risk deepening the current disregard for the consequences of violence."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Browsing Faith

THE SOURCE: "God on the Internet" by Jonathan V. Last, in *First Things*, Dec. 2005.

WHAT'S THE NEXT-BIGGEST thing on the Internet after pornography? Religion. According to a 2004 survey, 82 million Americans turn to the virtual world for religious purposes of one sort or another, from seeking out information to making donations, blogging, and, most often, sending "spiritual" e-mails and online greeting cards. Jonathan V. Last, online editor of *The Weekly Standard*, finds some of this pious online activity troubling.

Consider Beliefnet.com, the largest religious website, which gets 20 million page-views per month and dispatches some nine million advertising-laden e-mail newsletters to sub-

scribers every day. It's "a commercial, one-stop-shopping portal which serves evangelicals, Catholics, Scientologists, Earth worshippers, and everyone in between." By answering questions posed by the site's "Belief-O-Matic" survey, visitors can find out whether liberal Quakerism, Unitarian Universalism, neopaganism, or something entirely different would best suit them.

Beliefnet.com is helping people meet their *perceived* spiritual needs, says Last, but these "aren't always the same thing as genuine needs." Without the tutelage and guidance of a real church, some spiritual seekers become lost in cyberspace, communicating only with like-minded others and forming insular online communities. "Something is happening at the intersection of religion and the Internet that is like the old denominationalization of American sects raised to a new and frightening power."

Last also worries that the Web's promotion of "transparency" may be leading to a demystification of religion. Among the world's religious bloggers are some 50 Catholic priests, who sometimes reveal priestly conversations about such matters as how to keep Mass short enough to avoid putting parishioners to sleep. There's a loss of mystery that Last thinks diminishes the power of the rituals of the liturgy. The next step may be virtual religious practice. "At Absolution-Online.com, for instance, you can enter the virtual booth, select your sins from five general classes of misdoing, and then proceed to the automated confessor, which doles out punishments normally consisting of some combination of fasting,

Our Fathers, and Hail Marys." Virtual confessions aren't sanctioned by the Catholic Church, however.

Steve Waldman, Beliefnet.com's founder and a former *U.S. News & World Report* editor, regards the Internet's impersonality as a virtue. "The anonymity of the Internet is what makes it work so well for religion. It's the flip side of why porn spreads." Just as with pornography, he says, "you can explore religious matters in the privacy of your own home; ask questions you might be embarrassed to ask; have conversations with people with some anonymity; and do it anytime day or night."

But just as pornography is a far cry from real sex, Last says, so virtual churching isn't real religion.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Why the Jews Got Ahead

THE SOURCE: "Jewish Occupational Selection: Education, Restrictions, or Minorities?" by Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, in *The Journal of Economic History*, Dec. 2005.

ONE OF THE ANCIENT CALUMNIES against the Jews holds that an inborn instinct for sharp practices led them into the ranks of moneylenders and other urban occupational groups. Among scholars, the prevailing view has been that Jews were driven from the land centuries ago by local legal barriers to landownership and other privileges, and had no choice but to make their living as townspeople.

Economic historians Maristella Botticini of Boston University and Zvi Eckstein of Tel Aviv University have