

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