

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

another argument: Beginning with religious reforms in the first century AD, Jews placed a strong emphasis on literacy and education that later gave them a big advantage in the skilled urban occupations that burgeoned first in the Middle East and then around the world.

After the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70, the balance of power within Judaism shifted from the Sadducees to the Pharisees, a sect that rejected the old emphasis on sacrifices and other priest-led rituals. Instead, the Pharisees made it a prime requirement of the faith that every Jewish male read the Torah and teach it to his sons in the synagogue. In the main centers of Jewish life—Eretz Israel, Mesopotamia, and Egypt—virtually all Jews were still farmers and herders at the beginning of the 5th century AD, but literacy levels were high. Then Jews began a movement into the towns, where they worked as shopkeepers and artisans in industries such as tanning, silk, and glassware.

The Muslim Empire started to grow

Beginning with religious reforms in the first century AD, Jews placed a strong emphasis on literacy and education that gave them a big advantage.

in the seventh century AD, and by the ninth century, lands under Muslim rule experienced a burst of urbanization that increased demand for skilled workers in professions such as moneylending, bookselling, shipbuilding, and long-distance trade. This accelerated the movement of literate rural Jews into Baghdad (which had been established only in AD 762), Basra, and other rising cities.

The argument that Jews were legally forbidden or otherwise prevented from owning land is contradicted by a great deal of evidence, the authors say. Documents from the era, including contracts, wills, court records, and especially the rabbinic Responsa—scholarly letters written in response to questions

submitted from the Jewish community—show that Jews could and did own land. Like Christians and other non-Muslim minorities, they faced but one occupational or economic restriction: a tax on land. The largely illiterate Christians stayed on the farm; the Jews, increasingly, chose the towns and cities. Farming may have been a minority occupation among Jews as early as the ninth century.

By then, Jews seeking economic opportunity were beginning to migrate to North Africa and southern Europe. Their ability to communicate by letter and to understand contracts and trade laws gave them a natural advantage as merchants and moneylenders, and allowed a number to live as well as some local aristocrats. As trade revived in medieval Europe and throughout the Mediterranean, Jews' literacy and far-flung social networks proved an enormous advantage, and enterprising Jews established enclaves as far away as China. A religious transformation was remaking a people and the world they inhabited.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Why Your Mind Has A Mind of Its Own

THE SOURCE: "The Vulcanization of the Human Brain: A Neural Perspective on Interactions Between Cognition and Emotion" by Jonathan D. Cohen, in *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Fall 2005.

HOW DO WE MAKE DECISIONS? Why do we allow our emotions to get in the way of rational response? What

we think of as emotional behavior may be the result of "evolutionarily old" mechanisms winning out over areas of the brain that developed later in the course of human evolution, argues psychologist Jonathan D. Cohen, director of the Center for the Study of the Brain, Mind, and Behavior at

Princeton University. While emotional behavior sometimes seems irrational in a modern setting, it may have been perfectly reasonable in the early days of our evolutionary history.

In this view, the human mind is best thought of not as a unified whole but rather as a "society of minds," each capable of independent action. So although the brain's prefrontal cortex enables the individual to act in accordance with abstract goals or principles, it doesn't always run the show. The older, "limbic" system of the brain acts more quickly and thus may win the battle to determine behavior.