Fake Religion: Ordeals of Authenticity in the Study of Religion

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"So far as religion is concerned," the great American inventor Thomas Edison declared, "it's a damned fake." Bluntly, he insisted, "Religion is all bunk." Ironically, perhaps, for an inventor, Edison dismissed all religion as fake because he found that it was all invented. "All Bibles are man-made," he held, suggesting that the basis of religious authority in every religion is not divine intervention but human invention. In this skeptical dismissal, Thomas Edison placed religion in a difficult double-bind situation: If a religion claimed supernatural authority, it was lying. Accordingly, its proponents were devious frauds. If a religion told the truth by acknowledging it was man-made, then it was not a religion, so proponents who claimed the status of religion for such an artifice were also devious frauds. Either way, religion was all bunk, all a damned fake.

If all religion is fake, then the problem of distinguishing between religious authenticity and fakery is easily solved. There is no authentic religion, unless by "authentic," in this instance, we want to mean something like "really, truly, and genuinely fraudulent." Still, in the study of religion we occasionally have to confront outright frauds, religious fakes who deceive the public, a community, or a clientele with their religious claims. Obviously, religious frauds engage in misrepresentation, such as the alleged con-artists of Greater Ministries International, the Baptist Foundation of Arizona, and IRM Corp., with their Christian ponzi schemes, pyramid schemes, and "affinity fraud" schemes, in some cases audited by the same accounting firm that reviewed the books at Enron, which by the end of 2001 had resulted in legal proceedings in 27 states of the United States (*Los Angeles Times* 8 August 2001). In such cases of religious fraud, the adjudication is easy: Take them to court, convict them, and lock them up.

Occasionally, however, we encounter religious frauds who raise a crucial problem in the study of religion, the problem of representation. During the eighteenth century in London, for example, the literary conman, George Psalmanaazaar, produced an entirely fake account of the society, culture, and religion of the island of Formosa. As anthropologist Rodney Needham argued, the temporary

success of this fraud can be explained by the fact that Psalmanaazaar managed to make his fake account of the religion of Formosa look very much like a recognizable religion, or at least a religion that would fit expectations of an "exotic" religion among his readers in England (Needham 1985: 75-116; see Stewart 1991: 31-65; Lestringant 1994). Such productions of authenticity require a careful mediation between extraordinary accounts, which cannot be independently confirmed or disconfirmed, and ordinary expectations about the primitive, the savage, or the exotic. In this work of mediation, successful frauds in the study of religion have acted as intercultural brokers speaking in the name of silent partners who bear the burden of authenticity. In some cases, these intercultural mediations of authenticity are relatively easy to expose as fraudulent, as in Eugen Herrigel's (1953) representations of the Zen Master Kenzo Awa (see Needham 1985: 188-218), or Carlos Castenada's (1968) account of the Yaqui shaman Don Juan Matus (see de Mille 1978; 1980), or the English corset-maker Cyril Hoskin's promotion of himself as if he were the Tibetan Buddhist master, Lobsang Rampa (1956; Lopez 1998: chapter 3). All were transparently fake.

In other cases, however, it is very difficult to tell. If we critically review the exchanges between John Neihardt (1961) and Black Elk or between Marcel Griaule (1975) and Ogotemelli, for example, we have to conclude that these accounts of indigenous religion were produced out of specific intercultural mediations rather than through any extraordinary, unmediated access to authentic indigenous Sioux or Dogon religion (see Arnold 1999; van Beek 1991).

As these examples suggest, indigenous religion, popular religion, or folk religion has often born the burden of authenticity. In the modern era, these "elementary forms of religious life" have carried an aura of authenticity because they evoke the organic religious life of a rural peasantry rather than the urban citizenry, the lower class rather than the elite, the ordinary people rather than the clergy (Long 1995). In the process of its production as a category, however, folk religion was appropriated, reproduced, and arguably reinvented by urban, literate elites within modern societies to lend an aura of authenticity to emerging nationalisms. These "invented traditions" transformed folklore into what has been called "fakelore" in the service of various nationalist interests.[1] So, even fakelore or fake religion, although invented, mobilized, and deployed by frauds, can produce real effects in the real world.

Dilemmas posed by fake religion, I want to propose, go to the heart of the study of religion. Although its precise etymology remains uncertain, the Latin term, religio, whatever it meant, was inevitably defined in antiquity as the opposite of superstitio, which was understood as conduct based on ignorance, fear, and fraud (Beneveniste 1973: 522). Superstition, as fake religion, represented both the defining opposite and the defining limit of religious authenticity. This problem of the opposition between superstition and religion, between alleged fraud and assumed authenticity, has persisted in the constitution of what counts as

religion in modernity. In the introduction to his landmark book, *Significations*, Charles Long observed that "the problematical status of religion itself as an authentic and even necessary mode of human experience and expression is an acute issue of the modern period" (Long 1999: 3). Situated among different modern interests, such as Christian interreligious polemic, European colonial denials of indigenous religion, and Enlightenment critiques of original religion, this crisis of authenticity has been central to the problem of religion in the modern world.[2]

Pursuing the problem of religious authenticity, I want to highlight the productions of fake religion, focusing on the proliferation of invented religions, or "virtual religions," on the Internet. New religions in cyberspace, such as the Discordians and the Church of the SubGenius, the Wauists and the Church of the Covert Cosmos, the Church of Elvis and the Church of the Almighty Dollar, the Vendramists and the Church of Virus, along with many other virtual religions, have indeed flourished on the Internet. With over 150 virtual religions featured on their own websites, the formation of new religions has been an increasingly popular activity among Internet discussion groups, as the Yahoo Groups devoted to "parody religions" expanded from about 120 in mid-2001 to over 400 in mid-2002. As indigenous religions of cyberspace, virtual religions defy conventional religious sanctions, colonial containments, and Enlightenment standards of clarity and discipline. Looking just like religions, these virtual religions on the Internet raise the problem of religious authenticity, even when they are obviously fake, because they present themselves as real religions.

Religious Authenticity

Establishing terms and conditions for religious authenticity, it might be assumed, is the prerogative of any religious community, defining orthodoxy against heresy, defending orthopraxy against invalid rites or deviant behavior. Selecting an illustration of this dynamic at random, eighth-century Roman Catholic attempts to define religious authenticity in Europe required ongoing struggles against alternative Christian claims, such as the claim made by the Christian leader in Francia who had received a letter from Jesus, as well as claims arising from alternative religions, especially Islam, whose prophet was represented in Christian polemic as an epileptic, madman, sexual deviant, and political tyrant acting under the cover of religion (Chidester 2000: 168, 172-74). In opposition to Islam, this allegation of fraud persisted, implicating the Prophet, as an eighteenth-century English author put it, in the crime of "imposing a fake religion on mankind" (Sale 1734: viii). Whether directed against "internal" or "external" competition, these allegations of fraud certified authenticity by identifying alternatives as fakes, charlatans, or imposters.

At the same time, with the increasing importance of holy relics in sanctify-

ing Roman Catholic churches, the ordeal of authenticity increasingly focused on the authentication of material artifacts. The holy relic, as an authentic religious object, had to be certified not only by its origins but also by its real effects, the miracles, donations, and community formations that it inspired. Authenticity, in the case of the relic, was not adjudicated by any conventional standards of property or propriety. As historian Patrick Geary has shown, a relic was most authentic when it was stolen, its sacred power certified by the implied complicity of the saint in its theft (Geary 1978). By contrast to the relic, the object of magic, which eventually came to be rendered as the fetish, was an illicit object, an evil thing that was an imitation of authenticity, so therefore fake, but also a real demonic force in opposition to authenticity (Pietz 1985-88). The authentic spirituality of religion, in this dialectic of relics and fetishes, required methods for the authentication of religious materiality.

In Christian representations of indigenous religions all over the world, we find a long history of demonizing local forms of religious life, extending from the expansion of Roman Catholic Christianity into Europe to the explorations and conquests of the New World. As an indication of the demonization of indigenous religion, the earliest appearances of the term, "shaman," in travelers' reports tended to represent indigenous religious specialists as agents of the devil. Having served at the court of Peter the Great and journeyed through imperial Russia, Nicolas Witsen reported in his early eighteenth-century travel account, *Noord en Oost Tartaryen*, that a "*Schaman*" was nothing more nor less than a priest of the devil (Flaherty 1992: 23). While allegedly serving the devil and his demons, shamans were also represented as fakes, frauds, or imposters, thus combining genuine evil with artificial deception. This mixture of authenticity and fakery made the shaman a strange contradiction—full of real demonic power, but empty of legitimate religious power—in colonial representations of indigenous religions.

Certainly, these accounts recycled classic features of superstition, which could be rendered as beliefs and practices based on ignorance, fear, and fraud, as the defining antithesis of authentic religion. Nevertheless, the depiction of shamans as authentic frauds represented a strange crisis for the ideology of Christian colonization well into the nineteenth century. Working in southern Africa during the 1830s, the missionary Robert Moffat dismissed the local ritual specialists, the Tswana *ngaka*, as nothing more than imposters, but demonized them, along with all other indigenous religious specialists, whether the "angekoks" of Greenland, the "pawpaws" of North America, or the "greegrees" of West Africa, by identifying them as the "pillars of Satan's kingdom" (Moffat 1842: 305; Chidester 1996a: 192). In this formula, shamans, who supposedly were empty of any real power, allegedly were full of demonic power as the primary obstacles to the advance of a colonizing Christian empire.

The European Enlightenment, with its demystifying, debunking rationality,

dedicated to exposing concealment, took up the challenge of exposing the illusion, deception, and artifice of religion. Enlightened reason worked hard to expose fakes and imposters, forgeries and counterfeits, deceptions and delusions, hallucinations and illusions. As historian of American religion Leigh Schmidt (2000) has observed, the effort to trace the origin of religion back to fraud provided the basic terms for the most popular theory of religion during the Enlightenment. The fraud of priestcraft, by this account, played on popular ignorance of scientific causation and fear of the unknown to produce religious illusions. Effectively, this argument recast the received definition of the opposite of religion, superstition, which was human conduct based on ignorance, fear, and fraud, as the definition of religion.

During the eighteenth century, however, Enlightenment rationalists and Christian devotionalists seemed to agree on two criteria of authenticity, transparency and control. Obviously, rationalists exposed religious claims to the transparency of reason. On the devotional side, however, Jonathan Edwards' reflections on the exercises of religious affections, which were most evident in hearing mysterious voices and uttering strange sounds, posed the crucial problem of how to distinguish "counterfeit religion" from "true religion." Invoking the ideal of transparency, Edwards promised that "God will give much greater light to his people to distinguish between true religion and its counterfeits" (Edwards 1961: 17). Authenticity, in this case, depended upon an illuminated capacity for discernment that could distinguish between genuine and artificial religion.

By contrast to an authenticity based upon transparency, a second register of authenticity appeared in the disciplinary management of the senses in which hearing merged with tactility, a tactility in which speaking and hearing were subject to discipline as a measure of their authenticity. An entire Christian discipline of speaking could be derived from interpreting the implications of the discipline of the tongue in the New Testament Letter of James (1:26; 3:8) for marking the dividing line between true and counterfeit religion. "Where the tongue is not governed," as Charles G. Finney sermonized in 1845, "there is and can be no true religion" (Finney 1876). Certainly, the exuberance of evangelical revivals, which were "demonstrative and loud," raised questions about the governance of the tongue. Religion produced loud murmurs, sighs, moans, groans, cries, and shouts, the kinds of noise that Michel de Certeau identified as "sounds waiting for language," those "'obscene' citations of bodies," the unverbalizable "sounds of the body" (Certeau 1984: 162-64).

With respect to "unverbalizable" sounds of the body, Enlightenment rationalists and Christian devotionalists found common cause in the disciplinary management of relatively uncontrolled bodily eruptions—belching, farting, sneezing, laughing, and so on—that provided common ground for determining authenticity. Revisiting Norbert Elias' classic treatment of these matters in *The Civilizing Process*, we recall that authenticity required a certain degree of artifice when

dealing with flatulence. "If it is possible to withdraw, it should be done alone," Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote in 1530. "But if not, in accordance with the ancient proverb, let a cough hide the sound" (Elias 1978: 130). Two hundred years later, the disciplinary management of flatulence was all artifice, as La Salle instructed in 1729: "It is very impolite to emit wind from your body when in company, either from above or from below, even without noise; and it is shameful and indecent to do it in a way that can be heard by others" (Elias 1978: 132). In the project of civilizing flatulence, therefore, this unverbalizable sound of the body had to be carefully disciplined, managed, and controlled through artifice. In this respect, authenticity was based not on transparency but on a disciplinary control of embodied sounds.

In the case of sneezing, we find a relatively uncontrolled bodily eruption that became subject to the disciplinary tests of authenticity implicit in the civilizing process during the modern era. In what has been called the "craze for sneezing," aided and abetted by the use of snuff, among the privileged classes of Europe and North America, sneezing became a status symbol, an important part of men's conversation, a sound that could be interpreted as a sign of disapproval, lack of interest, or boredom in upper-class rituals of speaking and listening. By contrast, something regarded as worthwhile was "not to be sneezed at." Ironically, in his classic account of *Primitive Culture* published in 1871, the father of anthropology, E. B. Tylor, rendered the cultural significance of sneezing as a savage survival rather than a civilized affectation, a survival of the primitive doctrine of invading and pervading spirits he called animism, noting that the interpretation of sneezing among the Zulu, for example, recalled a primordial human soundscape in which "the explanation of sneezing had not yet been given over to physiology, but was still in the 'theological stage'" (Tylor 1871: 1:104).

Like farting and sneezing, the sound of laughter can register as a relatively uncontrolled bodily eruption, as a sound that both pietists and skeptics might try to control. While the Methodists were trying to restrain laughter, placing proscriptions upon "all lightness, jesting, and foolish talking" (Schmidt 2000: 51), their evangelical camp meetings were erupting in holy laughter. At the same time, while enlightened skeptics were developing a new seriousness, they were experimenting with the strange sounds that could be induced by nitrous oxide and hydrogen gas. In the disciplinary control of laughter, the devout and the skeptic could find common cause in identifying things that should not be heard. As a politics of authenticity, this embodied discipline might have prevented both "from grasping theoretically the nature of ambivalent festive laughter" (Bakhtin 1984: 118), but it nevertheless provided shared terms in which authenticity could be adjudicated through bodily control.

A politics of authenticity based on visual transparency and embodied discipline excludes not only the ambivalence of festive laughter but also the laughter-inducing incongruity of irony and satire. The satirist and student of religion,

Jonathan Swift, advanced a critique of both intellectual transparency and bodily control in his account of the religion of the Aeolians, recounted in A *Tale of a Tub*, which transformed farting into an hierophany. In documenting the religion of the Aeolists, who were devoted to the deity of wind, Swift depicts a devotional religion of holy sound that resisted any transparency of meaning. According to Aeolist doctrine, "words are but wind; and learning is nothing but words; *ergo* learning is nothing but wind." For this reason, the holy teachings of the Aeolians were delivered not by words but by wind from the belly, by the eructation of belching and farting. "The wise Aeolists," as Swift recounts, "affirm the gift of belching to be the noblest act of a rational creature." Accordingly, "their belches were received as sacred." A regular ritual reinforced the sacred meaning and power of wind. As the Aeolist priest entered a barrel, "a secret funnel is also conveyed from his posterior to the bottom of the barrel." Recalling the preoccupation with ventriloquism as the origin of religion in theories of religion during the Enlightenment, Swift's account of this ritual satirized the devotional sounds, and uncontrolled bodily eruptions, of religious enthusiasm.

> It is in this guise the sacred Aeolist delivers his oracular belches to his panting disciples; of whom some are greedily gaping after the sanctified breath, others are the while hymning out the praises of the winds; and, gently wafted to and fro by their own humming, do thus represent the soft breezes of their deities appeased. (Swift 1958: 156)

Swift's satire assumed the basic horizon but also challenged the basic principles—transparency, control—of religious authenticity. Against the background of a religious authenticity that required transparent speech and bodily discipline, the Aeolists stood in dramatic opposition by passing wind rather than speaking words and by farting openly rather than by retiring secretly to ensure that such a bodily eruption was not indecently heard by others.

By inventing the religion of the Aeolians, Jonathan Swift seemed to be anticipating the kinds of "fake" religions that would develop within the new medium of the Internet. Although the World Wide Web has provided new avenues of communication for conventional, recognized religions, it has also become an arena for the extraordinary proliferation of new, invented religions that challenge any assumptions about adjudicating authenticity by means of establishing standards of verbal transparency or embodied control. In some respects, these new Internet religions were anticipated by the anarchistic artistic movements of surrealism, dada, and the Beat generation, including the public graffiti art of Jean-Michael Basquiat, who began his career in 1978 by inventing a religion devoted to the deity SAMO, "Same Ol' Shit," and tagging New York City with the religious promises that "SAMO SAVES IDIOTS" and "SAMO IS

AN END TO MINDWASH." They were also anticipated by invented religions in popular fiction, especially science fiction, where new religions, such as the Fordianism of Aldous Huxley's, *Brave New World*, the Bokononism of Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, or the Church of All Worlds of Robert A. Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, were created to look just like conventional religions, but with a difference, since they also advanced critical perspectives on modern religion and society.[3] In some respects, by evoking alternative realities, virtual religions on the Internet also recall experiments during the 1960s with mind-altering chemicals, those entheogens that produced "religious" experiences, which might have been artificially induced, but as their advocate Walter Clark observed, "if this is a fake religion, then the fake is frequently better than the real thing" (Clark 1973: 17).

Surviving the 1960s, for some artists, meant creating new religions. Wavy Gravy created his Church of Fun, the San Francisco Mime Troupe initiated the annual St. Stupid's Day parades, and the Burning Man, an annual festival, was organized to provide an arena for new initiatives in religion. Dedicated to "the creative power of ritual," as organizer Larry Harvey explained, "Burning Man brings together art, performance, fire, and temporary community to create what has been called 'ritual without dogma'." At Burning Man festivals, temporary community often appears in new religions—the Church of St. John the Baptist of the Alien Artichoke, the Church of Naismith, the Alien Domination Gospel Mission, the Church of the Holy Electron, the Cult of Distraction, the Dead Media Cargo Cult, and so on—that celebrate the creative, uninhibited playfulness of "ritual without dogma." In some cases, these playful engagements with religion seem driven by serious intent, especially when intervening in the market economy, the dominant arena for adjudicating authenticity, by highlighting the commodification of religion and the religion of consumerism. At the Burning Man festival in 2001, for example, the commodification of religion was satirized at Enlightentrapment, where you can "choose a new religion (over 100 to choose from!!)," and Kult Camp, "a post-Enlightenment response to the commodification of the spiritual experience by Old World religions and new Age Groups," where religious consumers could buy into the In-n-Out Guru franchise, the fate-o-meter, the confessional, and the "chance to achieve Instant Endarkment." By 2001, however, one of the religious sites at the Burning Man festival, the Church of Holy Fucking Shit, had given up on religion. Renouncing the designation, "church," the leaders of this camp decided that religion had been overwhelmed by Weberian rationalization, by the power of bureaucracy, science, and technology, so religion no longer had any power. "It's not a church!," they declared. "Religion had its day, and fortunately for you, it's been replaced by bureaucracy and science in the Bureau of Holy Fucking Shit."[4]

In cyberspace, invented religions have multiplied, often invoking similar religious commitments to surrealism, performance art, liberation from dogma,

and implicit critiques of a modern world driven by market economy, consumerism, bureaucracy, science, and technology. Beyond censorship or discipline, virtual religions, even when obviously fake, have raised real dilemmas in negotiating the terms and conditions of religious authenticity.

Virtual Religions on the Internet

Although they might develop and propagate apparently unbelievable religious propositions, some virtual religions on the Internet display characteristic features of historical religions, such as founders, beliefs, symbols, myths, and rituals that make them look like any other religion. "On the World Wide Web," as a representative of the ABM—the Anti-Bullshit Movement—put it, "a fake religion can look every bit as impressive as the Vatican." On the home page of the Abstract Ministry, for example, we learn about an ancient religious tradition, Aramanism, which was founded in the first-century Syria by Araman, prophet of the god, Ikon, with its sacred texts, beliefs, rituals, and even sectarian divisions. Having disappeared by the beginning of the fourth century, Aramanism revived and died again several times before it was finally established as the Abstract Ministry on the Internet, where reportedly "it has been growing ever since." Belief systems animating Internet religions are not always so complex. For example, the religion of Andersianism, one of the smallest, but supposedly one of the fastest growing, religions on Earth, subscribes to one simple belief, "Anders is God." Although Anders is reportedly not a jealous God, he is beset by schismatics and heretics, such as the reformers in Presbyterian Andersianism, or the opponents in the Arcane Order of the Coming of the One True Anders, but Andersianism seems most threatened by the alternative religion, Asaism, which is exactly identical to the religion of Anders, a word-for word reproduction, except for its central religious belief, "Asa is God." In the process of building a religious community around belief, therefore, we cannot help but suspect that these Internet religions are messing with the very notion of religious belief.[5]

If it were possible to trace a genealogy of virtual religions on the Internet, it would probably begin with Discordianism. According to the tradition recorded in multiple editions of the *Principia Discordia*, the Discordian religion began in 1957 when two friends, sipping coffee in a bowling alley in southern California, experienced a dramatic break in the time-space continuum that caused them to realize that chaos was the underlying principle of everything. This realization was reinforced by a vision of the ancient Greek goddesses Eris, goddess of discord, conflict, and chaos, who revealed herself as the source not only of chaos but also of the "happy anarchy" of freedom, creativity, and laughter. Beginning in San Francisco, Discordian cabals spread during the 1980s across the United States, becoming part of the growing neo-pagan movement (Adler 1986: 336). Committed to celebrating the anarchy of Eris, Discordians are opposed to au-

thoritarian social structures, especially the oppressive order imposed on the world by agents of the secret society, the Illuminati. Discordians operate within a mythic horizon—the "hodge-podge" or "Sacred Chao"—in which liberating anarchy contends with oppressive order. In the midst of this conflict, enlightenment is possible through the body, by focusing on the pineal gland, but also by laughter.[6]

Flourishing on the Internet, Discordian sites multiplied, with over thirty sites by the beginning of the twenty-first century devoted to the liberating anarchy of Eris. Discordian off-shoots also emerged, such as the Church of the SubGenius, under the divine leadership of J. R. "Bob" Dobbs, with its principled commitment to the doctrine of slack, or the Otisians, the Illuminated Knights of Otis, devoted to Otis, the ancient Sumerian God or Goddess, gender uncertain, who is worshiped in the Intergalactic House of Fruitcakes, or the Holy Church of Unified Borkism, devoted to the Swedish "Muppet chef extraordinaire," the Borkian lord and savior, which is also dedicated to listening to loud music and poking fun at organized religion. Like the Discordians, these religions have generated elaborate religious beliefs, symbols, myths, and traditions as the basis for relatively disorganized religious communities. In forming a sense of community, these religions often assert that everyone is already a member. In this respect, they are following the lead of the Universal Life Church, founded in 1959, a legally recognized religious body in the United States, with the legal authority to ordain ministers, which also maintains that "everyone is already a member of the church and is just not aware of it as yet."[7]

More directly than any other Internet religion, the Discordians have taken up the challenge of religious authenticity. Finding themselves classified by the Yahoo search engine under the category "Parody Religions," Discordians launched a massive email campaign in May 2001 to get their religion reclassified. They inundated Yahoo with messages repeating their basic demand that either Discordianism must be removed from "Parody Religions" and listed with the "real" ones in the category "Religions and Faiths" or else all religions must be listed as "Parody Religions." As a model letter to Yahoo put the problem, "If Discordianism is a "Parody," then why aren't the alleged faiths of 'Christianity,' 'Judaism,' 'Islam,' or 'Hinduism'?" How would their members feel by being classified as a joke? Observing that the Pope would be outraged if Roman Catholicism was classified as a parody, this letter stipulated that Discordianism has billions of Popes, since every person on the planet is a member, whether they know it or not, and every member is a Pope. "While it is true that many people do not choose to actively participate in the whoreship of Eris, Goddess of Discord and Confusion and Really Scwewy Stuff, these people are nonetheless members of the fastest growing religion in all creation (Discordianism grows at the exact same rate as the population, you see)." After three weeks of this campaign, the Discordians achieved a kind of victory by being moved from "Parody Religions"

to "Entertainment—Religion—Humor," a situation they found more acceptable, as one Discordian observed, because, "Well, we are funny."[8]

By contrast to these elaborated belief systems, many virtual religions on the Internet are explicitly formulated as anti-belief systems, developing no doctrines, and often explicitly renouncing all doctrines, but at the same time advocating ethical, ritual, or performative religious practices that recall the religious anarchy of Discordianism. The Agnostic Church, it might be imagined, would undervalue religious beliefs, but the founder actually claims to have "VERY STRONG religious beliefs. They just happen to be of the agnostic persuasion." Other virtual religions similarly challenge religious belief by casting agnosticism as religion. In the "Religism" of the First Church of Rotate Your Envelope Stock, for example, the church's religious dogma features the teaching, "Believe what you want; or don't." Members are encouraged to "fabricate a belief or non-belief system uniquely tailored to their own needs." As the church promises, "virtually any belief is allowed and encouraged." The Church of Bullshitology, a "religion based entirely on falsehood," is proclaimed as a "religion you can *not* believe in without going to hell." In some cases, virtual religions reject the validity of religious belief entirely. The Church of Nothing at All, for example, with a "congregation of none and no ordained priesthood, recommends a prayer to God: "Thou art a big fat zero and are not there at all. Amen." The Last-Chance Cathedral and Discount House of Worship addresses the question, "Is NOTHING sacred any more?" "The answer, of course, is a resounding NO." In other cases, the rejection of the importance of religious belief is worked out in impressive detail. In the religion of Wauism, for example, members are promised "a faith that works for you, Friendly Friend, instead of the other way around." Based on the study of religions and in-depth market research, Wauism promises a religion in which you can believe anything you want, eat whatever you want, and choose your own Supreme Being, with no sexual taboos, hazing rituals, or annual fees. Salvation is guaranteed. "All you have to do," Wauism urges, "is whatever you want," ending with the poignant promise: "Be a Wauist or don't be. You are still surrounded in a cone of love." In other cases, the dismissal of religious belief is radically simplified. Hauverism, for example, "is a religion consisting solely of the belief that only you exist." Because only you exist, anything you believe will be an accurate profile of the entire scope of religious doctrine in the religion of Hauverism. In the Church of the Covert Cosmos, religious belief is slightly enlarged to embrace only two core articles of faith: You exist. I exist. However, as the church acknowledges, since these tenets "don't make for a very rich body of dogma," members of the Church of the Covert Cosmos are invited to choose from a list of items they might also want to believe in, such as black holes, quarks, or neutrinos, which they could put together into a kind of "roll-your-own catechism." So, again, anything you believe is the doctrine of the church.[9]

While discounting religious belief, these virtual religions occasionally pro-

mote innovative religious practices, both ethical and ritual. The Church of Cyberosophy, for example, requires no religious beliefs, but it does propound one ethical commandment, "Don't be such a jackass." The religious website, No Sin, provides ritual confession, with guaranteed forgiveness, for anyone who feels they might have violated any ethical commandment. Although the Church of the Covert Cosmos has a minimalist set of religious beliefs, it has developed a ritual practice that it regards as the central liturgy of the church. Instructions for celebrating the liturgy are provided: Go outside. Incline your head backwards and gaze up at the firmament. Exclaim the ritual expression, "Whooo-Whee!," loudly, if alone, but quietly if anyone is nearby. Go back inside, making sure to look down, at this stage in the ritual, to avoid tripping over the cat. The First Church of the Last Laugh, dedicated to St. Stupid, requires no religious beliefs, but celebrates its annual holy day, St. Stupid's Day, which has been observed every April 1 since 1978, by organizing festive ritual processions through the streets of San Francisco. The First Church of the Last Laugh is proclaimed as the "world's fastest growing snack religion, 150% less dogma, it's a Lite Religion, we practice what we call enlightened religion biz only one day a year." During the St. Stupid's Day parade of 2000, adherents of this "enlightened religion biz" marched in San Francisco, chanting, "We're here, we're stupid, we're not going away." The following year, they chanted, "No more chanting. No more chanting."[10]

The Internet religions considered so far look just like religion, whether elaborating or discounting religious belief, whether emphasizing the myth of Eris in Discordianism or the ritual of procession, chanting, and celebration on the holy day of St. Stupid in the First Church of the Last Laugh. As the Discordians have argued, they challenge any conventional system of distinguishing between real religion and parody, joke, or fake religions. In other situations, virtual religions have been explicitly formulated as satires of conventionally recognized religions. For example, an entire genre of Christian or Christianesque satires has appeared in religious sites on the Internet. While the First Church of Cyberspace asserts its legitimacy as an "authentic" Christian ministry on the Internet, the only Christian church existing solely in cyberspace, alternative constructions of Christianity appear in such sites as the Bastard Son of the Lord Home Page, Antichrist Bob's Family Fun Pages, or the home page devoted to the Christian wisdom, ethical guidance, and baking recipes of Betty Bowers, America's Best Christian. In some cases, alternative constructions of Christianity go beyond satire to appear as competing Christian claims. In the case of websites such as True Catholic or His Holiness Pope Gregory XVII, for example, elaborate alternative histories of the Roman Catholic Church are worked out to challenge the authority of the papacy. Similarly, the Landover Baptist Church, a satire on Baptists, ends up in conflict with "real" Baptist ministries that object to its interventions. In these instances, "fake" Christian sites have emerged as real participants in genuine

Christian controversies over religious legitimacy.[11]

Certainly, the most fervent Christian appeal on the Internet is made on the site, Jesus.com, in which "Jesus seeks loving woman." Proclaimed as "the most extravagant personal ad in the history of civilization," this site features Jesus, with photograph, seeking "a woman who would rather have an authentic life instead of one guided by the pursuit of modern trends." On the website, women who might be in search of such Christian authenticity can learn more about how they can contact Jesus, date Jesus, and even bathe with Jesus. Endorsements are provided, indicating that Jesus has been successful in establishing such authenticity in the past. Like the website for Liberated Christians devoted to the Christian gospel of love, which they interpret as polyamory, the enjoyment of multiple sexual partners, Jesus.com represents a particular kind of religious interpretation of the meaning and power of Christianity, an interpretation underwritten in this case, however, by the extraordinary claim that Jesus himself is looking for a loving woman to help him extend his gospel of love.[12]

Websites devoted to satires of New Age, spiritual, or consciousness-raising movements run into a similar ambiguity: Are they in opposition, in counterpoint, or in collaboration with such religious movements? Vendramism, for example, which is traced back to its founder, Sri Vendra Yallah, born in Madras, India, on December 25, 1874, develops into a path for achieving enlightenment, with slow and fast methods, but its spiritual techniques emerge in eating food, enjoying sex, smoking tobacco, and watching television. In a similar sacred transformation of normal pleasures, the religious movement of Alchodise, the Beer Church, and the Church of Our Lady of Malted Barley and Hops find enlightenment in alcohol, with special ritual attention to beer, which, as the religion of Alchodise proclaims, "is everlasting to everlasting, beer is eternal." At the same time, the religious movement of the Blaketashi Darwish, which weaves together the wisdom of Muslim Sufis and the English poet, artist, and visionary William Blake, seems seriously interested in exploring the spiritual resources that might arise from the conjunction of Islamic and British mysticism. The Center for Duck Studies, apparently an absurd proposition for a religious movement, advocates "Duck Consciousness," facilitated by a quacking mantra, which must be regarded as a satire of New Age spirituality. However, Duck Consciousness advances wisdom that seems entirely consistent with certain forms of religion emerging both in New Age movements and the Internet: "If you think it's real, it's real. If you think it's fake, it's fake. Either way, it's still the Duck."[13]

Ambiguity is removed, however, in religious sites that promote new religious movements explicitly under the designation, "cult." In these cases, a certain kind of religious intervention is evident in opposition to cults. Unlike the conventional anti-cult sites that try to expose cults by citing allegations of brainwashing, corruption, and political subversion, these Internet religions imaginatively create cults, as if they were following the "Cult Construction Set," which enables

you to build your own cult, in order to attack new religious movements. On a number of sites, the Church of Scientology is explicitly attacked by being reconfigured as Diarrhetics, Clearity is Confusion, Appliantology, Dianetech: Applied Spiritual Linguistic Technology, or Apelomatics: The Modern Pseudoscience of Mental Dentistry. Shifting from ridicule to exposure, the First Electronic Church of Scamizdat, which posted confidential Scientology documents on the Internet, was successfully sued by the Church of Scientology for violating copyright. More generally, new religious movements are attacked through the archetypal Internet cult, the Kick-Ass Post-Apocalyptic Doomsday Cult of Love. Under the leadership of the Honorable Rev. Sum Dum Guy, who is praised as a "Demented Psychopathic Megalomaniac," this new religious movement seeks "Toadies and Sheep" to not only join an "Extremist Revolutionary Religious Cult" but also to give up all their worldly possessions and submit with fanatical devotion to the leader's "perverted and deviant whims." In providing a profile of this cult, the website features photographs of the heavily armed followers and willing wives of the leader. While assuring prospective members that all the guns are legal, the site promises that the "Reverend's wives will do anything to get you to join the cult," but "once you are in and brainwashed they won't even give you the time of day." The children within the cult, pictured in karate uniforms and fighting poses, "are the cult's most valuable resources," but they are only valuable because "if we really get hard up for money, we can sell them." Clearly, the Kick-Ass Post-Apocalyptic Doomsday Cult of Love is not a genuine religion. Its satirical intervention in the cult controversies, however, asserts a real position on the validity of new religious movements, a position underscored, but also complicated, by the site's coda: "We Love and bless all of the visitors to this site. Really, we mean it." Really, whatever this love and blessing might mean, the Doomsday Cult of Love is not a religion but a satire of religion that nevertheless does a kind of religious work, not only by imitating religion, but also by taking a stand in the representation of alternative, emergent, and new religious movements as dangerous cults.[14]

In counterpoint to such attempts at limiting what might count as religion, students of religion have been exploring the ways in which popular culture might be regarded as religion. More importantly, participants in different formations of popular culture have used the term, "religion," to represent their experience of such enterprises as the church of baseball, the fetish of Coca-Cola, or the potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll (Chidester 1996b). Sacralizing popular culture, Internet religions have emerged to celebrate the entertainment industry of film, television, music, and sports as if these were really religious enterprises. Of course, Elvis Presley, the King, reigns supreme as a divine being worshiped in the Church of Elvis, the First Church of Jesus Christ, Elvis, the First Preslyterian Church of Elvis the Divine, and the Elvisarian religion of Zaragrunudgeyon.[15] As might be expected, Star Trek and Star Wars, which also have a devoted following, have

produced Internet religions, Star Trek, in the First Church of Shatnerology, with its own schismatic movement, the Second National Church of Shatnerology, and Star Wars, in the Jedi Religion, which actually succeeded in gaining recognition as a religion in the 2002 British census.[16] But many other instances of the deification or sanctification of popular culture have also appeared on the Internet: Some religious sites sacralize the productions of popular music, as in the Church of AntiChrist Superstar, devoted to Marilyn Manson, or the Temple of Bowie, devoted to David Bowie, or the Partridge Family Temple, which is an elaborate celebration of an entirely artificial, made-for-television musical group as if it were a real, genuine, and sacred focus of religious attention. Many other examples of infusing popular culture with religious significance could be cited. In the Church of the Heavenly Wood devotees can worship the creativity of the B-filmaker Ed Wood, while in the religious site, Tiger Woods is God, devotees can observe the sacred prowess of the ultimate golfer. Popular culture, therefore, can certainly appear as if it were religion.[17]

Since all of these forms of popular "religious" culture are driven by the supply and demand of the market, religion can also appear as if it were essentially about money, commodities, and consumerism. Frequently, Internet religions directly address the problem of the relationship between religion and money. While many ask for money, others celebrate, by way of satirical intervention, the capitalist economy of consumerism. The Holy Temple of Mass Consumption, the Shrine of Our Lady of Mass Consumption, and Jesus Christ Superstore, for example, are religious sites on the Internet that operate playfully, but critically within a religious arena that has made religion a consumer product and consumerism a religion. Adopting an adversarial position to the religion of the market, the Church of Stop Shopping, which opposes the seductions of consumerism, overtly assumes a religious stance against the religion of the market. The Church of Secularistic Holidayism, by contrast, suggests that moments of relief from the cycle of production and consumption is all that we have left of the sacred. Whether celebrating or opposing the religion of the market, however ironically they might construct their interventions, these religions seem to be suggesting that the market is the only religion worth considering as a religion.[18]

In the Church of the Almighty Dollar, a subsidiary of God, Inc., money is revealed not only as the object of worship, the ultimate value, but also as the basis for a religious system of meaning. According to the teachings of the Church of the Almighty Dollar, money is the medium of meaningful exchange between God and the world. Money is proof that God exists, a reminder that in God we trust, but also God's way of thinking about Himself. As the ultimate reason for human existence, the underlying meaning and mystery of human life, money is God's way of making us feel good about ourselves, in the process showing others that God loves us, although it is also God's way of telling us to make more money. In the end, as the currency that redeems our souls, money is the religious

bond between God and human beings in the world. While the Church of the Almighty Dollar addresses the ways in which money has become a religion, another Internet church, the Church of the Profit$, attacks the ways in which religions, especially the ministries of television evangelists, often appear as money-making businesses. Objecting to such religious businesses, with their tax exempt status, distributing literature in public schools, supporting Republicans, and trying to destroy the First Amendment separation of religion and state, the founder of the Church of the Profit$ established the only honest religion, dedicated to one simple truth, as the founder put it, "You give me money, and I keep it." Although followers were expected to lead moral lives, if they sinned, they had to pay, according to a fee schedule that covered sins from lying to impure acts. "To be forgiven," according to the Church of the Profit$, "you must do as is written in Matthew 22:10, 'Show me the money.'"[19]

As these two churches suggest, Internet religion operates in a terrain in which money is religion and religion is a money-making business. Certainly, these churches recall religious precedents, from Reverend Ike's gospel of money to televangelist appeals for donations, which had made a religion out of money and money out of religion, but these churches of money also capture an important feature of the relation between Internet religions and the market economy. Although new gods have appeared on the Internet, those deities are often revealed as products of corporations—God, Inc., God Co., Lord Co., Messiahs, Inc., and so on—as if God was now a subsidiary of a multinational conglomerate. In the competitive market of Internet religion, these corporate gods have to compete for market share. One site, the "Great God Contest," has been set up for entering deities as if they were competing products in a consumer test of religious brands. Messiah Mickey, of course, featured on his own religious site, has an advantage in being promoted not only by his devotees on the Internet but also by the Walt Disney Corporation. Likewise, the First Internet McChurch Tabernacle has the competitive advantage of being associated with McDonalds. "McChurch is a REAL religion," with easy to understand spiritual truths, supported by advertising slogans, "that make McWorship as easy as picking up a burger and fries." However, an evil force like Cthulu, a deity drawn from the horror fiction of H. P. Lovecraft, might be a more difficult God to market, but one of his sites has made a valiant attempt by supporting Cthulu's candidacy for president of the United States with the advertising slogan, "If you are tired of voting for the lesser of two evils, why not vote for the greatest evil of them all?" Consistently, the theology of Internet religions, underwritten by corporate sponsorship, consumer choice, and market competition, is driven by the prevailing discourse of the late-capitalist market economy.[20]

Perhaps, for this reason, many virtual religions have singled out commodities as their supreme focus of religious attention. A remarkable number of Internet religions are devoted to material objects. Religious enthusiasts for objects have

established the Church of the Avocado, the Church of the Big Plastic Fork, the Church of the Burnt Onion Ring, the Church of the Chainsaw, the Church of Ice Cream, the Church of the Twinkie, the Church of Volkswagenism, the First United Church of the Fisher-Price Record Player, and the shrine devoted to the Cult of the Potato.[21] At the same time, while deifying material objects, Internet religions often identify animals as their focus of religious devotion. Among the religions deifying animals, we find the Church of the Bunny, the Church of the Gerbil, the Church of the Quivering Otter, the Kult of Hamstur, the Holy Church of Moo, the Holy Turtle's Internet Cathedral, the Shrine of Skippy and the Holy 'Roos, the Temple of the Sacred Cat, and the Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua.[22] In most cases, these religious sites, devoted to material objects or animals, are just as thoughtful (or playful) about religion as the Discordians and other Internet religions. Nevertheless, by venerating objects and animals, they focus directly on materiality in a communication medium that is supposedly "virtual" rather than material. Challenging basic religious classifications—superhuman, subhuman, and human—these Internet religions also push religion in the direction of dealing with materiality.

Within the division of labor established by modernity, the meaning of materiality is the province of science. While religion might deal with spirituality, materiality is covered by scientific inquiry, investigation, experimentation, and explanation. On the Internet, however, new scientific religions have emerged to deal with materiality in religious terms. Environmentalism has been invested with religious significance in the First Internet Church of All, but a kind of environmentalist religion is also proclaimed in the Church of Euthanasia, which advocates, "Save the planet, kill yourself." The devotees of Lord Kelvin proclaim the scientific religion of physics, which observes the laws of thermodynamics, while proclaiming, "Kelvin is Lord!!! All Praise the Lord Kelvin!! Only the One, True Lord Kelvin can Conserve you from Entropy!" The Church of Virus, however, which is dedicated to the truth of Memes, a term coined by the philosopher Richard Dawkins, drawing an analogy with genes for culturally transmitted patterns of information, is entirely serious in advancing its religious claims about the ultimate significance of genetics, biological evolution, and the role of memes in the cultural evolution of humanity. The Church of Virus is proclaimed as "a memetically engineered atheistic religion." Featuring Charles Darwin as the church's saint, who was "illuminated" by being inducted into the church on February 12, 1996, the Church of Virus provides a lexicon of key terms in the science of memetics that would be familiar to scientific researchers working in the fields of evolutionary psychology or cognitive science. Other religions of biological, psychological, or technological evolution, such as Prometheism, Techanism, Technosophy, and the Church of the Almighty Revealed in Biotechnology, have also transformed any apparent opposition between religion and science into a religion of scientism.[23]

Adjudicating Authenticity

On the website of one Internet religion, the Holy Order of the Cheeseburger (HOC), the founder of this new religion makes a poignant confession. "I originally started this site to give people an alternative to crazy religions with an even crazier religion," he reports. "So, my journey began." Although that personal journey began with anarchistic humor about religion, providing a satirical alternative to conventional religions, it developed into a serious religious quest. "I have had a fun time with the HOC," he reflected, "but I have been getting more serious in my search for the one true religion." As a result of that search for the one authentic religion in the world, the founder of the Holy Order of the Cheeseburger decided to shut down the fake religion he had created in the virtual world of the Internet. As a result of what he had learned through his personal search for the one true religion, he was no longer prepared to offer an invented religion as if it were true. "My search has yielded the following results," the founder of the Holy Order of the Cheeseburger revealed. "Religion is bullshit!" Accordingly, removing himself from the business of religion, the founder of the Holy Order of the Cheeseburger advised any followers he might have had that they were now entirely on their own.[24]

Like Thomas Edison's assertion that religion was "all bunk," all "a damned fake," this confession settled the question of religious authenticity by rendering religion as essentially inauthentic. In making this judgment, however, Edison and the Prophet of the Holy Cheeseburger must certainly have used different indicators of authenticity. Applying the conventional modern tests of authenticity, which have been shared by Enlightenment rationalists and Protestant pietists, Edison would have assumed that religion was "bunk" because it failed to meet the demands of visual transparency and bodily control, the visual transparency that led to the discovery of truth and the bodily control of self-discipline and self-denial that led to the production of useful results in the world. By stark contrast, Internet religions, including, we must assume, the religious quest of the founder of the Holy Order of the Cheeseburger, have sought authenticity not in transparency and control but in opacity and anarchy. Authenticity, in this sense, cannot be transparently discerned or disciplinarily managed from the outside, from some assumed center of knowledge and power, but can only emerge in the thick, rich, complex, and opaque religious discourses and practices that liberate the body, in the first instance, although the mind, spirit, or soul might also follow, from oppressive disciplinary regimens of control. Put differently, although Thomas Edison and the founder of the Holy Order of the Cheeseburger agreed in dismissing the authenticity of religion, they disagreed over whether religion was "bunk" or "bullshit," with "bunk" being a failure of transparency and control, but "bullshit" being an imposition of conventional transparency and authoritarian control that blocked embodied freedom.

In their campaign to redress the injustice of their classification as a "Parody

Religion" by the search engine Yahoo, the Discordians, as we noted, brought the question of authenticity into focus. As one Discordian appealed to Yahoo, "I ask that either you move us into the same category as the rest of the religions, or tell me what the criteria is to become a 'real' religion so that I might show how Discordianism meets it." How would scholars of religion answer that question? What are the criteria for determining what should count as a real, genuine, or authentic religion? As I have suggested, the standard modern measures of establishing authenticity, visual transparency and disciplinary control, are directly challenged by the new religions emerging on the Internet. But these new religions also challenge other standards of authentication, such as historical methods of verification, morphological methods of comparison, psychological tests of sincerity, or philosophical assumptions, derived from what Theodor Adorno called the existentialist "jargon of authenticity," to assess existential identity, genuine commitment, and personal authenticity.

If asked about the historical reality of their religion, Discordians could point to Greco-Roman mythology. Undeniably, the Goddess Eris Discordia is real, really featuring in ancient religious texts, so the reality of the goddess, as a focus of religious attention, can be historically corroborated. Other virtual religions, however, employ historical reconstruction to create an aura of authenticity. For example, the histories of the ancient religion of Aramanism, the Hindu movement of Vendramism, or the "True Catholic" church, invoke historicity as a test of authenticity, even if those historical accounts are entirely fabricated.

Comparing their religion to the basic morphological patterns of other religions, Discordians could cite the important role played by divine tricksters in the history of religions. "Many cultures have trickster deities, yet their religions aren't considered parodies," as one Discordian observed. "How do you think the Native Americans would react to your placing their religions in the 'Parody' section? You'd be up to your ass valves in lawsuits!" Along similar lines, the morphology of religion, distilling basic patterns, structures, or elementary forms of religious life, provides the dominant standard of authenticity within the virtual religions of the Internet. In order to be a good fake, as Rodney Needham proposed, a fake religion must look exactly like a real religion. Basic forms of religion, such as myth, doctrine, ethics, ritual, personal experience, and social formation, represent the religious template not only for inventing new religions but also for asserting their authenticity.

Turning to the test of sincerity, Discordians could confirm that their religion "is at least as serious as all the other major Religions (perhaps more so)." Although religious sincerity is difficult if not impossible to verify, as the U.S. Supreme Court found in trying to adjudicate the authenticity of the I AM movement during the 1940s (Chidester, 1988b: 131-33), Discordians could testify to their religious sincerity, which was central to their commitment to the "ha ha, only serious worldview." Such a religious worldview, with its playful seriousness

or serious playfulness, did not easily conform to conventional standards of sincerity. Naturally, serious critics wanted to reassert seriousness, in opposition to playfulness, as the standard of authenticity. Ted Kaczynski, for example, in his *Unabomber Manifesto*, questioned the sincerity of new pagan, environmentalist religions. In the defense of Nature against Technology, he observed, Nature could use religious support, but "it would be a mistake to concoct artificially a religion to fill this role." Asserting that "such an invented religion would be a failure," the Unabomber cited the pagan religion of the earth goddess, Gaia. "Do its adherents REALLY believe in it or are they just play-acting?," he demanded. As the Unabomber concluded, "If they are just play-acting their religion will be a flop in the end." Therefore, in pursuing the war against technology, the Unabomber concluded that it was "best not to try to introduce religion into the conflict of nature vs. technology unless you REALLY believe in that religion yourself and find that it arouses a deep, strong, genuine response in many other people."[25] By contrast to such an adamant demand for personal sincerity and genuine response, virtual religions on the Internet have not demonstrated the sincerity that would make them obvious allies for the Unabomber or any other political project.

Turning to existential identity as a measure of authenticity, Discordians have certainly displayed a playful fluidity in self-identification, signing themselves, for example, as Wonk, Maenad, Saint Mae, Prince Mu Chao, Lord Falgan, and Bishop Squarepeg Roundhole. Certainly, this ambiguity of identity is a feature of communication on the Internet. According to a website devoted to connecting buyers and sellers, "What the Heck Is That.Com," it is nearly impossible to authenticate anyone's identity in cyberspace. "Because user identification on the Internet is difficult," this site advises, "whattheckisthat.com cannot and does not confirm that each user is who they claim to be."[26] Nevertheless, raising a profound question about human identity, the Discordians propose that everyone is already a member of their religion by virtue of being human, although, in most cases, admittedly, they have no idea about their membership. Nevertheless, based on this expansive, inclusive construction of human identity, both personal identity and collective identity, Discordians could argue that any denigration of their religion was an act of discrimination against every person on the planet. An injury to Discordianism, in this expansive vision of collective human identity, is an injury to all. As one Discordian tried to explain to Yahoo, since everyone, including everyone associated with Yahoo, was already a member, Yahoo was actually discriminating against its own religion by relegating Discordianism to the category of parody religions.

Such an intervention in identity, as we have seen, by claiming everyone as a member, whether they know it or not, has featured in other virtual religions on the Internet. Apparently advancing a universal religious claim, this assertion that everyone is already a member radically personalizes religious identity, since anyone, wherever they might be, and whatever they might believe, feel, do, or

experience, is the author of authentic religion. In this regard, we might recall the classic definition of religion provided by William James, who asked us to accept, "arbitrarily," that religion was "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James 1982: 31). Certainly, William James could not have anticipated the conditions in which men and women would find themselves a century later in the solitude of cyberspace, sitting alone before a computer, apprehending themselves in relation to the divinity of the ancient Greek Goddess Eris or the divinity of the 1950s American image of the clean-cut, pipe-smoking, entrepreneurial, but also slackful salesman, J. R. "Bob" Dobbs. James could never have anticipated the scope of a religious solitude in which people could find Mickey Mouse and McDonalds, Elvis Presley and Star Trek, money and consumerism, genetics and evolution, as authentic religious media through which they could "stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." Certainly, churches of plastic forks or chainsaws, of gerbils, hamsters, or bunnies, would have been even more unthinkable. Nevertheless, by developing a psychology of religion, with its primary focus on feelings, its location in solitude, and its conditional limitation on the criteria of what might count as religion that was set in such an expansive register that it seemed to include anything and everything that anyone might consider as divine, William James seemed to be asking for all this.

Of course, William James was not asking for any of this. Although he allowed broad scope for what might count as the divine focus of religion, he substantially narrowed religion's psychological register by limiting religious thought and feeling to the serious and the solemn. Religion, as a way of thinking, according to James, "signifies always a *serious* state of mind." As a serious mentality, religion "says 'hush' to all vain chatter and smart wit"; it is "hostile to light irony." Emotionally, as James observed, "There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must not scream or curse. It is precisely as being *solemn* experiences that I wish to interest you in religious experiences." Clarifying his definition of religion as a response to whatever might be regarded as divine, James insisted that the "divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest" (James 1982: 37-38). Obviously, therefore, William James would have had difficulty including the virtual religions of the Internet, with their jests and curses, their vain chatter, smart wit, and light irony, within the ambit of what should count as religion.

Nevertheless, virtual religions at play on the Internet test any preconceptions we might have about religious authenticity. As we have seen, they raise, and defy, all the basic tests, such as historical genealogy, structural morphology, personal sincerity, and so on, that might be applied in adjudicating the authen-

ticity of a religion. Giving up, let us call them religions, since they are real fakes, acting just like religions, even if they are completely fake, because they are doing real religious work in a medium of communication in which anything, even religion, seems possible.

Notes

[1] On the category of "fakelore," see Dorson (1976) and Dundes (1989). The term "fakelore" has been applied to the invented traditions of modern nationalism in Nairn (1997) and to the appropriations of indigenous religion by New Age movements in Niman (1997: 131-48).

[2] I have explored this problem of religious authenticity in relation to the denial and discovery of indigenous religions in Southern Africa (Chidester 1996a), the cult controversies in North America (Chidester 1988a), and the production and consumption of American popular culture as if it were religion (Chidester 1996b).

[3] Although Fordianism and Bokononism might also have their adherents, the Church of All Worlds, Inc., is apparently a legally recognized pagan religion in the United States (http://www.caw.org/). The website, Adherents.com, which compiles statistics on the membership of religious groups, includes a special section on "Religious Groups in Literature." Adherents.com also includes entries for the religions of television, sports, Disney, McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Elvis Worship (http://www.adherents.com).

[4] Burning Man (http://www.burningman.com). See Pike (2001).

[5] Anti-Bullshit Movement (http://home.att.net/~hugh2you/abm.html); Abstract Ministry (http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/9183/araman.html; Andersianism (http://www.d.kth.se/~nv91-asa/andersianism.html); Asaism (www.users.wineasy.se/johanssons/Mikael/asaism/asaism.html).

[6] Although Discordian sites are numerous, a good place to start is the self-proclaimed official site, "genuine and authorized by the House of Apostles of Eris," for Discordian links (http://www.kbuxton.com/discordia/). For the first edition of their sacred text, see Malaclypse the Younger (1978). On the struggle between Discordians and Illuminati, see Shea and Wilson (1975).

[7] Church of the SubGenius (http://www.subgenius.com); The Intergalactic House of Fruitcakes (http://www.tiac.net/users/ighf/index.html); The Holy Church of Unified Borkism (http://www.borkism.com/); The Universal Life Church, with facility for on-line ordination (http://www.ulc.org/ulchq/index.htm).

[8] Jakes—Yahoo "Parody Religion" Case (http://www.castlechaos.com/discord/jakes/yahooparody.html).

[9] Agnostic Church (http://agnostic.org/); First Church of Rotate Your Envelope Stock (http://www.globe-guardian.com/dogma.htm); Church of Bullshitology (http://www.churchofbs.org/); Church of Nothing at All (http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Square/1692/church.html); Last Chance Cathedral and Discount House of Worship (http://dragonet.com/allsaint/); Wauism (http://www.tftb.com/deify/wauism.htm); Hauverism (http://www.geocities.com/Athens/7780/).

[10]   Church of Cyberosophy (http://www.cyberosophy.com/); No Sin (http://nosin.com); Church of the Covert Cosmos (http://home.onestop.net/braxton/cotcc/); First Church of the Last Laugh (http://www.saintstupid.com).

[11]   First Church of Cyberspace (http://www.godweb.org/index1.html); Bastard Son of the Lord Home Page (http://www.bsotl.org/); Antichrist Bob's Family Fun Pages http://member.newsguy.com/%7Esatire/bob/); Betty Bowers, America's Best Christian (http://www.bettybowers.com/); True Catholic Church (http://www.truecatholic.org/); His Holiness Pope Gregory XVII (http://www.geocities.com/Area51/Lair/7170/ibio1.htm); Landover Baptist Church (http://www.landoverbaptist.org/).

[12]   Jesus Seeks Loving Woman (http://www.jesus.com/); Liberated Christians (http://www.libchrist.com/).

[13]   Vendraism (http://members.tripod.com/~vendra/); Alchodise (http://www.alchodise.co.uk/); Beer Church (http://www.beerchurch.com); Church of Our Lady of Malted Barley and Hops (http://www.branwen.com/01/); Blaketashi Darwish (http://www.blaketashi.co.uk/); Center for Duck Studies (http://www.jagaimo.com/duck/).

[14]   Cult Construction Set (http://www.fadetoblack.com/cultkit/); Diarrhetics (http://home.snafu.de/tilman/cos_fun/diarrhetics/lamp1.html); Clearity is Confusion (http://home.earthlink.net/~imfalse/hcu_annex.html); First Church of Appliantology (http://home.online.mo/~corneliu/extreme.html); Dianetech (http://www.geocities.com/Athens/iracke/5616/main.htm); Apelomatics (http://plaza.powersurfr.com/MHP/apelord/apead.html); First Electronic Church of Scamizdat (http://home.snafu.de/tilman/cos_fun/scamchr.txt); Kick-Ass Post-Apocalyptic Doomsday Cult of Love (http://welcome.to/doomsdaycult).

[15]   Church of Elvis (http://www.churchofelvis.com/welcome.htm); First Church of Jesus Christ, Elvis (http://www.stevens-tech.edu/jofo/sacred_heart_elvis.html); First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine (http://chelsea.ios.com/%7Ehkarlin1/welcome.html); Zaragrunudgeyon (http://www.dial1.net/mmacrae/). On the religious attention directed toward Elvis Presley, see Straussbaugh (1995), Doss (1999), and Girardot (2000).

[16]   First Church of Shatnerology (http://free.freespeech.org/shatner/); Second National Church of Shatnerology (http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/set/1931/shatner.html); Jedi Religion (http://www.jedireligion.com/forum/). On the religion of Star Trek, see Jindra (1994).

[17]   Church of AntiChrist Superstar (www.dewn.com/mm/); Temple of the Bowie (http://ugr8.ucsd.edu/Bowie/); Partridge Family Temple (http://www.kapelovitz.com/pft/); Church of the Heavenly Wood (http://geocities.com/Hollywood/Boulevard/9565/); Tiger Woods is God (http://www.tigerwoodsisgod.com/).

[18]   Holy Temple of Mass Consumption (http://www4.ncsu.edu/~aiken/); Our Lady of Mass Consumption (http://members.aol.com/olomc/olomc.htm); Jesus Christ Superstore (http://www.jesuschristsuperstore.net/); Church of Stop Shopping (http://www.lurchmag.com/revbilly.html); Church of Secularistic Holidayism (http://www.geocities.com/dontcommit/). On the religion of the market, see Loy;

[19]   Church of the Almighty Dollar (http://www.well.com/user/earl/church.html); Church of the Profit$ (http://home.epix.net/~jlferri/profit.html).

[20]   God Co. (http://www.angelfire.com/pq/godco/); Lord Co. (http://lordco.virtualave.net/index2.shtml); Messiahs, Inc. (http://www.iop.com/~thanedfane/); The Great God Contest (http://www.islandnet.com/~luree/contest.html); Messiah Mickey (http://www.iop.com/~thanedfane/); First Internet McChurch Tabernacle (http://www.mcchurch.com/); Cthulu (http://www.nightmoose.net/~cthulu/cthulu.html).

[21]   Church of the Avocado (http://members.tripod.com/~cotav/); Church of Big Plastic Fork (http://bigplasticfork/faithweb.com/); Church of the Burnt Onion Right (http://sickjokes.about.com/comedy/sickjokes/gi/dynamic/offsite.htm?site=http://www.eccentrica.org/spleen/); Church of the Chainsaw (http://clubs.yahoo.com/clubs/churchofthechainsaw); Church of Ice Cream (http://www.angelfire.com/pa/FudgementDay/); Church of the Twinkie (http://www.geocities.com/SouthBeach/Pointe/6500/twink%5Findex.html); Church of Volkswagenism (http://www.mvoc.com/vwism/); First United Church of the Fisher-Price Record Player (http://www.misty.com/people/penny/church.html); Shrine of the Potato (http://www.dillard.com/potato.htm).

[22]   Church of the Bunny (http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/bunnychurch/); Church of the Gerbil (http://www.corg.org/main.htm); Church of the Quivering Otter (http://triggur.org/cogo/); Kult of Hamstur (http://www.end.com/~niko/Texts/kult.html); Holy Church of Moo (http://members.aol.com/DailyCow/indexhcom.htm); Holy Turtle's Internet Cathedral (http://www.angelfire.com/ma2/holyturtle/); Shrine of Skippy and the Holy 'Roos (http://asfys1.fi.uib.no/~alsaker/Skippy/); Temple of the Sacred Cat (http://www.vcnet.com/valkat/temple.html); Virtual Church of the Blind Chihuahua (http://www.dogchurch.org/).

[23]   First Internet Church of All (http://www.netzone.com/~dggannon/ficoa.html); Church of Euthanasia (http://www.paranoia.com/coe/); Kelvin is Lord (http://zapatopi.net/lordkelvin.html); Church of Virus (http://virus.lucifer.com/); Prometheism (http://www.prometheism.net/); Techanism (http://techanism.sourseforge.net/tennets.html); Technosophy (http://www.technosophy.com/); Church of the Almighty Revealed in Biotechnology (http://iris6.carb.nist.gov:8000/pub/ram/misc/church.html).

[24]   Holy Order of the Cheeseburger (http://members.tripod.com/aslag6/idi7.htm).

[25]   Ted Kaczynski, Unabomber Manifesto (http://hotwired.lycos.com/special/unabom/notes/note20.html).

[26]   What the Heck Is That.Com (http://www.whattheheckisit.com/useragree.shtml).

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