The Lord Came Down in A Cloud: The Phenomenon of eReligious Authorities

Author Note

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Introduction

In an article published in the Guardian/The Observer in 2011, Aleks Krotoski addresses the question, “What effect has the internet had on Religion?” (Krotoski, 2011). The article begins with reminiscence from several years before when the author attended a virtual mass on Second Life. The last few sentences struck me in particular. They read, “I watched from the safe distance of a back-of-the-nave pew, listening to the officiant lead his digital flock through a very traditional Catholic ceremony. I left after transubstantiation, just as they were processing in a typically somber way to receive the Eucharist” (Krotoski, 2011).

These sentences raised several questions in my mind, but as an anthropologist of religion two in particular stood out. One was what it means to have a virtual Catholic officiant do a traditional sacramental ceremony to a virtual congregation. This is assuming, of course, that the actual person behind the priestly avatar was in fact a Roman Catholic priest. Were the virtual bread and wine transubstantiated? The second was what it would have been like to take a virtual communion, or what that might even mean in terms of Catholic theology. But these questions lead me to an even deeper question about *sacred space* and how that gets defined in cyberspace. Was the virtual congregation of avatars really a “church” in a Catholic theological sense? This in turn gets to the very heart of what after all makes this, that or the other meeting a *religious* meeting in the first place. As a scholar of religion, I have been trained to regard religious events as having certain features, not only the creation or recognition of a sacred space, but also the exercise of some commonly performed rituals that activate that space as sacred and thereby build a *church* out of the individual participants. Does all of this happen during a virtual mass in an imagined space among digital avatars in an artificial world called Second Life?

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Let me put the question in a slightly different way. *Religion* is and always has been a hard phenomenon to define. One way to get at it is to look at what we would regard as legitimately religious data (a ritual, a myth, a text, an attitude, whatever) and see if we can tease out how it differs from very similar non-religious data. So when we as academicians assemble in a room and center our attention on a subject that has deep meaning for us are we not engaged in an activity that could look like a religious activity if described in the right way? We are, after all, gathering together in a congregation at a certain time and place to perform a sort of academic ritual and to be enlightened by the spoken word. Nonetheless, I would imagine that for everyone but the most dedicated librarian, this is not what you would normally think of as a religious event. Why not? Well, the answer would have to include elements like the non-religious purposes for which we came together, that this is a self-defined academic time and space, not a self-defined religious time and space, that the person at the front is speaking as a secular academic and not as a religious leader and so forth. This circles things back around to the question of the virtual mass I mentioned above. In that case, people (or at least their avatars) did consciously and with intent gather in a self-identified religious place (albeit a virtual church), at a religiously appointed time explicitly to participate in a clearly defined religious ritual, namely a Catholic mass. In the more technical language of my discipline, we could say that there is definitely religious praxis going on. For me as an anthropologist of religion, however, there are two necessary components that seem to be missing, or at least take on new form – sacred space itself and human social/communal interaction. In the example before us, it is all avatars all the way down; there is no actual human interaction.

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This notion that somehow actual human interaction seems to be essential to the religious experience brings me to the topic I really wish to discuss, which is the changing characteristics of religious authority that the internet has created and expedited. I say expedited because the transition of religion away from the direct interaction between the religious leader and the congregation has been underway probably since the development of commercially viable printing. The printing of the Bible, say, meant that Protestant believers, especially of the bourgeois class, now had direct access to the divine word in their own homes, and eventually in their own vernacular language and available to them at any and every time. The Bible, it has been said, became for many early Protestants a sort of portable church. A similar trend is clearly visible in Judaism, most notably in the West, when printing allowed for the wide availability of Judaic texts to Jewish lay literati across Europe. These could be standard rabbinic texts—the Torah, say, or the Talmud itself—or more marginal books like midrash, or heretical writings of messianic figures or even, by the nineteenth century, of secular Jewish literature. Radio of course brought its own innovation to religious life, allowing people to sit at home and experience religious services or listen to sermons almost as if they were there. Television added more technological distancing and the internet only accelerates this trend, moving it further and faster. So the introduction of online religion is not so much at this point a difference of kind as it is of degree, but the degree is significant.

This development, specifically as it relates to religious authority, has of course been the subject of scholarly inquiry, and has been looked at intensively in a recent article published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (Campbell, 2012). Campbell notes that the internet has both empowered and challenged traditional authority (Campbell, 2012). On the one hand, traditional authorities have often been able cleverly to exploit the possibility of

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the web to extend their own reach and influence. On the other, new authorities have arisen, including what Campbell calls “web masters, moderators and bloggers,” as well as “instant experts” who gain authority through “perceived expertise online while bypassing time-honored training or prescribed initiation rites that would establish position offline” (Campbell, 2012, p. 74). There is, of course, pushback to these developments. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish groups for example have either tried to block access to the internet entirely for their followers or to restrict permitted access to certain sites declared to be *kosher*. In any case, it is clear just from what has been said above that the interaction between various religious communities and internet-based religious authorities is widespread. A Pew trust survey in 2001, for example, noted that back then, over ten years ago now, 30% of Internet users have sought religious information online (Madden & Rainie, 2003). It should be noted just in passing that none of these questions are restricted to purely religious communities. Virtual communities and social networks have become an integral part of our everyday lives in all sorts of ways.

Having said this, however, it also has to be noted that in all previous media – pulpit, books, radio, television – the hierarchical structure of established religious denominations has more or less stayed the same, even as access to both sides of the conversation has increased. Where the internet really seems to be different is in its ability to level out the distance between clergy and congregant. This leveling out, by the way, occurs in both directions. Clergy members find they have to become much more media savvy and active; that is, responding to emails, maintaining Facebook pages, tweeting, posting on YouTube, supplying content to smart phone apps, blogging and so on. One researcher, Pauline Cheong even notes that in some cases “online resources are now accorded a higher epistemic status by some pastors, who

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said that their ministry effectiveness depended on their mastery of web-based media”⁴ (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011, p. 947). It is thus not surprising that some media savvy religious leaders (whether clergy or not) can use their fluency in social networking, to actually enhance their effectiveness and so epistemic authority among younger congregants (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011). On the other side, congregants now have at their fingertips a plethora of religious information (or *information*), including material by which they can judge the credibility, or compatibility, of established clergy, or even check out various clergy persons against each other (Cheong, Huang, & Poon, 2011). There is, we might say, a lot of religious shopping going on.

In short, the internet goes well beyond virtual communities, virtual churches, virtual parishes, virtual prayer sessions, virtual religious identities, and the like. It is also an overwhelming source of information about various religions and religious communities, or to be more precise, information about *interpretations* of various religions and religious communities. Let me give an example of what I mean. I will pick on Roman Catholicism again. If I type in Roman Catholic Doctrine, Google delivers to me in about a quarter of a second 11,500,000 hits. Now to be sure that number—11,500,000—is both accurate and somewhat bogus. I will confess I did not check out all eleven plus million hits, but even a quick scan of random pages showed that many were duplicates or entirely irrelevant but were included for some cyber-reason. The hits included, of course, the usual suspects – Wikipedia, religionfacts.com, Infoplease, Britannica on-line. Others on the list were legitimate Catholic sites but from particular perspectives—Americancatholic.org was Franciscan, for example; a more conservative Catholic view seemed to characterize ewtn.com. Others sounded good, but

⁴ To be sure, Cheong’s research deals with Christian pastors in Singapore, so it is limited in focus and applicability, but I think is nonetheless indicative of the wider world.

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turned out to be anti-Catholic – such as Catholicdoctrine.org and Romancatholicteachings.com. To be fair there are also Catholic anti-Protestant sites, like ourcatholicfaith.org. And there were lots and lots of churches, blogs, videos, news stories and miscellaneous webpages that touched on the subject of the Roman Catholic Church while really talking about something else. Curiously, what I did not see was anything from the Vatican, a source one would think reliable on all matters Catholic. There might have been such a page, but it was lost in the tsunami of the 11 million. Or maybe it did not have the proper tags and metadata. And maybe in that very fact lies a sermon about using the internet to learn about a religion. But at any rate, an outsider can read a whole awful lot about any religion on the internet—the good, the bad, the polemic, the apologetic, the hateful, the witness, the real, the imaginary—the whole gamut.

But the influence of religious epistemic authority on the internet goes even further. There are, for example, numerous instances in which whole new religions, or at least religious groups, have been developed solely online. (Berger & Ezzy, 2004; Krogh & Pillifat, 2004). It is beyond the focus of this article to explore that phenomenon. I raise it only to illustrate the extent to which online authorities on religion and religions are accorded tremendous credibility by some people, whether the credibility is deserved and not.

Given the dispersion of religious communities today, and the greater privatization of religious life, plus the plethora of authoritative, or at least seemingly authoritative religious voices, the internet has in many ways become to be in strict competition with more established religious institutions and their clergies, the way, if I can say so, that Amazon challenges brick-and-mortar bookstores and booksellers (Campbell, 2010). In many ways it could be argued this is not a bad thing overall. It makes for greater access, for a more transparent and maybe

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therefore more *democratic* marketplace, and for a more responsive religious activities. But there is a danger as well, I think especially as regards religion, and it is to that which I wish to turn. My concern is that the internet not only disperses and challenges some religious authorities, it also homogenizes and promotes certain types of religious experiences as though they were universally normative.

I want to return again to the analogy of Amazon. Amazon gives everyone a common book buying experience to replace the intimacy, character and atmosphere of the local bookstore. In terms of bookstores, that may not be so much of a problem as just a different way of doing business. Like in a physical bookstore, one can browse through a book before buying, and even find reviews, recommendations and related books. But for religion, the effects can be significantly more influential and far-reaching. Let me take as an example, the Islamic site “FatwaOnline”, which provides a single and somewhat preset and homogenized set of Islamic practices to its readers, whatever that reader’s actual background or situation (Sisler, 2011). Now Islam, like other Western religions, is hardly monolithic, and to be sure, there are many competing Islamic sites with different approaches, but a certain few sites have now achieved a level of canonical status that claims to define Islam in a particular way that alone is authentic. In fact, for certain users, such sites define what the proper religious attitudes and practice are, creating and purveying a sort of universal and homogenized religious identity that never exist before, or existed only at the neighborhood or village level (Sisler, 2011). By creating a unitary voice, such site can in effect create not only an artificial constructed community, but a sort of artificially constructed religion and religious identity as well (Sisler, 2011).

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But my interest is on religion, and is more focused. I am interested here in not how outsiders get information, but how insiders do. If I as a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew, a Muslim and Hindu want to learn what my own religious community says on a subject, how do I find out? Back in the day it was fairly straightforward, I went to my priest, rabbi, minister, imam or guru and asked and I accepted pretty much at face value what that person told me. Alternatively if I were a bit more educated and had access to a religious library, I could go to a book, one authored by a person or printed by a publisher I regarded as denominationally trustworthy and look up the answer. This worked, and I think legitimately so, because there was some sort of personal link between me and the authority I was consulting. I would push these even further and say this kind of human interchange with a religious virtuoso is in fact a kind of religious praxis. It may not be as scripted as a mass or a Jewish Shacharit service, but the asking and answering of religious questions is the performance of a religiously laden ritual nonetheless: Catholic parishioners go to their priest, Jews to their rabbis, Muslims to their imams, and so forth. It is on this ritual, this arena of religious practice, on which I wish to focus.

Going back to Roman Catholicism again. Maybe not all priests would give the same answer to my Catholic question, and maybe the bishop would say something more nuanced, but my priest was my priest and to some significant degree, his Catholicism was my Catholicism. But the internet has changed the very nature of that interaction. When I get on the web, I can turn to “Frequently Asked *Questions* about the *Catholic* Church” and find myself being brought to the Frequently Asked Questions page of the Augustinian Club at Columbia University, for example. The site “Catholic Answers” bills itself as “one of the nation’s largest lay-run apostolates of Catholic apologetics and evangelization.” Its mission statement notes, “Catholic Answers is an apostolate dedicated to serving Christ by bringing the fullness of Catholic truth to

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the world. We help good Catholics become better Catholics, bring former Catholics ‘home,’ and lead non-Catholics into the fullness of the faith.” At this site I can also submit a question, join a discussion forum, or follow on Facebook or Twitter. All this makes access to the Roman Catholic world very easy, but is it really a religious interchange?

Here’s maybe the nub of the problem. What kind of answer am I getting back? This is not so much a question of the correctness of the answer as of its appropriateness. When I go to my rabbi for an answer, for example, we enter a dialogue. The rabbi gets to understand the question better, maybe I get to understand the question better. We can discuss back and forth about the answer and unclarities can be addressed. But what I get on an internet site is either a canned answer (and maybe a canned answer to a canned questions – which is what a lot of religious FAQ pages are) or an answer crafted by some unknown someone somewhere who is now willy-nilly my religious authority. Here, for an anthropologist of religion, the interchange gets interesting.

There is of course a more complex negotiation going on as well. As Sisler (2011) notes, there are several Islamic websites that make “fatwas (legal rulings according to Sharia) available. But which one should I turn to? I can choose to go to the Saudi Arabian, rather conservative, site I mentioned above, FatwaOnline. Alternatively I could go to the more moderate IslamOnline, run now out of Qatar. Interestingly enough, a “Muslim Arbitration Tribunal” was set up in the UK in 2007 to adjudicate marriage and divorce disputes according to Islamic law, but apparently in a way that is more sensitive to the needs of British Muslim women. On their website, the persons behind the organization stress, “...we will have young qualified people, male and female, sitting as members of the Arbitration Tribunal. They are not scholars or lawyers from abroad but from here” (Muslim Arbitration Tribunal, 2010). As Sisler (2011) also

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notes, in these fora, it is the petitioners, not the muftis, who set the agenda. The above examples actually illustrate some of the aspects of authority that internet sites can claim. First they can extend and ratify the importance of established religious hierarchies. FatwaOnline issues authentic albeit conservative fatwas, and now through the internet can claim a reach they would never have been imaginable before. On the other hand, the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal offers an explicit alternative, a counter-authority, if you will. An even more radical challenge would be Islamic bloggers or discussion groups which establish their own practices and values outside of any existing formal structure. That is, as Campbell (2010) has noted, even the moderator of an online group can be taken as a spiritual or religious authority. Another way of looking at this phenomenon is to see it as the rise of “vernacular” religion. (Howard, 2011). Howard (2011) has even devoted a whole book to the study of what he deems a new Christian Fundamentalist movement focused on the end time, a movement founded and maintained purely on the web.

The importance of this last point should not be overlooked. I noted that when I searched Google for “Roman Catholic Doctrine” I received some 11,500,000 items. Clearly that is an absurd number. But that does not mean the problem is not real. Campbell (2010, p. 256) did a more scientific survey of “Christian” bloggers in her study of religious authority on the internet and came up with 367 “useful” “Christian” blogs. Many of these were of course written by people who were legitimate religious authorities – ministers or pastors of local churches, for example. Many others were by educated and committed lay people, maybe even professors who were not themselves authenticated religious leaders, but who seemed to be working in a well-informed and considerate way within the accepted frameworks of their denominations. Campbell (2010, p. 269) herself notes that most often, the internet functions to affirm or “empower” (her phrase) religious authorities. On the other hand, researchers like Cheong,

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Huang, and Poon (2011) note that such traditional religious authorities are to some extent losing control the symbols of their own religions. This is because many online authorities are freelancers, who might at times be openly challenging various established or normative religious leaders, leadership roles, texts or theologies. I think the bottom line of her admittedly preliminary and rudimentary study is that the internet, so far at least, does more to empower or ratify existing religious authorities than challenge them, but it does open up possibilities for the creation of new, alternate, non-conventional and *virtual* religious leaders and communities. It is also possible that the mere existence of multiple religious sites, blogs and listservs, although not actually challenging established religious authority, nonetheless subtly influences and reshapes it. As noted above, even religious leaders have to work within the new system in order to be heard. In any event, the spread of online religious authority has certainly shifted religious authority away from being the exclusive domain of religious elites interacting on a personal level with their congregations (Cheong, Huang & Poon, 2011)

At this point, a couple of correctives need to be made. One is the limits of the web. Anastasia Karaflogka, in her book, “e-religion: A Critical Appraisal of Religious Discourse on the World Wide Web, published in 2006 [London: Equinox], for example, takes up the question, among others, as to whether Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) are in fact creating a new religious space altogether. Her conclusion is roughly that it is too early to tell, and given that the study is now over 5 years old and predates the remarkable growth of both smartphone apps and social networking, is probably out of date. But she does make the point that whenever we talk about religion on the web, we have to keep “web epistemology” in mind, namely, that only certain people a) have internet access at all and b) only a subset of those rely on the net for religious information. From another angle Howard (2011, p. 22) in his study of the

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rise of a virtual Christian Fundamentalist Ekklesia notes, “online communication enclaves like that of vernacular Christian fundamentalism may foreclose some of the new avenues toward the richly meaningful religious life that network communication technologies seem to afford.”

Members of the virtual Church he studies used the religious websites to both discuss and deepen their own understandings of materials that fit into their worldview and filter out divergent or challenging views (Howard, 2011). This is of course not a brand new phenomenon; vernacular and sectarian religions and churches have existed before, both in terms of geographic proximity and communes, and in more virtual ways through say radio or television. But the web, I think the argument is, makes such isolated and self-referential religious movements more accessible, cohesive and all-encompassing for its members or participants.

Let me take a slightly different angle on this. I was, actually still am, on the other side of the screen. I am one of the correspondents that answers questions submitted to “Ask the Rabbi” on the official Union of Reform Judaism website. The questions I have gotten over the years could very well be the subject of an anthropology paper on their own. But what my experience did teach me is how impersonal the exchange is, there is, as one of my colleagues put it, no pastoral dynamic. The questions are clearly coming from somewhere in the person’s mind, but it is often hard for me to figure out what exactly is being asked (the question behind the question, so to speak) and to know how appropriately to respond. And then, of course, there is almost never any follow up so I rarely know if my answer hit the mark. I often end up feeling like religion has been reduced to a commodity. I am an avid listener to “Car Talk” on public radio and one of the things I find fascinating is how often a simple question about a car can lead to discussions of marital relations, boy and girl friends, careers, and all sorts of other apparently

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irrelevant topics. When I becoming the answering internet rabbi I feel the opposite – questions of personal religious import get reduced to texted questions and a stranger’s paragraph in answer.

Because I do leave my signature block on my emailed answers, and I in fact do occasionally get some feedback. Sometimes it’s a thank you; sometimes a request for more information; sometimes an argument; sometimes an attempt to convert. Usually, though, it is nothing, silence, an answer tossed into the void.

It is this last experience as one of hundreds of religious authorities on the web that provoke me to think what “sacred space” means nowadays and how we will go about studying it. Maybe my experience as a web rabbi are not exactly equivalent to a priest giving communion, but it is an interaction between a religious authority and a lay person. More and more, it seems to me, that sacred space in the world of the internet is that fragile connection between some seeking person out there and the religious authority that that person happens to come upon in some mysterious way. On occasion a spark of a *sacred space* is created and then dissipates. Clearly we anthropologist and sociologist of religion will have to learn how to study the phenomenon in different ways. And clearly the nature and epistemic valence of religious authorities will have to be analyzed with new methods. What we may find, as in some ways we always knew, is that religious authority down here on earth is an elusive topic, one that is really riding up there somewhere in the cloud.

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Biographical Sketch

Professor Haas received his B.A. in Ancient Near East History from the University of Michigan in 1970 after which he attended Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, receiving ordination as a Reform rabbi in 1974. After ordination, he served as an active U.S. Army chaplain for three years and then remained in the Army National Guard for another 19 years. Upon completion of active duty, Rabbi Haas enrolled in the graduate program in religion at Brown University, earning a Ph.D. in Jewish Studies in 1980. He joined the faculty at Vanderbilt University in 1980, where he taught courses in Judaism, Jewish ethics, the Holocaust, Western religion, and the Middle East Conflict. Dr. Haas moved to Case Western Reserve University in 2000 and was appointed chair of the Department of Religious Studies in 2003. During this time he also was a visiting professor at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies in Chicago, IL. Prof. Haas has published several books and articles dealing with moral discourse and with Jewish and Christian thought after the Holocaust. He has continued to teach course on Western Religion (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) and on the religious, historical and social context of the current Middle East crises. He has lectured in the United States, Germany, Italy, Belgium and Israel.