THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE

Many of you may remember Thomas, "Tip", O'Neill, who represented districts in Massachusetts in the United States House of Representatives from 1953 to 1987. He was speaker of the House for the last ten years of his career, serving under Presidents Ford, Carter and Reagan. He is known and remembered for a lot of things, but surely one of his best remembered legacies is his statement, "All politics is local". O'Neill himself claims the quote came from his father on the occasion of Tip O'Neill's one electoral lose in his political career, a failed run for the Cambridge City Council in around 1935. The point was that voters in a particular district vote for this, that or the other representative not on the basis of grand and abstract ideas, but the basis of local needs.

I want to begin my talk my suggesting that what O'Neill said about politics is true of religion as well. Religions historically have tended to be very local indeed. We can see innumerable examples of this. Think back, for example, to Biblical Israel. We know from both the bible and archaeological evidence that there were numerous local shrines and altars in the land. To be sure the kings tried to consolidate worship in one place – Jerusalem in the south and Mt.Gerizim

in the northern kingdom. But we also know that these efforts were far from

successful in that prophets over the next several hundred years continue to

complain about people going to local altars or resorting to local priests and

mediums. The Romans, too had numerous local gods. In fact, it seems likely that

the major gods of the pantheon all began as various local deities in pre-republican

Rome and only gradually became more universalized an organized into a

"national" pantheon. Even so, each family still had its local *dii familiaris*, the Lars,

Genii and Junii, down to the time of the Empire. Another most striking example is

Hindu-ism, which only became an organized "ism" under British influence. The

reputed 330 million deities of Hinduism were not all equally worshipped

everywhere by everyone, but represent all the local, familial, caste and village

deities that are now subsumed under one "system".   I can draw a final example

from the politics of the Catholic church in the Cleveland area. As many of you

may be aware, the bishop of the Diocese of Cleveland announced in 2009 the

closing of some 50 parish churches. What maybe was surprising, even to the

Bishop himself, was the fierce pushback from parish members. Clearly the gut

loyalty was not to the dioceses or the bishop but to the local parish church.

I am saying all this because as an anthropologist I have been trained to look

deeply at local context. One of the methodological leaders of modern

anthropology of religion, Clifford Geertz, argued forcefully that one could never separate the meaning of a religious ritual from its local culture and that culture's web of symbols and significations. A good example of this is found in one of his later books, *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (1973a), in which Geertz develops his method of reading cultural practices as "texts."   His conclusion is, and I quote, "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz 1973a:452). In other words, the meaning of a cultural or religious activity does not rest so much in its official doctrine or general theology, but what it means in the minds of the practitioners in some specific time and place. Thus his work on Islam as in *Islam Observed* (1968) is an attempt to, and I quote, "lay out a general framework for the comparative analysis of religion and to apply it to a study of the development of a supposedly single creed, Islam, in two quite contrasting civilizations, The Indonesian and the Moroccan" (Geertz 1968:v).   In short, we might say that for Geertz, the question of Islam is not as interesting as is the question of how the practice of Islam generates meaning in some particular cultural context. There is no Islam in any concrete sense, we might say, but only innumerable "Islams", all of which share certain words and symbols, but each of which is local, even individual, in meaning.

So this brings me to the topic at hand for today. What does religion on the web mean, how does it generate meaning and what do we learn about contemporary religion and its practice by observing its "webby" manifestations? Obviously there is not going to be a simple answer to this, and in fact it may be too early to have an answer at all, given the rapid transmogrifications which computers are undergoing. But it is not too early to start thinking about this, and maybe more relevantly, to start thinking about how to think about this. It is on this exploratory trek that I want to take us in the next several minutes. My thesis is that far from spelling the end to religion, the internet is in fact creating new sorts of sacred spaces. What may be dead, if anything, is religion as we know it.

Let me start with some very simple brute facts. It was surely the case up to a generation or so ago that religion was done in local community settings – a parish church, a local synagogue, a neighborhood mosque, and so on. As I noted when I spoke here last year, most people's contact with the official religion came through the personal interaction with the local religious functionary, the priest, pastor, rabbi, imam or whoever. It was also the case that the particularities of each venue spoke to the needs of the community it served – how the liturgy was done, the nature of the clerical staff, the incorporation of local histories and customs, physical layout and the like. When Bishop Lennon in Cleveland moved

to close certain parish churches, he was not making it impossible for the parishioners to continue to be Catholic. In fact to the contrary, he was closing down what he saw as small, underperforming, resource hungry churches so as to better support larger and more vibrant communities. It was not Catholicism that was under threat here, it was the local Catholic communities in all their ethnic, historical and local specificity.

What the internet now makes possible is for religious interaction to take place outside of any communal or shared religious space altogether. Or to be more accurate, to take place outside any *physically actual* communal or shared religious space. Rather, the web is creating its own versions of religious space, space that is virtual, not real. Like shopping or watching a movie or chatting with friends, I no longer need to leave the chair in my home office. When I spoke at this conference last year I began my mentioning a virtual mass I was observing in Second Life. Then I used that illustration to raise questions of religious authority. In particular I asked about what it meant to have a virtual priest give a virtual communion to a virtual parishioner, etc. How would I know, for example, that the person behind the priestly avatar conducting the mass was really himself a priest? I also raised some other questions like if taking a virtual communion on Second Life would satisfy the obligation to take communion. This opens up a nice

theological consideration which I won't go into at this point, although I will return

to a version of it a bit later. My point here is that in one homogeneous sitting, so

to speak, I can read the New York Times, post on Facebook, order something on

the internet, attend a religious service, check on my email, Skype with my sister,

play a game of Sudoku, chat with friends, work on a paper for CSIR and so on.

Note that in the preceding I have enmeshed the religious service into a bunch of

other activities. This embeddedness has two aspects that I want to explore

further. One is that I do not have to leave my home and go to a sacred space to

participate in religion. The other is that the religious experience becomes

continuous, I just used the word homogeneous, with everything else I am doing

that day. Is there anything "religious" about what my participation?

Now to be sure this detachment or displacement of religious practice from

specific locals is not entirely new. One early such displacement, as many scholars

have argued, may have been the first synagogues, which on this view, originated

as an attempt to substitute worship for sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple. That is,

instead of making an actual pilgrimage to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice in the

Temple, I could go to the local synagogue at the same time as the sacrifice was

being, or would have been, offered and recite biblical passages or prayers alluding

to the sacrifices. Up to today, the synagogue liturgy reflects this substitutionary

origin of the synagogue. Another example of this first discplacement might be churches in which the assembled worshippers, scattered as they are, are nonetheless understood to constitute all together in some sense the single *corpus christi*, the body of Christ. Muslims have a similar experience of being part of a single *"Umma"* when they attend a Friday communal prayer. Another, later, "displacement" took place with the development of printing in the West. I could now have in my own home not only a printed bible to consult whenever I wanted, but also, say, "the City of God by St Augustine (printed in 1477), the letters and sermons of another great fourth century Bishop Ambrosius of Milan (published in 1490) and just to check up on things, the a copy of the decretals issued by Pope Boniface VIII (published in 1470).   And if I were really interested in some alternate readings of the bible I could check out "*Scrutinium scripturarum*" by Paulus de Sancta Maria, a scriptural commentary written by a Jewish convert to Christianity (published in 1470).   I could in short become my own religious expert. A more recent displacement was the advent of radio and certainly television, which allowed one to hear, and then to hear and watch, religious worship services from one's own living room or hospital bed. One could even more physically participate by sending in money, ordering books and other materials, and touching the television during certain prayer times.

But all of the preceding seems pretty tame when compared to the options available today. One can not only participate in a religion, any religion, in Second Life, but one can join a religious community, stay in touch with Facebook or Twitter or Google Plus, thereby interacting on a continual basis with the church leader and other members of the congregation.   And of course one can get almost instant access to religious information, including advice and doctrinal or ritual guidance. As I have noted before, one can even get multiple answers and so compare and contrast, to shop around, so to speak. And there is more. In my own religious tradition, if I want to light a Chanukah candle or put a prayer in the Western Wall in Jerusalem, well, there are apps for that.

So what is this new world of religious participation like? While what I am about to say will be irrelevant in detail shortly, it nonetheless indicates where things are heading in the big picture.

In what follows I want to direct your attention to the religious websites of three different religious communities. My goal is to give a preliminary sense of what the experience of each is like and to try to give some sense of how religion is

portrayed and conveyed by each. I will take as my perspective that each website

is a kind of sacred space that I am being invited to experience. I will share my

experience with you , and I will then draw some broad, preliminary, conclusions

on the basis of this first and barebones scan. So what I invite you to do is enter

with me into some of these new sacred spaces. We are only going to barely cross

the threshold and get a first impression, but first impressions do mean a lot, and I

think we learn something by paying attention to the immediate impact.

The first site which we shall regard is a Jewish site: Chabad.org. I choose

Chabad because it claims to be non- or maybe trans-denominational within the

Jewish world. Various Jewish movements have their own web presence of course

– Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Zionist, etc. and such sites of course

address a specifically intended audience with particular needs. Chabad claims to

be more then that, so I wanted to see how that kind of non-denominatinal sacred

space would look. Before proceeding, however, I need to say a few words about

this group. Chabad (Lubavitch as it is officially known) is one of a number of

Hasidic groups that survived the Holocaust and has had a revival in North

America. Hasidism itself was a populist, I might say even revivalist, movement

that emerged in mid-eighteenth century Galicia, that is, the area today that encompasses Western Ukraine and parts of southern Poland. It was heavily influenced by the mystical and spiritual teachings of Kabbalah, and basically can be categorized as a reaction among common Jewish peasants against the strictures and formalism of the rabbinic elite. The Chabad group was centered around the town of Lubavitch in modern day Belarus. Hasidic groups have from the very beginning tended to downplay rabbinic learning in favor of spiritual experience and joy in the worship of the divine. This is true of Lubavitch as well, although it is also known for its more intellectual bend. After World War II, a few remnants managed to establish themselves in North America. The last leader, or Rebbe, of the group established himself in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn in the early 1950's. Among his initiatives to revive his group was the development of an active, even aggressive, outreach program to Jews. As one Lubavitch rabbi told me, Chabad holds that there are only two types of Jews in the world: Lubavitch and potential Lubavitch. The mission of Lubavich is thus to reach out to all non-Lubavitch Jews and bring them back to "true" and "authentic" Judaism, that is, the Judaism that the Jewish soul really longs for. To this end, Lubavitch, or Chabad, has developed a very sophisticated marketing culture.

This has created an interesting conundrum. On the one hand, Lubavitch

Hasidism, like other Hasidisms, is what today is often categorized as "black hat" or

ultra-Orthodox Judaism. Its members maintain a very strict Orthodox life style in

terms of dress, dietary rules, religious holidays, education, marriage and so on. A

comparison might be with the Amish, although the Lubavitch live in towns and

cities. On the other hand, they actively reach out into the community and bring

non-Lubavitch into their homes, synagogues and communal events. The difficulty

they must negotiate is how to maintain their "true and authentic" Judaism while

still being open and accessible to highly assimilated Jews in a corrosively secular

culture.

A website, of course, is a prime way of accomplishing this. The home page

here is very sophisticated and is loaded with updated material. I want to focus on

just two or three elements because this is what one immediately sees. The first is

the index bar across the top. The topics are "Jewish Practice", "Learning &

Values", "Community & Family" and "Inspiration & Entertainment". Scrolling

over each produces a drop-down menu. Let's look at two in more detail. One is

"Learning and Values". This includes a number of features, including a submenu

dealing with the Torah portion, or bible reading, for each week of the year. The

subheadings include the reading of the week, the reading in a nutshell, blogs on

the reading, and links to series of videos on the Torah portion and related topics.

Besides the weekly Torah portion, there are submenus on daily study, science and

Torah, Ethics and Values, Questions and Answers, and so forth.   All the actual

materials, or at least the ones I looked at, are in breezy accessible language, easy

to read font, stylishly illustrated. One can easily be lulled into a comfort zone

without realizing the very conservative and specifically Hasidic message of the

content. I found the same true of the "Community and Family" area. I was

curious here because adopting a fully Lubavitch lifestyle would make relations

with non-Lubavitch relatives and friends rather difficult, in terms of appropriate

dress, food, activities, and so forth. I expected "Community & Family" to deal

with this. Instead the topics were timely topics like parenting, difficulties in

marriage, handling divorce, issues of rehabilitation, raising special needs children

and on and on. There are of course other topics as well, like kosher recipes. The

advice is open, pastorally sensitive, but also, subtly, from a very traditionalist

perspective. I will come back to this in a moment.

One other feature of the home page needs comment. There is a large sort

of banner under the menu bar that consists of a sort of slide show of scrolling

pictures and headlines on the featured topics of the day. On the day I looked (July

17, 2013), the featured stories were "Ceremony Without Words: -- about a bar

mitzvah for special needs children, a recipe for Chocolate Pistachio Granola, an article on the design of the Candelabrum of the ancient Jerusalem Temple, an article by an aspiring journalist entitled, "HelenThomas Told Me to Go Home", a discussion of the meaning of true love, and a piece called "Why Pray at the Western Wall?"   What struck me was the easy juxtaposition of the everyday, popular culture, personal interest and traditional teachings. They sort of blend in to each other. You are lured by one and maybe trapped by another.

There is a lot more on this home page so that it can function as a sort of general gateway into the world. There are also links to specific Lubavitch materials—learn more about Chabad, for example, or ""Ask the Rabbi", there is a local Chabad locator and a place to sign up for their newsletter, and links to other related sites, and a feature called "Today in Judaism" which included important dates in Hasidism. I should point out that none of these are particularly highlighted; but they are there and eventually you notice them.

What makes this site interesting from an anthropology of religions point of view is that it is creating a virtual and self-contained community in a very particular sort of way. On the one hand, its content is uncompromisingly Lubavitch Hasidic, yet on the other hand, the site is not what I would call an

insider site. That is, it is not like a local congregational site which focuses on the

activities and events of that particular synagogue. Nor is it "denominational", as

are the sites for the Reform, Conservative or Reconstructionist movements.

These speak specifically to their members. Rather this site presents itself as

somehow Jewish in a generic sense, maybe as trans- or post-denominational even

while it is clearly Chabad and makes no secret of that. It offers an easy and

comfortable way for non-affiliated but spiritually interested Jews to connect with

a very conservative tradition, and to connect in a comfortable way. Being

Lubavitch without becoming Lubavitch, in a way.

We come now to the entrance of our second site, one that is Roman

Catholic in affiliation. This presents an immediate problem. On the one hand

there are more what I would call official Roman Catholic holy spaces – the

Vatican, cathedrals, monasteries and the like. Some of these have their own web

presence (say, www.vatican.va). But these tend to stay in character, so to speak,

the are by, of and for the adepts. What I wanted was something more like the

web equivalent of the village church, that is something that reach out to the

everyday Catholics on a more pastoral or popular basis. The one I have chosen to

look at is www.catholic.com . I should say immediately that this needs to be

distinguished from www. Catholic.org. The "org" site is a news delivery site, that

provides news and views of Catholic interest on a whole variety of topics.   In

contrast, the "com" site leads to "Catholic Answers"   which is a lay run apostolate

in California, operating with the permission of the Diocese of San Diego. The

organization was founded in the late 1970's in response to a local evangelical

Protestant church that was placing anti-Catholic tracts on car windshields.

Catholic Answers describes itself as follows: *Catholic Answers is an apostolate*

dedicated to serving Christ by bringing the fullness of Catholic truth to the world.

We help good Catholics become better Catholics, help bring former Catholics

"home," and lead non-Catholics into the fullness of the faith

[http://www.catholic.com/about; accessed 18July13]. I have chosen to focus on

this site because it seems to be a fairly popular Catholic site, although I have not

actually looked at numbers of clicks.

The opening home page has many of the features we saw in the Chabad

page. There are invitations to follow on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, there

are a variety of menu tabs for blogs, videos, radio, forums, shop, and donate. The

slide show banner advertises the "Catholic Answers" Magazine, "faith" cruises,

Islam and conferences.   In addition there are buttons on the left side for "Top

Issues" (abortion, birth control, contraception, death penalty,…), for "Responding

to" (anti-catholicism, atheism, reformation, Jehovahs Witness…) and" Help With"

(addiction, anger, faith, temptation…). On the right side are buttons for Catholics, for Other Christians and for Non-Christians.   The rest of the page is a series of news stories and blogs dealing with a variety of issues, including new support for the cosmological argument, historical confirmation of an incident recorded in the St. Luke's gospel, and a blog of five places for Catholics to go for voluntary exile in the wake of the overturning of DOMA. [accessed 18July13]. There are also links to Questions and Answers and to various tracts. The site is colorful, easy to read and in popular accessible language. The content is very traditional as regards Catholic and social values. A featured book, for example is entitled, "How the Church Converted the Pagan West—And How We Can Do It Again."

What is striking about the site, at least from my perspective, was first, how much of the site is apologetics, that is, defense of Catholicism through answers to specific questions or groups, such as "atheists".   In fact, on their keyword search cloud, the two words in largest size were "apologetics" and "Scripture".   This no doubt reflects the origin of the apostolate.   It is also reflected in the fact that very up front are links for non-Catholics and in fact non-Christians. Indeed the site is designed to make getting the, or at least a, Catholic answer very simple. Going to say "Topic Issues…" and clicking on "Environmentalism" produces six links that

include quick answers "(Is Hunting for Sport OK?"), magazine articles ("Should Catholics be Environmentalists?") and a link to an open forum radio show.

Having said this it is also clear that the site is, or has evolved into being, much more than this. There is a real attempt to create community, not only through social media, but through the many links to blogs, comment/discussion opportunities and links to Q and A radio programs. There are also guides for proper Catholic living as well, including pastoral advice on topics on addiction, for example or tracts on how to pray under "Help With…and then "Prayer". The site does not explicitly bill itself as the go-to site for all things Catholic, but it certainly functions that way. It is also not explicit about its approach, suggesting that it is giving access to the correct Catholic materials, which often I think it is. This is in contrast to a site like Catholic.org, which explicitly asks, "Why would you support ANY other business but Catholic Online for your complete Catholic Internet Service needs?" [www.Catholic.org"; accessed 18July13, "About Us"]

The last site I thought worthwhile to visit has to do with the American Muslim community. This presents a challenge since in some sense there is no Muslim community in America; rather there are numerous Muslim communities:

Iranian Shiite to Kurdish Sunni, to Turkish Sufi to Moroccan to Pakistani professional to Somali taxi drivers, etc., etc. So what I looked for was one that was attempting to be a general American Muslim holy space.; that is, one that appears to be more broad-based and directed to community building, as opposed to a news or apologetic site. What appeared was "muslimonline.org". Before turning to the site itself, I think it would be helpful to say a few things about the anthropology of the contemporary Muslim community, the complexity of which I already alluded to. First, it should be kept in mind that even though a large part of the North American Muslim community has migrated here in the years since World War II, there has been a Muslim presence in North America since colonial times. In fact, the first actual mosque was reputedly built in Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1934 [www.islamicpopulation.com/America/USA/Islam in USA.htm]. Consequently, the contemporary Muslim community in the U.S. can be divided very roughly into three demographics. First there are the older Muslim communities, including African Americans, which make up about a third of the population. A second large group came in the 1960's, 70's and 80's and consisted largely of South Asian migrants (India, Pakistan, etc.) and included many doctors and other professionals. More recently there have been immigrants from other parts of the Muslim world, like the Middle East and North Africa, and have tended

to be not as well off.   The Muslim community has not concentrated in a few

major cities, but is spread across the country.   Although the old-time Muslim

community is relatively well off and assimilated, this is less true of the more

recent arrivals especially those from places like Bangladesh, for example, or

Somalia. The community is probably about three-quarters Sunni and the rest

Shiite. As you can imagine, the Muslim community is quite diverse, probably the

most diverse in the world in terms of the countries of origin. Given this diversity

and the relatively more integrated nature of the Muslim community here, it

seems that a new "American" style Islam could well emerge among the children

of these immigrants, a generation which is more Americanized, with less ties to a

specific country of origin and trying to be part of a very diverse, multi-ethnic

Muslim community.

With this background in mind, let us turn to the site itself.   The first

impression of the site is that it is somewhat staid, at least as compared to the

others we have looked at. It is a red background, with a black "sky" band across

the top with stars and the outlines of buildings. The material on the site is in a

large white box in the center, with no scrolling banner. Instead, there is a banner

with the words "register-its free".   Upon clicking this area, one is taken to a list of

rules – a short version for "those who hate reading rules" and a longer, full

version. In essence, the rules call for users to show respect to other opinions, to

not be offensive or childish (sic), to not do anything illegal and to use common

sense. I will come back to these rules in a moment.

Back to the home page. Across the top is the name of the site and the

tagline "Be united. Be yourself" Below are a number of menu tabs: "Mocity",

"Mocenter", Mohattan, "Morusalem", "Mouniversity", "Stadium" and "Mall". It

turns out that this site is actually hosted on servers that belong to "Mosque

Online.com", a domain that is available to individual mosques to display their own

websites. I think this accounts for the "mo" prefix to several of the titles.   In the

middle of this home page in large red letters is what I guess is a sort of mission

statement: "MoCity Come. Meet somebody new. Sunni or Shia. Share ideas.

Have some fun. Words not guns. In this city you'll will helped (sic) To be united,

be yourself."   Note that there is a sort of rap beat to this. Finally there is a "video

of the week", in this case (19 July 2013) a video performance by the Iranian

Islamic pop star Sami Yusuf.

The menu tabs bring us to the normal things we might expect. Mohattan

includes chat sites and areas dealing with counseling for marriage, divorce and

other family issues. Morusalem has links to, interestingly, "Ask A Muslim" , "Ask a

Sunni", "Ask a "Shia", "Ask a Convert" and "Ask a non-Muslim" (with an icon of a

cross).   "Mouniversity" has more technical material on internal Islamic debates

and philosophical debates, with a very prominent warning that this section is for

debate and not insults. There is also a link for news and politics. "Stadium" and

"Mall" offer links respectively to computer games and to various free downloads

like Islamic computer wallpaper.

So what to make of this site. The most striking feature is the tagline "Be

United Be Yourself". To me this suggests a basic tension in the target population.

First of course is the call for unity. This call has particular resonance for a

community that is still largely immigrant or first-generation American and consists

of people from a variety of backgrounds and which also faces external

misunderstanding and discrimination.   Although from the outside, the North

American Muslim community can look somewhat monolithic, the fact is that

internally it is extremely fractured.   This internal fractiousness stems from a

number of causes. One is the sheer number of different countries and cultures of

origin. For example, one mosque I know of in Cleveland has a battle every year of

when to begin the holy month of Ramadan because members come from areas

that have different traditions or customs on how to determine when the first day

of the month occurs. These tensions are exacerbated by tensions back home,

Syrian Alawis or Iranian Shiites in a Sunni community, for example, or poor

Somalis in a mosque with Pakistani bankers and physicians in the leadership

positions.   I know of one mosque again in Cleveland which insists on having the

Friday chutba, or sermon, delivered in Arabic even though no one in the mosque

understands Arabic, including the speaker, who reads from a transliterated

collection of sermons dating in fact back to Ottoman times.   In short, all the

tensions and emotions of the Arab and Muslim world echo within the American

Muslim community, especially among the newer arrivals. Hence the repeated

warnings to be civil, to engage in debate and not insults, and to respect

differences.   This reflects both the reality of the community and a step toward

Americanization.

The second part of the tagline is be yourself.   I take this to be in part

a normal feature of any immigrant community. The parents may still have a

strong identity as Pakistanis, Syrians, Egyptians, Somalis, Tunisians or whatever,

but the American born and raised generation does not necessarily have that

identity.   Clearly users of the site are assumed to want a Muslim identity,

whatever that might mean, but also want to be Americans. How does one

generate that sense of self and still be part of a community that is fractured and

regarded by outsiders with suspicion. This is an existential reality with which the

site seems to be grappling.

The last feature I want to point out is the "Morusalem" links to asking

questions. Unlike the previous sites, this offers a variety of perspectives, one can

ask a Muslim or a Sunni or a Shiite. There is room for interesting questions here

about the difference between being a Muslim as opposed to a Sunni or Shiite and

also what it means to be united and then give these options. Getting into the

answer to these questions requires virtually a paper in itself, but the mere

question affords some insight into the internal dynamics of the site's perceived

clientele.

What can we learn about contemporary religious communities from

this all too brief survey of websites? The first is that despite the serious nature of

their diverse missions, these sites all share some foundational features. All are

relatively intitive, feel open and accessible, and have a sort of breezy style, and

address what seem to be common themes of popular interest: love, answers to

general religious questions, advice for difficult personal or family issues.   You can

compare this to what it often feels like entering an unfamiliar religious building of

an established congregation. I was also struck by how similar the layouts of three

were to each other: colored background framing a white field that consisted of a

banner topped with a series of menu tabs. There was also an ample supply of

pictures and images, to a lesser extent on the Islamic site. Some of this might be

a function of how websites in general are designed, but I can tell you that not all

religious websites are like that.   I would venture to say that this commonality we

experienced in our brief visits suggests that all these sites understand themselves

as addressing a similar audience, that is, educated American young people. In

other words, in a typical American way, they are addressing the market. This

larger demographic reality, it seems, transcends, or underlies, the religious

differences. I would also say in this commonality we gain a window into the

American religious mind altogether.

Built on this basis, however, are somewhat different approaches to

the intended audience. The Chabad (Jewish) site, for example, the more topical

pieces share space with more traditional materials – about the Rebbe, about the

weekly Torah portion, about Jewish religious practice. This is perfectly consistent

with the site's claim to be purveying "true and authentic" Judaism. It is also a way

for the site to indicate its Chabad roots in a more indirect way. The subliminal

message is that other Jewish sites will not give you the quality of authenticity that

this site will; that in fact this site is somehow non- or post-denominatinal.

The Catholic site is more upfront about its denominational position. It

openly notes that it is providing specifically Catholic answers and if fact clearly

distinguishes itself at the outset as a Catholic as opposed to a generic Christian

(presumably Protestant) space. This no doubt reflects the origin of the site as a

counter to attacks from a local Protestant evangelical congregation.   I also found

it somewhat surprising that the site did not indicate the source of its authority, its

mandatum indicating it has authority to teach in accordance with the apostolic

constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*. To be sure the lay apostolate that runs the

website is under the auspices of the Diocese of San Diego, as we noted, but this

relationship is not clearly mentioned. I can only speculate that this may reflect a

sense that potential users may self-identify as Catholics but feel somewhat

alienated by the Church hierarchy.

The Islamic site is also clearly religious but is more like the Chabad site in

that it foregrounds its non-or post-denominationalism, with room for both Sunnis

and Shiites (and presumably others). What distinguishes it from Chabad is its very

open call for inter-Muslim tolerance and civic behavior. In fact in contrast to the

other two sites, it presents itself less as the place to find "the" answer and more

as a place for Muslims struggling with their identity to come together to share

common concerns. You can still get a Sunni or a Shiite answer (or interestingly, a

generic Muslim answer), and there are fora to encourage inter-denominational

discussion and debate (the rules spell out, by the way, that it in such a debate you

are to remember that you are attacking an argument not a member, and that

disagreeing with a scholar is OK, insulting the scholar is not).   In the various rules

regulating the fora, there are 29 rules, we can see, I submit, that the highly

charged tensions of the Muslim world carrying over into the American scene. This

suggests further that the common American-ness of the intended audience is not

yet strong enough to counteract attachment to the country and/or culture of the

user's family origins; a dynamic less true in the Catholic and Jewish communities.

Let me sum up with a few concluding observations. As an anthropologist of

religion, I am interested in among other things, sacred space. One can learn a

good deal about the deep assumptions of a religious community from the way it

structures its holy spaces, physically, ritually and emotionally. And one of the

most meaningful aspects of such structures is the portal, that is the way entry

from and exit to the secular or profane is managed. Of course to interpret these

structures adequately one has to parse their symbolism, meaning one has to be

able to tap into the system of symbols that give meaning to that community, as

Geertz, and others have shown. This process, I want to argue, is *mutando*

mutandis, the same on the internet, although of course religious or sacred space

comes in the form not of physical sites but of web sites. By looking at how these

are structured, how the portals are conceived, and which cultural symbols they

deploy and how, we can adduce, just as we can from physical space, a sense of

the sacred and religious meaning that animates the group. In this survey I have

looked at only three sites, really little more than portals, one from each of three

very internally complex religious traditions. Nonetheless, I think it is possible

even from this brief glimpse to see there is a wealth of insight available about

where American religion in the age of the internet may be heading. To go back to

the thought of "Tip" O'Neil with which I began this exploration, religious meaning

is local, we are now dealing with, we might say, a new "local", namely the website

you associate with, or become in some sense a member of, in your own home.

From these kinds of localities, we can learn about the religious landscapes and the

religious communities they construct, that are the product of the emerging age of

computers. There is a wealth of information and insight here if we just can learn

to mine it.