

Religion and the Cybernetic Diaspora: A Theoretical Exploration of Lived Hinduism in America through a Jewish Lens

By Peter Margolis

My project is an exploration of the ways that religion can be deployed on the Internet to shape and sustain ethnic identity and attachment to, and involvement with, the homeland in diasporic populations. Although it will use currently existing examples, it is by nature speculative and does not pretend to any technological determinism, but rather proposes a possible way of perceiving an emerging phenomenon. Nevertheless, the guiding idea is that a technology as powerful as the Internet must inevitably exert an influence on any society that uses it. While the focus of my doctoral project is on the Jewish diaspora, this article will examine the experience of Indian Hindus in the United States and draw occasional comparisons with that of Jews, which I will confine mostly to the notes. The reasons for this similarity of experience cluster around certain commonalities between the Jewish and Hindu diasporas in America: non-Christian religion, religious pluralism, relatively low levels of ritual observance, strong interconnectedness between religion and ethnicity, and perceived identity between religion and attachment to an ethnic homeland.¹ For both diasporic communities, the ethnic identity supported by religion encompasses more than the confession of faith to include a broad set of cultural signifiers.²

Crossing the Online/Offline Divide

It bears mentioning at the outset that this inquiry goes beyond aspects of religion that take place entirely on the Internet. While much has been written about social phenomena and religious activities that take place online, attention to the interaction between real and virtual spaces, and the recognition that nearly all activities—offline as well as online—are mediated by the Internet today is more recent. This evolving understanding has been conceptualized as a series of “waves” in the academic study of religion on the Internet: “In the first wave of research on religion and cyberspace, computers and the Internet could (and probably would) do anything. The Internet could create new religions existing only in cyberspace....In the second wave of research on religion in cyberspace, the significance of computer networks is not neglected, but is put into a more realistic perspective.” As Morten T. Højsgaard writes, “The Internet does not generate religion, only people do....The allegedly pure cyber-religious sites *are* being produced and used by persons who do not live their entire lives ‘on the screen.’”³ Christopher Helland in “Online Religion as Lived Religion”⁴ proposes a distinction in the second wave of religion in cyberspace between two broad categories: *religion online* and *online religion*. Religion online constitutes the preponderance of the religious presence on the Internet. It consists of institutionally sanctioned hierarchies, agendas, and activities, mostly of existing organizations but also of new ones, primarily offering one-to-many online communication (broadcasting) about rituals and activities that take place in traditional, local venues. In contrast to this, online religion refers to religious institutions whose existence is made possible by the Internet, where the religious activities of their members can cross the online/offline divide and where the members themselves play an interactive role in determining the nature of the organization’s activities.

With regard to the online/offline intersection as it applies to the experience of the homeland for members of diasporic communities, previous research by both Christopher Helland in “Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier”⁵ and Katerina Diamandaki in “Virtual Ethnicity and Digital Diasporas”⁶ examine only the online component. Somewhat more usefully, Maria Bakardjieva in *Internet Society* rejects the dichotomies of virtual versus real community and public versus private space in theoretical approaches to the Internet,⁷ while Mia Lövheim emphasizes the influence of offline influences on the online experiences of individuals.⁸ Ananda Mitra and Rae Lynn Schwatz⁹ conceptualize a true symbiosis of online

and offline spaces—"cybernetic space"—that is highly applicable to the ways in which the computer-mediated diasporic experience is lived by corporeal human beings. (I will return to the concept of cybernetic space later in this article.) It is thus useful to think of research on this thorough-going interpenetration of online and offline as representing the "third wave" of Internet research.

What Is Hinduism?

Hinduism traditionally defies the Western concept of a religion differentiated by a single, dominant doctrine, and may best be defined as the predominant, indigenous collection of traditions of the Indian subcontinent. In his discussion of the cultural milieu that produced the *Bhagavad Gita*, Ajay Shukla writes:

People of this area were later to be labeled as Hindus and the philosophies they developed, even though they were diverse, were grouped together and called the philosophy of Hinduism, although no such thing as Hinduism was ever founded or propagated. It would be technically more accurate to call these philosophies as thoughts of ancient Indian civilization.¹⁰

Under the pressure of colonial rule, for purposes of organization and control, and influenced by both Western conceptions of religion as a discrete and definable entity and by imperial condescension toward the "natives," the myriads of Hindu spiritual practices were defined as a religion. This necessitated the delineation of the components of that religion, just as the essential elements of Christianity could be listed and differentiated from other religions. While this served the purposes of the British colonial rulers, it also stimulated internal Indian efforts at ethno-religious self-definition as part of the nationalist project. Thus, the Indian Supreme Court felt constrained in 1995 to offer the following definition of Hinduism:

Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence; recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are diverse; and the realization of the truth that the number of gods to be worshipped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of the Hindu religion.¹¹

This "Modern Hinduism"¹² constitutes a very large tent indeed under which to include the varieties of Hindu belief and practice. The response of Hindu nationalist movements and social organizations has been the promulgation of "orthodox" Hinduism, inevitably resulting in a plethora of competing definitions, programs, and recommendations for practice purporting to represent the original, "eternal" Hinduism as a systematic religion,¹³ in effect a multiplicity of orthodoxies in response to the modernist penchant for categorization. Hinduism, as sociologist of religion Peter Beyer concludes, has been shaped for internal Indian purposes and presented in a global context by internal and external forces as a "modern construction" that can take its place "as a differentiated religion beside others."¹⁴ This Hinduism *as a religion*, along with its many ethnic components, constitutes the portable heritage of the Indian Hindu diaspora. It is also the defined, delimited, and demonstrable Hinduism that can be recast in discrete "chunks" or "objects" of content, information, and activities, and made accessible via the Internet.

Hinduism as a Vehicle for Preserving Ethnic Identity

Nearly 60 years ago, sociologist Will Herberg wrote: "The newcomer is expected to change many things about him as he becomes American—nationality, language, culture. One thing, however, he is not expected to change—and that is his religion."¹⁵ While Herberg posited

that, with the dissolution of the national ethnic identity of the immigrant generation, what remained for a subsequent generation to preserve was their religion, he noted that this formulation does not adequately express the experience of ethno-religious immigrant communities such as the Jews,¹⁶ and for my purposes here, following Mordecai M. Kaplan,¹⁷ Indian Hindus. Herberg described the consolidation of the place of religion in the Americanization process according to a three-generational model encapsulated in the quip by Marcus Hansen, "what the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember."¹⁸ He could not have anticipated the ways that the Internet, in conjunction with changes in the nature of transnational migration, has the capacity to accelerate and compress Herberg's tri-generational model.¹⁹ As I will show here, the experiences of ethnicity and diaspora—like every other aspect of contemporary life—have been altered by the growing ubiquity of the Internet.²⁰

While religion plays a role in preserving Hindu identity, Min found that for 73% of the Indian Hindu informants in his 2002-2003 study, the importance of religion was emphasized for its ability to strengthen ethnic heritage and identity, rather than to inculcate a confessional orientation.²¹ Min writes: "For most Indian Hindus, their religion is the most significant component of their Indian heritage, and thus their Hindu background enhances their Indian identity."²² The preservation of Indian ethnicity through religious observance, much of it home- rather than temple-based, and sometimes coerced, is also behind the importance attached by parents to children's participation in religious activities.²³ And while the residual effect of this religious upbringing rarely expresses itself in adult religiosity—62% of Min's interviewees visited a temple "not at all or a few times a year"²⁴—most Indian Hindus celebrate the most important religious holidays, as well as a selection of other practices and celebrations that have personal meaning for them. For example, 52% of the interview subjects not living with their parents "celebrated one or more religious holidays at their own homes, usually Diwali and another holiday."²⁵ The linkage between Hindu religion and Indian ethnicity is perhaps best summed up in the responses to Min's survey question, "Do you think your practice of Hindu religion signifies your Indian identity?" Of the three categories of responses (definitely yes, yes, and no), 30% of respondents said definitely yes, and another 62% said yes.²⁶ This Indian diasporic identity is constructed from selected "holidays, food, music, and other elements of Indian folk culture."²⁷ Given the ubiquity of Internet access during the period of Min's research in 2002-2003, it is quite surprising that his research completely ignores the process of access to these elements via the Internet. This process is discussed in the theoretical discussions that follow.

Theoretical Discussions

In examining the capacity of the Internet to contribute to the cultivation and preservation of Hindu ethnicity in America, I will propose four intersecting concepts that I employ in my study of computer-mediated Judaism. The first is the concept of *religion as communication in global society* formulated by Peter Beyer.²⁸ The second is the concept of *symbolic ethnicity and symbolic religion*. This concept, originally formulated by sociologist Herbert Gans and as used here modified by demographer Uzi Rebhun, refers to the use of religious signifiers to create forms of identification based on voluntary affiliation with a community that no longer has the traditional authority to exert social control over the individual.²⁹ The third is sociologist Yaacov Yadgar's concept of *traditionalism*, the ongoing dialogue with, and choice of, elements of the established religious culture to be given authority in the project of constructing personal and collective identity.³⁰ The fourth is the concept of *cybernetic space*, the synthesis of the real and the virtual into a common experiential space proposed by communications scholars Ananda Mitra and Rae Lynn Schwartz.³¹

To illustrate each theoretical approach, I will apply it to the three illustrative Hindu websites that appear in Figures 1-3 below. They were chosen as representing varieties of transnationalism and interactivity, as opposed to the great majority of temple websites that are both local examples of "religion online" as defined above.³² There is, of course, no

suggestion that the selected websites constitute a comprehensive overview of Hinduism on the Internet. The websites do, however, provide the vehicles to substantiate the speculative trend of this article. The websites are:

Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh USA <http://www.hssus.org>³³



Figure 1: Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (Volunteer Association) USA

(Source: <http://www.hssus.org>)

This website of the North American branch of an international organization serves as a "gateway" for social, communal, and educational activities, and provides a mechanism for some 140 local chapters to communicate with each other using various forms of social networking.

Saranam.com: Online Puja Service <http://www.saranam.com>³⁴

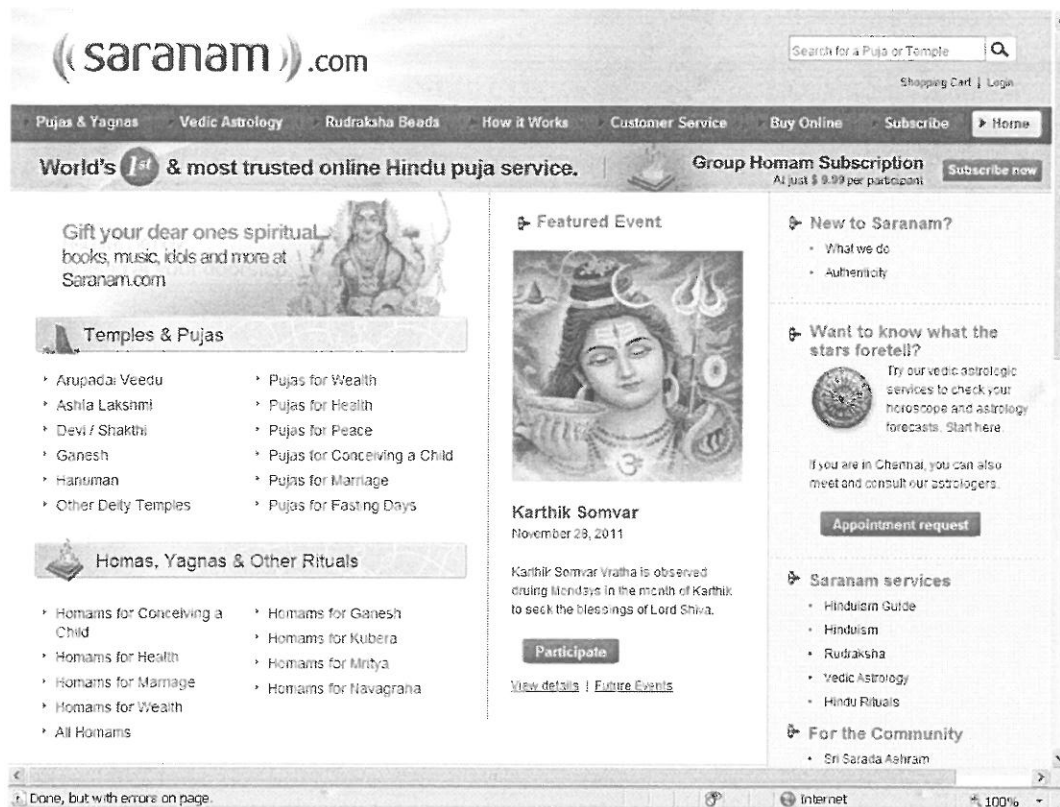
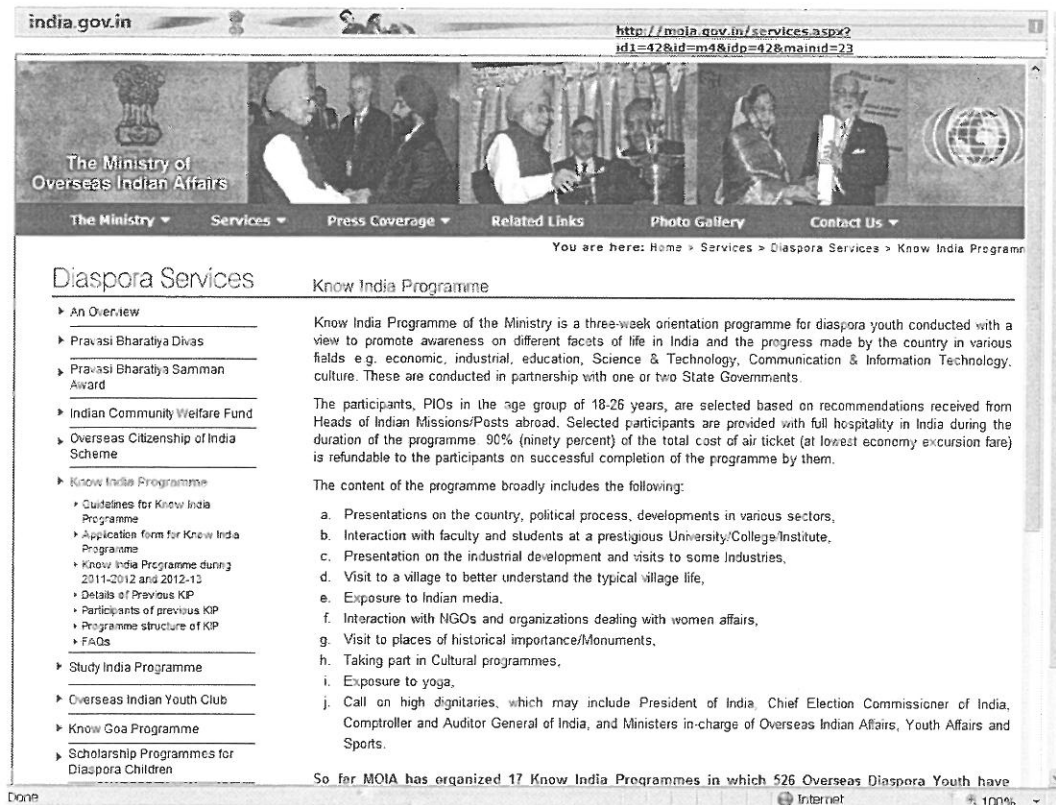


Figure 2: Saranam.com: Online Puja Service

(Source: <http://www.saranam.com>)

This commercial website, similar to numerous others,³⁵ enables diaspora Hindus to request—for a fee—*pujas* (religious devotions) to be performed on their behalf in India. The website also includes links to Hindu educational materials.

Know India Programme <http://india.gov.in/overseas/diaspora/nri.php>**Figure 3: Know India Programme (Government of India)**(Source: <http://india.gov.in/overseas/diaspora/nri.php>)

With information located only on the Government of India website, this program is a form of highly subsidized "diaspora tourism" designed to strengthen connections to the homeland for young Indian Hindus living abroad.³⁶

Religion as Communication in Global Society

In examining the place of the Internet in sustaining diasporic ethnicity, the approach of Peter Beyer to religion as a form of communication is particularly useful. Of course, everything that is located on the Internet is, by definition, a form of communication. But Beyer places Internet communication in the historical context of less instantaneous forms of communication and emphasizes that the universalizing tendency of globalization is not the only way that communication can operate:

The Internet, air travel and cellular satellite telephones do not just favor the operations of transnational companies and state surveillance. They also allow the anti-systemic, the alternative, the oppositional and the local greater communicative space. Another way of putting this result is to say that enhanced means of communication sharpen the capacity for particularization *and* for universalization. Social forms can be differently appropriated; different social forms have better possibilities for wider global distribution.³⁷

The Indian Hindu diaspora can thus readily and legitimately construct a substantive Internet presence for Hinduism, even as the basic fact of its transnational existence is an element of globalization. Moreover, for my purposes here, the Internet-based practice of religion blurs the online/offline binary, since religion "obviously needs human beings to carry out the religious communication, but it is the communication itself that constitutes religion socially, not the bodies...or even the 'faith' of the individuals participating...it is the performance of the communication that constitutes religion socially."³⁸ Within this formulation of religious communication as embodied practice, migration

undermines the ability of place or space to act as a "natural symbol" for social difference. People, considered now as loci of communication, carry their communicative orientations and habits, their particularity, with them, but to a different social context. Migration is thereby a way of universalizing various particulars, but also of particularizing universals as migrants generate adaptations of what they carry with them...and thus contribute to the transformation or at least pluralization of the original form.³⁹

Beyer's concept of religion as a form of communication in global society is readily applicable as a means to understand the three representative Hindu websites chosen for this article. In Figure 1, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh volunteer association communicates the identity of Hinduism as a religion in the Western sense, while enabling the enactment of "Hindu values" that are both unique to the diasporic community and accessible to the wider society, both through public service activities and social networking tools. Moreover, as a computer-mediated vehicle of social organization, it constitutes a new type of Hinduism, responding to the need for a new type of religious communication in the spatial and social space of the United States. In Figure 2, the Saranam.com Online Puja service communicates the ritual expectations that are directed at individuals, as well as providing an online "Hinduism guide" in the form of a differentiated religion consistent with pattern required of "Modern Hinduism." By the act of purchasing *puja* services in India temples, the diasporic Indian Hindu engages in an embodied practice, by proxy but also in the form of a newly constructed electronic action, contributing a new form of Hindu worship. In Figure 3, the Know India Programme—information about which is communicated to the Indian diaspora exclusively via Internet links on the websites of India's diplomatic missions worldwide—reifies a new transnational variety of ethnic identity that reinforces the integration of Indian and Hindu identities that, as we have seen, is central to the diasporic Indian Hindu experience. In this case, an embodied form of communication in the earlier sense of travel is fused with computer communications and intended for those who will complete their travel to create a pool of professional, cultural, and political human capital back in the diaspora.

Symbolic Ethnicity and Symbolic Religion

In his work on the acculturation and assimilation of ethnic groups into the United States, sociologist Herbert J. Gans looked closely at the experience of the descendants of the Jewish immigrants who arrived from Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴⁰ The result was a rather unflattering picture of superficiality that has been succinctly described by one of its critics, demographer Uzi Rebhun.⁴¹ In this process of Americanization, Gans claimed,

new ethnic behaviors and affiliations, while more publicly visible than earlier ones, are nonetheless merely symbolic expressions of concern with identity and group consciousness. These forms of identification, he argues, reflect aspirations for self-fulfillment, but lack structural cohesion, are detached from the practice of an ongoing ethno-religious culture....The way people feel about their ethnic and religious identity can take many forms, insofar as they do not

demand strong commitments or penetrate into everyday lifestyles. These behaviors include, according to Gans, the strengthening of ties to an "old country", tours to religious sites, occasional participation in religious worship, and the increased importance of home-based ceremonies....Yet another source of symbolic identification is the expanding availability of ethnic foods.⁴²

From Min's discussion of Indian Hindus as an ethno-religious community, and from examples presented here, it is clear that many of the elements of Gans's symbolic ethnicity and symbolic religion apply. There are no doubt members of that community who see in this a painful weakening and dilution of identity that is to be greatly regretted. However, Rebhun's critique of Gans, based on an analysis of ten indicators of Jewish identification clustered into four major blocks (ritual practices, institutional affiliation, informal social networks, and attachment to Israel),⁴³ suggests a more optimistic assessment:

Taking into account the tendencies for personal fulfillment and individualism in American life, there is little reason to believe that these behavioral patterns will not last for a long time. However, we might want to reconsider whether such behaviors as...the celebration of major holidays which involves family gathering, occasional participation in religious worship and attachment to country of ancestry are merely "symbolic" expressions of group belonging....A few religious or ceremonial activities can serve as mechanisms by which the meaning of group belonging becomes personal experience rather than a mere symbol, thus constituting the infrastructure of an individual's religious belief....[F]rom the subjective point of view, this group commitment is far from being symbolic; rather, it is true, authentic, and reaffirms the inherent connections of personal and group identity.⁴⁴

It is this more positive and charitable understanding of symbolic ethnicity and symbolic religion that suggests itself in the analysis of the three Hindu websites presented here. In practice, they constitute a reconfiguration of religiosity away from communally defined ritual proficiency and toward voluntary, affective, and malleable social connections infused with ethnic-religious value. By virtue of being publicly accessible (that is, they are not password protected, do not require membership, or the like), all of them constitute an online component of the "public face" of Hinduism as it appears to the majority society and to Hindus themselves. Likewise, participation in this approach to Hinduism is by definition voluntary: Obviously no one can be compelled to access a Hindu website or to partake of any of the activities presented there.

For any diasporic Hindu who so chooses, however, our three sample websites—and of course many others—offer a rich buffet of cultural and religious choices—or symbols—from which an individual can construct a Hindu life around those elements that confer personal meaning. The Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (Figure 1) is the most public of the three, offering choices of social and philanthropic activities and a selection of social networking tools to satisfy those for whom social contact is an important—or perhaps the only—variety of symbolic ethnicity that appeals. The Saranam.com Online Puja service of (Figure 2)—again, voluntary, noncoercive, and publicly accessible—purveys symbolic religion in a commercial idiom, offering choices from prominently displayed menus of religious options and immediate connections with the homeland. One can imagine the constellation of family and personal feelings, sentiments, and influences that would bring a diaspora Hindu to this type of site to honor family, seek guidance, or obtain knowledge; it would be both unkind and poor scholarship to follow Gans uncritically and dismiss this as mere symbolism lacking in substance. The Know India Programme (Figure 3) shifts the center of balance of the diasporic experience by invoking India itself as the dominant symbol of Hinduism in its full ethno-religious sense by orchestrating what must inevitably be a highly schematic encounter with religious and cultural activities intended to inform life in the diaspora.

Because of the origin of this theoretical approach in the study of the Jewish diaspora, it may be instructive at this point to bring Jews and Judaism up from the notes and briefly sketch some parallels between online symbolic Hindu religion and ethnicity and their Jewish equivalents in the positive sense of by Rebhun's critique of Gans. For example, the Birthright Israel heritage travel program generates Jewish excitement through exposure to a highly symbolic, schematic, and closely choreographed Israel that is a far cry from actually living there, but is not infrequently a life-changing experience.⁴⁵ And it is possible as never before to "mine" the constellation of readily available Jewish symbols to synthesize an entire Jewish life: ritual objects will come directly to the home of anyone who has a Web link and a credit card, Jewish wisdom is available on tap from countless "ask the rabbi" websites, and traditional (that is, Orthodox) Jewish organizations such as Chabad.org offer episodic Jewish experiences that fit easily into an otherwise secular lifestyle and can be located in a Google search that takes less than a second.

Traditionalism

Sociologist Yaacov Yadgar, in *Masortim* [traditionalists] in *Israel: Modernity without Secularization*,⁴⁶ describes the process of Jewish identity construction among Israeli Jews whose forebears emigrated from Arabic-speaking countries. He presents an ongoing discourse with tradition—filtered through the lens of a dominant, secularizing modernity—that closely resembles the fluidity of possibilities inherent in computer-mediated religion. But in rejecting a religious/secular binary, Yadgar presents traditionalism as a framework in which the past is perceived in the present by a specific social collective, and in conversation with modernity:

The lifestyle adopted by traditionalists itself expresses a dialogic relationship, faithful and simultaneously critical, to the tradition. This lifestyle, with the many practical choices and decisions that it expresses, is in effect the ongoing management of a critical dialog with the tradition: it identifies its essence (and in so doing also indicates its non-essential elements), interprets it and constantly updates the faithful expression of it in contexts that are regarded as essentially "modern" and "secularized."⁴⁷

This process of interpretation of tradition yields a set of institutions and symbols that establish the boundaries of possible meanings and builds social and cultural realities and gives them meaning. Yadgar writes: "I trust that the essential outlines raised here as the basis of the traditionalists in Israel can serve as a framework for the shaping of closely held identities in other contexts."⁴⁸

As we observe the ways that the Hindu ethno-religious diasporic identity is evolving in computer-mediated form, it appears to be a middle way that symbolically privileges an orthodox understanding of Hinduism within a dominant secular framework, very much like Yadgar's formulation of traditionalists. For example, Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh in Figure 1 makes no attempt to offer anything other than a traditional explanation of Hinduism. Its innovation is confined to the communication vehicle and to the axiomatic personal autonomy of participants to choose to participate, or not, in religious and social activities. There is no attempt, however, to reform, re-interpret, or re-invent the Hindu traditional practices offered. Likewise, the Saranam.com Online Puja service of Figure 2 does not question, challenge, or critique in any way the traditional services offered, beyond placing the transaction online. Again, the innovation lies in the individual's choice—in the spirit of the secular environment—to avail themselves of the service, or not, and in the sophisticated method of communication. As in Yadgar's formulation, the ongoing dialogue with tradition that informs those choices is subject to change over time due to personal motivations and life events and influences; the content of the religious ritual, however, is not.⁴⁹ And the Know India Programme (Figure 3) uses Internet communication to choreograph an Indian

experience for young diaspora India Hindus in which they visit a traditional village and important monuments and gain some exposure to yoga; while the participants no doubt draw their own conclusions about which elements resonate with them, there is no suggestion that the trip constitutes a venue in which to critique the actual content.⁵⁰

Cybernetic Space

The concept of cybernetic space, developed by Ananda Mitra and Rae Lynn Schwartz, proposes a new way of looking at "the relationship between spaces, culture and identity in the synthetic space we tend to live in."⁵¹ Using metaphors taken primarily from geography, Mitra and Schwartz note that much of the discourse on the nature of movement through physical space in its political, social, religious, and national aspects is reflected in discussion of the Internet. Thus, one speaks of the "information superhighway," "visiting a web site," or the label "cyberspace."⁵² The juxtaposition and interpenetration of controlled physical space and boundless cyberspace creates a contradiction where "users can immediately disconnect from the real space to enter the discursive world of cyberspace. At that moment of entry, the boundaries dissolve and real space recedes into a mere shell that needs to be occupied to reside in cyberspace."⁵³

Mitra and Schwartz propose a resolution to this contradiction in the concept of "cybernetic space" that is a synthesis of real space and virtual space. It is immediately obvious how this concept is applicable to the discussion of ethno-religious diasporic identity:

Elements of space such as location, nationality and movement become relatively less important within cybernetic space where we live simultaneously within the realm of physical nations and virtual communities. The ideas of nationality and diaspora become less critical since it is possible to remain physically tethered to one place but discursively connected to a different virtual community. In such cases, looking at identity as connected to either the real or the virtual is unproductive. With the emergence of cybernetic space, identity too is a product of the allegiances in cybernetic space, where some of the allegiances are grounded in real space, and others are rooted in cyberspace.⁵⁴

Cybernetic space is a broad enough concept to enfold within itself the other theoretical concepts examined here: religion as communication in global society, symbolic ethnicity and symbolic religion, and traditionalism. Returning once again to our three Hindu websites, it is now possible to look at them through a cybernetic lens.

As we have already noted, Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (Figure 1) integrally enlists Internet communications to enable the Hindu individual or group to construct a social reality that is both physical and virtual. The Saranam.com Online Puja service (Figure 2) represents the electronic symbiosis of physical locations in India and the diaspora, combined with a healthy dose of capitalism, creating an archetypal cybernetic space. This cybernetic space can be further enhanced and extended by live video webcast of the *puja* ritual purchased, as is indeed the case with other services of this type.⁵⁵ Writing in a book published in 2004 and reflecting older Internet technologies, Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan note that in cybernetic space,

The devotees of different gurus, temples, and religious organizations in India can go online to participate virtually in a variety of festivals and rites. When traveling they can even continue a lively discourse with their guru, meditate, or experience *satsang* (a group meeting for guidance and support) through the use of e-mail, Internet Relay Chat, and Webcasts.⁵⁶

The Know India Programme (Figure 3), like the Birthright Israel experience, uses the Internet as its point of departure to construct an affective experience in physical space. Both have distinct educational and social goals that, it is hoped, the program alumni will retain after their return. Both are predicated, at the most basic level, on transnational connections and communication between various centers of their respective diasporas. The ubiquity of online social networks greatly increases the likelihood that participants will use them to maintain contact, schedule reunions, share photos, trade memories, and perhaps even investigate another program. Stated another way, the participants are invited to become permanent residents in their ethno-religious cybernetic spaces.

Concluding Speculations

I return now to the role of this article in my doctoral project on the emergence and evolution of computer-mediated Judaism and the questions and research tasks suggested by the observations and works cited here. What is the nature of the transnational ethnic connection implicit in online/offline cultural activities? Can computer networks facilitate a transnational dialogue? Can they provide a framework of maintaining ethno-religious identity in the face of declining public worship and historical forms of ethnic affiliation? Can we map the ethnic world as interconnected centers of diasporic creativity? How do we fully explore the self-created identities synthesized from the elements available for acquisition in the online "marketplace" of tradition and enacted in physical space, and how can we tell if these constructions are legitimate? Above all, can this blending of ancient sources, modern autonomy, affordable transportation, market forces, and powerful, accessible information technology be channeled into affective, sustainable, and transmissible contemporary identities?

Peter Beyer, writing about Hindus in Canada, speculates:

South Asian migrants to Canada are, among other things, carriers of certain religious forms which they may or may not identify as Hinduism. Their new situation in Canada, however, encourages precisely such an imagining of "their religion" as Hinduism and adaptation of that form so that it becomes not simply a transplanted copy of what prevailed in India, but a different sort of Hinduism which they can then perhaps carry back to India or elsewhere as an authentic version of that religion.⁵⁷

How might this express itself through the way of conceptualizing the cybernetic diasporic experience proposed here, and how might it be express itself in Jewish experience? Israeli futurist Tsvi Bisk offers the following observation and speculation:

[G]lobalization and the affirmation of cultural pluralism are enabling various ethnic Diasporas to maintain and even enrich their cultural heritages far away from their homelands. The question of sustaining a Diaspora identity is no longer an exclusively Jewish issue....The Internet, joined to the fact of Israel's existence as the largest Jewish community in the world, changes the very concept of *aliya* [immigration to Israel]. We may now talk about the plausibility of *intellectual aliya*....In the Internet world we can envision a multitude of Jewish cultural centers, numerous cultural nodes existing on a global Jewish cultural network, reflecting the rich cultural pluralism that characterizes every Jewish community in the world today.⁵⁸

One has only to substitute the references to Jews and Israel with others about Hindus and India to see the similarities in the possibilities of these ethno-religious diasporas. Examining the ways in which the Indian Hindu diaspora engages with analogous issues points to a certain commonality of experience and responses. Particularly intriguing is the

idea that "diasporas create their homelands."⁵⁹ By wresting responsibility for ethnic survival and identity creation away from a traditional diaspora-homeland dichotomy and amplifying the role of computer-mediated human agency, online religion necessarily places a premium on self-directed creation. Expanding on Bisk's concept of internetworked "cultural nodes" and Beyer's portable Hindu innovations, is it perhaps reasonable to envision a future where lines of communication passing through global centers of dispersion and intersecting through the traditional homeland may yield a truly transnational amalgam of religious expressions that is simultaneously rooted in tradition, innovative, and accepted as authentic? The similar diasporic experiences of two of the world's oldest civilizations, ironically one of the largest and one of the smallest, suggests that the reconstruction of tradition and ethnicity in cybernetic space is indeed a viable, if speculative, lens through which to apprehend the contemporary situation.

Notes

¹ Pyong Gap Min, *Preserving Ethnicity through Religion in America: Korean Protestants and Indian Hindus across Generations* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 15-19. Jews and Hindus admittedly represent different waves of immigration to the United States and different stages in their entrance into contemporary American society. However, the commonalities between them, operating now in the accelerated space of instantaneous communications, suggest that the Hindu experience may provide a vehicle to shed light on, and perhaps to some degree generalize, the role of the Internet in constructing Jewish ethnic identity in their respective diasporas. Likewise, for both Indian Hindus and Jews, the civil religion of their homelands is predominately identified with the majority religion of their homeland—respectively Hinduism and Judaism—although in both cases there is a sizeable minority populations, the largest of which in both countries is Muslim. One could make the case that most of the world's Hindus live in India, although more Jews live in the diaspora than in Israel. However, Israel has been the largest Jewish population in the world since 2010. Sergio DellaPergola, *World Jewish Population, 2010* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2010), http://www.jewishdatabank.org/Reports/World_Jewish_Population_2010.pdf (accessed November 17, 2011).

² Mordecai M. Kaplan enumerates the constituent elements of a civilization in a manner that serves the study of Judaism and Hinduism equally well: land, language, mores, laws and folkways, folk sanctions, folk arts, and social structure. Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 186-208. Kaplan also recognizes the similarity between Judaism and Hinduism when he observes: "The Jewish civilization differs from all except the Hindu and the Far Eastern civilizations in deriving both the religious and the national sanctions from one and the same historic background, and that altogether its own" (Kaplan, 199).

³ Morten T. Højsgaard, "Cyber-religion: On the cutting edge between the virtual and the real," in *Religion and Cyberspace*, ed. Morten T. Højsgaard and Margit Warburg (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 51. Representative of first wave research and understandings of religion on the Internet are Barbara E. Brasher, *Give Me that Online Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004), and Jeff Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How New Technology is Changing Our Spiritual Lives* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

⁴ Christopher Helland, "Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet," *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet 1.1, Issue on Theory and Methodology*, ed. Oliver Krüger (2005), <http://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/5823> (accessed November 17, 2011). As a cursory Google® search will

easily demonstrate, the overwhelming majority of Hindu temples and Jewish synagogues fall into the category of "religion online."

⁵ Christopher Helland, "Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing virtual connections with sacred homelands," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12(3), article 10 (2007), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue3/helland.html> (accessed November 17, 2011).

⁶ Katerina Diamandaki, "Virtual Ethnicity and Digital Diasporas: Identity Construction in Cyberspace," *Global Media Journal* 2(2) (Spring 2003): 186.

⁷ Maria Bakardjieva, *Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005).

⁸ Mia Lövheim, "Young People, Religious Identity, and the Internet," *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 59-73.

⁹ Ananda Mitra and Rae Lynn Schwartz, "From Cyber Space to Cybernetic Space: Rethinking the Relationship between Real and Virtual Space," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 7(1), (2001), <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol7/issue1/mitra.html> (accessed November 17, 2011).

¹⁰ Ajay Shukla, *The Philosophy of Shri Bhagavad Gita* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2001), 16. See also Min, 31-36.

¹¹ Peter Beyer, *Religions in Global Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 211; 224, n.9.

¹² Min, 32.

¹³ Beyer, 189-224. Without minimizing the difference in circumstances, one can draw a rough parallel with the emergence of Jewish orthodoxy in response to the proliferation of identity options occasioned by Jewish participation in the European Enlightenment project. The concept of orthodoxy (of which there are in fact numerous variations) often serves as the touchstone of Jewish authenticity even—one might even say especially—for those who honor it in the breach. See Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Beyer, 189.

¹⁵ Will Herberg, *Protestant—Catholic—Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 23.

¹⁶ Herberg, 186-87.

¹⁷ See note 2 above.

¹⁸ Herberg, 9.

¹⁹ It is also worth noting that significant Indian Hindu immigration to the United States following the 1965 Immigration Act (Min, 47-50) roughly coincides with the primacy given to Israel by American Jews as their "adopted homeland" following Israel's victory in the Six Day War of 1967. Thus, the formative experiences of young Jews and young Hindus born in the United States in the last third of the twentieth century were shaped by the cultural and religious influence of a distant homeland. See Sergio DellaPergola, Uzi Rebhun, and Rosa Perla Raicher, "The Six-Day War and Israel-Diaspora Relations: An Analysis of Quantitative Indicators," in *The Six-Day War and World Jewry*, ed. Eli Lederhandler (Bethesda: University of Maryland Press, 2000), 11-50.

²⁰ Barry Wellman writes prolifically on the centrality of the Internet in contemporary society, for example, in Barry Wellman, "Physical Place and Cyberspace: The Rise of Personalized Networks," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25(2) (2001): 227-52.

²¹ Min, 123.

²² Min, 126.

²³ Min, 133-36.

²⁴ Min, 154.

²⁵ Min, 167. The parallelism between Min's findings and those of the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey is striking. While only 27% of American Jews attend a Jewish religious service once a month or more, 67% celebrate Passover, and 59% fast on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). United Jewish Communities, "The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01: Strength, Challenge and Diversity in the American Jewish Population" (September 2003), 7, <http://www.jewishfederations.org/page.aspx?id=46194> (accessed December 5, 2011).

²⁶ Min, 182.

²⁷ Min, 198.

²⁸ Beyer, 92-93.

²⁹ Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2 (1979): 1-20; Herbert J. Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity and Symbolic Religiosity: Towards a Comparison of Ethnic and Religious Acculturation," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17 (1994): 557-92; Uzi Rebhun, "Jewish Identification in Contemporary America: Gans's Symbolic Ethnicity and Religiosity Theory Revisited," *Social Compass* 51(3) (2004): 349-66.

³⁰ Yaacov Yadgar, *Masortim [traditionalists] in Israel: Modernity without Secularization* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter Books, 2010).

³¹ Mitra and Schwartz, "From Cyber Space to Cybernetic Space."

³² Online Hinduism is a topic that has attracted scholarly interest in its own right. At the American Association of Religions conference in Montreal in 2009, several scholars presented papers on various aspects of online Hinduism. These papers appear in *Online—Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet: Vol. 04.1 Special Issue on Aesthetics and the Dimensions of the Senses*, ed. Simone Heidbrink and Nadja Miczek (2010), <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/portal/relinternet/>. In his introductory essay "(Virtually) been there, (Virtually) done that: Examining the Online Religious Practices of the Hindu Tradition: Introduction," 148-150, <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2010/11302/pdf/08.pdf>, Christopher Helland notes that the highly visual nature of Hinduism suggests that its constellation of traditions is especially fertile ground for the assimilation of online technologies. Phyllis K. Herman examines "the situation in which the computer has become a legitimate open portal through which Hindu religious experience can pass back and forth" in "Seeing the Divine through Windows: Online Puja and Virtual Religious Experience," 151-78, <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2010/11303/pdf/09.pdf>. Nicole Karapanagiotis describes ritual practices adopted by worshippers to overcome concerns about issues of purity online in "Vaishnava Cyber-Puja: Problems of Purity and Novel Ritual Solutions," 179-95, <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2010/11304/pdf/10.pdf>. However, Heinz Scheifinger suggests that online *puja* is inconsistent with the embodied nature of Hinduism in "Hindu Embodiment and the Internet," 196-219, <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2010/11305/pdf/11.pdf> (all papers accessed July 24, 2012).

³³ Translation: "Volunteer Association."

³⁴ *Saranam* can variously mean "shelter" or "surrender," a combination of meanings suggestive of spiritual surrender to the protective shelter of a particular deity or practice, perhaps not dissimilar to the idea of Islam as "submission."

³⁵ *Puja* websites number in the hundreds are also popular in India itself and, as reported by S. Srinivasn, "Religion Online: Hindus Turn to the Internet for Prayer," *Worldwide Religion News* (from Associated Press, June 27, 2002) <http://wwrn.org/articles/13483/?&place=india§ion=internet-related> (accessed December 5, 2011).

³⁶ This program is very similar to the Israeli "Birthright" program directed at young diaspora Jews. Shaul Kelner compares the Israeli variant of diaspora tourism with similar efforts—in some cases directly inspired by the success of Birthright—directed at North American diasporic populations of Lebanese, Armenian, Chinese, Italian, Croatian, and Irish extraction—among others—some of which also include a service component to the homeland. Shaul Kelner, *Tours that Bind: Diaspora, Pilgrimage, and Israeli Birthright Tourism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010).

³⁷ Beyer, 59.

³⁸ Beyer, 92-93.

³⁹ Beyer, 59.

⁴⁰ Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity" (1979) and "Symbolic Ethnicity and Symbolic Religiosity" (1994).

⁴¹ Rebhun, 350. Gans's negative assessment of American Jewish assimilation is shared by sociologist Chaim I. Waxman: "Traditional ethnicity meant submerging the individual self to the demands of the group. The group has strong social control. Today, the group has no control and the individual does not submit. Symbolic ethnicity is modern...it is a 'community' with which one chooses to 'identify' emotionally. It is, perhaps, a psychological community but not a sociological one. Even in choosing to identify with an ethnicity, the individual picks and chooses that which he can accept and that which he rejects, much as modern religion has become pick and choose religion." Chaim I. Waxman, "The Limited Impact of the Six-Day War on America's Jews," in *The Six-Day War and World Jewry*, ed. Eli Lederhandler (Bethesda: University of Maryland Press, 2000), 113.

⁴² Rebhun, 350.

⁴³ Rebhun, 352. The "blocks" clearly have their parallels in the experience of Indian Hindus in America as reported by Min and discussed above.

⁴⁴ Rebhun, 364.

⁴⁵ See Leonard Saxe et al., *The Impact of Taglit-Birthright Israel: 2010 Update* (Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, February 2011), <http://bir.brandeis.edu/bitstream/handle/10192/24237/Jewish.Futures.02.08.11.pdf?sequence=1> (accessed December 11, 2011).

⁴⁶ Yaacov Yadgar, *Masortim [traditionalists] in Israel: Modernity without Secularization* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter Books, 2010). Translation from the Hebrew by author.

⁴⁷ Yadgar, 34-35.

⁴⁸ Yadgar, 364.

⁴⁹ The online *puja* service has its parallel in the proliferation of websites through which Jews in the diaspora can commission the traditional act of placing a note of prayer or supplication—a *tzetzal* in Yiddish—in the cracks of Jerusalem's Western Wall. This is generally done at no charge, but occasionally for a fee or a recommended donation. One website states: "If you want to send your note to The Jerusalem Western Wall, then get associated with us. We are popular as the whole process of inserting Tzetzal into Wailing Wall is shot by means of video. Then we send the video to your email address which is [mentioned in the form that you had filled. The other benefit of getting associated with us is, we comprise [*sic*] of real rabbis who accomplish the process of placing the note into Western Wall special [*sic*]. Moreover, the person will carry out all necessary procedures and ceremonies, including prayers and beatifications." Jerusalem Western Wailing Wall, http://www.jerusalemwesternwall.com/how_we_work.asp?lang=en (accessed December 8, 2011).

⁵⁰ An analogous privileging of orthodoxy as the "real" Judaism is also common on Jewish websites such as Temple Beth Israel in the Second Life® online virtual world, discussed by Julian Voloj, "Imagined Communities," in *Jewish Ideas Daily* (April 29, 2010), <http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/content/module/2010/4/29/main-feature/1/imagined->

communities (accessed December 11, 2011) or the now-defunct family education website "Mishpacha" [Hebrew for "family"]. Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, *Mishpacha: A Virtual Community for Real Jewish Families*, <http://www.mishpacha.org> (accessed December 11, 2011), where the technological sophistication of graphical presentation is in inverse proportion to ritual innovation and experimentation.

⁵¹ Mitra and Schwartz.

⁵² Mitra and Schwartz.

⁵³ Mitra and Schwartz.

⁵⁴ Mitra and Schwartz.

⁵⁵ Christopher Helland reports: "Online broadcasting of religious festivals became so popular that in January 1991, the Kumbha Mela festival was broadcast online on an even larger scale, not especially for people in India but rather for people in the UK and North America." Helland, "Diaspora on the Electronic Frontier: Developing Virtual Connections with Sacred Homelands." This finds its parallel in cybernetic Jewish space in the "Kotel Cam," a live video webcast of Jerusalem's Western Wall [Hebrew: *kotel*]. Broadcasting "24/6" (it does not operate on the Jewish Sabbath), it proclaims "It's the next best thing to being there yourself." Kotel Cam, *Virtual Jerusalem*, http://www.livekotel.com/a_freecam_1.cfm?affid=20 (accessed December 12, 2011).

⁵⁶ Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, "Introduction," *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

⁵⁷ Beyer, 59.

⁵⁸ Tsvi Bisk, *The Optimistic Jew: A Positive Vision for the Jewish People in the 21st Century* (Jerusalem: Maxanna Press, 2007), 158-59.

⁵⁹ J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.