H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paolo Apolito. *The Internet and the Madonna: Religious Visionary Experience on the Web.* Translated by Antony Shugaar. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 240 pp. $26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-02150-8.

Reviewed by Eugene Hynes
Published on H-Catholic (October, 2009)
Commissioned by Patrick J. Hayes

Working Miracles of the Madonna

In a densely argued introduction, Paolo Apolito identifies his subject as the Catholic visionary movement, largely but not exclusively Marian, that involved unprecedented numbers of seers and millions of believers in the last decades of the twentieth century. Mary appeared in more places to more people and more regularly than ever before. Apolito elucidates the causes of the phenomenal increase, describes the patterns it takes, and speculates on its likely effects. The movement proliferated through countless Web sites and electronic communications of all sorts growing exponentially in volume and density. This development, he argues, "profoundly altered the very perception of religion among a substantial number of Catholics, shifting the course of post Vatican II transformation of the Catholic Church in a completely unexpected direction" (p. 2). On superficial examination, this visionary culture seems to recreate a pre-Vatican II atmosphere, especially by and among Marianists who resented or rejected the "modernization" of that Council. But the late twentieth century, visionary culture blends elements of late modernity with archaic features to create a "pervasive eclecticism," mixing modern technology with a neo-baroque focus on visions, icons, and omens of all sorts (p. 3).

Apolito concentrates on the role of technology, especially of the Internet. Scholars recognize that promoters of apparition sites, such as Lourdes, effectively utilized the latest technology, such as railroads and newspapers, but Apolito goes well beyond providing just another example of this. If we take Lourdes as paradigmatic of traditional visions, we see a tension between the charisma of the individual seer (Bernadette Soubirous) and the authority claims of the hierarchical institutional church. Technology, however, has made it more difficult for the ecclesiastical authorities to control, channel, and regulate the visionary experience. But this does not mean that individual visionaries acquire more power and influence. After weakening institutional control, the "technologising of the visionary and the wondrous" tends to marginalize the charismatic individual seer. For every Bernadette there are hundreds of modern day visionaries, many of whom relay daily communications from on-high through ever proliferating online networks.

Messages from heaven become routine. Moreover, use of technology shifts attention from the "gifts" of a direct relationship with heaven to the technical procedures of visions and contact with the beyond. Technology is used not just to report or investigate visions and miracles but actually to produce them. The power to police the relationship between heaven and earth passes from the ecclesiastical to the technical dimension, with technology becoming the site of people's experience and the measure of "truth." "In the visionary context, the Catholic religion, a religion of faith and nonvision, is transformed imperceptively–but decisively–into a religion with a 'scientific' basis, technologically 'tested,' desubjectified and self-evident, in which in the final analysis the divine is reduced to a 'verifiable' sign, which is therefore reliable. One of the central proofs of the authenticity of apparitions today is the 'supernatural experiment' that is, the experimental verification of the detectable effects of the manifestations of celestial entities, which then implicitly becomes the very proof of the existence of those entities" (p. 14).

More than a data-bank of apparitions and other signs from heaven, the Internet becomes a place where relationships are established and contacts multiplied with other devotees, and, for worshippers, a place where heaven is directly seen and heard. While earlier technologies, such as Polaroid photography, were used to document a "world beyond," the Web creates visions of heaven "in there," in its own virtual world. The more immersed the individual Web surfer becomes in this self-referential world, the less the authority of the ecclesia

or the prestige of the charismatic seer-visionary, and the more likely he or she will be overcome by the Web's dynamic itself.

Chapter 1 documents the proliferation of apparitions. Despite difficulties in definition and measurement, it is clear that apparitions snowballed in numbers in the late twentieth century. Apolito shrewdly assesses a range of causes, inside and especially beyond the church. The election of the sympathetic Pope John Paul II in 1978 was important for some traditionalist Catholics. In the wider culture, the collapse of the ideology of progress reduced if it did not eliminate faith in a better terrestrial future; the advancement of science undercut many more certainties than it created; and fears of Big Brother, nuclear holocaust, or ecological collapse compounded anxieties. These factors opened the way for a "loquacious Madonna" who speaks every day, in hundreds of places, and whose statements point the way to a larger protective scheme. Moreover, each new apparition was validated by all the others, creating a "mechanism of reciprocal confirmation" (p. 29). It is networks of visionaries and devotees operating especially online and not the Vatican that legitimizes apparitions in the eyes of others in this vast visionary culture. Acting as catalyst rather than cause, Medjugorje spread the idea that such prodigious happenings could happen anywhere at any time. The mundane everyday world and the other world are no longer as separate as they had been but "more interactive, superimposed and confused" (p. 46). Moreover, this visionary culture allows for the recognition of suffering and grief usually submerged in the modern rational world. This re-enchantment of the world is based more on the use of technological instruments than the exceptional powers of charismatic individuals or visionaries. The new visionaries become embedded in networks that spread their influence internationally, especially in the most technologically advanced countries, such as the United States. Nearly always some clerical champion is available, the hierarchy is divided, and Rome is officially noncommittal.

Apolito finds that the Internet levels the playing field. Typically, Web surfers do not defer or even refer to orthodox ecclesiastical leaders, and official Web sites are accorded no privileged status among the myriad other sites. Even though many "strong" seers, such as those from Medjugorje, communicate incessantly, speaking, praying, prophesying, traveling, and occupying center stage in the attention of crowds of worshippers, the Web also ultimately marginalizes even them, as multiple thousands of "weak" visionaries report inner locutions, sensed presences, sweet odors, and a thousand other attenuated contacts with heaven, extending potentially to all believers. Virgin images are seen on everyday items ranging from bread to buildings and even in the deepest recesses of outer space. Epiphanic phenomena are spread not through interpersonal contact but through myriads of others encountering an electronic trace (a report of reports) of the first on the Web. Alone with his or her computer, the Web surfer is without the social or symbolic ties that tended to regularize "traditional" apparitions.

Chapter 2 deals with the end of the world as understood in the visionary culture. The apocalyptic stream has become a strong current, growing from earlier Catholic apocalyptic apparitions but drawing also from the wider popular culture of millenarianism especially in American Protestantism and converging with a panoply of technological, ecological, and political fears. Predictions of the end of the world are regularly found to be wrong, but believers sustain their faith. For example, October 13, 1998 was widely prophesied to see the end of the world; afterward one seer in Phoenix spread a message from the Virgin that through her intercession, a nuclear war had been averted that day.

Chapter 3 provides an analytic overview of connections between pre-Internet media technologies, especially various kinds of photography, and apparitions. From early attempts to document heavenly events, up through television and videotape, to the use of laboratory experiments to prove the presence of the divine, the role of technology has expanded at the expense of the heavenly beings, whose immanent presence was finally established scientifically. Rather than heavenly beings themselves choosing when and where they visit, humans now determine when and where they are found. Moreover, Apolito argues, the various media provided templates that structured apparitions to people of the time. Thus the television age spawned prolonged serial visions, continuing soap operas, each accompanied by a flood of daily short messages akin to advertisements, all repeated incessantly.

Chapter 4 on the Internet is the longest at one hundred pages. Apolito earlier published two books largely based on his study in Oliveto Citra, an Italian town where numerous apparitions of the Virgin and other supernatural beings were seen in the 1980s.[1] Using the research methods of cultural anthropology, he observed numerous small groups of witnesses, expectant pilgrim groups, and others, and noted how their conversations constructed the apparitions for them. Thus he is far better prepared than most to isolate the distinctive contributions of the Internet to the experience of visions. In an

off-line community, such as in Oliveto Citra, those who hear stories about the Virgin appearing use all the resources available to judge their credibility. When and where is the story told? Is the teller already familiar and trustworthy? What is the opinion of people you trust? In face-to-face interaction, the "preventative censorship of the community" ensures that any oral creation establishes itself only within the ideological limits of the local community (p. 208). On the Internet, such cues are absent, making it a site for new experiences that transcend the local limits. Even believers who consciously decide to confine themselves to "orthodox" sites may often find themselves reaching others that may merely be fronts for other enterprises ranging from commerce, to debunking of rival apparition claims, to playful or ironic commentary on the bizarre or the bazaar on display, to self-labeled upholders of orthodoxy who peddle the most heretical of claims. Soon, even the idea of orthodoxy dissolves, as everything is relativized: devotional sites and blasphemous sites, fundamentalism and its caricatures, prayer chains, and commercial entrepreneurship.

From the distinction between clergy and laity to the architecture of churches, off-line Catholicism is suffused with the idea of hierarchy. But the radically level playing field of the Internet undercuts any marks of superiority. Self-appointed experts on visions offer their analyses without any reference to official criteria or their own qualifications. A dozen American visionaries all use the same Webmaster to spread the Virgin's messages and their own commentaries. Skill in technology rather than theology is what gains influence, though homespun theology pervades the discussions.

While officially the church mandates the local bishop to investigate and judge the veracity of claimed visions, on the Internet rarely is that bishop even mentioned or identified. Most bishops hold aloof or are dismissive, but on the Web they are ignored except for a few commentators who pray that the Virgin will convert them or condemn them as agents of Satan. Some ecclesiastic somewhere will be cited by many as "recognizing" their visions and endorsing their messages, but the canonical status of these ecclesiastics or whether they even exist is beyond the capacity of Web surfers to determine even if they wanted to, which most do not.

Particularly instructive is Apolito's analysis of the causes and patterns of the expansion of the visionary culture from about 1980 to the end of the century. His careful tracing of the development of networks that spread word of apparitions links the local and the global and draws attention to the demand for what the visionary culture had to offer. The Medjugorje visions started in the former Yugoslavia, but were quickly promoted abroad through various networks first in Italy and later especially in the United States. Because rich countries and the United States, in particular, dominate in Internet use, predictably the proliferating visions and appearances cluster in these countries. Increasingly the Virgin speaks in English and with an American accent.

Apolito confined his study of the effects of the Internet to what he found online. The strength of his analysis derives from his immersion in this reality. But that focus also contributes to some blind spots in his account. He has no evidence from those who stopped participating when the prophecy of the end of the world was unfulfilled. More generally, while untold millions of people have participated in the visionary culture, what is not clear is how many stay immersed over the long term. Perhaps for many it is a stage that they pass through; a place where they can try on the identity of a visionary or seek recognition or acceptance as a part of a community of like-minded believers, but how fragile or stable are these communities and identities?

Precisely because so many others have access to heavenly beings, it may be necessary for some seers to have ever more extensive or impressive interactions with them–and then the Internet conduces not to reciprocal confirmation but to an escalation of ever more extravagant claims that implicitly if not explicitly disconfirm or at least challenge others. Surely the proliferation of visions and visionaries renders each one more commonplace. Moreover, as visions are publicized so may be the peccadilloes of particular people involved. Priest advisors to Medjugorje witnesses have been discredited (in the eyes of some people, at least). Recently, persons associated with one Irish visionary allegedly browbeat vulnerable "donors" in retirement homes into contributing large sums. Such cases can contribute to a cynicism about all vision claims. Certainly, Apolito recognizes this potential too. He notes that the more involved individuals are in the visionary culture, the more likely are they to encounter conflicting claims and then be forced toward some personal position, an "invitation to individual discernment" (p. 214). More generally, he argues that the Internet as used in the visionary culture implicitly empowers the individual surfer and thereby reinforces the transformative potential of this culture for the larger Catholic world.

Anyone who wants to understand Catholicism today or the effects of the Internet on modernity will be rewarded by reading and reflecting on this book. Apolito's

insights are fascinating and compelling. We should not blame him for not doing all that needs to be done to understand the visionary culture and the impact of the Internet. We need studies of the careers of devotees in their particular local circumstances off- and online. Like other media, the Internet likely has diverse effects in different contexts, and what needs to be explored is how all media are used by different groups for diverse ends in various settings.

Note

[1]. Paolo Apolito, *"Dice che hanno visto la Madonna": Un Caso di Apparizioni in Campania* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1990); Paolo Apolito, *Il Cielo in Terra: Construzioni Simboliche di Un'apparizione Mariana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992); and Paolo Apolito, *Apparitions of the Madonna at Oliveto Citra: Local Visions and Cosmic Drama*, trans. William Christian Jr. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), which presents in English the second book while also incorporating material from the first.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Eugene Hynes. Review of Apolito, Paolo, *The Internet and the Madonna: Religious Visionary Experience on the Web.* H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25698

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.