Simone Heidbrink, Nadja Miczek (Eds.)

Aesthetics

and the Dimensions of the Senses

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VAISHNAVA CYBER-*PŪJĀ*

PROBLEMS OF PURITY & NOVEL RITUAL SOLUTIONS

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I. Introduction

In the digital age of which we are currently a part, usage of the Internet and World Wide Web has become a central part of people's daily lives. Not only are people engaging in activities such as online banking, shopping, dating, and attending college, but now people can also participate in religious ritual by means of the Internet. With several clicks and drags of the mouse, people can perform a variety of religious cyber-rituals, including attending virtual churches, embarking on virtual pilgrimage, and performing devotions to gods and goddesses online.[1]

This new form of religious participation, online religion, is a phenomenon that raises many interesting questions for the study of religion.[2] What is virtual sacred space and what does it mean to inhabit it? How is this space demarcated and maintained as sacred? What does it mean to perform ritual virtually? What are the protocols by which such rituals are (or ought to be) performed? And what, if anything, are the requisite practices necessary to frame the ritual in sacred time and space?

I address some of these questions in this paper, which is an examination of Vaishnava Hindu views on cyber-*pūjā*.[3] Based on ethnographic interviews and discussions that I conduct with Vaishnava devotees in the New Jersey tri-state area, I contend that although they have nothing against the online worship of Vishnu *in theory*, Vaishnava Hindus nonetheless have reservations about performing such worship *in practice*.[4] These

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[1]   I would like to thank David Haberman, Rebecca Manring, Richard Nance, and Nancy Levene for their thoughtful guidance in my dissertation work (of which this paper is a small part).

[2]   The term 'online religion' refers to the *actual participation* in religion on the Internet. This can include activities ranging from the spinning of Buddhist cyber-prayer wheels and the attending of webcast Catholic masses, to the offering of virtual flowers to gurus and spiritual masters, or e-mailing one's prayers to God. In contrast, the term 'religion online' refers to the *information about* various religious traditions and groups that is present on the Internet. These terms were coined by Christopher Helland. See Helland 2000. For a further description of the differences between these terms, see the Introduction and essays in Dawson & Cowan 2004.

[3]   *Pūjā* is the Hindu ritual practice of worshipping the gods and/goddesses by offering them various devotional materials (incense, flowers, fire/light, etc.). Cyber-*pūjā* is the performance of this ritual worship on the Internet.

[4]   I conducted my ethnographic research from August 2009-August 2010 with Vaishnava Hindus in north and central New Jersey and in the southern region of the state of New York. In order to protect confidentiality, devotees' identities will

reservations, I argue, stem from concerns about violations of purity: the purity of the sacred cyber-altar space in which Vishnu resides and the purity of the mental state of the devotee who is performing the cyber-*pūjā*. However, I show that while many Vaishnavas believe that both cyberspace and the computer are problematic places for housing Vishnu, many have nonetheless come up with novel ways to mark the computer as a suitably sacred space for housing Vishnu and performing His worship. These novel ritual practices can help to overcome the violations of purity that cyber-*pūjā* is often seen to entail.

II. The Ontological Status of Cyber-Vishnu: Virtual Vishnu is Vishnu

In Vaishnava Hinduism, there is seemingly no limit to the locations in which Vishnu may manifest or be worshipped: Vishnu is manifest (and worshipped) in elaborate temples in both India and abroad, in Hindu homes, in road side altars and shrines, and in natural settings such as hillsides and mountain tops. Further, there also seems to be no limit to the forms as which Vishnu may manifest and through which Vaishnavas may worship him. These forms range from Vishnu's material, three-dimensional embodied forms (known as *mūrtis* or *svarūpas*)[5] established in Hindu temples or set up in Hindu homes, to images of Vishnu depicted on posters and calendars; from images of Vishnu broadcast on television screens, to his natural forms as mountains and or stones.[6]

Although Vaishnavas already worship Vishnu as embodied in a seemingly endless variety of forms, the forms through which he may become manifest are becoming ever more innovative and variegated. Vishnu is no longer limited to being manifest in wood, stone, or metal;[7] now, because of Internet technology, he is also manifest in cyberspace. And while it may at first seem surprising that devotees hold that Vishnu can be manifest in

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remain anonymous throughout this paper.

[5] A *mūrti* is a material, three-dimensional, embodied form of God. Some Vaishnavas use the term *svarūpa*, which literally means 'self-form' or 'own form,' to describe these embodied forms of God (though the term *mūrti* is much more common). It is very important to note that the material, three-dimensional, embodied forms of God that Hindus worship *are not* symbols of or for God; instead, Hindu devotees (and not just Vaishnava Hindus) believe that these forms are *embodied forms of God*. In other words, they are *actual forms of God* and not symbols of/for God. According to devotional Hindu theology, the unlimited and infinite Absolute/Ultimate Reality manifests in particular embodied forms —out of grace— in order to foster a loving devotional relationship between Itself and the devotee. These particular material forms, however, do not exhaust the Absolute, which is simultaneously one and many, infinite and finite, immaterial and material, and unmanifest and manifest.

[6] For interesting discussions of worship to Vishnu in various forms, see: Waghorne & Cutler 1984; Eck 1998; Babb & Wadley 1995; Lynch 1990; Haberman 1994.

[7] Verse 11.27.12 of the *Bhāgavat Purāna* lists the eight materials out of which forms of Vishnu are 'traditionally' constructed. These are: stone, wood, metal, clay or sandalwood paste, paint, sand, precious stones or metals, and interestingly, the mind.

cyberspace (and available for worship on the computer), this is entirely consistent with Vaishnava Hindu theologies of divine embodiment. While the textual and philosophical underpinnings for these theologies are too substantial and complex to elaborate in detail here, suffice it to say that Vaishnava Hindu texts and sectarian literatures clearly express the view that Vishnu is both everywhere and everything.[8] From a textual or *siddhāntik* (doctrinal) perspective, therefore, because everything that exists is Vishnu, and because there is nothing that exists that is not Vishnu, *anything* can be worshipped as Vishnu and Vishnu can be manifest and worshipped *anywhere* – including cyberspace.[9]

Throughout my ethnographic research, Vaishnava devotees with whom I spoke echoed these textual views, articulating again and again their belief that because Vishnu is everything and everywhere, he is also in cyberspace, and is therefore available to be worshipped online and by means of the computer. "God is everywhere," said one devotee. "There is nowhere Vishnu isn't. So you can't say that Vishnu isn't in cyberspace, because he is. If cyberspace is a place, then Vishnu is there." Or, as another devotee put it,

> as it has been mentioned in the ancient texts, Bhagwaan [God] is everywhere: land, air, sea, in malls, in shops, in houses, in temples, you name it. Therefore, [he is also in] online *pūjā*.

It seems that, for devotees, since Vishnu is both everywhere and everything, there is nothing – *ipso facto* – that precludes him from being manifest (and available for worship) in cyber-space. In fact, as one devotee noted, since Vishnu is everywhere and everything, worship of anything (and any form of him, including a cyber-form) is invariably worship of Vishnu himself. "The earnest devotee," he noted,

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[8] Vaishnavas use the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the *Upanishads*, the *Purusha Sūkta*, the *Purānas*, and a variety of sectarian philosophical treatises in order to support these theological views. There is a group of Vaishnavas, however, which does not hold the view that Vishnu is everywhere and everything; these Vaishnavas follow the teachings of Madhvācārya and are dualists (Dvaita Vedāntins).

[9] As an important qualification, however, it is necessary to note that although Vaishnava Hindus believe that Vishnu is both everywhere and everything, it is unlikely that a Vaishnava devotee would ever pick up, say, a fluorescent bulb and worship it, even though this bulb is technically Vishnu. In other words, although everything is theoretically Vishnu, one must remember that the 'object' or images that devotees worship are those that are invoked or ritually framed as sacred. As such, although they could technically worship anything as Vishnu, Vaishnava devotees worship the forms that are specially seen to be God: those forms that evoke a sense of emotion, awe, or reverence. Therefore, although Vishnu is understood to be in cyberspace, his particular cyber-forms need to evoke adequate sentiment in his devotees in order for them to worship him in those forms.

thinks and must think that God is imminent in the entire Universe and every part of it; and if he actually realizes His presence, the worship of the entire universe (*virāt rūpa*) or parts (e.g., a saint or an image) is undoubtedly worship (and a good form of worship) of God Himself.[10]

While these statements are just a selection of comments that I heard from devotees, they make clear at least the basic point that Vaishnavas do in fact believe that since he is everywhere, Vishnu is also in cyberspace. Because of this theological position that allows them to maintain that Vishnu does exist (in the full ontological sense) online and is available there for worship, it would seem to follow that cyber-*pūjā* would be a real and appealing ritual option for Vaishnava devotees. However, it turns out that Vaishnavas *do* have reservations about worshipping Vishnu online, but these reservations do not concern the ontological status of his cyber-forms.

III. If Vishnu is Online and So Too is the Opportunity to Worship Him, Wherein Lies the Problem?

Despite the fact that they believe that Vishnu can be embodied in cyberspace and on the computer, Vaishnavas nevertheless express some reservations about worshipping him by means of these media. Their reservations about cyber-*pūjā* arise due to two main areas of concern: concern over violations of the spatial purity of the cyber-altar space in which Vishnu resides and concern over violations of mental purity, or the one-pointed, devotionally-focused state of mind for which devotees aim during *pūjā*.

Problem #1:
Violations of Spatial Purity

Work, Bills, Social Networking, and E-mails

Maintaining the purity (Sanskrit, *śauca*) of Vishnu's altar space is something that nearly all Vaishnava devotees cite as being necessary for his worship.[11] Although the specific requirements for maintaining this spatial purity

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10 This devotee's statement was taken from Sri Ramana Maharshi's commentary on the fifth verse of the *Upadesha Saram*.
11 *Śauca* is listed as the first of the five *niyamas* (observances) in verse II.32 of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* (the *niyamas* are the second of the eight limbs of Patañjali's Yoga system). *Śauca* means purity or cleanliness, and in his commentary on this verse, Vyāsa mentions two types of this purity: external purity (*vāhyam śaucam*) and internal purity (*ābhyantaram*

differ depending on both the ritual circumstance and whom one asks, it requires – at the very least – keeping Vishnu's altar (and its surrounding areas) clean: free from dirt, dust, etc., and also free from items, activities, dealings, and interactions that are non-religious in nature. So for example, if one has an altar for Vishnu in one's home, one would never set down on it one's glasses, newspaper, or cell phone. Instead, the altar would be kept in a separate and set aside place: one that is clean, uncluttered, and used only for the dwelling and worship of Vishnu.[12]

Keeping Vishnu's altar in a proper state of spatial purity (*śauca*) is, according to many devotees, the most important condition for worship, because the state of Vishnu's altar space directly involves the comfort, respect, and proper treatment of Vishnu himself. Since the altar is believed to be the literal dwelling space of the Lord, it is important that it be kept ever clean and unsullied. However, according to many Vaishnava devotees, this requisite spatial purity is *not* a characteristic of Vishnu's cyber-altar, and it is for this reason that they see cyber-*pūjā* as an (at least initially) problematic form of worship. Because the computer is used for the purposes of work, paying bills, chatting with friends, social networking, and even for viewing pornography, Vaishnava devotees believe that it is not spatially pure enough to house a form of Vishnu. "The altar is for worship and the computer is for work," said one devotee from central New Jersey. "I cannot mix these two and think that it is just fine. I would not put my office work in Vishnu's area, so why should I put Vishnu in my work area?"[13]

For the above devotee, the computer is a space that is designated for (or, at least, used primarily for the purpose of) tasks related to work: spreadsheets, e-mails, access documents, etc. And while these non-religious

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śaucam). Vyāsa notes that the former (external purity) is engendered by activities such as ritual bathing and the eating of clean or pure food, while the latter (internal purity) is characterized by the cleansing of mental impurities. In this essay, I use the term *śauca* to mean both types of purity—external purity (which I term 'spatial purity') and internal purity (which I call 'mental purity'). For a full translation of Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras, see Āranya, Sāmkhya-yogāchārya Swāmi Hariharānanda 1983. Aranya Samkhya?

12 For devotees who are wealthy, Vishnu's altar is often housed in a room that is separate from the ordinary dealings of the house (a spare bedroom, for example, reserved only for God). For most devotees, however, this separate space is not a separate room, but is instead a shelf of a bookcase or entertainment center, a shelf of a kitchen cabinet, etc. However, despite the fact that these spaces are not entirely separate rooms, they are nonetheless separate spaces that are kept and used only for the housing and worship of Vishnu. If one has Vishnu's altar in a kitchen cabinet, then one would not place spices, dishes, or cups in that cabinet (or on that shelf of the cabinet). Instead, that cabinet would only contain material forms (*mūrtis*) or pictures of Vishnu, along with perhaps some flowers, altar decorations (ribbons, cloth, etc.), and maybe some ritual instruments (offering plate, *āratī* lamp, etc.).

13 Some devotees do not think that the computer is an impure space. Others simply do not care that the computer is impure (that is, although they recognize that the computer is impure, they do not think this should stop one from worshipping Vishnu online). As one devotee put it,

> Can you perform *pūjā* using the computer? I mean, yeah. You use your hands and arms and legs and eyes to perform mundane work [too] and then you use these to perform *pūjā*, [so why can't you use the computer for *pūjā*?] In that sense, I can't see any difference.

materials are fine (in fact, necessary) for work spaces, they are problematic for religious ritual space. This resonates well with Mary Douglas' famous characterization of dirt as "matter out of place."[14] Dirt, Douglas argues,

> is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs, outdoor things indoors; upstairs things downstairs; underclothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on.[15]

In her discussion of pollution, Douglas describes dirt not as an absolute idea, but rather as a relative one; instead of being tied to notions of 'pathogenicity' and 'hygiene,' dirt consists of things *being where they shouldn't*. Douglas contends that we have cherished conceptions and classifications of the way that things and spaces ought to be (e.g., we think that dirty cooking utensils should not be kept in the bedroom); dirt – or matter which is placed where it shouldn't be – is problematic because it challenges these cherished conceptions and classifications. And just like having dirty utensils on the bed challenges our conceptions of the bedroom as a clean oasis for rest and sleep, so too does the presence of documents, financial spreadsheets, etc., challenge Vaishnavas' cherished conceptions of what Vishnu's altar space ought to be: ritually pure, clean, and removed from the mundane. Non-religious documents and materials on the computer violate its spatial purity and therefore defy devotees' conceptions of what Vishnu's altar space ought to be. As a result, these documents, spreadsheets, etc., render the computer a problematic place to worship Vishnu, and strip away feelings of sacredness from the performance of cyber-*pūjā*. As one devotee noted, "If I worship Vishnu on the computer where I work every day, then it is no longer a holy *pūjā*. It is more like playing an e-game." The spatial purity requirement is taken so seriously, it seems, that *pūjās* performed in spaces in which it is not met are likened to games: frivolous, meaningless, and perhaps even flippant.

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[14] See Douglas 1966, 44.

[15] See Ibid, 44.

Advertisements

Aside from citing work related documents (and e-mails, bills, social chatting, etc.) as violating the spatial purity of Vishnu's altar space, devotees also claim that this purity is violated by the advertisements that are featured on many cyber-*pūjā* sites.[16] Devotees note that these advertisements, which range from hotel ads to ads for dating services, are exceptionally problematic violations of such spatial purity because they are often on the very cyber-altar web page itself. In other words, unlike spreadsheets, word documents, and e-mails that are at least open in windows that are separate from the webpage that contains the cyber-altar, these advertisements – these non-religious bits of content, images, and information – are placed *directly on or around* Vishnu's cyber-altar. Therefore, in much the same way that putting a pamphlet of a local pizza restaurant's weekly specials on Vishnu's altar at home would violate the spatial purity of that altar, these advertisements quite literally violate the purity of Vishnu's cyber-altar. These advertisements are, therefore, understandably troubling for devotees. As one devotee distressingly noted upon seeing these advertisements on a commercial website,

> *Look* at this page! It is cluttered with ads…and they are in English. There are shopping carts, packages, freebies, and ads by Google. It looks way too much like Amazon.com. These things are not appropriate for an altar![17]

Echoing this dissatisfaction with the cyber-*pūjā* pages because of the advertisements on them, another devotee from New Jersey made an illustrative remark. "Hindus," she said, "don't throw away pictures of the

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[16] Cyber-*pūjās* can be found on many Hindu websites, including those affiliated with Hindu *mandirs* (temples) both in India and abroad. They can also be found on commercial websites (sites that offer various religious products and services for sale). In general, however, advertisements, however, only appear on commercial sites.

[17] Aside from the computer's association with work, e-mails, chatting, social networking, etc., and the cyber-*pūjā* websites' featuring of advertisements on or around Vishnu's cyber-altar spaces, the presence (or potential presence) of pornography on the computer was also mentioned by devotees as a violation of the computer's spatial purity. As one devotee put it,

> I can have a business website open on one side of the computer (or be chatting with my girlfriend on instant messenger, or have a porn site open), and on the other side I can have a virtual *pūjā* site open. This is not ok for me.

Another devotee put it even more strongly: "The computer is inherently impure. God and porn can be in the same place. That is very disrespectful to worship."

The presence of any non-religious image, document, or advertisement in or on the altar of Vishnu is seen by devotees to be an offence and a violation of the spatial purity (*śauca*) of that altar, and therefore renders that altar an inappropriate space for the performance of *pūjā*. However, it seems that the presence of pornography is the greatest offense of all, as well as the greatest violation of the spatial purity of Vishnu's altar space.

gods. A picture of God is God Himself…So we wouldn't throw away just a picture. But," she said, "if it's a flier…with information *and* a picture of God on it, then we throw it away."

A Matter of Emplacement and Framing

For the abovementioned woman, a picture of God is sacred and is therefore not to be thrown in the garbage. However, it is only sacred as long as it remains a religious object, and for her this hinges on its being in a space that is pure, and therefore free from non-religious clutter. This non-religious clutter includes extraneous information, advertisements, etc. – the very things that change the photo from a sacred picture of God (in fact, God himself) to a flier. And this story can be used as an analogy for worshipping Vishnu online in a space that is similarly contaminated with ads, Google links, etc.: although Vishnu can technically reside in cyber-altars and these cyber-altars can be sacred spaces, the non-religious links and advertisements on the cyber-*pūjā* page violate their spatial purity. Once this spatial purity is violated, the space (like the flier) is no longer sacred, and it therefore becomes inappropriate to worship Vishnu there.

However, there is a different way to interpret this devotee's story that highlights another way to understand Vaishnava devotees' reservations about worshipping Vishnu on the Internet: namely, that their reservations arise primarily because the computer is a problematic *frame* for the ritual of *pūjā*.

In his renowned work, *The Lives of Indian Images*, Richard Davis argues that,

> The location of any object…plays a constitutive role in the act of looking. The physical display, adornment (or lack of adornment), pedestal, lighting, label, surrounding objects, and even the type of building [or space that the image is in]—what I will call the "frame" of the object—all help guide the attention and responses of the viewer in looking at, and in some cases acting toward, a visual object.[18]

In other words, Davis argues that the space that frames an image, *makes the image what it is*. "An Indian religious image," he notes

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[18] See Davis 1997, 9.

does not appear to us in a museum the same as it does to Indian worshippers in a temple. The way it is displayed, the frame of surrounding objects, and the expectations the two audiences bring to their encounters with the object differ dramatically.[19]

The frame of an object affects what each audience sees. The image in question – whether it is housed in a temple or displayed in a museum – is the same exact image in each case; however, the way it is framed determines both how we see/understand it (is the image a sacred form of God or a work of art?) and also how we interact with it (do we reverently fold our hands before it or do we just gaze at it, appreciating its aesthetic features?).

Just as location and setting (i.e., the frame) matter in how we view an *image*, so too does the frame matter in how we view and understand cyber-*pūjā* as *ritual process*. In order for a *pūjā* ritual to be perceived as sacred, appropriate, and proper, the space in which it is performed – the space and context in which it is framed – must be proper and fitting for a religious *pūjā* ritual. And this is another reason why devotees have a difficult time viewing the computer and the cyber-*pūjā* websites as adequate spaces in which to perform *pūjā*: these spaces, cluttered as they are with word documents, excel spreadsheets, and advertisements, are not appropriate frames for religious ritual.[20]

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[19] See Ibid., 17.

[20] J.Z. Smith also argues that the frame is central to how one perceives or understands sacred objects, images, etc. He writes

> When one enters a temple, one enters a marked-off space…in which, at least in principle, nothing is accidental; everything, at least potentially, demands attention. The temple serves as a focusing lens, establishing the possibility of significance by directing attention, by requiring the perception of difference. Within the temple, the ordinary (which to any outside eye or ear remains wholly ordinary) becomes significant, becomes "sacred," simply by being there. A ritual object or action becomes sacred by having attention focused on it in a highly marked way…Sacrality is, above all, a category of emplacement. (Smith 1987, 104).

I agree with Smith's point that space does to a large extent determine the nature of an object, or at least how we perceive/understand it (consider, for example, a vessel in the kitchen cupboard versus that same vessel on the table of oblation in an Eastern Orthodox church). And this is another reason why devotees have a difficult time initially viewing cyber-*pūjā* as a sacred religious ritual: *rituals performed on the computer are not sacred by virtue of them being on the computer*. On the contrary, by virtue of their being located on the computer, rituals are more likely to be considered mundane, secular, etc. Therefore, extra ritual work (which I discuss later in the essay) is necessary in order to change the frame itself (the computer) so that the rituals performed therein can be understood as sacred.

Problem #2

Violating Mental Purity: Distractions from the Devotional Mindset

Just as devotees argue that the proper worship of Vishnu must be conducted in a space in which spatial purity (*śauca*) is maintained, so too do they assert that a second type of purity must be maintained for Vishnu's proper worship: namely, mental purity (also, *śauca*). This mental purity involves the maintenance, during worship, of a devotional state of mind that is one pointed, undistracted, undivided, and completely present in and focused on the devotional worship and experience at hand. Just like the state of spatial purity, this mental purity is brought about (or at least fostered) by an altar or worship space that is free from non-religious clutter, materials, and interactions. In order to most successfully meet the requirement of mental purity, therefore, devotees say that it is best that the space in which worship is conducted be as religiously engaging and distraction-free as possible: worship should be conducted in places that are removed from reminders and affairs of the mundane world, that are evocative of religious sentiment, and that are "clean, fresh, and holy." The computer, however, is neither religiously engaging enough nor free enough from distractions to be conducive of this mental purity. As one devotee put it, "you can't forget about worldliness while doing a *pūjā* online, because it's on your computer. I mean, it's in your office, you use it for work." Instead, "*pūjā* should be a meditation and while doing it, [one] should forget about worldliness."

According to Vaishnava devotees, there is an experiential difference between what one thinks and feels at the temple, and what one thinks and feels in front of the computer. The temple, they say, prompts religious sentiment, perception of the sacred, and engagement in religious activities (reverence, reflection, seeing and being seen by God (*darshan*), and prostration). The computer, on the other hand, evokes non-religious feelings and thoughts (about work, school, the news, etc.) and prompts non-religious activities (work, online chatting, balancing budgets, and perhaps even viewing pornography). "When you go to the temple," one devotee said,

> it is experiential, confessional, and you are purified [there]. You see the gods, you smell the flowers and the incense, you hear the bells, you taste the *prasad* [sanctified food]…you cannot help but be absorbed in meditation while you are there.

This, however, is not the case with the computer. "When I look at and use the computer," another young woman informed me, "I think work, bills, Facebook; I do not think God!" According to devotees, the computer is too inextricably linked to work, social networking, etc., and is therefore too suggestive of the mundane, to be conducive of the state of mental purity that they aim to achieve during *pūjā*.

Finally, just as advertisements compromise the spatial purity of Vishnu's cyber-altar, so too do they compromise the purity of the mental state of the devotee who is trying to escape traces of worldliness and mundane life. "The moment you put ads on the *pūjā* page," said one devotee, "it is too distracting and therefore it is not good. *Pūjā*," she said, "is supposed to be free and freeing from distractions. So, [if there are ads on the page], you defeat the whole purpose."

III. New Ritual Media, New Ritual Solutions

Vaishnava devotees are faced with a dilemma when presented with forms of *pūjā* that are available to them on the Internet. On the one hand, they believe that Vishnu does in fact exist (and is in actuality manifest) in both cyberspace and on the computer. Vishnu, they claim, is everywhere and as such he is available for worship online and on the computer in just the same way (albeit in a different form) that he is available for worship in the temple. On the other hand, however, there are properties of the computer that render it unsuitable as both a space to house Vishnu and as a medium by which to worship him. Given these problems, then, do Vaishnavas simply toss the baby out with the bathwater and refuse to conduct worship on the Internet? Do they close themselves off to the possibility of worshipping the forms of Vishnu that have been made so easily accessible through new media? Are there special rituals that can be done so as to render one's computer an appropriate medium for *pūjā* (and a suitable place for Vishnu to reside)? Are there novel ways of framing the space and the worship so as to make them feel sacred and meaningful?

Although for some devotees, the problems associated with worshipping Vishnu on the computer are too great to surmount, for others, there are steps that can be taken to mitigate or overcome them. With these novel ritual adjustments and innovative ritual steps, devotees contend, Vishnu's cyber-altar can be spatially purified and his worship online made more easily generative of mental purity.

Novel Ritual Adjustments

What types of adjustment or ritual modification are necessary for overcoming the problems that characterize worshipping Vishnu online and on one's computer?

First and foremost, Vaishnava devotees make it clear that if performing a cyber-*pūjā* to Vishnu on their computers, devotees should engage in all of the same pre-*pūjā* purification rituals that they would when

performing *pūjā* elsewhere.[21] "If you are performing any *pūjā*," one devotee remarked, "then you need to at least follow the necessary procedures." This is one criterion on which most devotees are unwilling to compromise.

Aside from these 'standard' purification practices, many devotees contend that extra practices – ones that are specifically suited for the medium of the computer – are necessary in order to make cyber-*pūjā* a sacred and meaningful religious practice. These ritual activities can enhance the computer's spatial purity and also increase the likelihood that devotees will be able to experience mental purity while performing cyber-*pūjā* on the computer. As a result, they decrease devotees' concerns regarding the problems associated with performance of *pūjā* on the computer, and increase their desire to use the computer as a medium for performing *pūjā*.

For example, one devotee suggested that before performing cyber-*pūjā*, one should "make sure the environment around the computer is clean…[one should] wipe down the table on which the keyboard sits, and also wipe down the computer itself." Another devotee suggested that one should always keep *chandan* (sandalwood) and *kum kum* (vermilion) in front of the computer and that before a cyber-*pūjā*, one should play devotional music on the computer.

These suggestions evidence both the problems with the computer as a space for performing *pūjā* and devotees' novel suggestions of ways that one could attempt to resolve them. Since the computer and its surrounding spaces (table, desk, etc.) are not spatially pure, it was suggested that one should clean these spaces before cyber-*pūjā* so as to remove any physical dirt that may be contributing to their impurity. It was also suggested that *chandan* and *kum kum* – devotional powders/pastes believed by Hindus to have both sacred and purificatory properties – be kept in front of the computer and that devotional music be played from it before performing the cyber-*pūjā*. Each of these ritual adjustments helps to make the computer (and the space around it) both more sacred and more spatially pure. As a result, they make the computer a less problematic space for the performance of *pūjā* and in turn increase the level of mental purity devotees can experience while performing cyber-*pūjā*.

Other devotees also made suggestions about the ways in which one can – with a few extra ritual steps – enhance the purity of the computer as a space in which to both house Vishnu and perform his worship. One devotee argued that it might be necessary to "close all of the open windows on the computer screen and also clear the private data [history, cache, cookies, etc.] before performing the cyber-*pūjā*." By closing the windows and especially by clearing out the private data (this latter step is presumably to remove any traces of 'bad' sites that were visited, be they pornographic or business in nature), devotees can literally 'clean,' or remove the 'bad,' or mundane, sites, information, etc., that they believe compromise the purity of Vishnu's cyber-altar space.

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[21] While most devotees note that there is a set of necessary 'standard procedures' that one should perform before doing *pūjā*, there is little consensus amongst them as to what exactly this set of procedures entails. Generally, however, it includes bathing, wearing clean clothes, and removing ones shoes.

There were also several suggestions from devotees that one should even *restart* the computer before performing a cyber-*pūjā* (so as to somehow refresh it anew) and 'wash away' all traces of the mundane sites, information, etc., that one was viewing or working on before performing the cyber-*pūjā*.[22] All of these are steps to remove (or at least separate out) the impure elements from the computer so as to enhance its spatial purity.

In addition to these extra, general, ritual ways in which the computer can be made more spatially pure, many devotees' suggestions were more specific, often centering around keeping the computer in as separate a space as possible so as to more likely achieve spatial purity for it. In order to make the computer more spatially pure, for example, some devotees suggested keeping it on a separate or special part of the table or desk, away from the work materials, file folders, pens, pencils, paper clips, etc., while others even suggested placing the computer on an altar of sorts before (and while) performing *pūjā* on it. These steps of physically separating the computer (at least initially prior to, and during, *pūjā*), enhance its spatial purity. If a computer is set up in a space that is separate from mundane places and activities, then the cyber-altar more closely resembles an altar space that one might see in the home or in the temple – a space that is set aside and used only for the purpose of housing and worshipping Vishnu. As such, the cyber-*pūjā* can be more easily perceived as sacred and therefore also more evocative of religious sentiment and conducive of mental purity.[23]

Keeping the computer in a separate space also decreases the likelihood of the problematic behavior of what one devotee referred to as 'cruising.' Although not a technical term, 'cruising' refers to the common habit of Internet users to rapidly move, shift, or 'cruise,' from one webpage to the next. This shifting, or 'cruising,' can be somewhat accidental and relatively thoughtless; one may see a link and click on it, then see another and click on it too, and before one knows it, he/she is reading about a topic very far off from the one that he/she started with/intended to read about. Contrary to 'mindless cruising,' devotees contend that *pūjā* to Vishnu should be a deliberate activity, and they claim that before conducting it, one should have the concentrated thought to do so. As such, before doing *pūjā,* one should adjust one's actions and the *pūjā* environment accordingly, and moving the computer to a space that is separate from the desk or table on which it usually sits (or moving it to a different part of the desk and/or away from work-related materials) is one such way to adjust one's actions. These conscious actions can set the stage for the performance of a more deliberate religious ritual and make devotees more likely to retain a state of mental purity.

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[22] One more skeptical devotee said, "I'm afraid that one should re-format one's entire system before performing [an] online *pūjā*!"

[23] Some devotees suggested that this separation can be mental: *imagining* the computer as a separate and sacred altar space, never eating in front of the computer, focusing one's mind on the cyber-*pūjā*, not multitasking while doing cyber-*pūjā*, not doing a cyber-*pūjā* immediately after checking e-mail, etc.

Purity of Heart/Intention

While many devotees cited novel ritual practices that can be done in order to overcome the two main problems associated with performing *pūjā* to Vishnu on the computer (that the computer is neither spatially pure nor conducive of mental purity), most argued that these problems can also be overcome by having purity of heart, or by having the sincere intention to worship Vishnu with pure devotional love. As one devotee put it,

> more important than the type of *pūjā*, or the kind of items that one is offering [during the *pūjā*], is the mindstate of the *pujārī* [the person performing the *pūjā*] and the devotional state of their heart.

In other words, if a devotee's *pūjā* is characterized by sincere love and devotion to Vishnu, and is coupled with the pure desire to make a pleasing offering of devotion to him, then that devotee's *pūjā* is exactly what it should be – despite whatever problems may be associated with the medium or method in which he/she is performing it. "After all," I was told, "God appreciates devotion that is inside a devotee's heart and not the worshipping method or venue of worship." When it comes to *pūjā*, it seems that having one's heart and intention in the right place goes a long way – in fact, for Vaishnava devotees, purity of heart and intention can even excuse the violations of purity that characterize worship of Vishnu on the computer.

The importance of the sincerity, pure intention, and loving devotion that one has in one's heart is stressed again and again in the Vaishnava devotional literature and oral traditions. One story, that was recounted to me on numerous occasions by devotees, demonstrates this quite well. As the story goes,

> There once was a man who was an earnest and loving devotee of the god Rāma (an *avatār*, or incarnation, of Vishnu). One day, the monkey-god Hanumān (a loyal devotee of Rāma) walked by the devotee and saw the devotee chanting Rāma's name while defecating. Hanumān became so angry at the devotee's taking the name of Rāma while defecating, that he slapped the devotee on the face. The next time Hanumān saw his beloved Rāma, however, Rāma had a bruise on his cheek. Hanumān was horrified and saddened upon seeing the bruise on his beloved lord's cheek. When he asked who caused this bruise, Rāma answered that he himself had chosen to take the hit; interceding on behalf of the devotee whom Hanumān had struck on the face, Rāma chose to take the hit himself. [24]

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[24] The account I have given above is pieced together from the various accounts that devotees relayed to me. Neither the several reputable scholars I asked nor the devotees with whom I spoke were able to give the textual source for this story, suggesting that it is probably an oral one.

Devotees related the moral of this story to the importance of devotional intention and purity of heart during ritual *pūjā*. Hanumān, as a faithful devotee of Lord Rāma, was justifiably concerned upon seeing someone taking the name of Rāma while defecating. Defecation, in the Vaishnava traditions, is an impure act and it is errant and disrespectful to chant the name of God while engaged in it. *However*, as the story shows, what is important to God is the devotion that the devotee has in his/her heart while performing ritual, and not the particular ritual rules (or violations of such rules) as such. Because the devotee in the story was a faithful and sincere devotee of Rāma, and because he chanted Rāma's name with sincere intention and a heart full of devotional love, Rāma protected him from the pain of Hanumān's strike—even though the devotee was technically violating purity rules by taking God's name while defecating. This story shows that – according to the Vaishnava traditions – love, sincerity, and devotional intention are most important to God, and *not* ritual minutiae. As long as one is sincere in his/her performance of *pūjā*, and as long as he/she performs the *pūjā* with loving devotion to God, then the violations in purity that such worship produces fall to the wayside.

It is important to note, however, that just because God values love and purity of devotion more than ritual rules, this does not mean that one should not perform any of the purificatory rituals before doing cyber-*pūjā* (or any other type of *pūjā*). Further, it does not mean that, because one's heart and intentions are pure, one can simply ignore the problems associated with the computer as a medium of worship, and worship God on it in whatever way one likes. On the contrary, devotees argue that one should engage in these ritual practices and uphold purity rules both out of respect for God and as a mental preparation for the performance of religious ritual. When devotees contend, therefore, that purity of intention and devotional love for God are more important than ritual minutiae and purity rules, they are not saying that these rules should be thrown to the wayside. On the contrary, they are saying that one should perform the *pūjā* to the best of one's ability because this is what is proper and pleasing to God and because this proper performance is most conducive to developing love for God in one's heart. However, what matters *ultimately* is one's intention and sentiment. And in this sense, as long as one's heart is pure, and full of love for Vishnu, then all worship that one performs to him is good worship. As one devotee put it to me,

> As long as a worshipper performs his worship with the *bhāvanā* [meditative understanding] that he is worshipping God Himself, whatever worship he performs, turns out to be an excellent form of worship. *The key here is the attitude with which one performs his worship*…The efficacy of worship is entirely in the hands of the worshipper and the attitude with which he performs it.

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