Digital Jesus

*The Making of a New
Christian Fundamentalist
Community on the Internet*

Robert Glenn Howard

For my mother and father

References to Internet websites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing.
Neither the author nor New York University Press is responsible for URLs
that may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

CIP tk

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all
   mysteries, and all knowledge;
and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains,
if I have not charity . . .
I am nothing.

—I Corinthians 13: 2

Contents

Acknowledgments

I am most indebted to the many respondents who have replied to my emails, engaged my questions, agreed to meet me for interviews, and sometimes even invited me into their homes. This research has been difficult because while I cannot share their beliefs, I have witnessed their compassion first hand. In particular, I would like to thank those who took the time to read and respond to early versions of my research and offer significant corrects, additions, and comments.

For years of advice, engaged discussions, and close friendship, I would like to thank my mentor Daniel Wojcik at the University of Oregon. I would also like to thank Leonard Norman Primiano at Cabrini College for his willingness to mentor from afar. And at the University of Wisconsin, I would like to thank Kristin Eschenfelder for her creative ear for titles; and Erik Hjalmeby for keeping on eye on some of the newest and coolest evangelical media.

I would also like to thank all my colleagues and friends at the University of Wisconsin for their years of support, discussions, and suggestions that helped shape both this work and me. In particular, I would like to thank Rob Asen, Christine Garlough, Jenell Johnson, Jim Leary, Steve Lucas, Marie Stolzenburg, Mike Xenos, and Sue Zaekse. I would also like to thank my teachers and advisors during the first years of this research at the University of Oregon. In particular, I would like to thank Jim Crosswhite, David Frank, John Gage, Anne Laskaya, and Sharon Sherman. I am also indebted to my teachers and friends at UCLA, where I learned to love the study of everyday culture. In particular, I would like to thank Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones.

I am also greatly indebted to the patience and advice of my editor at NYU, Jennifer Hammer. In addition, I would like to thank the series editors for taking on this formidable project, Timothy Miller and Susan J. Palmer. I am also grateful for the support provided by the Wisconsin Alumni Foundation, the Risa Palm Memorial Dissertation Research Award, and to Pamela and George Hamel for their generous support of the research and teaching done in the Department of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin.

I would also like to thank my Wisconsin family Kathy, Ned, Mack, and Bob. Also, I would like to thank all my teachers, including Carl A. Cato of Spring Valley Junior High School for a career dedicated to getting seventh and eighth graders to think; and my brother Ken for being one of my first teachers and most committed protectors; my life-long friend James; and my Aunt Sue (though she won't be able to read the final product); and the most important teachers of all, my mother, Pat; and my father, Deane.

Finally, I would like to thank Lily for hearing about this work all these years and yet never uttering a word of her own about it; and my wife, Megan, for being my biggest supporter both when success seemed imminent and when it did not.

Introduction

*Vernacular Christian
Fundamentalism on the Internet*

Marilyn and Lambert

Late in the summer of 1999 at a fast food restaurant outside Riverside, California, a well-known Christian author and blogger, Marilyn Agee, told me about God's call for her to publish interpretations of biblical prophecy:

> So I'd been typing all day, and I grabbed my Bible by the back of it and I just bounced down across the bed. And I said: "What am I doing all this work for anyway?" The next thing I knew, I'm looking at my Bible—about an inch from my face and Jeremiah 50 verse 2 has a rectangle of light on it. Everything else looks gray. I could have read it if I [had] wanted to, it wasn't that dark, but it looked gray—and this verse had light on it, saying: "Publish and conceal not." (Agee and Edgar 1999)

Marilyn came to believe that God gave her access to divine knowledge.[1] Armed with this certainty, she first published books and then developed a well-known amateur evangelical Web site. At the time, it may have been the most well-known site focused on discussing what its users term the "End Times."

Later that month, I interviewed the builder of another well-known amateur Web site. Lambert Dolphin is a retired Stanford physicist and a man called to Christianity by a different sort of direct experience with God. I had been in email contact with him since 1992, but we met face-to-face for the first time in September 1999. As we spoke about his intense conversion experience thirty-seven years before, Lambert said that it felt like "lights turning on where there'd been a dark house before." He experienced an emotional,

immediate, and permanent change. I asked him if this experience gave him special access to divine knowledge. He shook his head, saying no: "In fact, it's probably perfectly acceptable to have equivalent models and use the one that you feel most comfortable with—or the one that fits best to your circumstances" (Dolphin 1999f).

Though both Marilyn and Lambert felt compelled to share their understanding of God with others, they expressed different conceptions of how and what God communicates. Marilyn experienced a clear and resolute call to "publish" biblical studies based on her access to divine truth. Lambert's experience, however, was of an intimate, emotional, and intense sense of "peace," "hope," and "excitement about the future" (Dolphin 1999f). Seeking to share that experience, he began engaging people online by discussing the different "models" that might help them access the same sense of peace.

Even though these two individuals had direct experiences of the same God, their resulting understandings of the divine were fundamentally different. Marilyn locates a single truth in the Bible and then communicates that truth to others. Lambert sees the words of the Bible as malleable. They constitute a resource through which he can guide others toward the same personal sense of tranquility he has been granted. The two of them imagine the Christian god in strikingly different ways.

Given their similar backgrounds, one might expect that Marilyn and Lambert's religious thinking would be largely the same. They have both lived most of their lives in California. They are about the same age. They are both retired. They both came to Christianity through Baptist churches in North America. They both believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible. They both use the Internet daily to engage in amateur Christian evangelism. By 1999, in fact, they were already very much part of the same growing web of online communication.

On hundreds of amateur Web pages, blogs, forums, and other Internet media, everyday members of a new kind of Christian religious movement make links to both their Web sites: Marilyn's *Bible Prophecy Corner* and Lambert's *Lambert's Library*. While Lambert and Marilyn have not corresponded directly, they have shared several correspondents in common. Even as early as 1999, it was clear that Marilyn and Lambert were being connected by thousands of individuals who thought of them as part of the same online web of believers. These individuals made and followed Internet links that subsumed individual differences into something larger. What was the nature of this larger entity? How could it incorporate these two fundamentally different conceptions of the same God? The research resulting in this book began

as an attempt to answer these questions. In this attempt, I discovered a new religious movement I have termed "vernacular Christian fundamentalism."

This study begins by exploring the definitive characteristics of the new movement. It is new because it focuses on a particular "End Times" interpretation of biblical prophecy that differentiates it from broader forms of evangelical Christianity. It also constitutes a new *kind* of religious movement because even as its beliefs have diverged from existing institutions, no new central leadership has emerged. Instead, it takes shape as its believers use the Internet to engage in a kind of ritualized deliberation that they believe generates a church that exists only on the Internet. While the dispersed nature of this network-based movement might suggest that it is free from social control, this is not the case. Instead, individual members use the Internet to create a dispersed vernacular authority that enforces a self-sealing ideology.

Chapter 2 documents individuals in the movement as they coped with the shock of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon building on September 11, 2001. Marilyn Agee publicly posted the rush of email exchanges she had over the course of the day on her Web site. These posts reveal a discursive process so powerful it almost immediately rendered the new facts sensible in terms of the movement's complex prophetic narrative. Tracing the cluster of beliefs associated with the movement from their origins in the nineteenth century, a radical sense of certainty associated with direct experiences of the divine accounts for the powerful social processes that made this assimilation possible.

Chapter 3 goes back in time to document the movement as it first appeared online in a medium called "Usenet newsgroups." When the mainstream Christians that dominated communication in this medium responded with ridicule and hostility to communications about the End Times, individuals in the movement used private email lists to deliberate about their beliefs without facing resistance from outsiders. On these email lists, the cohesive force of the movement relied on the formation of communication enclaves where individuals could most freely engage in their ritual deliberation.

Chapter 4 documents the growing diversity of the virtual ekklesia as it moved onto the Worldwide Web between 1996 and 2000. As the movement adapted, the new medium exacerbated an existing tension between the need to express individual authority and the need to engage others in deliberation. As a wide diversity of individuals experimented with different ways to mediate this tension, Marilyn Agee's *Bible Prophecy Corner* Web site prefigured the most robust deployment of Internet media by individuals in the movement today.

Chapter 5 charts participatory media's rise to dominance in online communication. While differences in the technologies encourage individuals to use them in different ways, today's centrally moderated blogs and forums provide the best environment for individuals in the movement to engage in ritual deliberation. In these media, divergent views can be excluded while, at the same time, adherents can enact complex communication about their belief in the End Times.

Chapter 6 documents the expressions of prejudice that persist in the movement. While well suited for ritual deliberation, moderated participatory media mix with historical tendencies and radical certainty to encourage intolerance for individuals with beliefs or practices that are thought to contradict the movement's basic beliefs. Despite the media's role in facilitating such intolerance, the online deliberation of a new generation of Internet-savvy believers suggests that tolerance may be a trait that users of these media will increasingly demand from their online religious communities in the future.

The conclusion explores the implications of these findings for researchers of contemporary religion and new media technologies. The existence of this new sort of religious movement suggests that individual believers are more responsible for the nature of their religiosity when they are empowered to construct their worldviews from the vast possibilities afforded by Internet communication technologies. Recognizing the increased responsibility afforded by these media, researchers must continue to increase their understanding of the communication practices of everyday religious believers.

Vernacular Christian Fundamentalism

At least since the emergence of mass-produced vernacular Bibles, individual Christians have been confronted with more responsibility for interpreting the Christian message (Howard 2005b). With the rise of secular governments, individual choice has come to be a primary guide for religious expression in the United States, and with new communication and travel technologies, people have enjoyed growing exposure to a vast diversity of religious ideas. Meanwhile, the counterculture movements of the late 1960s and 1970s produced a whole generation of believers more oriented toward non-Western religious and spiritual ideas (Roof 1999).

At the same time, increased immigration into the United States further expanded the diversity of belief. With the widespread adoption of communication technologies during the information age, individuals have been

granted even greater control over the ideas they access (Lindlof 2002, 71–72). These technological and cultural changes have cultivated a more voluntaristic attitude toward spiritual involvement. As a result, religious commitment in the United States has grown more individualized and fluid (Ammerman 1997; Clark 2003; Cowan 2005, 195).

With this increased individualization, the authority for religious belief and expression has shifted further and further away from religious institutions. This shift has prompted researchers to consider religion more as it is "lived" and less at the levels of institutional history and theology (McGuire 2008). While the movement I document in this book should be considered "lived religion," it is also specifically "vernacular" because it has grown and spread without forming institutions or relying on centralized leadership for authority.

The term "vernacular" refers to noninstitutional beliefs and practices that exist alongside but apart from institutions. This meaning evolved in reference to languages. All the way up through the Renaissance, "vernacular" referred to any language that was not Latin. This meaning came from its ancient associations first with non-Greek and non-Roman slaves and later with speakers of the varieties of "Vulgar" Latin. These informal and localized forms of Latin eventually evolved into the Romance languages of Western Europe and they were called, as a group, "vernacular" because they existed alongside but apart from the formal institutional language of Latin (Howard 2008a and 2008b).

Though "vernacular" still holds this meaning, its association with the noninstitutional gave the term new currency as an analytic category in interpretive anthropology and folklore studies. The term appeared as early as 1960 in an *American Anthropologist* article where researcher Margaret Lantis used it to refer to "the commonplace" (Lantis 1960, 202). While sociologists like Karl Mannheim (1980), Harold Garfinkle (1967), or Peter L. Berger (1990) tend to approach religion by looking at its social structures and (in particular) its social orders, folklorists and anthropologists like Lantis tend to focus more on the expressive human behaviors that create a shared sense of culture. As a result, the expressive and linguistic orientation of the term "vernacular" seems to have given it more traction in anthropology and folklore studies. Applying it to the study of religion specifically, ethnographer Leonard Primiano has described "vernacular religion" as the manifestation of religious beliefs and practices in the everyday lives of individual believers (1995).

Sociologists of religion sometimes refer to this as "popular religion." Historian David D. Hall has pointed out, however, that many researchers use

the term "popular religion" to demarcate the difference between official Christianity and pagan elements surviving in popular practice (1997, viii). This suggests an opposition to the official that is not necessarily the case in vernacular Christian fundamentalism. Similarly, folklorists sometimes refer to informally shared beliefs as "folk religion" or "folk belief." However, this terminology suggests a connection to tradition in the sense of an ongoing handing down of beliefs and practices from one generation to the next. This "traditional" characteristic may or may not be present in cases of new or idiosyncratic forms of everyday religion.

Avoiding these connotations, Hall offers the concept of "lived religion." He argues that his "lived religion" perspective focuses on "charting the practices of the laity." This conception does not set these practices in opposition to church leadership or necessarily associate them with any preexisting expressive traditions (1997, vii). Another proponent of the "lived religion" concept, Robert Orsi, notes how Hall's formulation has the potential to overemphasize individual agency because it deemphasizes the power of religious institutions and documents that are not "lived" in the normal sense of the word. Orsi demonstrates the possible extreme of this tendency by referencing Primiano's description of "vernacular religion." As Orsi notes, Primiano seems to emphasize individual agency so completely that the "vernacular" leaves no way to account for the power of religious institutions at all (1997, 20).

Advocating his "vernacular" perspective on religion, Primiano argues that "there is no objective existence of practice which expresses 'official religion.' No one, no special religious elite or member of an institutional hierarchy, neither the Pope in Rome nor the Dalai Lama of Tibet . . . lives an 'officially' religious life" (1995, 46). In Primiano's view, all religion is actually "lived" by individuals and thus even the institutions empowered through them are "vernacular" religious expressions. My redeployment of the term "vernacular" mitigates this difference of views by maintaining Primiano and Hall's specific focus on lived religion but adding a specific theory of "vernacular authority." This authority accounts for both vernacular and institutional power by emphasizing the dialectical definition central to the ancient meanings of the vernacular (Howard 2008b and 2010b).

The Roman Latin noun "verna" specifically referred to slaves who were born and raised in a Roman home. While the term is often associated with this "home-born" meaning, it also carried with it the connotation of a specific kind of power. The verna was a native to Roman culture but was also the offspring of a sublimated non-Roman ethnic or culture group. In Roman

society, most slaves were seized during wars, during the suppression of colonial insurrections, or even through outright piracy (Westermann 1984, 101). The majority of these slaves did not read or write Classical Latin or Greek. Since any person born to a slave woman (without regard to the social position of the father) was automatically a slave, female slaves were encouraged to have children to increase the master's slave stock (Bradley 1987, 42–44). These verna could become even more valuable than their mothers when they were trained as native users of the institutional languages and thus able to engage in more technical kinds of work.

Vernacular power, then, came from a dialectical distinction: a verna was made powerful because she or he had native access to Roman institutional language and yet was explicitly defined as something which was separate from Roman institutions. In one of its earliest uses to describe expressive human behavior, the Roman philosopher and politician Cicero suggested that being vernacular was a means to persuasive power because of this unique position. In a work on rhetoric, *Brutus*, he wrote of an "indescribable flavor" that rendered a particular speaker persuasive. This power was "vernacular" because the speaker had learned it outside Roman institutions (1971, 147). Cicero understood the vernacular as alternate to what he and other Roman politicians saw as the institutional elements of persuasive communication available through the formal study of oratory, Roman history, literature, and philosophy (Howard 2008b). The "vernacular" might support or oppose institutional power, but it is specifically and consciously the power of not being institutional. In this sense, it is a dialectical term because it is defined by its opposite.

This dialectical sense of the vernacular maps particularly well onto vernacular Christian fundamentalism because one of the movement's definitive traits is its lack of institutional leadership. In fact, its power to unify people into a church is based on the idea that there is no institutional component to the movement. It is not merely "lived religion," it is a social entity made authoritative by everyday believers' repeated choices to connect. With repetition over time, those choices accumulate to enact a larger shared volition. This aggregate volition is the vernacular authority that gives shape to the online church.

Though this movement is different from the historical movement of Christian fundamentalism in the 1920s, using the term "fundamentalism" helps locate the set of ideas unifying the group both in terms of their historical antecedents and also as a subject of much research (see Marty and Appleby 1995, 6–7; and Harris 1998, 1ff). The movement I have documented

is typically not termed "fundamentalism" by its adherents. As I am using it, the term is strictly analytic. This analytic approach to fundamentalism goes at least as far back as the work of biblical scholar James Barr starting in the mid-1960s (Barr 1966 and 1978; Kellstedt and Smidt 1991; Perkin 2000).

For Barr, "fundamentalism" denoted a way of thinking. In historical and discursive terms, Barr's "cognitive" fundamentalism is better understood as "ideological." By ideology, I mean a set of interrelated ideas that function as the symbolic apparatus through which a social group understands its world (Althusser 1984; Eagleton 1991; Howard 2009c and 2009d). In this sense, ideology is a habit of thinking based on shared beliefs. From this perspective, a communication can be seen as participating in fundamentalism whenever specific definitive traits are observed—whether or not the person expressing them is self-identified with a specifically "fundamentalist" group.

Based on ethnographic data collected in the 1990s, researcher of religion Charles B. Strozier constructed the first systematic catalog of the four observable traits that indicate the existence of Christian fundamentalism (1994, 5). In online discourse, I have located a similar set of four core beliefs. They are: a belief in biblical literalism, a belief in the experience of spiritual rebirth, a belief in the need to evangelize, and a belief in the End Times interpretation of biblical prophecy. When these four beliefs are expressed in a noninstitutional communication, that communication participates in vernacular Christian fundamentalism.

The unifying force behind this set of beliefs is an emphasis on a literal interpretative approach to the Bible. This form of interpretation generally assumes that, even in translation, the Bible has a single, simple, and direct meaning. In cases like those presented by the complex symbolic language of the Book of Revelation, this literalism occurs at a secondary level. In the famous passage in Revelation 19:15, for example, where the returned messiah is described as "smiting the nations" with a "sharp sword" coming out of His mouth, a literal interpretation might accept the "sword" to refer to modern weapons of war such as guns, tanks, and so on. How a literal reading would understand the sword as coming out of the mouth instead of held in the hand, however, presents a greater range of possible literal meanings. As a result, the emphasis on a literal interpretation assumes that there is a single and correct meaning even if the language is itself figurative and obscure.

In some cases, a text is even assumed to be literal at a "typological" level. In these cases, texts that make clear and straightforward claims about a specific concrete historical entity are thought to refer not only to that specific case but also to other types, of which that entity is only representative (O'Leary

1994, 55). For example, some references to "the Israelites" are typologically reinterpreted to mean any of those who are chosen by God to be His people. For some evangelicals, this means that contemporary evangelical Christians (as "true" followers of Christ) are typologically referred to as Israelites in the Bible.

While coming to agreement on these sorts of interpretations can be the source of deliberation about many issues, the four distinctive beliefs are thought to be supported by the most obvious meaning of one or more biblical passages and are typically not the basis for deliberation. As a result, individuals deploying this sort of interpretative technique can often simply make an assertion and then quote one or more specific biblical passages that are assumed to prove the assertion, based on a belief in a literal meaning of the Bible. This technique is often referred to by its detractors as "prooftexting."

While a commitment to this kind of interpretation is probably best known as the basis for the rejection of Darwin's theory of evolution, literalist interpreters have applied the technique to other central questions of theology as well. Importantly, it has been used to account for an emphasis on direct experience with the divine popularized by evangelicals like Billy Graham under the name "spiritual rebirth." Inspired by a radical certainty afforded by this intense direct experience, believers locate references to such experiences in interpretations of specific New Testament passages. One passage often used to account for the rebirth experience is Jesus' words to the Pharisee Nicodemus in the Gospel of John: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). As a result, the first belief (in literalism) supports the second, the need for spiritual rebirth.

Then, in turn, the belief in the necessity of spiritual rebirth drives the third belief: that it is necessary to convert others by inviting them to have their own spiritual rebirth experiences. Even when not evangelizing nonbelievers, Christians emphasize the evangelical component of their belief system by giving testimony of their own spiritual rebirth. By exchanging personal experience narratives about their rebirths as a form of "witnessing," individuals engage in "speaking the truth in love" to each other (Ephesians 4:16). This evangelical witnessing supports the shared understanding of the rebirth experience and links the radical certainty of direct experience with a literal reading of the Bible.

These first three beliefs taken together, however, do not necessarily mark vernacular Christian fundamentalism. Indeed, they could mark any number of more common evangelical ideologies, sects, or movements. Vernacular Christian fundamentalism only emerges when a literal interpretation of the

prophetic texts gives rise to online ritualized deliberation based on a belief in the "End Times." This distinctive fourth trait interlocks both with the radical certainty afforded by spiritual rebirth and the need to "witness" their shared literalism by giving everyday adherents a reason to discuss their faith online.

As with the other defining beliefs, the faith in the End Times is located in specific biblical passages. The central biblical idea associated with the phrase the "Kingdom of Heaven" is one often cited as a literal reference to the end of human history. Of the many references throughout the New Testament, the Gospel of Mathew presents a typical one. After Jesus describes at some length the violence and suffering that will mark the End Times period, he states bluntly: "And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory" (Mathew 24: 29–30). When a literal interpretation of these passages is emphasized, believers assume that Christ will visibly return at some point in human history. When people begin to engage in deliberation about exactly when this return might occur, that activity becomes the distinctive marker of this new religious movement.

While it is clear that these beliefs were being expressed online by the 1990s, the nature of the social entity that the individuals communicating these beliefs comprise challenges our notions of community. These individuals enact a sort of community only so long as they imagine each other as forming a cohesive social group in which they have some stake. At the same time, this sort of online religious community is fundamentally different from "real-world" or geographically based communities. Individuals form it as they express shared ideas instead of when they share physical proximity. As a result, its members are freer to choose with whom they create their community. The radical freedom afforded by network communication technologies makes this new religious movement a new kind of religious movement because it gives form to a "virtual ekklesia."

In this research, I consider vernacular Christian fundamentalism a new religious movement based on religious scholar J. Gordon Melton's definition. It fulfills Melton's definitive traits of a new religious movement. It has emerged "apart from dominant religious culture" as a result of a "significant theological divergence" in its emphasis on the End Times. As a result of this emphasis, its adherents "act in a different manner from the majority" (1999) when they engage in the ritual deliberation that constitutes their online church, their "virtual ekklesia."

The Virtual Ekklesia

Believing that they were acting in a way much like "first-century Christians," one of my respondents told me that he and his wife used the Internet to enact their "ekklesia." Rejecting the need for religious institutions in favor of vernacular authority, he described how "it's absolutely viable for the 'church,' if you understand what I mean by that: the ekklesia; to meet on the Internet" (Jane and John 1999). Ritual deliberation is the primary form this "meeting" takes in vernacular Christian fundamentalism, and that deliberation is an extension of the ancient Christian tradition of *koinonia* or "fellowship." This emphasis on fellowship has proved readily adaptable to the online environment (Howard 2009b).

In Greek (the language of the New Testament), *koinonos* literally means a "partner" or "sharer." In early Christian theology, the Apostle Paul imagined the Christian community as a group of "sharers" of the knowledge that the teachings of Christ were true. Compelling his followers to engage in "sharing" this already shared knowledge with each other, Paul used the Greek word "*koinonia*" (I Corinthians: 10: 16). The members of the early church communicated their shared belief in the teachings of Jesus as they formed new sorts of communities in the midst of diverse Roman cities. Over time, engaging in koinonia came to be a defining mark of membership in the Christian church.

In the online environment today, individuals seldom share the material possessions, resources, or geographical space associated with real-world communities like cities. While this sort of nongeographic fellowship is very different from a typical community, a church based on koinonia readily adapts to an online environment because it emerges in individual acts of communication. When early Christians expressed their shared beliefs, they marked themselves as part of what was, at that time, a newly formed religion. Doing so marked them as different from others in the cosmopolitan cities in which many of them lived because they shared the unique and specific knowledge that the Christian message was true.

The idea that sharing knowledge generates a community is at least as old as the Christian idea of "church" itself. In the Gospel of Mathew, Jesus famously declared: "And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (16: 18). Here, the word "church" is translated from the Greek word "*ekklesia*." In Classical Greek, ekklesia referred to "an assembly of important persons."

In New Testament Greek, this word came to refer to the congregation associated with a particular synagogue. When the Apostle Paul brought the Christian message to non-Jews, he made it clear that a shared knowledge of Christ's message instead of Jewish heritage was a prerequisite to membership in this new kind of ekklesia (Colossians 1:1–24). Translated literally from the Greek, Paul's role as an "evangelist" was a "sharer of good news." However, this sharing was not just the activity of making new converts to Christianity. It was also the expression of Christ's message among those already converted. Koinonia was the ongoing constitution of the ekklesia through the active sharing of knowledge.

Paul emphasized that shared knowledge marked the members of the Christian community as distinct from nonbelievers when he analogized the community to a "temple of the living God" writing in II Corinthians 6: 14: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness?" Elsewhere, Paul describes how the individual members of the Christian community must "knit together" the "body of Christ" by "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4: 16). Advocating for unity in the face of an early controversy surrounding the need for non-Jewish Christians to adhere to Jewish law, Paul argued that Christians should foster group cohesion by sharing "the word of Christ" among themselves: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another" (Colossians 3:15–16).

In a diverse society, individual Christians could understand themselves as members of a distinct community on the basis of their collaborative expression of shared knowledge. The need for community recognition gave rise to the traditions of self-expression referred to as "witnessing" or "giving testimony" in which everyday churchgoers stand before the congregation and declare their personal experiences with the divine (Bruce 1974; Titon 1988). Traditions of testimony and witnessing as forms of fellowship have long been common in Protestantism and evangelical Christianity in particular, but in vernacular Christian fundamentalism these behaviors take on a more central importance because there are no geographically based churches. Instead, the "body of Christ" that is "knit together" by Internet communication creates a "virtual ekklesia."

By "virtual," I refer to the literal meaning of the word as "manifest by effect." While this meaning is similar to that currently associated with "virtual worlds" such as those created by immersive online environments like Second Life, the term comes from the seventeenth-century realization that some plants possessed "virtues" that could only be recognized when ingested

as medicines. In this sense, those effects were "virtual" because they were only observable through their effect. Later, the term was brought into physics to refer to subatomic particles that were invisible to microscopy but could be detected by studying the behavior of the particles around them. From there, it moved into computer science to refer to computer memory that was not part of the computer's physical memory.

Building on that common computer jargon to refer to things that were emulated like "virtual RAM," communication theorist Howard Rheingold famously coined the phrase "virtual community" in 1993. At the time, it was not generally accepted that individuals could form geographically separated communities through network communication. Rheingold, however, argued that "virtual communities" were "social aggregations that emerge" through network communication when there is "sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships" (2000, 5).

For Rheingold, a community can be "virtual" when network communication has the effect of allowing a group of people to sense an emotional stake in a shared social aggregate that has no physical or geographic existence. Applying Rheingold's idea to the study of online religion, communication researcher Heidi Campbell first suggested that when such a virtual community imagines itself as an online congregation, it constitutes a "virtual ecclesia" (2005). While the virtual congregation or, as my respondent termed it above, the "virtual ekklesia," does have the effect of creating a group of people with a stake in sharing their ideology, this sort of community is far more tenuous than one based on a shared physical location.

A virtual community exists only insofar as the community exists in the minds of its members. It is most palpable when individuals are actually communicating online in front of their computers, but it exists "virtually" (it has its effect) so long as individuals imagine that they are members of it. In this sense, the virtual ekklesia is primarily an "imagined community" much as famously described by Benedict Anderson in 1991. Because this community is based on its effect of creating an imagined link between physically separated individuals, repeated episodes of online communication among these individuals become the only means by which the virtual ekklesia can come into being.

However, communication is centrally important in this movement not only because it only exists virtually. It is also important because it has emerged without any modern-day Apostle Paul. In vernacular Christian fundamentalism, individuals use communication technologies to transcend not just geographic locations but also traditional sources of authority in the

forms of both specific leaders and institutions. Here, vernacular authority comes from individuals using communication technologies to sacralize their own aggregate social entity by "witnessing" their shared certainty in the truth of their particular interpretation of the Christian message.

As they enact this particular virtual ekklesia, individuals must be marked as insiders who share their special knowledge, while those who do not share this knowledge must be marked as outsiders. There are, however, no physical locations or barriers to separate the believers from the nonbelievers as there might be in a new religious movement that establishes a real-world community. As I have noted, there is also no central leadership to fulfill this role. Instead, a powerful form of social control must emerge from this group's aggregated vernacular authority.

Sociologists of religion have long struggled to understand the different ways social control emerges in new religious movements. In movements that have strongly enforced self-sealing worldviews, researchers have imagined central control being exerted by a leader or leaders, often including pressure to cut ties to nonbelievers and even move into shared living and working spaces. Vernacular Christian fundamentalism complicates this understanding with its virtual ekklesia based only on vernacular authority.

Some researchers have sought to explain the reasons believers would choose to alienate themselves by focusing on extreme cases like that of the People's Temple or Heaven's Gate. These researchers tend to portray believers as mesmerized followers (Davis 2000; Lifton 1989; Schein 1971; Singer 2003). This conception suggests that social control flows down from a specific leader or leaders who command powerful personal charisma (Cialdini 1993; Weber 1978; Lalich 2004, 15). Imagined this way, researchers can attribute any negative outcomes to the movement's leadership (see Lewis 2001; Robbins and Zablocki 2001). This removes both agency and responsibility from the everyday believers.

In vernacular Christian fundamentalism individuals generate powerful social control without any institutions, leadership, or even a shared geographic location. By performing ritual deliberation about the End Times, they choose to follow this specific ideology. In that choosing, they generate the vernacular authority that enforces a self-sealing system of belief that alienates them from the mainstream society in which they live. If we cannot attribute this powerful social control to the manipulative intentions of a charismatic leader, then something about it must appeal to each individual who chooses to participate in enacting the vernacular authority.

Historically, a belief in the impending return of Christ has exhibited a broad popularity across the Christian tradition. Rhetoric scholar Stephen O'Leary has described how these apocalyptic ideas typically function as "symbolic resources that enable societies to define and address the problem of evil" (1994, 6). When evil is associated with mainstream society, however, apocalypticism increases the potential for intolerance and prejudice, because imagining outsiders as agents of an active evil force renders prejudice against them more reasonable.

Historian Richard Hofstadter famously documented a conspiratorial or "paranoid" style in Christian apocalypticism that emerges when individuals describe the world in terms of fundamentally good and fundamentally evil forces (1967, 39). More recently, researcher of religion and folklorist Daniel Wojcik has documented this same dualism in evangelical Christian media that imagines mainstream society as "irreversibly evil" (1997, 140; 2000). In these texts, an adamant belief in the near return of Jesus Christ encourages believers to think of themselves as warriors in a mythic struggle against all who disagree (Howard 2009a).

As Wojcik notes, this kind of thinking breeds the "profound alienation from contemporary society that is central to much apocalyptic thought" (1997, 142). Tracing expressions of this alienation in apocalyptic discourse, researchers of religion Chip Berlet and Matthew Lyons have mapped recurring associations between "aggressive White supremacy, demagogic appeals, demonization, conspiracist scapegoating, anti-Semitism, hatred of the Left, militaristic nationalism, an apocalyptic style, and millennialist themes" (2000, 17).

These prejudices are resilient in contemporary apocalyptic discourse because the dualism and the perceived alienation work together to generate a self-sealing worldview. Analyzing specific examples of this discourse, O'Leary has powerfully demonstrated how End Times biblical interpretation typically deploys an argumentative strategy that "denies the credentials of all authorities who disagree" by arguing that outsiders who dissent are in league with the forces of evil. By presenting anyone with a different view as part of an evil mainstream society, End Times interpretation "transforms their disagreements into further support for the claim by interpreting it as itself a sign of the End" (1994, 170). A feedback loop is completed when the sense that outsiders are evil is validated by a feeling of alienation brought on by considering the overwhelming volume of divergent ideas in mainstream society.

As I have noted, vernacular Christian fundamentalism is characterized by its emergence in network media. The fact that it also exhibits the dualistic and self-sealing qualities typical of Christian apocalyptism suggests that individuals are choosing to use the Internet to foster their own isolation from mainstream discourse. In fact, sociologist of religion Michael Barkun has documented how "those whose worldview is built around conspiracy ideas find in the Internet virtual communities of the like-minded" (2003, 13). This is not what advocates of network communication technology were hoping to find in religious expression as it adjusts to the digital age.

In 2001, sociologist of religion Brenda Brasher voiced the expectation that Internet communication would foster a global tolerance for religious diversity: "The wisdom of Web pages and holy hyperlinks that are the stuff of online religion possess the potential to make a unique contribution to global fellowship in the frequently volatile area of interreligous understanding" (2001b, 6). This attitude is common among Internet communication researchers, and it has emerged from communication theories about the conditions which foster healthy public deliberation.

Some Internet theorists hope that network communication will have a widely positive impact on politics because they feel it harbors the potential for creating more equal dialogue positions between individuals involved in public debates. They argue that individuals in a society who enjoy relatively equal positions are encouraged to tolerate difference because it is through such tolerance that others hear their voices. Referencing Jürgen Habermas's vision of a "public sphere" of open discourse, for example, Internet scholar Zizi Papacharissi has argued that "a virtual space enhances discussion; and a virtual sphere enhances democracy" (Habermas 1974; Papacharissi 2002, 11). Similarly, Yale law professor Jack Balkin has argued that the ability to make links between Web pages discourages fragmentation by encouraging linking to pages with divergent content (Balkin 2004).

In reference to the increased opportunities individuals have to express themselves online, Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig has lauded a new vigor in communal creative expression he terms "read/write culture" (2008, 28). Well-known communication and media theorist Henry Jenkins has made similar claims in his celebration of "convergence culture" (2006b, 135). Harvard law professor Yochai Benkler is perhaps the most vocal proponent of the idea that the Internet is fostering new kinds of empowerment for everyday people. He has argued for a sweepingly positive assessment of the role of the Internet, describing it as "a mechanism to achieve improvements in human development everywhere" (2008, 2). For Benkler, network com-

munication technologies have fostered a "new folk culture" that encourages "a wider practice of active personal engagement in the telling and retelling of basic cultural themes." For Benkler, this practice "offers new avenues for freedom" (2008, 299–300).

Benkler and others are certainly correct when they argue that the Internet can transfer authority from institutions to individuals. In terms of media production, this is a good thing at least when it allows people to express themselves in ways that were previously only available to the most powerful sectors of society (Howard 2008a). Further, the increased attention to noninstitutional voices associated with these new modes of communication seems to be empowering individuals with new ways to become politically engaged. This increases the possibilities for transformative social change because it opens conduits of influence that can move from the bottom up (Howard 2010a). As Benkler puts it:

> At a more foundational level of collective understanding, the shift from an industrial to a networked information economy increases the extent to which individuals can become active participants in producing their own cultural environment. It opens the possibility of a more critical and reflective culture. (2008, 130)

What, however, of those individuals whose worldviews seem to compel them to use this new freedom not so much to be "critical and reflective" as to locate others with which to form like-minded enclaves of belief?

Benkler acknowledges this problem, noting that it is a "fact that the Internet allows widely dispersed people with extreme views to find each other and talk." He concludes, however, that this phenomenon "is not a failure for the liberal public sphere" (2008, 256). The goal of a liberal public sphere should be to allow people to communicate more or less as equals. Insofar as that condition is aided by the Internet, advocates like Benkler are right to suggest that the resulting empowerment should cause individuals to reject beliefs that alienate them from the mainstream because they stand to benefit by having their voices heard more broadly.

For Benkler, those who fail to reject intolerant beliefs, however, "may present new challenges for the liberal state in constraining extreme action" (2008, 257). While it may be possible to arrest and detain individuals who commit violent acts because of their extreme views, the milder forms of intolerance and prejudice that are associated with some kinds of apocalypticism cannot easily be "constrained" by the "state" without compromising the

mainstream value of tolerance itself (see Wessinger 2000b). Instead, these individuals' choices to believe and express their beliefs must be respected as a right even by critics of those beliefs.

This situation tempers the hope of these Internet scholars. The fact that vernacular Christian fundamentalism's dualistic and self-sealing ideology is flourishing online reveals that some Internet users do not place a very high value on the more critical and reflective forms of tolerance an online public sphere provides them. Instead, these individuals seem to place a greater value on the social control they can generate through vernacular authority. For them, network communication enables them to cordon off their beliefs from criticism and enact discourse that portrays any resistance from the outside as proof both of their alienation and their righteousness. In this sense, the Internet is not just compatible with the self-sealing and dualistic ideology associated with apocalypticism, but some Internet users are using network communication technologies to foster it.

Vernacular Webs

When the telegraph first rendered messages into electricity in 1844, the act of sharing ideas was unyoked from the physical movement of people or objects (Carey 1989, 201ff; Fischer 1992). It became possible to replace an individual's physical presence with a "telepresence" (Markham 1998, 17). With the introduction of personal computer technologies in the late 1970s, communication was again transformed because it could be "digitized" into binary numbers (Ceruzzi 2003). As sequences of on-and-off electric pulses or "bits," vastly more and more complex human expressions could be rendered telepresent. Then, persistent webs of telepresent human discourse became possible as computer network technologies were developed into the Internet during the 1980s.

The emergence of vernacular Christian fundamentalism serves as an indication of the profound effects this technologizing of everyday human communication can have. The Internet can elevate individual action to new levels of power by generating distributed vernacular authority. Paolo Apolito, a prominent researcher of technology and religion, has argued that this technological shift toward the everyday and the individual has "marginalized the charismatic, shifting the focus as it does from the 'gift' of [a] direct relationship with heaven to the technical structure of the procedures of vision and contact with the beyond" (2005, 5).

For Apolito, the technologizing of authority has placed distance between the powerful experience of the divine and the humans who seek it. While this may be the case in some ways, it must not be forgotten that these very technological structures are themselves animated by humans. Through digital conduits, repeated individual actions etch channels of shared imagining. Over time, these channels mark an aggregate volition, and this volition is the source of vernacular authority. Even if it is less dramatic than personal contact with the Madonna or space aliens, this authority still moves through these everyday believers to fill their daily lives with the divine.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, one of the first researchers to take a modern approach to the study of religion, Emile Durkheim, famously argued for an almost transcendent understanding of aggregate social action. For Durkheim, "society" can only know itself through ongoing cooperation: "It is by common action that [society] takes consciousness of itself and realizes its position; it is before all else an active cooperation. [. . .] It is action which dominates the religious life, because of the mere fact that it is society which is its source" (1915, 465–66). For Durkheim, cooperative action sacralizes the world because it is only through such action that individual experiences are made sensible beyond the individual self. In this process, the ritual enacting of the social divine renders its presence visible across time by creating, maintaining, and re-creating the shared meanings that link individual humans together.

In this research, I have located individuals communicating the beliefs of vernacular Christian fundamentalism online from the earliest days of the Internet in the 1980s to the surge of participatory media in the early part of the twenty-first century. In so doing, this book documents a vernacular web of expression enacted in the sharing of this ideology. In the thick of this web, Marilyn Agee's site functions as a prominent location for connecting with others who wish to discuss the End Times. While Marilyn is deeply enmeshed in this web, Lambert Dolphin inhabits its edge.

Among the more than seven hundred pages on Lambert's site in 2001, only one page engaged the possibility of a typical End Times scenario. Well known in the community and often referenced as authoritative, this single page functions as the node through which he is drawn into the movement. As individuals move through various links from other End Times sites to his page, his recounting of the prophetic narrative pushes the walls of the virtual ekklesia just a little wider. In these moments, vernacular Christian fundamentalism's web of network locations encompasses both Agee and Dolphin.

While Marilyn and Lambert both inhabit this web, their online expression focuses on very different things. Lambert's site contained a huge variety of theological ideas and teachings in addition to his discussion of the End Times. Marilyn's focused almost exclusively on prophecy. Lambert expressed the idea that maybe different "models" for understanding the divine might work equally well. Marilyn emphasized that any conception of the divine other than her own "is totally false" (Agee and Edgar, 1999). Despite the fundamentally more rigid understanding of the divine that Marilyn holds, these two popular amateur theologians are linked by the beliefs of vernacular Christian fundamentalism.

Lambert hangs on the very edge of this movement only because he does not make his position on literalism clear. He seemed to contradict any strict adherence to a single interpretation of the Bible during my interview with him, and his Web site has information that might suggest almost any evangelical Protestant belief system. Amongst that material, however, he does express his belief in spiritual rebirth, evangelism, and the End Times without any caveat. Since these beliefs are typically found together with the fourth belief definitive of the movement, namely, literalism, individuals recognize his expression of those three traits as supported by the fourth. Reading Lambert's online communication, they assimilate his expression into their movement as their own.

Willingly or not, Lambert's Web page on the End Times participates in vernacular Christian fundamentalism. His case is telling because it demonstrates the interactive relationship between the individual and the social that characterizes this new sort of movement. On the one hand, the individual is disempowered by the social because it exerts control through vernacular authority. It pulls communication into its web wherever it finds support for its core beliefs and it excludes communication that challenges them.

At the same time, the practice of ritual deliberation empowers individuals by tolerating a significant diversity of expression. This tolerance is possible because the four beliefs that define the movement allow individuals to spin and change their interpretations of the prophetic narrative without the constraints imposed by any centralized authority or more complex doctrines. As Lambert's case demonstrates, the vernacular authority generated by individuals spinning out these interpretive possibilities can pull communication into its undulating web even from the extreme fringes.

Long before the emergence of the Worldwide Web, cultural theorist Clifford Geertz imagined humans as "an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz 1973, 5). Today, these webs emerge and

extend with the aid of network media. One of these webs continually constructs, maintains, and reconstructs a placeless church based on a shared belief in the imminent approach of Jesus Christ's Second Coming. Not a lifeless structure lifted and turned by the chance of circumstance, this vernacular web is emergent from the aggregate authority of an untold number of individual human choices to engage in ritual deliberation about the End Times.

The implications of this finding are far-reaching.

In the second half of the twentieth century, researchers of religion imagined that U.S. culture was growing more secular (Carter 1991; Ying 1957). Late in the century, however, it became clear that American society was not growing less religious but, instead, that its religiosity was changing (Cowan 2005; Hadden 1987). Today, individuals feel less affiliated with their traditional institutions. They do not necessarily continue to associate with their childhood or family denomination, and they (especially younger believers) increasingly turn to nondenominational and often Internet-based forms of religious community (Pew 2008). Today's media offer individuals more opportunities to construct their own personalized systems of belief than ever before in history, and more people than ever are taking advantage of these opportunities (Ammerman 1997; Cimino and Lattin 1998; Roof 1999).

With the recognition of this broader trend, the virtual ekklesia documented here raises new questions about the nature of religion in an age of network communication. What roles do communication technologies play in these individualistic constructions of religious belief? What dangers are emerging in the heavily mediated and individually constructed religious marketplaces of the digital age? The case of vernacular Christian fundamentalism demonstrates that individual believers can deploy even the most powerful communication media to limit their exposure to the diversity of ideas those media have made available to them. Documenting individuals making this choice without the influence of any central leadership, this research suggests that individual believers empowered by modern technology must be considered responsible for the sorts of religiosity they choose to construct.

The central motive behind these individuals' choice to construct this self-sealing virtual ekklesia may well be a fundamentally human one. As the well-known scholar of communication James W. Carey noted, individuals engage in communication not just to transmit knowledge but also as a means for "the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world" (1989, 18–19). People do not want to do this alone. They seek to construct their worlds in connection with others. To realize this connection, they seek to share their understanding of the world.

Individuals today are freer to express themselves than at any point in human history. They are freer to gather information from more diverse sources than ever before. They are freer to engage in the wealth of diversity other human beings are expressing. Together, their aggregated volition generates something wholly new in human history. This aggregate action generates a new Christian body, a virtual ekklesia, a digital Jesus. For some, however, this aggregation may be coming at too great a cost.

Today's network communication technologies afford individuals the chance to choose wholly different ways of knowing. In diversity, transformation remains possible. However, the trend toward individually aggregating new information into very tightly focused ideological enclaves like that demonstrated in vernacular Christian fundamentalism suggests that this freedom can also diminish the power of those who have it. As a mechanism that places limits on the consumption and expression of ideas, online communication enclaves like that of vernacular Christian fundamentalism may foreclose some of the new avenues toward the richly meaningful religious life that network communication technologies seem to afford.