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Contents

Apocalypse in your In-Box: End-Times Communication on the Internet[1]

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In the 1990s, there has been quite a bit of media attention paid to radical Christian fundamentalists—the image of gun-toting, communal-living, child-molesting terrorists might come to mind. This image is really only an update. Historically, apocalyptic Christians have been portrayed with wild eyes. Even in the 1970 revision of his 1957 classic *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, Norman Cohn kept them fearfully hanging on the periphery. In recent press coverage, it seems that the average Christian millennialist is dangerously devoted to a single malevolent leader. This article argues that, on the Internet at least, this image does not hold true. Most Christian millennialists who are highly involved in electronic discourse seem, by the very nature of the electronic media less, likely to be devoted to a single religious authority.

The media attention paid to Heaven's Gate in 1997 has only helped build and expand the devoted-follower stereotype of millennialists.[2] It is no doubt important to study the complex world views that can support New Age ritual suicide. However, my observations imply that the vast majority of millennialists on the Internet are not part of idiosyncratic religious groups. By and large, they are not attached to any single individual as in the case of Heaven's Gate. Phenomena like Heaven's Gate are distinct from the phenomena discussed by Sacvan Bercovitch in his now classic 1978 analysis of popular American rhetoric, *The American Jeremiad*, or more recently in 1997, by Daniel Wojcik in his folkloristic exploration of popular apocalyptic belief *The End of the World as We Know It*.[3]

From these two scholars, it seems clear that popular millennialism in the

United States is rooted in colonial history, is primarily Christian or Christian-influenced, and is still prevalent today. Both scholars imply, historically in the case of Bercovitch and currently in the case of Wojcik, that phenomena like Heaven's Gate or other recent high profile millennialists present idiosyncratic behavior in relation to the popular American discourse of apocalypse. Although I believe such idiosyncratic behavior can be usefully addressed by folklorists, it is not the topic of this article. Instead, I am addressing the normative communicative behaviors of Christian millennialists on the Internet in the mid-1990s from a folkloristic perspective.

I recognize the difficulty in calling my subject "popular" Christian millennialism while claiming a "folkloristic" perspective. In choosing the term "popular," I am attempting to acknowledge the complex relationship between the mass media forms that influence the folk and the actual expressive behaviors of those individuals. The popular-media side of this exchange presents the synthesis of multiple Christian and non-Christian traditions into commercial forms that are accessible to a wide audience. As this media is consumed by the folk, the result is a highly syncretistic folk religious matrix in the sense Don Yoder discussed in 1974. From one perspective, folk religion is a syncretistic ideational matrix based on multiple interpretations of two or more conventional religious forms. More broadly defining his terms, Yoder asserts that the folk religious expressions are those which "exist among the people apart from and alongside the strictly theological and liturgical forms of the official religion"(Yoder 1974: 13-14). The behaviors I describe in this article both exist apart from official Protestant and Catholic doctrines and are highly syncretistic.

However, based on Leonard Norman Primiano's (1995) refinement of Yoder, I maintain that actual religion really exists only in individual thought and behavior. The distinction Yoder made between "institutional" and "folk" religion relies on his belief that the abstract doctrines of a religious institution exist in some ideal form distinct from actual daily life. From Primiano, I assert that such "institutional" expressions of religion exist only in the actual documents that establish, maintain, and define religious institutions. If one hopes to address these religious doctrines in any rigorous way, including in terms of their relationships to non-doctrinal practice, we must engage in the careful documentation of individuals involved in religious activity.

In this sense, then, even the most doctrinal expression of religious belief is "vernacular" in that it is expressed by an individual who has ideas and beliefs that are distinct from, even if parallel to, the authorizing documents of a religious institution. Thus, be it doctrinal or radically idiosyncratic, if

we are to understand religion at all, it must be documented through a behavioral folkloristic method and examined in terms of the real human individuals who make it manifest.[4]

In 1991, when I first really began to explore the Internet, Christian vernacular expression there was small. By 1994, a number of large and broadly inclusive Christian newsgroups were in full bloom. On those groups, however, millennial discourse only came in short bursts. Noting the occasional millennial queries there, I naively posted a message asking for people interested in millennial theory to drop me an e-mail. I was immediately inundated with messages from interested parties as well as irate individuals who felt such absurd topics were best kept off their newsgroup.

At first I was a little discouraged, but I soon realized that, among those who responded positively, there were an untold number of private e-mail exchange groups. Though only marginally present on the larger newsgroups, quite a few Christians were highly engaged in millennial discourse through e-mail exchanges among much smaller groups.

Now, as we enter the late 1990s, the Christian Internet communities have diversified and expanded. In so doing, Christians offer themselves more niches for millennial expression. This development seems a typical pattern for contemporary electronic communication. The effect of this pattern on communicative behavior is, however, debatable. More diversity in smaller discursive niches might allow individuals to limit their media and/or folk influences to only those with which they already more or less agree. Some argue that such individuals would then become more easily influenced by dogmatic leaders. However, the behavior I have observed indicates that individuals involved in electronic media do not immerse themselves in a single newsgroup or discourse community—and thus are not, for the most part, easily influenced by single-minded or dogmatic argumentative techniques.

For instance, at the time of my initial research, as now, people watching Jack Van Impe's weekly Christian millennial television broadcasts also talk to their friends about his show. They engage both popular media and face-to-face human interaction in a dynamic interchange of influence and expression. In 1994, many of them were also beginning to go onto the Internet and engage in e-mail discussions about his show in relation to their previously held beliefs or other discursive influences. Then, these same individuals might also communicate with an untold number of different individuals in chat rooms, newsgroups, or through web pages.

As these individuals widen and diversify the multiple discourse communities they participate in, they must also, by the very act of widening and

diversifying, accept more and different ideas into their discourse. To explore this trend, I will discuss popular Christian millennialism as expressed in interviews I conducted primarily through e-mail with individual millennial believers active in 1994 and 1995 in small e-mail groups of their own creation as well as on the, then, small number of Christian Usenet newsgroups. In the fast-paced world of these apocalyptic believers, new technology proved indispensable to the development and reinforcement of their belief structures. I have found secretaries, businessmen, and school teachers settled on their own small plots of cyber-space—refining, expanding, and reinforcing their millennial beliefs.

A newsgroup is sort of an electronic bulletin board. People send messages to the newsgroup where they are posted for others to read. These forums have been described as an "information river"(Engst 1995: 31). In 1995, some 200 megabytes worth of this information entered the newsgroups each day and the volume has only increased since. However, such databases have a limited capacity. A constant influx of new data pushes older data off the bulletin board. The newsgroup is an excellent forum for ongoing discussions, but not a forum for static information such as is a standard database.

The majority of these groups have little or no moderation. The individual poster can usually place anything he or she feels is appropriate on the board—the only form of correction being hostile feed-back. These groups are the most open of Internet forums and, in the early and mid-1990s, they were some of the most popular. Their limits are only in the time the posts survive on the boards and the subject that a given newsgroup is attempting to keep in focus. Even in the 1990's, the titles of these groups ranged from "bionet.neuroscience" to "alt.sex.spanking."

When entering the newsgroup, the computer user sees a list of headings representing each group by subject as represented in figure 1.[5]

——————————————Newsgroup Listing————————————1-19 of 22————

COMMAND ===>   SCROLL ===> 8

To redisplay all newsgroups, use ONLY command without operands.

Select All	Reg Dereg Mark Unmark	Unread	Count	Range
alt.christnet		322	28145	1 - 28145
alt.christnet.bible		255	13678	1 - 13678
alt.christnet.christianlife		67	2676	1 - 2676
alt.christnet.ethics		14	23	1 - 623
alt.christnet.evangelical		121	2296	1 - 2296
alt.christnet.philosophy		118	4995	1 - 4995
alt.christnet.prayer		2	33	1 - 332
alt.christnet.public		9	696	1 - 696
alt.christnet.sex		146	500	1 - 500
alt.christnet.theology		121	8452	1 - 8452
alt.education.home-school.christian		12	829	1 - 829
alt.fan.christopher.walken		5	5	1 - 5
alt.fan.jesus-christ		28	4724	1 - 4724
alt.religion.christian.boston-church	R	24	1330	1 - 1330
bit.listserv.christia	R	159	19622	1 - 19622
misc.education.home-school.christian		59	4016	1 - 4016
rec.music.christian		355	33716	1 - 33716
soc.religion.christian		222	21198	1 - 21198
soc.religion.christian.bible-study	R	95	12493	1 - 1249

(Figure 1: Newsgroups Listed by headings as they appear on the user's computer screen when searched by the keyword "Christ."[6])

Accessing a particular newsgroup then yields a similar list of each e-mailed "post." It includes the poster's name, the time and date received, and the subject of the post as it was designated by the poster. This list is represented in figure 2.

Newsgroup: soc.religion.christian——————————————————Range 20977-21198		
COMMAND ===>	SCROLL ===> CSR	
Article: Select Extract Print Mark Unmark Cancel	Status	Date
20995 Re: Toronto Blessing - I was there too!	Unread	27 Sep 1995
20997 Re: You won't believe what I saw today...	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21000 Re: Why is OT in the Bible?	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21003 Re: pimps.most effective.in history	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21004 *** Mary's Sept 25/95 Message ***	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21005 Re: Did Judas do the will of God	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21006 Re: Life in the Spirit (Telepathy) Group	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21010 Re: The Matthean Gospel - (Not?) Jewish	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21012 Re: Info on "The Church Of The Brethren"	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21013 Re: Is Allah the same as the Christian God	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21014 Re: Growing in Christ (request for testim...	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21040 Re: Gays and 1 Cor 6:9, 1 Tim 1:10	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21046 Re: Is Masturbation correct?	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21048 Toronto curse	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21051 ==> Mormon religion <==	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21058 Modern Day Idolatry	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21068 Re: Is Masturbation correct? (NO!)	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21069 Re: Did God Create Himself?	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21070 Re: SEX!!! Now that I've gotten your att...	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21071 Whats your Opinion @ this?	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21054 Re: The Third Prediction/Prophesy of Fa...	Unread	27 Sep 1995
21056 Re: Toronto Blessing - I was there too!	Unread	27 Sep 1995

(Figure 2: Selected Newsgroup Posts listed by headings as they appear on the user's computer screen.)

Some of these headings begin with the prefix "re:." Such messages are replies to previously posted messages. There are often long series of exchanges set off by a single post. These exchanges are termed "threads" and are the primary form of newsgroup debate.

Unlike the newsgroups, e-mail is a private forum. The format of the messages is the same in e-mail and newsgroup posts—but e-mailed messages are sent directly to individuals. In many cases people first make contact through a newsgroup. Later they develop a relationship exchanging e-mail. Often single e-mailed messages will be "CCed" to more than one individual— "CC" referring to the "carbon-copy" function of many e-mail applications. Small e-mail groups can then quickly develop through sending and replying to messages with multiple recipients. Through these messages,

groups of people who share common interests coalesce into new news-
groups, participate in threads, and establish lists of regular e-mail corre-
spondents. They form communities through the Internet.

Current scholarship seldom seems to have much influence in most of
these communities, but one of my informants did suggest that I look at
When Time Shall Be No More "to get the folklore spin on this stuff." [7] In 1992,
Paul Boyer wrote this exhaustive socio-historical document. He concluded
that, "at a time when nuclear war threatened, the Cold War rumbled on,
materialism and self-indulgence seemed all pervasive, and an impersonal
computerized economic order threatened human autonomy, the Millen-
nium shimmered on the horizon as an alternative future"(Boyer 1992:
324). In this situation, prophecy is "a quasi-empirical, 'scientific' validation
of their faith"(294). Some twenty years before, Norman Cohn minced his
words less:

> emotionally charged phantasies of a final, apocalyptic struggle or an
> egalitarian Millennium had much less attraction for technologi-
> cally advanced societies. Those who are fascinated by such ideas are,
> on the one hand the population of certain technologically backward
> societies which are not only overpopulated and desperately poor but
> also involved in a problematic transition to the modern world—
> and on the other hand, certain politically marginal elements in
> technologically advanced societies—chiefly young or unemployed
> workers and a small minority of intellectuals and students.(Cohn
> 1970: 285-6)

Such attitudes are not limited to either millennial study or the more
arcane scholarly literature. In the semi-popular press of the mid-1990s,
there is a similar line of thinking about the Internet in general. In *War Of
The Worlds: Cyber-space and The High-Tech Assault On Reality*, Mark Slouka, an
English professor, prophesies about the danger of radical cyber-junkies.
Slouka's vision is "the hive, a super-global organism half wire half human."
This hive is populated by humans, "ignorant, docile, governed by 'the Invis-
ible Hand.'" In time, "we will disappear in a rapture of submission"(1995:
97). Slouka exclaims: "you think the human hive is a harmless abstraction?
Think again. Hell, we're halfway there already"(1995: 104).

Slouka places extremists on the Internet into what he calls "ghettos" of
dogmatic ideology. He feels that such communities exist without ever con-
tacting those who might challenge their beliefs. In time, some individuals
will gain enough electronic influence to subjugate the masses in an elec-
tronic "rapture" by manipulating the limited view of the individuals in these
closed communities.

Clifford Stoll presents a less extreme take on the same issue: the nature and scope of Internet dogmatism. He points out that, "looks, gender, race, or age don't matter on bulletin boards and networks. There are no accents and all voices are equally loud" (Stoll 1995: 112). While invoking the popular idea of electronic egalitarianism, this Internet pioneer from the inner-circle at M.I.T. alternately cautions and chides. He reminds us that, "consideration, kindness, and chosen words go far, whether on the air, on-line, or in person"(115). Stoll rightly notes the potential for intolerance, not to mention bad manners, to limit individual participation in Internet communities. This is very much the sort of phenomenon I noted above when I observed that millennial Christians were kept out of the mainline Christian newsgroups in the mid-1990s. I was myself subject to this sort of harassment based on my openly academic query about millennialism in the Christian Internet community. This sort of behavior is, however, a far cry from a radically dogmatic Internet sect.

As in any community, there are those who insist on berating individuals who do not hold views similar to their own, but it seems to me that the commentators so quick to demean millennialism and point to Internet dogmatism fail to note a major group of facts. Christian millennialists, like most everyone else, are book-readers and radio-listeners. They are active in their social, work, and religious organizations. They read magazines, write letters, talk on the phone, and, after all, engage in creative communication face-to-face in small groups. However, such communication is, to some degree, motivated by a desire to persuade toward particular beliefs.

In Stephen O'Leary's 1992 application of Kenneth Burke's "dramatistic"[8] model of discourse, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, O'Leary advocates studying apocalyptic rhetoric with an, "argumentative analysis guided by the root metaphor of contextualism." He argues that previous studies of millennial discourse have failed to account for "how and why the audiences for these [millennial] texts behave as they do" (O'Leary 1992: 14). When O'Leary attempted to describe the audience of a well-know contemporary millennial author, he felt limited to "imprecise sales and distribution figures" (142). Though his study is illuminating, O'Leary seems limited by his traditional rhetorical perspective. He does not conduct interviews or interact at all, it seems, with this audience. In this study, he leaves the audience, at least half of his subject, voiceless.

In order to give millennial believers a voice in the explorations of their own beliefs, I have chosen to conceive of them as a group of individuals who comprise a single discourse community.[9] This community is

populated by the various individuals who participate in Christian oriented newsgroups and communicate about the End-Times in electronic mail. As it turns out, these millennialists engage in lively rhetorical debates themselves.

To help get a handle on multiple individuals involved in multiple discourses simultaneously over great geographical spaces and in different media, I use my concept of "influence community." The individuals who are influenced by a single data source comprise an influence community. Although discourse communities are necessarily also influence communities, the reverse is not also true. Influence sources, like the books of Hal Lindsey or the television shows of Jack Van Impe, project communication unilaterally. In themselves, unilateral influences produce no debate. Viewers cannot argue with a television set—or with a megalomaniacal cult leader for that matter. Still, unless the televangelist or television producers are themselves dogmatists, their communicative choices are also affected by the discourse communities in which they are involved. All the television producers and e-mailers involved in millennial influence communities are also simultaneously involved in any number of other divergent communities, and all of these influences serve as sources of data.

Looking at Internet millennialism as a discourse community necessitates an examination of television and popular nonfiction simply because the three influence sources are so intertwined. Television and some popular texts serve as primary information sources, and they provide many of the ideas commonly expressed on the Internet. Many different sorts of people watch exactly the same programming and read exactly the same words. Many fervently exchange electronic messages about what they watch and read. Regardless of their other influences, the viewers of the melodrama on *Melrose Place* and the apocalyptic evangelization on *Jack Van Impe Presents*, or the readers of Hal Lindsey's Biblical interpretations in *The Late Great Planet Earth* share a matrix of knowledge. As new shows or books are produced, these influence communities provide new data to fuel the bilateral discourse.

Once the Internet is added to these influence-communities, the influx of such data becomes staggering. Beyond the many newspaper, government, and private databases, there are various forums for interpersonal communication. In these forums folkloric activities thrive. It is clear that these millennialists use debate as the primary vehicle to express their folk beliefs. It is also clear that debate is not the medium of choice for dogmatists or authorities in general.

Building on the work of Margrit Eichler and others, Catherine

Wessinger has developed and continues to refine a classificatory model for millennial groups. Her work with contemporary and historic millennialism yields a model of open versus closed-access authority. Earlier scholars recognized this difference as that between a prophet and an "ideological leader." A prophet is a leader who claims access to deity, and hence authority. The ideological leader makes no such claims. Instead, he or she gains power through the popularity of his or her ideas—interpretations of Biblical verse for instance. A millennial community that focuses on a leadership claiming closed-access authority is ripe for authoritarianism and, in some cases, violence. Those communities with open-access authority are less inclined toward dogmatism of any kind (Wessinger 1988: 22-27). E-mail and newsgroup forums are on-going communicative exchanges. Closed access authority might function in an environment that discourages bilateral communication, but it has no place in one that must continually exchange information in order to exist.

In order to see how this works, we must first look more closely at the basic influence sources for contemporary popular Christian millennialism. On television, apocalyptic preachers like Jack Van Impe use a standard set of issues. From watching *Jack Van Impe Presents* regularly over a two month period in 1994, I have constructed a schematic of his End-Times narrative. Immediately following the United States' ground assault on the Iraqi forces occupying Kuwait:

1. Iraq surrenders and negotiates peace;
2. Palestine peace "becomes international in scope";
3. a world leader rises out of revived Roman Empire (the European Union);
4. EU originates and consummates international peace treaty;
5. world coalition of nations is the "New World Order" President Bush spoke of during the Gulf War;
6. Russia breaks away from world organization and attacks Israel at the three and a half year point of a seven year peace treaty;
7. the majority of Arab world will align itself against Israel with Russia;
8. England and America ("the English speaking world") and Saudi Arabia "will raise a voice of opposition" against Russia;
9. "three and a half years of skirmishes " climax in Jerusalem;
10. "Messiah will come to put an end to it, not wipe out the world, but end the war."

At the time Van Impe made these prophesies, number 1 and, arguably, number 2 had already occurred. The following eight events were, by implication, on the immediate horizon. From Van Impe's perspective, these

events are well grounded in Biblical verse—and those verses are, on one level, the obvious root of Christian millennialism.

If one looks at a text from 1970, the multi-million copy best-seller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey presents a very similar model with the primary addition of the "secret Rapture" and post-Apocalypse events in numbers 12 through 17:

1. rise of New Roman Empire as European Common Market, before 1988;
2. the establishment a world governing body led by Antichrist;
3. Antichrist sides with world government and Israel against Russia;
4. Antichrist dies of head wound, but miraculously recovers;
5. Antichrist is worshipped as a god;
6. 666 tattoo on forehead or palm established as economic mark of European Common Market;
7. rebuilding of Temple in Jerusalem;
8. Arab, other African states, and the Soviet Union attack Israel;
9. Antichrist destroys Soviet Alliance with a nuclear attack;
10. China attacks forces of Antichrist;
11. one third of world destroyed by nuclear weapons;
12. Christ returns to protect faithful, "secret Rapture";
13. mass conversion of Jews;
14. Armageddon;
15. establishment of "atomic material" paradise for a 1000 years;
16. resurgence of Antichrist put down by Christ;
17. return of faithful to heaven with Christ.[10]

These two schematics are hardly mutually exclusive. Van Impe's model differs in its more contemporary grounding in current events, and he excludes the Rapture and post-apocalypse elements. Still, both schematics focus on the events that surround a great war centered in Jerusalem and incorporating Russia, China, the European Union, the United States, and some African nations: Lindsey's numbers 1 through 12 and Van Impe's numbers 3 through 10. There are some interesting differences between the two models, but it is clear that the two are not in direct conflict.

As in any discourse community, a certain level of shared knowledge must be achieved. In the case of Christian millennialists on the Internet, Hal Lindsey's work is the base-line. From this base, the believers move out into different camps with a wide variety of theories and levels of debate. In a word, these basic narrative elements become issues—and these issues are themselves derived in some sense from biblical verse.

As it turns out, these issues are quite versatile. Many different sorts of data might appear to relate, for instance, to the catch-phrase "New World Order." Van Impe serves-up his regular-watching millennialists a weekly ration of current events keyed to these issues. He offers a diverse assortment of sound bytes gathered during the week from newspapers and other television shows. This format provides an unending supply of new information for the regular watchers to hash over, while it allows new viewers to quickly catch the thread of the narrative.

Cyber-space expands on this dynamic. Television stews together the news, sitcoms, and drama. The e-mail community assimilates these, and much more—only to digest and reproduce them on each other's computer screens. In both cases, access to many data sources leads to an ability to assimilate many different sorts of ideas. One can think of these ideas as "cross-overs"—ideas originating from, ostensibly at least, unrelated data sources. There have always been cross-overs, but the sheer volume of data allows people to harbor an immeasurable number of differing ideas. The introduction of new, often spicy and unfamiliar, bits of data leads to hotly debated issues. The result is a widely varying group of persons linked in multiple ways to a huge pot of electronic gumbo.

This discourse community model contradicts the devoted-follower image of the average millennialist—but it falls right in line with Wessinger's model of open-access authority. In the case of the Internet, individuals do not follow single leaders because the amount of diverging data drowns out the singularity a dogmatic voice must command. There are too many people saying too many different things at the same time. Through multiplicity they gain equality—though it is an equality of indecision. The debate is always spirited, but it is never conclusive.

Every day and every new database presents new sets of specific possibilities to be introduced, in appropriate proportion, to enhance to flavor of the overall narrative—and each ingredient must be hashed over a while to decide its relative probability. In the end, however, "it's just too complex." There is no final decision.

Without dogmatic leadership, various schools of thinking have sprung up. There are, for instance, the die-hard anti-Communists who see the fall of the Soviet Empire as false or only temporary, the China-As-Sleeping-Gianters who believe that the antichrist will rise out of that nation, the United-States-As-A-Ten-Zone-Nation that will produce the antichrist variant, and the European-Union-As-Rising-Threat types. This last position is, again, the view held by Lindsey and Van Impe and is often the point of departure for debate.

Still, debate can occur even when the believers adhere strongly to the same school because the range of the standard issues in the primary set is both diverse and inexact. The relationship between the EU and UN in the new totalitarian regime, the exact role of China, the nature of the electronic "Mark of the Beast," and the New Age movement, are all hotly debated issues.

This situation leads to a large volume of correspondence involving the scrutiny of "new theories." One man ranged the entire gamut of prophetic issues with his probing theories. On one occasion, he e-mailed me a 537 word exposition of Revelations 8: 10-11. It is very much in the style of this particular informant. He takes a sort of structuralist's schematic approach:

> Here's my new theory on REV 8:10,11, tell me what you think: 10 star, blazing like a torch falls from sky=nuclear melt down (The fissile material burns its way down through the reactor into the ground below) falls on 1/3 of rivers & on springs=fissile core contaminates the ground water and the rivers and streams become radioactive. 11 The name of the star is "Wormwood" (Bitterness)=the Russian Bible uses the Russian word for "wormwood" - "Chernobyl" (now a world famous Russian word). Many people died from the waters which had become bitter=many people have died from the waters which had become radioactive. By uncanny "coincidence" the ground underneath the reactor contains the bones of many massacred Jews from WW2.
>
> All comments are welcome.[11]

This specific interpretation has little or no effect on the validity of the Lindsey/Van Impe model. Instead, it is a very specific interpretation of how Chernobyl might be an sign of the coming End-Times. Its underlying function is as an open invitation to issue-exchange—"tell me what you think" and "all comments are welcome." To this sort of letter, I quickly learned in my 1994 e-mail exchanges, one must respond, "well yes but…" or risk losing the interest of the informant.

I asked my informants about their attitude toward Jack Van Impe and found that they think, as one man put it, he is, "a good guy. But is he human? Is he capable of error? Can he error by malicious intent? I do not believe he has a mean bone in his body. But, yes, he can be wrong." Though Van Impe continues to be a leading thinker in the movement, he is treated much like any other believer expressing his or her beliefs. His ideas are taken in as a possible interpretation, they are discussed, and their validity is tentatively assessed.

Though the Internet amplifies this lack of authority, the phenomenon

goes back, at least, to Hal Lindsey. In his introduction to *The Late Great Planet Earth* he stated, "I am attempting to step aside and let the prophets speak. The readers are given the freedom to accept or reject my conclusions" (Lindsey 1970: 6). After thirty-five years of sequels and updates, Lindsey's conclusions have, to some degree, been accepted.

These, and other, thinkers have gathered a large following. They have created an emically acceptable normalform of sorts. Still, the variance from this form keeps the debate vigorous. One informant summed-up the sentiment quite well when he asked about the European Union: "could this be the dread beast? could this be a compact from the pit of hell? Could all Frenchmen love wine? I see a definite possibility that maybe it might. Pretty noncommittal huh?" I have, in fact, found only a few instances of individuals who claim access to divine knowledge—and thus a dogmatic authority. As I have shown elsewhere in the case of "Do," the Heaven's Gate leader, these individuals are, by and large, ignored or assimilated into the issue-exchange like any other media source (Howard 1998).

To get an idea of how a normative debate plays out, we can take a closer look at the unification of Europe, and its association with the New Roman Empire. The issue was ripe for discussion in 1994 and 1995 for two obvious reasons. For one, the UN, EU, and various economic treaties like GATT were in the news regularly. Secondly, the popularity of conspiracy theory had increased the volume of data on the subject.

One man noted, "it turns out that since about 1933, things have been controlled not by who we imagine to be in control. I am talking about the CFR, Trilateral Commission, the World Bank, the UN, and all that bunch. As you can probably tell, I have read some conspiracy books."

Generally, my informants were not this blunt about their exposure to conspiracy-theory media. More often, I opened my Internet in-box to find something like, "Oh boy, its really coming! Did you realize that in May a dangerous, historic precedent was set when United States military forces were put under UN command, under a Turkish commander? Are you familiar with State Department Document 7277, a long-standing official US government policy program calling for the transfer of all US military forces to the UN?"

This sort communication often takes the form of specific references to governmental documents interspersed with "what do you think" and "all comments welcomed." In the 1994 and 1995 Internet environment, and today's, state and federal laws and many proceedings—not to mention other theorists—are all easy targets for probing keyboards.

Of course, cyberspace is not the only source of cross-over ideas. The tele-

vision, movie, and paperback producers have taken hold of the standard conspiracy legends with films like *JFK* and television shows like *The X-Files*. Millennialists, in turn, assimilate and re-assimilate these narratives. One secretary in Virginia noted:

> Norio Hayakawa author of *UFOs The Grand Deception and The New World Order* warns of a global UFO conspiracy linked to a sinister occult force that is manufacturing the Grand Deception of 1995. Hayakawa believes that this worldwide plot is designed to stage a counterfeit extraterrestrial contact-landing to simulate an extraterrestrial "threat" of invasions in order to urgently and ultimately bring about a delusive New World Order. In his view the actual guiding force behind the staged event may be "highly intelligent," but deceptive, ultra dimensional negative entities conveniently materializing in disguise as extraterrestrial "aliens."

This informant presents "Hayakawa's" model of the "Grand Deception" in terms entirely congruous with the Van Impe/Lindsey model—though without God. In this case, instead of spreading a dogma of fundamentalism, the fundamentalist is being infused with a range of non-fundamentalist ideas.

This same informant told me earlier, "it is my personal belief that not too far off 'UFOs' will come to the earth with 'beings' on them to save us. (I think the UFOs are really created by our own military to scare us all into being 'slaves')." This extra-terrestrial element is not as uncommon as one might think. In fact, Lindsey incorporated it into his 1994 book where he notes that "UFOs are operated by beings of great intelligence and power. To be blunt, I think they are demons"(68).

Jack Van Impe has integrated the conspiracy belief matrix as well. During his October 23, 1994, broadcast Van Impe noted, "John F. Kennedy said, 'A move is on to take away freedom from all Americans, and I will not let that happen,' ten days later he died"—and that was right after the discussion of the, "unexplained pounding heard off the coast of Carmel, California. Through information sent to me, it is a pulsating micro-wave generated by the military non-lethal program to alter minds through frequency... *brain control!*"

Here we see one unilateral communicator, a televangelist, feeding off a divergent influence community—the *Sightings*/The-CIA-Killed-JFK-With-The-Help-Of-Aliens crowd. Once projected outward, this interaction then folds back into an interplay on the Internet. One informant told me that he downloaded a data-set on the EU's structure and it seems that, "the EU may indeed have things hidden. I got this from the alt.conspiracy group

and it appears to be more or less genuine. If it is indeed real, Jack [Van Impe] may indeed be right!"

Fictional television is another major source of concern for the Internet millennialist. They often perceive certain programs as dangerous tools of the demonic forces bearing down on the planet.

I saw Babylon 5 last night. Boy, the brainwashing is becoming more and more frequent. A main point to last night's show was that the souls of 1 alien race had begun to be reborn as humans. They were teaching reincarnation. They also talked a lot about "the prophecies" coming true, whatever they will turn out to be. You can be sure that they aren't talking about the prophecies of the Bible. I like the show, but it, along with all the other shows like it, seem to be becoming primary brainwashing tools to be used to manipulate societal beliefs.

As one informant notes, this sort of television programming is "just another manifestation of the New Age." Hal Lindsey himself recognized the danger posed by these shows in his 1994 *Planet Earth—2000 AD.: Will Mankind Survive?* Here, Lindsey claims that programming like: "the latest 'Star Trek' series, 'Deep Space Nine,' routinely promotes many Eastern religious ideas"(39). This leads us directly to a final major exchange issue I would like to mention—Eastern religions and/or the New Age movement.

In many sources, including Lindsey's *Satan Is Alive and Well On Planet Earth* and Van Impe's *New Age Spirits From The Underworld*, the issue of the New Age movement is a central element. From the Bible, it is clear that Antichrist will set him or herself up as a divine figure and be worshipped. Every apocalyptic narrative I examined described the Christian persecution by mainstream society and government. In the final days, Christians must bow down to the political leader/antichrist as a god or goddess during a period called "The Tribulation."

This scenario instills a deep sense of fear in the millennial fundamentalist. As one woman described it: "the New Age is a misnomer from the get go. If you look carefully at crystallography, meditation, etc. etc. etc.— they are quite obviously Stolen Pagan beliefs and practices. It should be called OLD AGE STUFF."

The millennialists in the 1994-95 Internet community clearly saw the New Age as the mechanism that the antichrist will use to gain this earthly divinity—much as they do today. First, the antichrist will appear as a human prophet or messiah. Then, three and a half years into the Tribulation Satan will incarnate in the body of the messianic leader.

At this point, the intolerance of the New Age coupled with the distrust of television and government may seem a little alarming. It is true, every group casts reality in terms that it has come to understand and believe. It also may be true that a more strict ideology cultivates a less mutable belief structure. With racial supremacists or terrorist groups advocating violence, this can be dangerous—but on the Internet, unlike locally isolated communities—there is exposure to outside ideas. There is, in fact, a continual influx of new data. From this data, debates quickly develop. Individuals revel in them with an equality of voice. Would-be dogmatic leaders may type and type—but their words merely blend into the overall concoction.

In 1969, Robert A. Georges stated: "since storytelling events are communicative events and social experiences, they can be generated by the interactions of two or more people regardless of their social, economic, or educational status"(Georges 1969: 323). As Georges sought to open folkloristics to the whole range of individuals exhibiting narrative behavior, so too folklorists' field of vision can be opened to the new and diverse range of communicative forums technology is unfolding. Without the human desire to communicate, and leaders who do not discourage it, Internet communities would not exist. Electronic data transmitted over a network is nothing if not a form of communication—and the Internet is nothing more than electronic data transmitted over a network. Without the communication encouraged by open-access authority, Internet millennialism would have little reason to exist—but, as of yet, folklorists have done little to explore the effect of these new forums on folkloric behavior.

Such a folkloristic approach to the data I have been discussing in this article makes one thing clear: dogmatic authorities are not well suited to the developing Internet environment. Many believers made statements like: "Jack [Van Impe]'s assessment of the Catholic church and the current Pope is right on. John Paul is a good brother in Christ." This effect of electronic environments may, in fact, not be limited to just Internet behavior. Van Impe himself not only holds up the current Pope as a powerful and devoted religious figure, but he went so far as to promote the Holy Father's book on the air. Van Impe rejects the common fundamentalist intolerance for Catholic influences. In fact, Van Impe's show is open to all manner of spiritual symbols. He even presented a sacred white Buffalo born in the mid 1990s as a valid and powerful sign from his Christian god—despite its Native American source. Though he did not in 1994 or 1995, Van Impe now has his own World-Wide-Web page and comments on the e-mail he receives during his broadcasts.

Again, it is clear that exposure to differing data sources encourages ideational variance—not dogmatic ideologies. The broth that modern media have brewed only adds ever more ingredients to drive the exchange. Individuals in small, very specific belief communities adapt and interpret data elements. They re-cast them in terms of their own beliefs. Even more accurately, certain elements are plucked out of the media cauldron, highlighted, and used as appetizers and adjuncts for well known issues. Through their inter-personal communication, individuals create, recreate, and maintain a world view being constantly distilled and reintroduced into an already diverse, ephemeral, and conflicted media concoction. A behavioral folkloristic approach seems well suited indeed for the documentation and analysis of these sorts of very contemporary communicative, vernacular, acts.

In contemporary society, face-to-face avenues for the development, reinforcement, and expression of folklore would not be complete, and cannot be fully understood, without considering the role in the cycle played by the introduction of new technologies into folklife. In the end, these forums have brought and will bring deep changes.

In the case of popular Christian millennialism, we must accept first that average millennialists are not necessarily radical communists existing on the fringes of society or potential New Age suicides. Instead, many modern millennialists are the same men and women who send e-mail about *Star Trek* and *Sightings* like many Americans. Secondly, we must accept that these individuals, steeped in these media and their forms, generally do not cling to single leaders and thus do not subscribe to radical dogmatism. Finally, it seems that the very ability to assimilate the vast amounts of divergent information typical of contemporary electronic discourse correlates with a belief, or at least an acceptance, that there is no single individual or group who knows rightly or wholly the coming millennial events.

One of my informants clearly exemplifies the assimilation of divergent beliefs and the lack of decision when he says, "who is The Antichrist? Nobody knows. But there is very strong evidence of a person named Maitreya." From a database at a newspaper site in the Netherlands:

> The Netherlands—A motorist picked up a hitchhiker along the motor way. The hitchhiker announced that Christ would return soon, then disappeared. The motorist was so shaken by the experience that he parked his car on the hard shoulder to recover from the shock. He was approached by some traffic policemen to whom he told the story. They replied: "You are the eighth motorist today who has told us this. [March 1991]"

My informant explains: "You see, Maitreya claims explicitly to be 'a Christ' in the line of Buddha and Jesus, it is no surprise that he is manifesting in the Netherlands." In this e-mail communication, four distinct and disparate sources combine. A common contemporary legend reported in a newspaper is interpreted from a Christian millennial perspective and combined with a prominent non-Christian spiritual figure. The mere availability of newspaper data in the Netherlands has transfigured the Vanishing Hitchhiker into a demonic false prophet of the New Age; at least for one man in California—who isn't really sure about Maitreya being the antichrist anyway.[12]

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Notes

[1] A shorter version of this paper was presented on October 14, 1995 at the American Folklore Society Meeting in Lafayatte, Lousianna. Since that time, it has been extensively revised. For advice and suggestion in that revision process, I would like to thank Daniel Wojcik and Camilla H. Mortensen at the Universtiy of Oregon, and Peter Tokofsky at the University of California, Los Angeles.

[2] For a critique of the media's representation of Heaven's Gate please see Howard, 1997.

[3] For a discussion of these issues in relation to Heaven's Gate, please see Howard, 1998.

[4] For a discussion of the behavioral approach to folklore studies, see Georges and Jones, 1995, chapters 8 and 9.

[5] In 1994, most Internet access was conducted through terminal emulation. With the rise the World-Wide-Web starting around 1994 and 1995, more complex protocols became popular which allowed the graphic-based interfaces most of us use today.

[6] When the research data for this paper was collected, there were, as far as I could tell, no prophecy specific newsgroups. Recently, a number have appeared.

[7] All informants are quoted from private e-mailed correspondence or forwarded sections of private e-mail correspondence occurring in the Fall of 1994.

[8] For Burke's explanation of "dramatism" see Burke 1966: 54ff.

[9] On discourse communities, see Gage 1991: 1ff. For parallel ideas, also see Geertz (1983) on "local knowledge" and Fish (1980) on "interpretive communities."

[10] The elements of this list are schematic in the sense that they are only some of the major elements of Lindsey's discourse. They do not always appear in the

same order, but are, in my view, central to the ideational exchange evolving out of Lindsey's work. For a more complete summary of Lindsey's narrative, see Wojcik 1997: 37-59.

[11] I have retained all punctuation and replicated the formatting of all the e-mailed text in an effort to accurately represent the style and content of the messages. Any clarifying additions I have made are enclosed in brackets.

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