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Abstract

Based on the interactive features of websites, researchers have distinguished between 'religion online' and 'online religion'. Approaching online religious expression as 'vernacular religion' can transcend the distinction by focussing on the lived experience of believers. In this study, qualitative interviews and close textual analysis are deployed to locate four traits that define the 'vernacular ideology of Christian fundamentalism'. Tracing these traits in public discourse, they are seen to emerge as a set in the early 20th century. Collecting a sample of 40 sites, the traits are located in association with biblical prophecy. Based on qualitative interviews conducted with four individuals in the sample, linked websites connect individuals in a virtual 'ekklesia' based on their shared interest. Locating religion in lived experience instead of media artifacts, this research suggests that a limiting tendency found in this form of fundamentalism is the result of individual choices facilitated by network media.

Key words

Christian fundamentalism, evangelism, religion, vernacular discourse, virtual community, worldwide web

Since the late 20th century, more and more individuals report that they engage in religious behavior online. Survey data have demonstrated two major trends in this internet usage. Many individuals seek information about religious traditions other than their own (Larsen, 2001). Even more report using the internet to supplement activities and commitments associated with their brick-and-mortar churches (Hoover et al., 2004). In both cases, online religious behavior seems to be dominated by information-seeking activities. Because these

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behaviors seem to largely lack significant ritual or social interactivity, researchers have struggled to define what constitutes the 'religious' online (Campbell, 2006).

Attempting to create definitive distinctions, Chris Helland has described an important difference between 'religion online' and 'online religion' (2000). Focussing on the media that carry religious content, Helland makes the distinction in terms of observable website features. 'Religion online' is characterized by websites that present information about religion in a controlled environment. In these cases, individuals typically consume information that they will deploy in offline religious activity. On the other hand, websites engaged in 'online religion' provide an 'interactive religious environment' (Helland, 2002). These websites allow religious interaction to occur online.

Sustained qualitative research demonstrates, however, that this distinction is more one of degree than kind. For example, modern pagan sites have been found to provide the texts and locations for online rituals, but seem to only occasionally actually host online ritual action. In this case, interactive features were not primarily used for religious action (Cowan, 2005: 121). In another case, online texts that invite the performance of a 'sinner's prayer' seemed to have no interactive mechanisms. Qualitative interviews, however, revealed that their audiences were using the texts interactively by performing online prayer and engaging in email exchanges about their experiences (Howard, 2005a). In both of these cases, the nature of the religious activity was not obviously marked in the media artifacts themselves.

Taking another tack, Glenn Young has emphasized the performative nature of communication to argue that even marginally interactive web features constitute 'online religion'. From this perspective, the heavily controlled website of a powerful Protestant institution can be seen as a location for 'online religion' because it gives its audience the chance to join an email list (Young, 2004). While joining an institutional email list is a tenuous example of performative religious action, the case makes an important point. The real nodes of any communication network are the humans who enact the communications. In specific people, the 'religious' emerges in experience. This religiosity can then be observed in their performed speech acts. As Helland put it in his 2005 response to Young, religion (like all real human experience) is 'lived'. However, studying religion as 'lived' instead of trying to locate it in specific media artifacts requires more than an adjustment of terms.

Online discourse can easily be located, analyzed and demarcated as 'online' when it is mediated by a website, email or other network communication technology. From the perspective of communications research, such artifacts can be sufficient objects of study by themselves. However, the religious is rendered so by the belief and actions of individuals. From this perspective, religion must be understood as what ethnographer Leonard Primiano has termed 'vernacular' (1995). Vernacular religion does not exist in media artifacts, but instead in the lived experience of the believers who deploy those media. Approaching online religious expression as vernacular religion can transcend the debates about 'religion online' versus 'online religion' by locating the religious in individual belief and action instead of in the media that carry them.

Demonstrating a vernacular approach, this article is a qualitative analysis of two linked websites that contained the phrase 'end times'. The research sought to discover if the four individuals who built these sites could be considered part of the same online religious community. Disseminated in evangelical media across the course of

the 20th century, four beliefs typically associated with Christian fundamentalism should be harbored by individuals who use this phrase (Hendershot, 2004; Howard, 1997; O'Leary, 1994; Strozier, 1994; Wojcik, 1997). Engaging in close textual analysis of their websites and qualitative interviews, the definitive beliefs were located. Based on this shared ideology, individuals articulated a belief that they participate in a virtual 'ekkle-sia'. This article finds that these individuals were able to connect with each other based on the phrase 'end times', and this connection constitutes the online performance of the shared vernacular ideology of Christian fundamentalism.

For these individuals, online discourse has largely replaced brick-and-mortar-based religious practices, and no central organization or location undergirds their sense of shared identity. Instead, they recognize each other as participating in the same social formation when they use the internet to share information about biblical prophecy. Although this information sharing is not necessarily facilitated by interactive website features, it enacts an 'ekkle-sia' or church. Because it transcends any geographic location, this ekklesia is 'virtual'. Because it exists only in the shared perceptions of its online congregation, it is radically vernacular. It is important to consider the implications of this web of connected internet sites because its emergence suggests that the ability to limit diversity made possible by network technologies is seen as a benefit by participants. From the perspective of vernacular religion, this limiting tendency is a result of the individual choices that everyday believers make about how they deploy network media. With this insight, further qualitative and contextualized research should be pursued to document what beliefs and conditions might encourage individuals to use their network communication in this potentially debilitating way.

Methods

To locate this ideology in online vernacular communication, specific examples of websites were collected and compared. In order to find those examples, a definitive textual mark that can locate a particular online communication as likely to be involved in discourse emergent from the ideology must be identified. To do this, interview data were consulted that were collected previous to the major surge in internet use associated with the mid-1990s. There, four traits of Christian fundamentalism are enumerated. Because the first three are not exclusive of conservative evangelicalism, an interest in the 'end times' becomes a definitive marker for vernacular Christian fundamentalism. Following the emergence of end times discourse in the history of Protestantism in the USA, the three remaining traits were found.

Verifying the historically related nature of the four traits, websites that expressed these traits were located. First, the terms 'end time', 'end times', 'endtime' and 'end-times' were searched in a common search engine. Cataloging the first 500 websites, the first 120 that were not built by a professional minister or religious institution were selected for the study. Of those 120, survey responses were collected for 67. Excluding those who were non-Protestant, the first 40 were more closely examined using content analysis. Of those 40, 36 individuals were engaged in online interviews and 20 individuals were interviewed face-to-face. All interview quotes from the two couples are taken from face-to-face qualitative interviews conducted by the author in 1999.

In this article, two linked websites demonstrate the way that very different individuals can choose to create connections because their sites represent opposite poles in terms of style and interest. Interviews conducted in 1999 with each of the two couples reveal that their online communication has largely replaced the social functions of their brick-and-mortar churches. The first of these two sites is Acts 17:11 (<http://www.acts17-11.com>) and is maintained by Laura and Dean VanDruff. Among the sites in the sample, Laura and Dean's had 11 links from six different websites. As such, it represented a modest degree of linkage. Out of the 40, the two most linked sites had 49 overall links from 12 different websites and 18 links from 12 different websites, respectively. The least linked sites in the sample (of which there were several) had only one or two links.

The second site had a much higher profile. This was David and Brenda Flynn's Watcher Website (<http://www.mt.net/~watcher/>). Often referring to themselves by the collective pseudonym 'the Watcher', the Flynn's are a middle-class married couple living in Helena, Montana. David is a psychologist and Brenda worked as a photographer. A mix of biblical literalism, conspiracy theory and UFO beliefs, their site has been one of the most popular sites about the end times since the late 1990s. In the sample set, it had the most links from the external websites. It had 29 incoming links from 14 different external sites.

The vernacular ideology of christian fundamentalism

based on the work of Don Yoder and Leonard Norman Primiano, 'vernacular religion' refers to those beliefs and practices that emerge from the bottom upward. From the classical Greek and Roman words for 'home born' or 'native', vernacular came to refer to the 'non-institutional' languages of the Middle Period and Renaissance in Western Europe. Because all institutional writing and speaking were conducted in Latin at that time, 'vernacular' came to refer to the local 'native' forms of language. In 1960, Margaret Lantis introduced the term to cultural theorists as referring to non-institutional cultural forms and practices.

In the case of vernacular religion, it is recognized as distinct from (although it may or may not coincide with) religious institutions because no central agent imposes its beliefs and practices (Yoder, 1974). Institutional religious discourse is manifest, for example, in the statements made *ex cathedra* by the Pope as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. However, even the Pope's daily prayers can be viewed as vernacular when they are expressions of personal devotion by a particular person (Primiano, 1995).

Applying the perspective of vernacular religion to religious expression on the internet transcends the distinction between 'online religion' and 'religion online' because it starts with the premise that all religion is emergent in individual human expressive behaviors. From that premise, each individual can be imagined as a node in a dynamic 'vernacular web' of discourse. This web exists alongside institutional discourse, but is embodied only in the aggregate personal choices to communicate made by many different individuals over time (Howard, 2005c, 2008a, 2008b). From this perspective, no religion is 'online religion' strictly speaking, although some media may encourage more or less religious interactivity. Instead, the religiosity of an online communicative act resides in the individual actor's experience. To document that, the individuals

building and using the website must be observed and/or interviewed about their perceptions of their own internet use.

In today's networked society, the vernacular perspective on religion is particularly useful because these media seem to be giving more control to individuals (Ammerman, 1997; Cimino and Lattin, 1998; Roof, 1999). As a result, new kinds of ideologies have emerged. More varied and individualized, there are still specific continuities and consistencies that mark their presence. One such ideology is the system of ideas among conservative evangelicals I term the 'vernacular ideology of Christian fundamentalism'.

Although vernacular fundamentalism is different from the historical movement of Christian fundamentalism in the 1920s, using the term locates the ideology both in its historical antecedents and also as a subject of much recent research (see Harris, 1998: 1ff.; Marty and Appleby, 1995: 6–7). Vernacular fundamentalism refers to an ideology with traits that are recognizable in discourse, but not necessarily so named by the actors in that discourse. From this perspective, fundamentalism can be understood as ideological (Perkin, 2000). Here, ideology refers to a set of interrelated ideas that function as the symbolic apparatus through which a social group understands its world (Althusser, 1984; Eagleton, 1991). As a way of thinking based on shared beliefs, ideology emerges in discourse exhibiting specific observable traits.

Based in ethnographic data, a systematic catalog of four observable traits that indicate the existence of ideological fundamentalism can be found in the work of the historian of religion, Charles B. Strozier: 1) an 'orientation toward biblical literalism'; 2) 'evangelicalism (or the obligation to convert others)'; 3) 'the experience of being reborn in faith'; and, 4) 'an apocalypticism in its specifically end time form' (1994: 5). When these four traits appear in a non-institutional communication, that communication is an expression of the vernacular ideology of Christian fundamentalism.

Held together by an emphasis on literalism (the first trait of the ideology), the other three traits represent degrees of conservatism in approaching biblical understanding. Going back to the beginnings of the Reformation itself, Martin Luther's claim that there was a 'simple' and 'literal' meaning in the biblical texts became an institutional mechanism that gave more power to vernacular interpretations of the Bible than had the Catholic Church (Howard, 2005d). This situation allowed lay people to serve as important actors in spreading Protestantism. This practice was itself grounded in a literal reading of the Bible. Often termed 'the Great Commission', the final lines of the Gospel of Matthew depict Jesus commanding his disciples to evangelize (28:18–19). This is the scriptural basis for the second trait in the emergent ideology: 'the obligation to convert others'.

The other two remaining observable traits that mark the ideology – the experience of spiritual rebirth and a belief in an approaching apocalypse – are also easily located in the King James New Testament. The belief in spiritual rebirth is a literal interpretation of Jesus' words to the Pharisee Nicodemus in the Gospel of John (3:3): 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Sometimes understood more metaphorically, various manifestations of this idea are also common among less conservative evangelicals. The more distinctively fundamentalist trait emerges, however, from an insistence on a literal reading of biblical prophecy as describing the end times.

Throughout the New Testament, there are descriptions of the return of 'the Kingdom of Heaven' (see Matthew 24:29–30). When the literal interpretation of these passages is

emphasized, apocalypticism becomes a distinctive marker for the vernacular fundamentalist ideology. However, all four traits reinforce each other. If Christ commanded his disciplines to spread a literal message of the Bible, then they are compelled to attempt to induce spiritual rebirth in others before a rapidly approaching end times renders it too late. Pursuing the historical roots of this group of ideas in the next section, it becomes clear that they first began to coalesce with their definitive mark of apocalypticism during the 19th century American religious revivals.

Fundamentalism in mass media

The set of ideas that came together as the historical movement of Christian fundamentalism can be traced in emerging communication technologies from the beginning of the 20th century (Harris, 1998: 3ff.; Marsden, 1980: 4ff.). During the early 20th century, American Protestants became increasingly polarized. By 1915, Protestant denominations in the USA were deeply divided into more liberal and more conservative camps over the proper understanding of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution (Marsden, 1980: 117ff.). This division had been fueled by a series of annual conferences on biblical study held between 1883 and 1887. At these conferences, a network of conservative evangelicals developed a set of ideas deemed fundamental by conservatives. These included a literal approach to the Bible, evangelism, spiritual rebirth and, the most distinctive, the belief in an approaching 'second coming' of Christ (see Harris, 1998: 24, 25ff.; Marsden, 1980: 77ff.; Moore, 1994: 184ff.).

The inclusion of the interest in the end times was the result of the 19th-century evangelist John Nelson Darby. Imagining a rapidly approaching end times, Darby gained a large following before his death in 1882. During the late 1800s, a new non-denominational alliance of conservative evangelicals formed around these ideas (Boyer, 1992: 86ff.). In 1899, the powerful combination of literalism, spiritual rebirth and the end times was canonized by C.I. Scofield in his immensely popular evangelical text *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1945).

In 1918, during the heat of the institutional battles between conservative and liberal Protestants, a conservative preacher heavily influenced by these four ideas, William B. Riley, formed the World's Christian Fundamentals Association. The WCFA focussed on a political campaign to rid the denominational institutions of liberal officials. The WCFA advocated an apocalyptically tinged struggle against secular values. Making a doctrinal point, the editor of a Baptist paper first coined the term 'fundamentalist' to refer to those 'ready to do battle royal for the Fundamentals' associated with the WCFA (Marsden, 1980: 159).

When John Scopes, a small town schoolteacher, was charged with breaking a Tennessee state law against teaching evolution, William Jennings Bryan prosecuted him under the banner of fundamentalism. Although he won the trial, Bryan was publicly ridiculed. In the newspaper coverage, journalists used the term 'fundamentalist' to refer to a caricature of a hopelessly backward and rural brand of Christianity. Disgraced in the glare of the media attention, radical conservatives receded from public view. Rejected by most Christian institutions, the term 'fundamentalism' largely fell out of use. However, its conservative ideas did not go away (Armstrong, 2000: 177ff.). Persisting in the vernacular, they would re-emerge in mass media.

As evangelical media began to emerge, first on the radio and later on television, they became wedded to a market of consumers. Strongly motivated to share a conservative message, evangelical institutions were confronted with high broadcasting costs. By emphasizing a simple message that many current believers could support, they began to successfully raise funds by soliciting donations largely from those already converted (Moore, 1994; Schultze, 2003). This message emphasized a simple, literal and emotional understanding of the Bible, and successful evangelists such as Billy Graham, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell developed media empires based on this strategy.

In 1970, a mass-marketed evangelical book sold 7.5 million copies and became the bestselling non-fiction book of the decade (excluding the Bible itself): Lindsey and Carlson's literalist interpretation of biblical prophecy as foretelling Cold War politics, entitled *The Late Great Planet Earth*. During the 1980s, Lindsey published many successful books, hosted his own television show and developed a significant following. Noting his success, Baptist minister Tim LaHaye updated Lindsey and Carlson's ideas in the form of evangelical fiction. With his co-writer Jerry Jenkins, LaHaye published the first in a series of novels called *Left Behind* in 1995. By May 2004 (when the *Left Behind* series was completed), LaHaye had appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* proclaiming that the combined sales of the 12 books had topped 62 million copies (Hendershot, 2004).

Conservative Protestant mass media placed their emphasis on an overtly emotional personal relationship with the divine. This simplified message appealed across a variety of denominational boundaries. As a result, the mass media audience of Protestant Christians could be large enough to support a growing industry of media evangelism. As a byproduct, the conservative evangelical media seem to have spread a coherent set of basic values across institutional lines. In their most literal form, they included a reading of biblical prophecy imagining what was typically termed the 'end times'. It would be precisely this phrase that allowed everyday Christians to locate each other online.

Laura and dean meet 'the watcher'

Driven out of institutions, the four traits of this ideology re-emerged in mass media and then in the religious expression of amateur website builders (Howard, 2000). Today, they can be found in an expansive vernacular web of communication surrounding the term the 'end times'. To document the four traits, this section contextualizes them on two very different websites that were (literally) linked by being based on the shared ideology.

Although all four individuals associated with these two sites identified themselves as Christians, the couples are very different. David and Brenda Flynn are adult converts. David was raised Catholic, but abandoned his faith as an adult. When they met, Brenda was practicing Wicca. Later, they both experienced spiritual rebirths that led them to consider themselves Christians. Unlike David and Brenda, Laura and Dean VanDruff were both raised as Baptists. Later, they joined a series of Bible Churches, Assemblies of God and independent charismatic churches. Reflecting their different backgrounds, the style and content of their two sites are very different. Where Laura and Dean's site offers a simple, serious and family-oriented series of topical Bible studies, David and Brenda's site offers a busy, playful and sometimes darkly humorous pastiche of conspiracy theory, ufology and end times speculation.

Despite these differences, the four individuals share the interest in the end times. On a page articulating their basic belief about the impending approach of the end times, David and Brenda cited a long quote from one of Laura and Dean's subpages: a study on the concept of the end of time. Underneath the quote, they placed a link directly to the page on www.acts17-11.com. Despite the fact that the Acts 17:11 site is not focussed on the end times, the Flynns labeled their link to it, 'End Time Bible study website' (Watcher, 2000). This is a telling detail because it demonstrates that David and Brenda imagined their linkage to Laura and Dean in terms of that definitive trait of vernacular Christian fundamentalism. Recognizing their participation in end times discourse, a closer examination reveals that they exhibit all four of the definitive traits of the ideology of vernacular Christian fundamentalism.

Self-identifying as 'born again' when asked directly during an interview, Brenda and David's use of those terms established that they are conversant with the typical evangelical Protestant emphasis on spiritual rebirth. As would be expected, this emphasis on spiritual rebirth was accompanied by evangelism in the form of an interest in spreading the word about the availability of this experience for others. Presented on their website in the form of a variety of scriptural interpretations or 'studies', this second of the four traits of vernacular fundamentalism is clearly evident.

Since 1993, the couple has slowly expanded their site by periodically adding new studies and making new links to other sites that relate to their interests. Deploying a mix of pop culture, humor and links to a wide variety of controversial and often sinister material from all over the web, the site garners a wide audience for its message about the UFO presence. However, one of its most prominent pages is bluntly evangelistic. At the top of that page, a brightly colored graphic flashes, 'The most important page of all!'. Below the graphic, they invite their audience to perform a 'sinner's prayer' by asking: 'Salvation is only a prayer of faith away, So what are you waiting for?' (Watcher, 2000). The inclusion of this traditional evangelical prayer is the marker of a commitment to the second trait of the ideology: evangelism (see Howard, 2005a).

During an interview, we directly discussed the meaning of the term 'fundamentalism' and their feelings about it. David specifically stated that they are not 'Christian fundamentalists'. For David, to align themselves with such a movement would 'entail that we would buy into some of the Christian tradition'. Instead, they self-identified as 'scriptural fundamentalists' who 'focus on just the Bible, *sola scriptura*, nothing else but the Bible'. This statement marks a third trait of the ideology: an orientation toward biblical literalism.

A popular slogan among evangelicals, the phrase '*sola scriptura*' or 'by biblical texts only' refers to one of the Reformation's five 'solas' or 'slogans'. *Sola scriptura* suggests that the Bible is written clearly by the divine so that anyone can understand it, and, as a result, individuals have no need to rely on interpretative methods or authorities beyond their own reading of the texts. As a result of this literal reading, interpretations that render the more problematic biblical accounts figurative become unnecessary. In addition to overtly stating their commitment to a literal meaning, the Flynns manifest it in the way they make claims on their website.

When incorporating the far-flung ideas of UFOs, conspiracy theory and the Bible, they ground their beliefs in specific biblical passages. Interpreting photographs from NASA or

the writings of other UFO believers, the Flynns locate the final authority in oft-unexplained quotes from the Bible. For example, making the claim that 'UFOs and Alien Abduction Are Nothing New', they begin by quoting the Bible without explanation: 'Matthew 24:37, But as the days of Noah, so also will be the coming of the Son of man. For as they were in the days before the flood ...'. They then raise the rhetorical question, 'Just what was going on in the "days before the flood"?' Describing a pre-flood world where demons 'hybridized' with humans, they use 27 citations containing some 1137 of their own words and 691 words of quoted text from the Bible (Watcher, 2007a). With a biblical quote for nearly every two of their own words, this style of arguing demonstrates their commitment to a belief in the knowable, literal and correct meaning of the Bible.

The Flynns demonstrate a commitment to literalism, evangelism and spiritual rebirth. While those three traits alone might only indicate an adherence to a variety of conservative Protestant belief systems generally thought of as evangelicism, the primary topical focus of their website is what initially drew them into this study: the definitive trait of the vernacular ideology of Christian fundamentalism, an interest in apocalypticism in its end times form. Specifically using the term 'end time', the Flynns imagine a rapidly approaching apocalyptic scenario that climaxes with a destructive world war in Jerusalem and the return of Jesus Christ. On their website, they express belief in the basic components that comprise the prophetic end times narrative as it has developed since the 19th century. These include: the rise of antichrist to power, a bodily 'rapture' of Christians, the 'tribulation period', the building of the 'third temple' in Jerusalem and the final triumphant establishment of the 'millennial reign of Christ' (Howard, 2006).

The Flynns connect this narrative to their belief in UFOs, saying: 'Our studies of scripture have led us to the controversial view that civilizations of pre-rebellion angels lived on the planets of our solar system before the creation of Adam.' These demons founded a civilization on Mars called Cydonia (Watcher, 2007b). Calling it 'the end time delusion', the Flynns claim that the antichrist will come to power partially based on her or his false revelation that space aliens are the ancient progenitors of the human race. The antichrist will offer scientific proof by unveiling the 'discovery' of an ancient civilization on Mars. In this scenario, the aliens are actually fallen angels acting in league with the antichrist (specifically, the 'nephilim' mentioned in the Old Testament).

Seeming to contradict the biblical account of creation with the suggestion that there were pre-Adamic aliens who helped 'create' the human race, the UFO/demons 'would deceive even the elect [Christians already born again], and will lead to the setting up of antichrist on the world throne' (Watcher, 2007c). As is typical of this discourse, they ground their claims in references to the Bible:

Proof of artificially built structures on Cydonia Mars will lead to the conclusion that the entities responsible not only designed and guided our species through history, they also qualify as our gods ... that the beings from Mars, and in UFOs, are the God of the Bible. This is THE strong delusion allowed for 'those dwelling on the earth to believe the lie', II Thess 2:11. (Watcher, 2007b)

Although the topic and style of David and Brenda's Flynn's Watcher website are radically different from those of Laura and Dean VanDruff's Acts 17:11 site, the Flynns demonstrate a shared belief system when they name Laura and Dean's site an 'end time

Bible study website'. Although they justify their linkage between the two sites on this basis, only one page of Laura and Dean's site is focussed on the end times and only a few touched upon it at all.

In 1993, while working in the computer industry in Dallas, Texas, Laura and Dean both felt dissatisfied with their face-to-face church communities. The couple felt that their experiences with organized evangelical churches were not fully serving their spiritual needs. From their perspective, institutional churches often oversimplify difficult questions into 'legalistic' answers and fail to connect scripture to daily life.¹ Both of them stated that they had been 'born again' in the 1970s. In 1990, Dean experienced 'a powerful conveyance of the Holy Spirit'. He described it on the website, saying: 'It was real ... Submission to God in this event was one of the most terrifying and difficult experiences of my life, but has resulted in a crop of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit' (VanDruff and VanDruff, 2006c). Because they stated that they were 'born again', and with this emphasis on the ongoing influence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, they exhibited their first trait of the vernacular ideology of Christian fundamentalism: the experience of being reborn in Christ.

Based on their revelatory experiences, Dean and Laura began to believe that the Holy Spirit was pushing them to make changes in their lives. To try to enact such change, they began to invite their Christian friends to their home to read and discuss the Bible over simple dinners. This practice soon became a Saturday night tradition. As Dean commented: 'We had a sense during that time that we had gotten swept into or caught up in something. I had been a Christian at that point for 13 years and gone to church and had a little bit of a sense of knowing God.' Unlike their institutional church experiences, this informal group of friends gave Laura and Dean a renewed sense of spiritual presence.

Through their meetings, they felt they began to 'know' God in a far more intimate and fulfilling way. Seldom bringing any particular topic to their meetings, they found that each evening, the particular combination of individuals would (under the guidance of the Holy Spirit) give rise to important insights into biblical verses. Often, friends of friends or acquaintances traveling through town would unexpectedly show up at these meetings with particular problems or ideas that yielded new insights. After a while, Dean began to carefully document the informal group's discussions. Soon he was writing them up and filing them away, often handing them around to other participants after the meeting and co-writing full discussions of the topics that had emerged.

In 1993, however, after a year or more of these meetings, Dean's job took the couple to San Jose, California. During the same period, the internet was exploding as a popular medium. So Dean decided to make the Bible studies that his group had been working on available to his friends both in Texas and California by putting them on a website. Dean stated in an interview:

When we wrote those studies – given what we have told you – we had in mind that there would be maybe 15 people who would come, and it was for them. We had absolutely no idea of what I have just told you ... that they would get spread around later. Ya know, read by thousands of people a day on the internet [laughs]. It just seemed kinda funny. The limit of what we were doing was simply to serve the brothers and sisters in Christ that we knew.

Inspired by the correspondence generated by their new web presence, Laura and Dean felt that the spiritual lack felt in their church institutions abated. Laura and Dean discovered an internet-based community that could engage with discussions about their beliefs and values in more specific and intimate ways than they were finding through their brick-and-mortar churches. By actively seeking to share their understanding of the Bible, Laura and Dean were clearly evangelical. In this way, they exhibited a second trait of vernacular fundamentalism.

The satisfaction they gained through their virtual ekklesia was powerful and, in the case of Dean at least, surprising. As he put it during an interview: 'We find a life and fellowship on the internet that is embarrassing to admit! Who would have thought? Who would have believed it? [... that] the [Holy] Spirit is able to pierce through beyond mere characters floating on a screen.' Not only did Dean and Laura suddenly start receiving inspiring emails from likeminded Christians, they were also brought into the virtual community of individuals engaged in fundamentalist discourse online.

With a stated commitment to *sola scriptura*, their literalism emerges as a third trait of their involvement in vernacular Christian fundamentalism. On an introductory page entitled Doctrinal Statement, they group 69 quotations from the Bible under 19 single word or phrase heads such as The Trinity, Inspiration of Scripture, Satan, The Fundamentals and The End of the Age. Exhibiting a reliance on the 'Bible only' even more strongly than did David and Brenda in the example above, these quotes are offered with no other explanatory material whatsoever (VanDruff and VanDruff, 2006a). On another page, they state that:

The Scripture should speak for itself to make every major point ... A fundamental requirement of each study is that it must accurately depict what Scripture teaches on the subject, as opposed to what is currently popular or would tickle the ears. (VanDruff and VanDruff, 2006b)

With this emphasis on literalism, Laura and Dean have exhibited the first three traits of vernacular fundamentalism. However, it was their expression of the final definitive trait that most significantly linked them to the vernacular web of communication surrounding the term the 'end times'. Analyzing access logs for Dean and Laura's website, it was clear that there were hundreds of individuals looking at their website every day. Based on those logs, the few pages that had sections dealing with end times topics were the most frequently visited. While the end times may have both marked them as participants in fundamentalism and connected them with the most other believers, Dean expressed ambivalence about this aspect of their website.

As early as 1999, Dean no longer paid much attention to end times discourse. However, he left the End Time Study page live at least as late as the writing of this article in the spring of 2007. When asked about the page during an interview, he stated: 'Most eschatological teaching is shameful! Embarrassing. All these ideas distract and bring shame to the cause and name of Christ.' Laura, at first quiet during this part of the interview, spoke up. She stated that she was still interested in the topic and discussed it with some of her friends. A brief discussion ensued between them. Then Dean expanded on why he considered the topic 'shameful':

We should be like virgins waiting to be consummated with our husbands! So we shouldn't be distracted. If our husband comes and we have our room all coated with charts about when he's gonna come, ya know, I don't think he's gonna say, 'way to go!'. It's like ... He would say, 'You have no idea what my coming means. It's *not* to see these charts!' [Laughs]

Despite their ambivalence about apocalyptic prophecy, the VanDruffs have become caught up with thousands of others in a new kind of social aggregate. Their case demonstrates that internet media create the opportunity for a relatively small group to forge a new kind of fellowship based on an interest in biblical prophecy.

Describing this online fellowship, David Flynn of the Watcher Website specifically told me that he and Brenda used the internet to enact an 'ekklesia'. For David, 'any time people are together, two or more are gathered in His name: there you are! You're the ekklesia!' Rejecting the need for religious institutions, David described how his online communication replaced the function of a brick-and-mortar church:

There is no real reason you have to show up at a denomination or every Sunday show up at this certain location in the city or else you're a reprobate. And I think it's absolutely viable for the 'church', if you understand what I mean by that – the ekklesia – to meet on the internet. And I have seen it happen a lot. And that's pretty much where we hold our church.²

In the New Testament, the word 'church' is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia*. Ekklesia referred to the congregation associated with a particular synagogue. As Christianity evolved, both the Catholic and Eastern 'churches' emphasized the importance of institutional leadership. Over time, institutional structures began to be synonymous with the community as a 'church'. Ultimately, this institutional power was embodied in the physical brick-and-mortar buildings and church came to refer to the institutions of Christianity instead of the community they engendered.

David, however, is imagining church as the people who comprise a congregation. While individuals may not have always needed an overarching institution to be a church in this sense, such institutions function to spread shared knowledge through institutional documents, religious leaders and community-based organizations. As those ideas are shared, they become the glue that holds the congregation together. When Brenda and David 'hold church' online, their online vernacular religious expression creates a new kind of ekklesia, one without any recourse to religious institutions. Although this ekklesia is enacted by its members, it is unlike any ancient congregation because it lacks any specific geographic place. In its placelessness, it is a 'virtual' ekklesia. Unmediated by institutional documents, religious leaders or brick-and-mortar churches, those individuals touched by the Spirit enact a virtual church. It seems that the Holy Spirit, as Dean puts it, does indeed have the capacity to 'pierce beyond' the 'mere characters floating on a screen'. However, the individuals who enact this geography-free church among the vast expanse of network media are an exclusive and exclusionary group.

The problem of the radically vernacular online

in the 1990s, utopian claims about religious internet use gave some researchers cause to hope that the exclusionary beliefs associated with Christian fundamentalism would fade

away in the online environment (Brasher, 2001; Howard, 1997). Since then, studies have shown that intensely held religious belief allows individuals to deploy network technologies in ways that filter out the voices of those who might offer alternative or dissenting ideas (Howard, 2005b, 2006). Approaching the web of communication based on the discourse of the end times as vernacular religion suggests that the radically virtual *ekklesia* made possible by the internet may actually enable intolerance. However, further research is necessary to establish if this is specific to the virtual *ekklesia* or if it is a broader trend. As network media empower individuals to act outside of institutional control, some of those individuals choose to engage in exclusionary communication behaviors. Without the forces of geography or the institutions that have traditionally mediated conflicts arising from that geography, individuals are able to filter out the diversity that could challenge their religious convictions.

As Heidi Campbell has noted, individuals involved in religion online can choose to engage in more 'self-regulated forms of socialization' (2005: 188). In the case of the virtual *ekklesia* that emerges from vernacular fundamentalism, the expression of the four definitive traits of the ideology enables individuals who share it to locate each other online by expressing key terms associated with the end times. At the same time, individuals uninterested or unable to engage in this ideologically driven discourse can simply move through the web unaware. As a result, those who choose to participate in the discourse seem primarily to be individuals who already share its ideology.

This specific virtual *ekklesia* is comprised of weakly linked individuals (Csermely, 2006; Wellman and Giulia, 1999). They are weakly linked because they share few if any material resources and seldom seek shared action beyond expressing their ideas to each other. As a result, the exclusively virtual *ekklesia* is freed from the geographical factors associated with living in proximity and sharing material resources. For its congregants, the only pressing need for cooperation is in the actual sharing of the ideology itself.

While internet technologies have freed individuals from institutional control, this radically individualized form of communication may undermine the valuable role that social institutions have traditionally played in creating and maintaining the spaces for public deliberation. Cass Sunstein has argued that, 'The public forum represents one area of law in which the right to free speech demands a public subsidy to the speakers' (2001: 28). As Sunstein has explained, the freedom to speak is twofold.

The freedom to express one's personal opinion is one sort of freedom. However, the ability to express oneself is expanded by access to the knowledge of the diversity of possibilities for expression available. Thus, the freedom to speak is also a freedom to hear the diversity of others speaking. When social institutions bring divergent voices together in public, the sheer diversity of alternative opinions would challenge the voicing of the idea that demons built monuments on Mars or that the Bible is only to be understood literally.

Radically vernacular religion online, however, seems to be able to deny social institutions their role as locations for individuals to exchange ideas. It is true that institutions can and often do force homogeneity on individuals. However, the expression of Christian fundamentalism online suggests that some individuals are choosing to limit their own exposure to new, diverging and possibly empowering ideas. From the perspective of vernacular religion, this limiting factor is not just a product of media or institutional structures, it is also a product of how individuals choose to deploy the internet in their

everyday religious lives. Further research on vernacular religion on the internet is necessary to seek to understand what conditions lead individuals to choose to limit their own exposure to the everyday deliberation that should provide them with the freedom afforded by a copious and diverse discursive online experience.

Notes

- 1 Laura and Dean VanDruff were interviewed by the author in San Jose, California on 28 August 1999.
- 2 Brenda and David Flynn were interviewed by the author in Helena, Montana on 17 October 1999.

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