

Sustainability and Narrative Plasticity in Online Apocalyptic Discourse After September 11, 2001

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It has been suggested that one avenue for critically assessing online discourses is in their ability to sustain themselves. In this article, I argue that apocalyptic Christian discourse is highly sustainable in the online environment precisely because its argumentative norms are grounded in a profound narrative plasticity. Because the authorizing biblical texts and interpretive narrative that define this discourse exhibit a profound flexibility, new events are immediately assimilated into the narrative structure, making the discourse highly sustainable in the online environment. However, a case study analysis suggests that precisely the same qualities that allow this sustainability also allow this discourse to insulate itself from the necessarily divergent ideas that might generate more constructive public deliberation.

Recently, Robert Asen (2004) suggested considering “discourse practices” as “modes” of citizenship because “discourse practices present potentially accessible and powerful everyday enactments of citizenship. Even regular voters can vote only periodically. ... By contrast, discourse practices suggest a frequency and sustainability to civic engagement” (p. 207). With the recent attention paid to the political significance of evangelical Protestant Christianity in the United States, scholars of religious communication should begin to ask what sort of communicative behaviors correlate with productive modes of public deliberation within these religious communities. What sort of communicative behaviors encourage a productive kind of “civic engagement”? How do particular media encourage or discourage such behaviors? What role might the recent rise of Internet communication play in these previously existing Christian discourses?

One avenue for critically assessing the role online communication might play in these questions is case study research that seeks to assess specific online conversations' sustainability (Mejias, 2001). Considering discourse from the perspective of public sphere theory, productive encounters should emerge from controversy when those controversies are publicly debated in specific conversations (Habermas, 1970, 1974). From this critical perspective, sustainability is desirable in discourse because it offers the opportunity for innovation and adaptation through discursive engagement (Goodnight, 1987, 1991, 1992; Zulick, 1997). For at least some online Christian discourse, however, this is not the case.

In this article, I argue that apocalyptic Christian rhetoric is highly sustainable in the online environment because its argumentative norms are grounded in a profound narrative plasticity. However, a detailed case study of a specific online conversation suggests that the same narrative plasticity that allows for the sustainability of this discourse also insulates it from divergent ideas that might yield more constructive discursive behaviors.

Previous research indicates that fundamentalist Christians engaged in traditionally closed discourses have taken on more open rhetorical styles in their Internet discourse (Howard, 1997, 2000). One factor contributing to this behavioral pattern may be a perceived resource of sustainability as a primary benefit of using online media. In this sense, *sustainability* refers to the ability of a particular medium to sustain a particular discourse over time and thus expand the actual quantity of discursive behaviors associated with the defined discourse. Online discourse, like traditional discourses, must support social processes that convert resources into valued benefits (B. S. Butler, 2001). A sustainable discourse is one that is adaptable and open to the introduction of new ideas (Howard, 2005b). Participants in such a discourse should value and support the entrance of new voices into that conversation. New voices should then yield new and divergent ideas. Over time, inclusive discourses such as these should prove to be adaptable because of their ability to resolve controversies through the generation of new ideas.

Through a case study of a specific apocalyptic Christian conversation that took place on September 12, 2001, however, it becomes clear that this discourse is sustainable precisely because of a self-sealing narrative reasoning that precludes the generation of new ideas. Christian apocalyptic reasoning is based in a shared valuation of a narrative that is closed to significant change while being held open to an infinite variety of minor revisions. Through this plasticity, the discourse proceeding in the apocalyptic narrative paradigm is plastic enough to flourish in online media. At the same time, however, its core valuation of the shared narrative renders it static enough to maintain a profound inflexibility.

With mass media, individuals have unidirectional access to the events from which they construct their variant narratives by way of newspaper, magazine, and television news agencies. Since the advent of the public World Wide Web in 1992, multidirectional debate about these events has become commonplace on a multitude of newsgroups, online bulletin boards, and both private and public

e-mail lists. As scholars like Siva Vaidhyanathan (2004) argued, “the availability and accessibility of the substance of expression” make public discussion and shared creativity possible (p. 185). Through media exposure, individuals are confronted with more potential characters, causes, plots, and subplots. In the online environment, Christian apocalyptic communication has rapidly expanded like other interpersonal discourse.

Although millions of people shared access to the unidirectional mass media descriptions of the events on September 11, 2001, a few hundred of those discussed that same event in a much smaller discourse community through multilateral media on the Internet. In one such community, apocalyptic Christian believers discussed an impending “End Times” scenario that locates a series of events expected to precede the second coming of Christ and the end of mundane history. In this community, discussion of world events, the events of 9/11 among them, is the primary communicative behavior. In the online environment, large numbers of individuals sharing this belief system engage in a surprising volume of multilateral discourse.

In this discourse, the writer Hal Lindsey is particularly influential because his many popular press books updated and helped contextualize a particular End Times narrative into Cold War-era geopolitics. In 1970, his first major book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Lindsey & Carlson, 1970) sold 7.5 million copies, making it the largest selling nonfiction book of the decade. Today, it is estimated to have sold more than 25 million total copies (Wojcik, 1997, p. 8). More recently, Tim LaHaye’s series of novels beginning in 1995 with *Left Behind* (LaHaye & Jenkins, 1995) took Lindsey’s End Times scheme and rewrote it in the form of narrative fiction. The books in this series have consistently made the *New York Times* best-seller list. In October 2004, the 12th and final novel was published in paperback under the title *Glorious Appearing: The End of Days* (LaHaye & Jenkins, 2004).

After the 2004 presidential election, there can be no doubt that a large number of voters in the United States are influenced by fundamentalist Christian thinking—including its End Times scenario. During the 2002 congressional elections that swept Republicans into the majority, data collected by the *Washington Times* indicate that the fundamentalist political organization The Christian Coalition exerted significant influence at the state level through its online distribution of voter guides (Witham, 2002). Since the late 1980s, numerous scholars have documented the complex influence the Christian Right has quietly wielded in U.S. politics (Brown, 2002; Corbett, 1999; Durham, 2000; Green, Rozell, & Wilcox, 2000; Kintz, 1997; Reichley, 2002). At the same time, polls show that a rapidly increasing number of individuals are seeking religious materials online. In 2001, 8% of adults and 12% of teenagers used the Internet for “religious or spiritual experiences” (Barna Research Online, 2001).

For researchers in the 1990s, this move to Internet-based religious discussions might have appeared to be a positive trend. Many studies in the 1990s produced optimistic visions of Internet communities. Perhaps most famous among these is

Jon Katz's publications, which first appeared in *Wired* magazine. The most visible Internet idealist, Katz used survey data to come to the conclusion that a new "digital nation" was being formed through Internet communities composed of "netizens" who, according to Katz (1999a, 1999b), are more democratic, pluralistic, and, most important, "inherently tolerant." Other more recent researchers like Cass Sunstein (2001) argued that online communities form in ways that filter their exposure to divergent political ideas and thus exhibit a potential for a profound sort of intolerance.

Today, researchers must develop more complicated notions about what characteristics of online discourse might tend to be correlated with more tolerant discursive civic engagement. Sustainability is a characteristic that might emerge in examples of more tolerant discourses. However, this expectation is not fulfilled in the specific online conversation that I explore in detail in this article.

In the case of this online End Times conversation, one finds that discursive sustainability is actually a product of the larger discourse's radically static narrative structure. Because the authorizing biblical texts that organize and define the End Times narrative set exhibit a profound plasticity made possible by flexible relationships between ambiguously defined narrative elements, the discourse displays a surprising ability to immediately assimilate new narrative details into its overall matrix of beliefs. This plasticity is surprising, because the discourse proceeds from the core belief that the biblical text is a divinely inspired prophetic narrative of the nearing end of time. Although the narrative cannot be rightly known by humans, its truth is beyond question. As scholars of popular religion and apocalyptic rhetoric alike have noted, the core interpretations and the supporting narrative structure of these texts are not up for debate (Brummett, 1991; Darsey, 1997; O'Leary, 1994; Wojcik, 1997). These core interpretations remain dominant specifically because any potential debater who might wish to challenge them effectively must first have fully assimilated and understood the rather arcane narrative they tell. Much as Sunstein (2001) was concerned would be the case, few individuals not already invested in the Christian End Times belief system seem interested in exploring the details of the End Times narrative. It seems that even fewer individuals not already deeply invested in those beliefs seek out and engage others about them in the online environment.

METHOD

For this article, I use the single-case-study approach to examine a single, specific online conversation in depth (Yin, 1994). However, that single conversation is part of much larger and ongoing research that adapts the basic methods of participant observation and qualitative discourse analysis to online research (Jorgensen, 1989). The specific conversation was drawn from larger archives of over 4.2 gigabytes of archived discourse. This research effort began in 1994 and ended on Sep-

tember 12, 2001. In all, the archived data included complete Web sites, e-mail lists, newsgroup posts, survey data, and face-to-face interviews that were conducted between August and December 1999.

Because communicative competence in online End Times discourse is primarily learned through informal social interaction, this discourse and the core belief structures that support it are properly termed *vernacular* because they exist outside of but alongside institutional discursive communications (Howard, 2005c; Primiano, 1995; Yoder, 1974). The manifestations of this behavior in the online environment are primarily the vigorous exchange of what at first appear to be randomly constructed conglomerations of theology, UFO beliefs, conspiracy theories, and Christian theology. However, through firsthand experience in this discourse community, it becomes rapidly clear that unspoken social norms have developed that regulate the communicative behaviors.

To execute this particular case study, I first read the authoritative texts to which respondents in the community most often referred. Most prominent among these in this case was Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Lindsey & Carlson, 1970). I carefully outlined the structural elements of Lindsey's narrative. Observing those basic narrative elements as they emerged in online conversations, I noted how these elements functioned as issues that framed new media news stories. When reviewing these documents, I discovered the archived Web site called Bible Prophecy Corner. Because of the structure and content of that site, I found a September 12, 2001, conversation that emerged in response to terrorist attacks the day before. Because these attacks were unforeseen and historic, this conversation provided an opportunity to observe how a totally unexpected event could be integrated into the preexisting End Times narrative scenario. Because these events involved Middle Eastern politics, there was no doubt that believers in an approaching End Times would be compelled to attempt to do so. Then, through a close reading of this particular conversation, one way in which this integration was accomplished by a specific group of individuals involved in the discourse was revealed.

THE SELF-REGULATORY POWER OF NARRATIVE PLASTICITY IN END TIMES DISCOURSE

In 1956, Leon Festinger famously described how the members of a prophetic religious sect tenuously held to their beliefs despite the failure of their leader's prophetic claims (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956). More recently, Barry Brummett (1991) described how apocalyptic discourse functions as a system of order for individuals who perceive their current worldviews as under threat. Rhetorically, apocalyptic discourse "replaces the received systems of explanation that an audience has lost" (Brummett, 1991, p. 31). James Darsey (1997) located the power of this explanative system in its Old Testament roots. As a system that seeks

to stabilize its participants' understanding of the world, apocalyptic argument "reverses figure-ground relationships" by making "the absence of evidence, evidence" (Darsey, 2002, p. 470).

In 1994, Stephen O'Leary published his well-known analysis of apocalyptic Christian rhetoric, *Arguing the Apocalypse*. O'Leary concluded that apocalyptic rhetoric is, in Kenneth Burke's sense, fundamentally "tragic." Apocalypticism is a closed system of interpretation that resists change and is nearly impervious to debate. Looking at the work of the famous contemporary End Times writer Hal Lindsey, O'Leary (1994) noted that Lindsey's strategy "denies the credentials of all authorities who disagree with his central apocalyptic claim, and transforms their disagreements into further support for the claim by interpreting it as itself a sign of the End" (p. 170).

In a similar way but coming from a much different theoretical perspective, Daniel Wojcik (1997) argued that contemporary End Times discourse is profoundly "fatalistic": "Fatalism not only is central to American apocalypticism but is a pervasive mode of interpreting experiences and perceptions" (p. 18). By "fatalism," Wojcik meant "the belief that human will or effort is incapable of altering the outcome of certain events" (p. 18).

These scholars have adequately demonstrated how the narrative structure and core beliefs in End Times discourse are profoundly static. O'Leary (1994) noted this at the level of argumentative discourse when he described how Hal Lindsey specifically insulated himself against counterargument by anticipating those arguments and labeling them as "signs." At the level of belief, Wojcik (1997) showed how End Times believers adhere to a narrative that holds as one of its core tenets that the end of history and the fates of its actors are predecided by God. Both of these characteristics of End Times discourse function with its core values to keep the narrative structure static by anticipating and closing off avenues for the introduction of divergent claims into the discourse.

The participants in this discourse all keep the end near, but it seems never to quite arrive. There are always new possibilities for who will be the Antichrist or how the technology of the mark of the beast will be implemented. When confronted with new information or even a new historic event such as the attacks of 9/11, the participants in this discourse immediately can assimilate this new information into their worldview without confronting any challenges to the narrative structure in which they exist.

Despite the static nature of Christian End Times's core values and the narrative structure they support, online discourse on the topic vigorously sustains itself through the continual introduction of new details. In particular, the introduction of current world events expands the topical possibilities without challenging its core interpretive system. Although this discourse is radically constrained by its adherence to particular closed interpretations of biblical texts, those very constraints form the primary *topi* from which discourse about the more flexible details of exchange issues and associated belief positions can unfold.

In its broadest sense, Walter Fisher's theoretical framework of the "narrative paradigm" described how humans think natively not in *logos* or "reason" alone, but also, and maybe first, in *mythos*—in *story*. "The narrative paradigm sees people as storytellers—authors and co-authors who creatively read and evaluate the texts of life and literature" (Fisher, 1985, p. 86). Since the 1987 publication of his central work, *Human Communication as Narration*, Fisher's claim has come under criticism because it seems to suggest a fundamentally conservative nature of the assessment of new ideas by audiences (Kirkwood, 1992). From Fisher's perspective, humans judge new claims based on narrative principles or a "narrative rationality." New claims are assessed by audience members for narrative consistency and fidelity. Individuals judge claims made based on "narrative consistency." They judge if the new claims conform to the expectations of plot development. Further, they assess new claims based on their "narrative fidelity." They assess if the new claims seem to present a narrative structure that does not conflict with their our personal experiences (Fisher, 1987). Because new ideas are assessed in terms of previously held values, Fisher's paradigm implies that the narrative basis for judging claims is fundamentally conservative. This fundamental conservatism may not be true cross-culturally. However, it certainly does seem to be the case in online Christian End Times discourse.

In Christian apocalyptic discourse, individuals must possess a tacit understanding of the narrative structure as well as of its implications for narrative consistency. When a new experience challenges this understanding, the previously assumed narrative fidelity of the End Times scenario might be brought into question. In the case of the response to the unexpected experience of news media coverage of the attacks on September 11, 2001, this new experience was rapidly assimilated and understood in terms that rendered it consistent with the shared understanding of the overall apocalyptic narrative. In this way, the narrative structure of the End Times scenario proved itself plastic enough to accommodate new and unexpected experiences—and thus it proved itself sustainable.

Like all expressions of religious belief, apocalyptic discourse functions to give divine authority and import to individual understandings of the world. In the case of the Christian End Times scenario, it assures its adherents of an afterlife. Thus, as long as an individual's belief in the End Times worldview is strong, believers remain motivated to engage in discourse about it. For most participants, it is necessary to share certain "core values" of the discourse. Such core values are usually quite obvious.

The most definitive core values in Christian End Times belief are (a) that humans are inherently sinful, (b) that Christ offers divine grace from that sin, (c) that the text of the Bible is divinely inspired and beyond question, (d) that the proper interpretation of that text describes a series of events that will immediately proceed the end of time and the Millennial Reign of Christ, (e) that the Saints or true Christian believers will join Christ to rule during that 1,000-year reign of heaven on earth, and (f) that the exact time or nature of those events will not be fully

known by humans until the events have already occurred or are in the process of occurring. For those believers anticipating the End Times and expecting to join Christ during the Millennial Reign, there is a high level of motivation to watch for current events that indicate the time is near. For nonbelievers, the End Times, or “Tribulation Period,” will be unpleasant at best—marked by war, disease, government oppression, and general human misery. For believers, however, especially those expecting to be “Raptured,” or removed bodily from the earth before the Tribulation Period, the approach of an afterlife reigning peacefully with their deity is a much anticipated event for which they yearn.

Generally referred to as “premillennial,” these central End Times or “dispensationalist” core values appear in various Christian fundamentalist, Pentecostal, and evangelical Protestant ideological movements. Some research even locates these basic components as necessary outcomes of Martin Luther’s argument against free will (Howard, 2005a). Their current form, however, can be traced back at least to Charles Nelson Darby in the 19th century (Marsden, 1980). Darby taught that specific key events would continue to lead mankind through a series of epochs, or dispensations. The current state of things is the current dispensation, or “The Church Age.” Beginning with the crucifixion of Christ, this current dispensation would end with the Rapture (Boyer, 1992, pp. 86–90).

Part of the longevity of this interpretive scheme can be attributed to its emphasis on the idea that no human can know exactly when the End Times will begin. This core value is derived from passages like Matthew 24:35–36: “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away. But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (King James Version).

In light of this core value and its biblical basis, most prophetically oriented preachers do not claim certainty about their interpretations of the biblical passages. Hal Lindsey, for example, stated in the introduction to *The Late Great Planet Earth*: “I am attempting to step aside and let the prophets speak. The readers are given the freedom to accept or reject my conclusions” (Lindsey & Carlson, 1970, p. 6). With a subtle move, Lindsey denied any direct contact with the divine for himself but, instead, associated his interpretations with the divine authority Christians place in the prophetic biblical texts. At the same time, however, Lindsey and other End Times–oriented preachers leave themselves a rhetorical escape hatch. Although it is unquestionably true for End Times believers that at some point Christ will return to the earth, no matter how good a human interpreter is, that interpreter may be wrong. For believers, such misinterpretations of the details in no way imply that the larger narrative structure of the End Times or the core values that support it are incorrect.

By specifically not claiming any divine authority in his particular interpretive scheme, Lindsey’s popular press books on the End Times opened the discourse up to debate. However, and maybe more important, his interpretations seem to have found such a wide audience because of the audacious way in which he

related the ancient Christian scriptures to a clear and very contemporary series of geopolitical events. Many of these events are of the sort that, in an age of mass communication, his readers are able to track them in the mainstream news media. From the base of Lindsey's narrative set, discursive behaviors can emerge in ways that are both consistent with its narrative structure and supportive of the core values its believers hold. It is necessary for contemporary End Times believers to internalize both the core values and the contemporary narrative set to participate in the issue-exchange behavior.

A schematized version of the narrative set based on *The Late Great Planet Earth* sheds light on how issues lead to the discursive recycling of the core values. Reducing the narrative to its essential components and numbering them based on their chronological progression results in the following narrative schematic:

1. Rise of New Roman Empire as European Common Market, before 1988.
2. The establishment of a world-governing body led by the Antichrist.
3. The Antichrist sides with world government and Israel against Russia.
4. The Antichrist dies of head wound but miraculously recovers.
5. The Antichrist is worshiped 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. The 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 1,000 years.
16. Resurgence of the Antichrist put down by Christ.
17. Return of "faithful to heaven with Christ."

Each element of this schematic is based on a series of biblical verses. However, Lindsey significantly updated them to mesh with contemporary politics. The Roman Empire, now long expired, is exchanged for the European Common Market because such a "united Europe" is the closest thing, in Lindsey's view, to the Roman Empire of old we see on the current global scene. Although the two are rationally, totally different things, narrative consistency is maintained because Europe represents a large "nation" relatively close to Jerusalem. Because the narrative states that a large nation will be engaged in Jerusalem, the natural focus for apocalyptic discourse is to look to a united Europe as the source of the Antichrist. Because most of the events are rooted in a narrative structure that relies on this particular order, the consistence of the narrative is the primary recalcitrance that

limits the influx of new ideas. For example, the Antichrist comes to inhabit the leader of the New Roman Empire as a result of his pseudo-resurrection in Event 4 only after he or she has become the leader of the European Common Market. Further, one could expect that such a ruler would be “worshipped as a god” (Event 5) only after he or she has come to power (Event 2).

In this way, the basic syntagmatic organization of the narrative structure must remain intact, and this ordering of events is supported by the very specific interpretations of biblical texts. These elements of the discourse are not up for debate. However, this fact does not close off debate on the topic. Instead, it has spawned a surprisingly vigorous online discourse, not about the structurally necessary narrative events but about current world events and the possibility that such events might fill the narrative slots and thus create a viable narrative set based on the core structure. Because of the ambiguity of the biblical texts themselves and because Lindsey and others made no claims to divine authority in their interpretations, End Times believers today have no problem substituting the idea of the European Common Market for what it is now properly called, the European Union (EU). In fact, the progression toward a unified Europe has functioned to fulfill and validate Lindsey’s interpretations. In this way, the narrative set is not quite so fixed as it at first appears. It raises questions like, Who will be the Antichrist? Will the mark of the beast turn out to be a microchip implant or will it merely be a tattoo? What political changes in Israel and Palestine will emerge to make way for the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem?

Because the exact nature of the events is always unknown, the elements that might fulfill these slots provide a wide array of potential points for debate or exchange issues (Howard, 2000). They are constrained by the plot of the End Times scenario. Although some have argued that China will be the New Roman Empire, few accept this claim because China is an Asian country and the Roman Empire was European in origin. Further, the temple must be rebuilt before the final apocalypse, so some argue that the EU/United Nations leader/god/Antichrist will emerge out of Israel itself. However, this leader/god/Antichrist could just as easily emerge from a new treaty that would unite the leader of the United Nations with the EU and create a One-World Government. For online End Times believers, the possibilities for this sort of narrative reasoning seem inexhaustible. The ability to exchange specific details in the narrative set for new information fuels online communication about the End Times.

SEPTEMBER 12, 2001

On September 11, 2001, there was an outpouring of grief, confusion, anger, and shock in the online End Times community, as there was in the world at large. Because of the importance of the rebuilding of the Jewish temple in Israel in the apocalyptic narrative, Christians interested in the End Times have often paid close attention to events in the Middle East. It quickly became clear that the commercial

planes had been hijacked by individuals involved in Middle Eastern politics, and End Times believers placed the attacks into their unique view of geopolitical conflict. Because the End Times narrative is radically flexible, the events of 9/11 were almost immediately pulled into the issue-exchange behavior. In this discourse, the shock of the 9/11 attacks was quickly placed in relation to the overall narrative of a nearing apocalypse. The case study of a World Wide Web–based conversation that occurred on September 12, 2001, reveals the plasticity characteristic of End Times discourse online.

One of the largest and most well-known End Times Web sites is the Bible Prophecy Corner (Agee, 1999). First established by Marilyn Agee in 1996, this Web site has become a fixture in the community. Primarily through this Web site, Agee has constructed herself as an authoritative lay minister. Outside of any specific denominational power structure, Agee is able to take on the traditionally male role of pastor and theologian.

Agee was a well-known Christian author before she built her Web site. After a long career running a small business with her husband, in retirement she turned to studying the Bible. The results of her studies have been three published books selling, by her own account, over 90,000 copies. As her books gained a large readership, she began to receive letters from individuals who found her work inspirational and enlightening. Agee tried to return all of her fan mail. Soon, however, it was getting to be a very large task. Meanwhile, she and her husband purchased a used computer. She found herself with an e-mail account and began to receive not just fan mail but e-mailed questions, complaints, and disagreements from fellow Christians. Soon, Marilyn realized that she could reach as many or more people with a Web site as she could through traditional publications. Teaching herself basic Web site design, Marilyn built the early versions of her now well-known Bible Prophecy Corner.

In 1998, Marilyn gained particular notoriety when she was forced to recant her published prediction that the Tribulation would begin with a mass Rapture on Pentecost of that year. In September 1999, I interviewed her and her husband near their home in Riverside, California. Discussing with me how she could claim such powerful knowledge of the divine, she stated that she spent 7 years reading “everything man had written about the Bible” but was disappointed with people’s lack of understanding: “I wanted to know the hard things. So I just opened my Bible, and put my hands on it, and I said, ‘Lord you’ll have to show me.’ The next seven years I learned so fast I could hardly keep up with it” (personal communication, September 4, 1999). Based on this divine infusion of understanding, Agee commonly makes rhetorical claims to authority based on her personal experience through study. On her biographical Web page, she states: “I am a Baptist believer who has been studying the Bible as deep as I can go for over 38 years.” This “depth” comes by way of being “led by God” in her studies (Agee, 1999).

By claiming this “leading by God,” Marilyn places her own writings in a clear authoritative relationship to the biblical texts she interprets. Because the community holds the core value that the biblical texts are divinely inspired and unquestionably

true, Marilyn places her secondary interpretations of those texts into the realm of divine authority by relating her story of how she came to realize that God wanted her to write books. As Marilyn stated:

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

Despite this divine authority, the bulk of her Web site is a sort of documentation of her e-mail discussions with other believers. As she discussed with me, her Web site was a natural outgrowth of her attempts to respond to the many letters and then e-mail messages from people who had questions or disagreements about her particular End Times narrative set. Since 1997, she has devoted the vast majority of her time to this project instead of attempting to publish traditional books.

Although the site does contain some longer topical essays, the main section is devoted to what she calls the Pro and Con Index. At the time of this writing, the Index contained over 1,000 individual pages, many of which are well over 5,000 words. Each page contains 4 to 10 "incoming" e-mail messages on a particular topic, often from a number of different individuals. In response to the incoming e-mail, Marilyn has written "my reply" sections addressing the concerns expressed by her e-mail respondents. Sometimes she even includes rebuttals the original respondent has made to her reply.

Because of her notoriety, longevity, and authority in the community, it seems that Marilyn receives a very large quantity of e-mail, and she clearly engages in a high volume of online communication about the End Times. Because she then posts some of this discourse, her site has become a well-known virtual location for issue exchange in the online End Times community. Because her pages document both her ideas and incoming e-mail messages in chronological order, Marilyn's Web site offers a snapshot of a single conversation within this diverse and active community on September 11, 2001. In fact, on September 12th, she posted a long Pro and Con page that included many exchanges she had on the 11th.

In these exchanges, the participants continually ponder what "sign of the End Times" those terrorist acts fulfill. They were struggling to understand their new experience in terms consistent with their divinely authorized narrative. For them, such an important historical event must, in some way, be prophesized in their sacred text. Their question is where the Bible refers to the events of 9/11. Individuals vigorously debate this issue because if it can be located in the divine scriptures then it can be placed in the proper chronological sequence of the End Times narrative structure. If this could be done, it would function to index September 11, 2001, at a given point in the necessary series of narrative events that will proceed the Millen-

nial Reign of Christ and thus maintain the consistency of the narrative. Indexed in this way, it would give End Times believers a sense of just how near the End Times actually are.

Marilyn's Pro and Con number 803 is dated September 12, 2001. Nearly 5,000 words long, this Web page includes 13 incoming e-mail messages and four "my replies," which occurred throughout the day on September 11th. Marilyn's replies address two different broad topics through which she seems to categorize the 13 communications she received. Marilyn posted 11 incoming e-mail in one group that are mostly only a line or two and make no specific claims. One example of this series includes the post "WTC-towers collapsing, well that's what i call a sign :)."¹ Although the post shows a certain insensitivity to the tragedy, it also correctly anticipates what will dominate the community's response to the events of 9/11: It is surely a sign, but of what?

Marilyn responds by beginning to place the 9/11 events into the specific contexts of her prophetic interpretations in ways that provide the expected narrative consistency. In fact, an ongoing issue exchanged on her Web site in previous days had to do with the possibility that asteroids are described striking the earth in the book of Revelation. She describes her views on the Pro and Con page from the week before, number 802:

I think God wants as many people as possible to know that there is an asteroid threat. That Rev. 8:8,10 is talking about asteroid impacts could not be known perfectly before the first asteroid was discovered in modern times. Now we can understand it perfectly. Every heavenly body that we have been able to photograph the surface of is pockmarked with craters. The Earth is not immune, although the Moon may have swept many from our orbital path. Lights that have been sighted on the Moon from time to time may have been asteroid impacts.

In the September 12th Pro and Con, she immediately returns to the topic of asteroids and places them in reference to 9/11:

The Lord said that vengeance belongs to him. He knows who did what and how to punish them. They don't know what is in store for them for plotting this wickedness. They will get what for without our doing a thing. I'll list below some verses that mention the Lord's vengeance. The asteroid of Rev. 8:8 will fall into the Mediterranean Sea. The star of Rev. 8:10 will destroy Babylon. Rev. 18:21 says, "a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone, and cast it into the sea, saying, Thus with violence shall that great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all."

Her ability to shift immediately from the current tragedy to an ongoing interpretative point she wants to make shows both her agility of mind and the force of

¹All quotations from Internet-based media are cited as they appear. The informal nature of Internet discourse leads to the nonstandard language found in these citations.

the End Times narrative structure. The aforementioned example of her move from 9/11, to vengeance, to asteroids is maybe a little unsubtle. However, the longer interpretive section she writes for the 803 Pro and Con presents a more complicated example of both the plasticity of the narrative set and the coercive force of the core values.

The longest section of the 803 Pro and Con takes up nearly half the entire Web page. It consists of an initial e-mail that was sent to Marilyn; Marilyn's 1,300-word reply; a reply from the initial e-mail author to Marilyn's reply, which is only a few sentences long; and then a second reply from Marilyn of over 500 words.

From: SA, Re: The Ark of the Covenant

... I was delving into the KJV electronic bible which I have just downloaded and unzipped and the first OT book I went into was the calling of Samuel to serve the Lord. I grabbed my NIV for a second read through since the KJV can be rather oblique at times and reached 1 Sam 4 where the Philistines capture the Ark. I read on till 6:17 and then BAM—realized that here is a connection with Zephaniah 2:4. The Philistines had to send a guilt offering of five gold tumours and five gold rats ... and the gold tumours represent Ashdod, Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron ... and guess where the asteroid strikes!! "Gaza will be abandoned and Ashkelon left in ruins. At MIDDAY Ashdod will be emptied and Ekron uprooted. Woe to you who live by the sea, O Kerethite people ... (NIV)"

Isn't that a classic—just goes to show—don't mess with the Lord Almighty!!

What would be the significance of 1 Sam 6:1 "When the Ark of the Lord had been in Philistine territory seven months ..."?

It's just so nice to see how the Lord deals out justice and all the more why we should understand that it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:31)!

I shall continue on and see where the Ark lands up. In Christ and looking up (18th hopefully!!!) Agape

This passage is a continuation of an ongoing exchange issue that is not particular to Marilyn's work but appears elsewhere in End Times discourse. Specifically, this individual is searching the entire Bible for references to the Ark of the Covenant, destructive natural events, and the number 7. Her project is typical of End Times thought. She is "looking up" both in the Bible, to God in Heaven, and into the future: "(18th hopefully!!!)." The number 18 here refers specifically to September 18, 2001. The 18th has taken on special significance because the writer assumes that the events of 9/11 could be "The Seven Day Warning," which has been under discussion already in End Times circles for some time at this point. The Seven Day Warning is thought to have been given to Noah before the Great Flood, and some End Times believers argue that this pattern will be mirrored in the End Times scenario by some "sign" 7 days before the beginning of the End Times. The logic is quite simple. If the September 11th events are a Seven Day Warning and the days are meant literally, the asteroids

Marilyn has been predicting will strike Earth and begin the End Times scenario may show up 7 days after the 11th, on September 18th.

Marilyn clearly understands her e-mailer's somewhat obscure line of thought when she responds in kind: "(9-18-01 is Tishri 1, 5761, the Feast of Trumpets, hopefully the Rapture)." Here, Marilyn translates the date at the time to her understanding of its equivalent in the ancient Hebrew calendar system that the Old Testament prophets would have been using. Specifically, she places the newly significant date 9/11/01 into the context of her ongoing efforts to interpret biblical texts in terms of this Hebrew calendar and modern astronomy. She then relates the new date to her ongoing concern about when a particular feast day will be. At this point, she feels that the Rapture may occur in the near future on the day of the Feast of Trumpets, which would be during Rosh Hashanah:

Most suggested that the plane impacts that were instrumental in bringing down the twin towers at the World Trade Center in New York may be a 7-day sign. I think it is very likely. Sept. 11 is 7 days before the Feast of Trumpets.

This places the newly important date into the context of her overall interpretation of biblical texts. Next, she specifically looks for and locates evidence in the Bible itself that can serve to authorize her new assertion that September 18, 2001, could be the day of the Rapture:

Prophecy casts its shadows before it. Isa. 30:25 says, "there shall be upon every high mountain, and upon every high hill, rivers and streams of waters in the day of the great slaughter, WHEN THE TOWERS FALL."

Those words, "WHEN THE TOWERS FALL," that have echoed through my head today, tie today's tragedy to the final catastrophe on the Day of God's Wrath. In that day, the UN and UR will be housed in towers in Babylon, Iraq. Those towers will fall.

Here she makes two important moves. First, she claims, "the words echoed" in her head all day. Because the divine leads her in the study of scripture, it is not an accident that this passage sticks with her. She relates that to her audience because, from their perspective, this is the primary source of her authority as a teacher who is led by God in her studies.

Her second important move acts to incorporate the new events in a way that supports her preexisting interpretations. Her claim that "prophecy casts its shadows before it" is a direct reference to the paradigmatic way in which much End Times interpretation proceeds. It is not that the Bible metaphorically refers to something that she incorrectly thought were "asteroids" but actually turned out to be planes. If that had been the case, it would mean that the 9/11 was the day of Rapture and not the Seven Day Warning before it. Obviously, such an interpretation would not function in the larger narrative she is constructing. Instead, the fact

that there were two planes and two towers (ignoring for a moment that there were actually four planes and other targets) paradigmatically prefigures the approaching two asteroids she has been predicting for a long time. Appealing to the idea of the Seven Day Warning, the new events of 9/11 are immediately placed into her specific narrative set. This set then functions as a prophetic interpretation in a way that supports her specific current debate issue, the overall narrative structure of the End Times, and the core values that support both.

In her next lines, she makes this very clear:

Two planes hitting the World Trade towers picture the two asteroids that will hit Earth on the day the towers fall. Zech. 5:4 tells us what will happen when the curse that orbits over the face of the Earth falls. It says, "I will bring it forth, saith the LORD of hosts, and it shall enter into the house of the thief (False Prophet that steals the church), and into the house of him that sweareth falsely by my name (the Tribulation Pope): and it shall remain in the midst of his house, and shall consume it with the timber thereof and the stones thereof."

She caps her argument by again rerooting it in specific quotes from the Bible.

Neither a Rapture nor any great astronomical events were to occur on September 18, 2001. However, this did not at all concern Marilyn. Of her many predictions that the Rapture was near at hand, she admits that none have yet proved correct. This is simply not a problem for Marilyn or many of her fellow members of the on-line End Times community. Preoccupied with the exchanging ideas about the surface details of their interpretations, when September 18, 2001, passed without event, the participants had no inclination to reconsider their core values or even the narrative structure that those values support.

Pro and Con 810 was posted 10 days after the 18th on September 28, 2001. A more typical Pro and Con entry, it seems to contain Marilyn's e-mail exchanges over the course of several days, including the auspicious September 18. There are a number of news article links about the Middle East, the discussion of a group in Israel working to build the temple in Jerusalem, a question about the length of the Tribulation Period, some disagreements about specific calendar dating Marilyn has made, and even a warning about a particular computer virus that has been making the rounds.

Two sections of the page seem to directly engage the failed predictions of 7 days before. One is a long post from "Mark," who attempts to adjust the calendar interpretation to push the date for the Rapture back a few days. He comes up with a concrete new time, September 27, saying:

This is not date setting, but to give your readers hope, and keep them from being discouraged that the rapture has not occurred yet ... as the last trumpet did NOT sound at the end of Rosh Hashana ... We still have 9 days to go ... God Bless.

Although Marilyn posts his message, she seems not to respond to his argument. However, the second e-mail author who engages the failed interpretation takes another tact:

10-02 of 2001 will be the 651st day since the winter solstice of 5760. The 651st composite (not prime) number is 790 (10 x 79 Gold). $651 + 790 = 1441$ the Jewish day number for 9-11 of 2001. This is a very strong marker for a repeat of the 9-11 attack. YBIC

Here, the e-mail tones down expectations for 9/18 by suggesting that maybe it will only be the date of a second terrorist attack. Such an attack, even if it had occurred, would have had no impact on the indexing of current events to create a specific narrative set. As such, Marilyn replies, expressing a simple disinterest in any such less significant interpretive possibilities for the date:

Ouch. I hope for something better than that, and I don't mean more explosive. I'd say, "What is this world coming to?" but I know all too well what the end of this age will bring. The only funny thing about it is that it is all written down. They could know how it will end, but they don't read it, don't believe it, or don't understand it. I think of Dan. 12:10, "the wicked shall do wickedly: and none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand." Maranatha! Agape

In this final quote from Marilyn, her anticipation of the End Times is a hopeful and powerful belief. She "hopes" and desires that the End Times will start despite the human suffering it will bring. Further, her belief that she knows about End Times events is totally unchanged in light of the incorporation of 9/11 as a Seven Day Warning and its failure to predict any significant event. Instead, she reflects on how people could possibly fail to take the divine narrative of the End Times as told in the Bible as absolute truth: "They could know how it will end, but they don't read it." Here, again, Marilyn expresses her adherence to the core value that the Bible is absolutely true and that it describes events of the End Times that are near on the historical horizon. Just as clearly, however, the full context of this quote shows how she and her fellow community members assimilated a new historic event into their narrative structure, gave it a significant import, and now have been forced to abandon their claims—all without reflecting on the validity of the core values that enabled them to make their incorrect predictions.

TOPICAL COMMUNITY FORMATION

Scholars of religion like Wojcik (1997) have adequately noted the ways in which the belief system of contemporary Christian End Times thinking is radically static. Scholars of rhetoric like O'Leary (1994) have noted how some participants in this

discourse employ logics that insulate their beliefs from divergent ideas. But previous analyses have not noted the way in which the narrative structure of the End Times proves itself highly sustainable in online media. The fixed narrative structure and core values through which it operates create a space for discourse to proceed in such a way that it can incorporate new ideas, incite vigorous debates, and even hatch new potential dates for the end of time without challenging its core values or worldview. The open field of issue exchange reveals a surprising plasticity in the midst of the closed belief system. Once individuals gain the discursive competence necessary to understand the issues being debated, they seem to let their imaginations run free with preliminary interpretations. This freedom born out of a static discourse presents itself as a paradox. The very plasticity of any specific narrative set allows believers to seem to be actively engaging in inquiring discourse. However, no matter the outcome of their predictions, it seems, the core values of the discourse are not in question because, quite simply, they are never engaged. Although the communication behaviors appear, at first, to be a form of deliberative inquiry into the various possibilities of the apocalyptic narrative, they only function to reinforce the already held values of the community.

In the case of End Times-oriented Christians on the Internet, the way the discursive competence and narrative plasticity function to limit the range of its debate is thrown into sharp relief. However, in light of Walter Fisher's (1985, 1987) long-standing claims that humans think primarily through narrative as they formulate their shared understanding of the world, it must also be noted that those narratives can act to exclude individuals from the discourse, reinforce dominant paradigms, and further the power structures of dominant ideologies in any community. In this case, at least, the discourse is sustainable in online media and it exhibits a high degree of conservatism based in its reliance on a core narrative.

This observation is particularly relevant to the study of the heteroglossia typical of network communities because such communities seem to thrive on the ongoing exchange of ideas. In the most optimistic of analyses, one might hope that a melting pot of divergent ideas would breed an online ethos of pluralism. As long as a debate is prolonged, the hardened prejudices of our day might be softened and melted away. However, in online End Times discourse, this does not appear to be the case.

As Benedict Anderson (1991) aptly noted, communities "imagine" themselves through discourse. For the End Times community online, this imagining is the primary function of its members' communication behaviors (Anderson, 1991). The identity of individual members of any community is imagined simultaneously to the creation of that imagined community through its discourse. From a rhetorical perspective, this imagining is a form of generative symbolic action. As Margaret Zulick (1997) described it, generative rhetoric causes "social invention." Zulick noted how "every conversation generates a virtual public space, a field of common talk neither reducible to nor entirely commensurable with any prior language" (p. 117).

Zulick (1997) was building on Jürgen Habermas's conception of the private or semiprivate "talk" of individuals as one basis for generating a "public sphere" of dis-

course. The public sphere is a social exchange of discourse that “is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public” (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). A “public” or discourse-based community is formed in each contextualized exchange of communication because individuals generate both a “sphere” or, to use Howard Rheingold’s (2000) terms, a “social aggregation” that carries with it a sense of individual belonging (p. 5). That is to say, in a functioning public sphere of discourse, individuals have a stake in who they are in relation to that community.

However, for individuals to locate themselves into any such community, they must also form an individual identity from which they can imagine themselves as a member of the larger group. In this way, apocalyptic Christian discourse functions to create, maintain, and re-create both individual identities and the communities that those individuals imagine themselves to inhabit. By enacting social norms that both reinscribe and perform membership in that community, individuals both demonstrate and generate the community to which their identity as a Christian belongs. The social norms that govern the possibilities of this performance within this Christian community online create the community while limiting its potential to diverge from the norms of that community. Primary among these social norms is that of “topical community formation.” Topical community formation occurs when discourse-based communities form based on shared topical interests.

Topical community formation enables the social norm of issue exchange. Issue-exchange behavior accounts for the bulk of End Times communication online. Issue exchange occurs when individuals involved in the discourse discuss the relevancy of a specific fact to a larger shared issue of concern without any expectation of a final solution or resulting action emerging from the discussion. For an individual to engage in issue exchange, both sides of the communication must have a certain competence in the discourse. An example of one such End Times issue is the “pre-trib versus post-trib” discussion. Communications about this issue focus on the order of specific events that End Times believers expect to occur in the near future. The *pre* and *post* refer to whether Christians will be raptured before or after the Tribulation Period.

Regardless of a particular participant’s position on this exchange issue, he or she must be familiar with one of the basics of the End Times narrative: True Christians will be saved in the Rapture at some point. This, of course, implies knowledge of the broader discourse of Christian belief. This knowledge, as well as some familiarity with the Bible, is necessary for competence in the online End Times discourse. As David Zaret (1992) noted in the context of 18th-century English political and religious strife, tension emerges in Protestant thinking about the relationship between private judgments of conscience and public reason. The divine authority of the text of the Bible is known in a radically private sphere. On the other hand, the “public” standards of reason are products of a fallen world and hence fundamentally inferior to judgments derived from the individual experience of the text of the Bible. That is to say, the shared reason that public deliberation values are reduced

by a belief that the “correct” knowledge of the divine is accessed only through the privacy of individual contemplation. Nonetheless, public deliberation emerges because those private judgments must be justified to a public of individuals who have a stake in the judgment.

In the case of End Times issue-exchange behavior after 9/11, however, the need to justify private conviction is radically reduced by the formation of a discourse community that shares the belief that final knowledge of God’s divine plan cannot be known for sure in the mundane world. Through topical community formation, individuals are united by their shared “stake” in the ongoing performance of the powerful inscrutability of God’s plan. Individuals are able to engage in public deliberation in a way that does not challenge the radically private validity of their judgments about the divine, and the characteristics of network-based media function to facilitate this kind of communication by enabling topical community formation and the issue-exchange behavior that characterizes it.

Engaging in issue exchange, individuals can actively communicate about very different and often new discursive elements without ever challenging or even speaking about the core values of their shared literacy. It is at this level that online Christian End Times believers exhibit what Lev Manovich (2001) termed “modularity.” Online communication encourages the ability to personalize discourse through the rearrangement of a given set of “modular” ideas. However, this very same modularity enables radically limiting communicative norms because the set of modular elements is fixed. To engage in issue exchange, individuals do not need to profess their End Times belief, because they were already displaying it by properly presenting and commenting on the shared issues that defined the competency necessary to successful engage in the discourse. They must already know how the narrative ends, and in so knowing, they actively use network technologies to limit the introduction of any ideas that might challenge their core Christian beliefs; they could do this precisely because online communities are formed “topically” instead of geographically. Individuals actively “filter” the discourse possible in their community in a way that Cass Sunstein (2001) argued encourages “extremism and fragmentation” (p. 9).

The radical modularity of End Times discourse is enabled by a narrative plasticity that generates communicative behaviors that function to limit the generative potential of any discursive mode of citizenship, because that plasticity acts to buffer the core beliefs from the divergent voices necessary to generate new adaptive ideas. If Sunstein (2001) was right, topical community formation of this sort encourages intolerance for new ideas and a withdrawal from larger public debates. Modularity undercuts controversy. Without the ability to adapt through controversy, it would seem that the rapidly evolving cultural and technological world would render End Times discourse ineffective for individuals to rely on as a definitive belief system. So far, however, this has not proven to be the case. With the ongoing influence of evangelical Christianity in U.S. politics, the tenacity and closed nature of End Times discourse must now be carefully observed and assessed with a renewed vigor.

Further research must seek to ask the most difficult question raised by this case study: Why do individuals seek to engage in public deliberation about that which cannot be decided? Further, why do individuals communicate in the absence of any pressing “need” for communication?

From a post-Freudian perspective, Slavoj Žižek (1998) suggested that

the subject is never able to assume his or her fundamental fantasy, to recognize him- or herself in it, in a performance of a speech act. Perhaps cyberspace opens up a domain in which the subject can nonetheless externalize or stage his or her fundamental fantasy and thus gain a minimum of distance toward it. (p. 511)

If there is some fundamental compulsion to recognize the self in language, it is also a compulsion to acknowledge a community for which that self is performed. The location of self necessitates the acknowledgment of others as unique and separate selves. Judith Butler (2001) suggested: “I speak as an ‘I’ . . . I find that my very formation implicates the Other in me, that my own foreignness to myself, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others” (p. 37).

Discourse that is premised on a lack of controversy may encourage individuals to avoid the ethical challenges that arise from attempting to mediate between a diversity of values. Such discourse is less ethically responsible because it avoids the challenge of diversity that characterizes the postmodern public. The engagement of such communities reduces the transformative power of the public sphere. If this is so, it may be the case that some kinds of communities now possible through network media enable a debilitating sort of communal narcissism precisely because they can function to “privatize” the network-based public.

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