

### **Millennialism and Society**

Series Editor: Brenda E. Brasher

*Millennialism and Society* had its genesis in the 1996–2002 annual meetings of the Center for Millennial Studies at Boston University. Those meetings brought together an international array of scholars to discuss the texts and traditions of religious revelation or apocalypses concerning the end of the world as we know it, whether in a tumultuous final judgement or a utopian eternal paradise. As apocalyptic texts advance an argument that massive change on earth is possible, even desirable, because it is part of a divine plan, the scholars' goal was to attain a richer, more nuanced understanding of our most ancient ideas of social change, including their influence on societies today.

Taken together, *Millennialism and Society* as a series represents a sustained effort on the part of this scholarly network to advance our understanding of what is a frequently unruly element of our cultural heritage.

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## **The End All Around Us** **Apocalyptic Texts and Popular Culture**

Edited by

**John Walliss and Kenneth G. C. Newport**

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## An End Times Virtual "Ekklesia" Ritual Deliberation in Participatory Media

Robert Glenn Howard

### Introduction

Believing that they were acting in a way much like "first century Christians," David (a professional psychologist and convert to evangelical Christianity) told me that he and his wife Brenda used the Internet to enact their "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. (Brenda and David, 1999)

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 communities that they supported. 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, was imagining the older meaning of "church:" 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 religious expression creates a new kind of ekklesia. Though this ekklesia is enacted by its members, it is unlike any ancient congregation because it lacks both a specific geographic place and any authorizing institutional affiliation. A leaderless and placeless community, it is "virtual". Because it is virtual, its very existence rests on the continual performance of shared ideas by those who imagine themselves as comprising its human congregation.

Many individuals use the Internet to supplement activities and commitments associated with their brick-and-mortar churches (Hoover et al., 2004). Because these behaviours seem largely to lack significant ritual or social interactivity, researchers have struggled to define what constitutes the "religious" online (Campbell, 2006). Sustained qualitative research demonstrates that some individuals do engage in religious social behaviour online. For example, neopagans have been found to gather in chat rooms and conduct online rituals (Cowan, 2005: 121). In another case, online texts invite the believers to engage in the ritual performance of a "Sinner's Prayer" and then subsequently engage in email exchanges about their experiences (Howard, 2005b). Locating online religious behaviours like these, Glenn Young has suggested that researchers have not paid enough attention to the performative qualities of online religious communication (Young, 2004).

This chapter documents individuals for whom the performance of online discourse has largely replaced brick-and-mortar-based religious ritual practices. For them, no central organization or location undergirds their sense of shared identity. Instead, they recognize each other as participating in a shared social formation when they use the Internet to share information about a particular form of contemporary Protestant belief: apocalypticism in the so-called "End Times" form (O'Leary, 1994; Strozier, 1994; Howard, 1997; Wojcik, 1997; Hendershot, 2004). For them, the ritual performance of online information sharing about the "End Times" enacts a religious community. Because this community has no physical existence beyond its emergence in performance, it must be sustained by open-ended communication practices. I have termed these practices "ritual deliberation".

To document ritual deliberation, ethnographic data are deployed to locate group performances of online communication about the End Times. Tracing the basic form of the End Times narrative in media discourse, it is seen to emerge in mass media during the early

1970s. Next, out of a sample of 200 blog entries, examples of ritual deliberation about the End Times are located. Then, those examples are contextualized in the surrounding web of Websites and blogs that are the virtual locations where this ekklesia is performed. In the end, it is important to consider the implications of this web because its emergence suggests that the ability to limit diversity made possible by network technologies is seen as a benefit by participants in the discourse. This limiting tendency is a result of the individual choices everyday believers are making about how they deploy network media.

### Ritual Deliberation and the End Times Narrative

The set of ideas that came together to offer the resources of shared meaning that make ritual deliberation about the End Times possible can be traced back to the growing influence of communication technologies over the course of the twentieth century (Marsden, 1980: 4ff; Harris, 1998: 3ff). During the early twentieth century, American Protestants became increasingly polarized. By 1915, Protestant denominations in the United States were deeply divided into more liberal and more conservative camps over how literally the Bible should be understood (Marsden, 1980: 117ff). This division had been fuelled 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 to Christian belief. These fundamentals included a literal approach to the Bible, evangelism, spiritual rebirth, and the most distinctive: the belief in an approaching Second Coming of Christ (see Marsden, 1980: 77ff; Moore, 1994: 184ff; Harris, 1998: 24 and 25ff).

When evangelical mass media began to emerge first on the radio and later on television, it emerged wedded to a consumer market. Motivated to use new communication technologies to share their message, conservative evangelical institutions were confronted with high broadcasting costs. By emphasizing a simple message that many different believers could support, they successfully began to raise funds by soliciting donations directly from their audience (Moore 1994; Schultze 2003; Howard, 2009). This message emphasized a simple, literal, and emotional understanding of the Bible. Using it, successful evangelists like Billy Graham, Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell

developed media empires. With these empires, the mass media audience of evangelical Christians formed a huge new market.

In 1970, a mass-marketed evangelical book produced for consumption by this audience sold 7.5 million copies and became the bestselling non-fiction book of the decade (excluding the Bible itself): Hal Lindsey's literalist interpretation of biblical prophecy as foretelling Cold War politics titled *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Wojcik, 1997). During the 1980s, Lindsey published many successful books, hosted his own television show, and developed a significant following. Building on this success, Baptist minister Tim LaHaye updated Lindsey's ideas in the form of evangelical fiction. With his co-writer Jerry Jenkins, LaHaye published the first in series of novels called *Left Behind* in 1995. By May of 2004 (when the *Left Behind* series was completed), LaHaye appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* proclaiming that the combined sales of the 12 books had topped 62 million (Hendershot, 2004).

This conservative Protestant mass media successfully courted a large non-denominational audience by placing its emphasis on an overtly emotional personal relationship with the divine and simple relatively literal interpretations of the Bible. Without contradicting any specific Protestant doctrines, the mass media audience of Protestant Christians could be large enough to support a huge industry of evangelical media products. As a byproduct, however, this evangelical media spread a coherent narrative interpretation of Biblical prophecy across institutional lines.

Looking at *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey presents a model that defined the popular understanding of the End Times. With the controversial addition of the "secret Rapture" instead of an open "pre-Tribulational" Rapture (bodily ascension of born-again Christians to Heaven near the End of Time), Lindsey's basic narrative would be largely reproduced in the *Left Behind* series, and would persist in a myriad of variants online. In 1970, Lindsey's narrative could be reduced to the following schematic narrative:

1. rise of New Roman Empire as European Common Market, before 1988;
2. the establishment a world governing body led by Antichrist;
3. Antichrist sides with world government and Israel against Russia;
4. Antichrist dies of head wound, but miraculously recovers;

5. Antichrist is worshipped as a god;
6. 666 tattoo on forehead or palm established as economic mark of European Common Market;
7. rebuilding of Temple in Jerusalem;
8. Arab, other African states, and the Soviet Union attack Israel;
9. Antichrist destroys Soviet Alliance with a nuclear attack;
10. China attacks forces of Antichrist;
11. one third of world destroyed by nuclear weapons;
12. Christ returns to protect faithful, "secret Rapture";
13. mass conversion of Jews;
14. Armageddon;
15. establishment of "atomic material" paradise for 1,000 years;
16. resurgence of Antichrist put down by Christ;
17. return of "faithful to heaven with Christ". (Lindsey 1970)

Nearly 40 years later, a Website detailed an "End Times Prophecy" portraying functionally the same scenario (*Endtime Bible Prophecy*, 2008). First noting that Israel was re-established in 1947 and took control of Jerusalem in 1967, the page on the *Endtime Bible Prophecy* Website describes a variety of "Signs of the End" including "Earthquakes", "False Messiahs" and "Wars and Rumors of Wars". It goes on to assert that the Rapture or "the instantaneous removal of God's people from the earth" will occur just before the, "SEVEN-YEAR PERIOD OF DANIEL BEGINS". Then it offers the following basic schematic of events:

1. "Seven-year covenant or peace treaty with Israel is confirmed by the Antichrist";
2. "Antichrist is revealed";
3. "Rebuilding of the Third Temple in Jerusalem";
4. "War";
5. "Mark of the Beast is required on all people to buy or sell";
6. "Resurrection of the Beast/Antichrist after a fatal wound" marks the "TRIBULATION MIDPOINT (3½ years after the peace treaty with Israel)";
7. "Breaking of the covenant with Israel by the Antichrist";
8. Persecutions of Christians Begins;
9. "Death"—"One-fourth of the world's population (new Christians and Jews) are killed by the Antichrist/Beast with the sword and with starvation";

10. "Signs in the Sky" "(Great Earthquake, Bloody Moon, Black-out of the Sun, Meteors falling, Mountains and Islands moving, Sky splits apart)";
11. "144,000 of the tribe of Israel are sealed";
12. "Hail and Fire Destruction of all the grass and 1/3 of trees. Meteor falls into the Ocean destroying 1/3 of ships and sea life," and "Wormwood falls from the Heavens causing fresh water to become bitter," and "Eastern army of 200,000,000 men kill 1/3 of mankind";
13. Gathering of the Antichrist, kings and, armies of the world in final battle of "Armageddon";
14. "Second Coming" which results in the "Beast and False Prophet thrown into the Lake of Fire" and the "Destruction of the armies by the word of God";
15. millennial reign of Christ where "Christ rules on Earth";
16. "Judgment of Nations";
17. "NEW HEAVEN AND EARTH". (*Endtime Bible Prophecy*, 2008)

Lindsey's claim of a "secret Rapture" becomes one of the central deliberative issues among End Time believers. Debating when and how the Rapture will occur, some argue it will come before the violence predicted for the "Tribulation" period, some say during, and others hold that it will happen at the end. The timing of the Rapture, however, is just one issue about which individuals deliberate. For example, Lindsey's numbers 4, 5, 6 and 7 correspond directly to *Endtime Bible Prophecy's* numbers 5, 6 and 7. However, neither interpretation can definitively answer who will be the Antichrist, where she or he will come from, or how her or his power will be exercised. There is agreement, however, that there will be an Antichrist, she or he will be assassinated and rise from the dead to be worshipped as if divine, and subsequently force everyone to take "the Mark of the Beast". Of course, no one is quite sure what that "Mark" will be or when it will be enforced.

In a similar way, while there is disagreement between the two timelines about when the Temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt (number 7 for Lindsey and number 3 for *Endtime Bible Prophecy*), there is no doubt that it will occur. Ritual deliberation can arise from this narrative precisely because while these events are themselves not

disputable, exactly who, how and when they will occur is. With access to news media content, new data can be inserted into the narrative and its validity discussed. While the narrative structure is largely rigid, it is highly plastic in the details. As a result, it is able to assimilate a wide range of potential specific new details without threatening its religious or theological import (Howard, 2006).

Before the advent of Internet communication, believers could watch television news, read newspapers and magazines looking for signs that indicated the fulfilment of prophecy. Through their church or other local institutions, they would have been able to locate a only few others with their interests. They might have generated interest by organizing lay Bible studies or meetings, but these geographically based communities would have been relatively small. For them, this limited access to shared ritual action could not generate any sizeable community.

However, the online environment that emerged in the 1990s transformed the possibilities for individuals interested in this set of beliefs. Online, individuals could not only rapidly access far more news sources than ever before, they could locate and interact with individuals who shared this interest in world events and biblical prophecy without being limited by geographic proximity. Online, these people formed networks of communication. In these networks, they engage in everyday conversations that speculate about an imminent End Times (Howard, 1997, 2000, 2009).

With the continual consumption of information about specific (but constantly changing) world events, believers deliberate together online. This deliberation does not necessarily seek to discover new facts or come to any final shared decisions. Instead, it seeks to exchange and consume ideas within a shared ideological frame. In this sense, it is a performative ritual. Enacting this ritual, individuals enact the shared nature of their ekklesia, and that sharing gives this virtual ekklesia its only existence. Because there are no geographic locations, institutions, or leaders, it constantly has to build itself up from the informal expression of everyday adherents. The Internet has transcended bricks and mortar to make this bottom-up construction possible on a scale not previously available.

In this ongoing everyday online communication, social control bubbles upward from the vernacular or "everyday" religious practice. At the "lived" or "vernacular" level, shared religious belief emerges not from religious institutions (Primiano, 1995; Howard,

2005a). Instead, it is learned and relearned in undifferentiated and countless moments in the ongoing flow of social interaction. Unlike the documents that form doctrines, the informal discourse of individuals manifests the creative diversity of personal expression. From this diversity, individuals can enact the shared markers that join them in their "church". One way this is done online is through the deployment of the Internet medium generally termed "blogs".

Heralded as marking a new era of "participatory culture," the number of web pages considered "blogs" exploded in the years after 2002 (Jenkins, 2006). In July of 2002, 3 per cent of Internet users reported having their own blog. By November of 2005, that number had jumped to 10 per cent. At that time, 27 per cent read other people's blogs and 19 per cent of teenage internet users maintained their own blogs (Lenhart, 2005; Pew, 2005). Since then, it has been estimated that 70,000 new blogs and about 700,000 new posts to existing blogs are appearing every day (Technorati Data, 2006).

This explosion has fuelled and been fuelled by a growing diversity of media forms. Famously termed "Web 2.0" by computer media CEO Tim O'Reilly, these forms were made possible by innovations on the original HTML computer language that Tim Burners-Lee created in 1992 (O'Reilly, 2005). After 2002, these more robust computer languages made it easier for web-users to add and change website content. From wikis, to social networking, to photo sharing, to blogs themselves, these new participatory forms of Web-use occur across network locations to create new and complex webs of vernacular communication (Howard, 2008, 2009). Emerging out of what is considered the first digital genre on the Worldwide Web, "web logs" were part of the content that was considered characteristic of personal "home pages" (Howard, 2005b). In 1999, several companies released software designed to automate Website creation in an effort to harness the growing popularity of so-called "weblogs." The most successful of these ventures was the "Blogger" software of *Blogger.com* (Blood, 2004).

In exchange for placing third party advertising on the personal Websites it hosted, *Blogger.com* offered a service that made it very easy for even computer novices to put personal content online. The software was primarily designed to put diary-like entries on a Website. The popularity of its software allowed *Blogger.com* to define the basic features of the new genre of "blogs". Primary among these was the reverse dated entries by a single author. Secondarily, was a

"Comments" section included after each entry. These comments sections allowed audience members to post responses to the blogger's entries (Blood, 2004).

To locate ritual deliberation about the End Times in online vernacular communication for this chapter, specific blog entries and comments sections have been collected and compared. In order to find those entries, the terms "End Time", "End Times", "Endtime" and "Endtimes" were searched in two common search engines on 28 June 2007. For the sample set, the top 100 hits from each of the two search engines were combined to create a collection of 200 specific Webpages. For this chapter, I have chosen a series of these pages that exemplify the way very different individuals can enact a shared virtual ekklesia based on ritual deliberation. Despite their differences, these examples demonstrate that the online communication of these individuals generates a web of communication that is emergent from their online performance of ritual deliberation.

## Deliberating the End Times in Participatory Media

Because it is typically free for individuals to post text, graphic or video media on their blogs, individuals often use these media to make personal statements that may or may not generate an interested audience. Using search engines such as *Google Blog Search* or *Technorati*, individuals can locate others with similar interests based on key words associated with the End Times narrative. When the conditions are right, these individuals can use participatory media to generate their virtual ekklesia through the performance of ritual deliberation.

With 20 entries, *666 Mark of the Beast 666* was the most prevalent blog in the sample set. Run by "Joshua", the site uses a modified version of the *Wordpress.com* blogging software. Set on a black background, the text of the blog is blood red. Using no graphic or video content, it featured its title across the top followed by a "Welcome!" statement. Along the left side, the site deploys the *Wordpress* software to create a search engine for its blog entries. Readers can also browse the entries based on specific topics: "News", "Prophecy", "Mark of the Beast", "Antichrist", "Satanism" and "Catholic Times" (Joshua, 2008). Below that, the audience can access the entries by date going back two years.

The reverse dated entries themselves are in the central pane of the site, and they were comprised primarily of links to news stories suggestive of End Times predictions or other writings about the End Times collected from around the Web. In its "Welcome!" statement, the site clearly associates its discourse with the End Times by announcing it is a Website:

Dedicated to the study of the End Times, the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the Prophecies in Revelation. We believe that Bible prophecy is to be understood in a literal way and the expressed view of this site is of a pre-millennial return of Christ and pre-tribulational Rapture of the Church. Therefore, this website is dedicated to bring fellow believers the latest news, stories, events and signs that brings us closer to the End Times. (Joshua, 2008)

*666 Mark of the Beast 666* exemplifies the most common way the blog medium was deployed in the examples found in the in the sample set. Here, a single individual or small group uses blogging software to communicate their ideas outward to an audience of passive receivers. In this form, the medium does not encourage deliberation. In the case of *666 Mark of the Beast 666*, there were very few comments in the comments sections of the many blog entries. Still, *666 Mark of the Beast 666* is deliberative in a weak sense because its entries are almost exclusively comprised of material performatively reframed as potential new details in the End Times narrative.

In blogs, this performance is typically the action of cutting and pasting or linking to mainstream news media stories elsewhere online. Often with few elaborations, the frame set by the blog as being, "to bring fellow believers the latest news, stories, events and signs" redefines and redeploys whatever content has been collected from around the Web. This new frame is the End Times narrative. This information reframing constitutes the weak form of online ritual deliberation because it functions to draw otherwise more general information into the vernacular web of communication emergent from a shared belief in the End Times narrative. Another blog that appeared in the sample, *Jesus Christology*, presents an example of a blog that was moderately open to deliberation. In this case, a stronger form of ritual deliberation emerges as individuals publicly responded to each other in the comments sections of the blog entries.

A 35 year old male living in Georgia, *Jesus Christology's* "Job" was drawn to the End Times ekklesia through what he considers a "spiritual warfare" experience. A life-time sufferer from severe

asthma, Job relied on an inhaler. As he describes it, "Because of the longtime overuse of the asthma medicine, I reached the point where it did me virtually no good anymore." When he discovered that his son might also suffer from asthma, he began a regime of fasting in an effort to bring the power of the divine to bear on his health problem. His religious fasting gave him, "revelations of things concerning prophecy, discernment, and spiritual warfare" (Job, 2008b).

Job described his belief that, "Satan knew that my moment of truth was coming and thought that filling me with doubt, fear, failure, and desperation would cause me to crumble when it came." However, Job did not crumble. Instead, in an inspired moment, he threw his inhaler into the trash. Witnessing the event, Job's wife threw her eyeglass in the trash, and their toddler threw his favourite toy in the trash. "And so we all ran around the house praising God, all three of us!" Job was inspired by this experience to create his own amateur ministry online. This ministry took the form of the *Jesus Christology* blog (Job, 2008b).

Specifically rejecting church institutions, Job hopes his ministry will help individuals avoid what he sees as the failure of church institutions. Job believes that during the Tribulation period the world will witness God, "pouring out his wrath upon and scattering the church". Job writes:

God is about to judge the church, and when that judgment comes it will be better to be outside the church than to be a sinner in it! [...] I pray that I will allow God to use me in this ministry and all those who have similar ministries, such that all who receive this and similar teachings will be spared God's wrath, be part of God's remnant, and do his will. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen. (Job, 2008c)

Believing that Satan and his demons are leading both Christians and non-Christians astray, Job's focus is spiritual warfare. As he describes it, "spiritual warfare is fighting against and overcoming demons, or former angels that have been cast out of God's Kingdom and now follow Satan, with the power and Name of Jesus Christ". As is common among individuals involved in spiritual warfare, individuals associated with non-Christian traditions also become targets. According to Job, spiritual warfare must target humans, "who (whether knowingly or not) work for Satan with the assistance of demons: witches, satanists, devil worshippers, idolators, etc." (Job 2008d).

One of these individuals turned out to be the 2008 US Democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama. While many of Job's

posts are largely just linking and forwarding articles like those of 666 *Mark of the Beast* 666, others encourage audience engagement. Job's cues for his audience to respond result in the blog becoming a location for strong-form ritual deliberation. One example of this cued deliberation is in a blog entry posted on 26 January 2008 entitled: "Does Anyone Know The Number Of Barack HUSSEIN Obama's Name?" In this entry, Job writes:

It would seem that one would have to somehow translate Barack HUSSEIN Obama to either Arabic, Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, or Greek first and then just add up the position of the letters in the alphabet. [...] Don't get me wrong, I really do not think that Obama is the anti-Christ. It is just that we have to keep our eye on all these unifying charismatic figures. (Job, 2008e)

This post is openly deliberative because its title is a question. With this question, it actively encourages the participation of others who might be able to translate Obama's name and "add up" the letters. This encouragement elicits nine comments from five individuals in Job's audience. In these comments, there are two requests to engage in a discussion of the matter in private. There is an attempt to apply the long held association between Ronald Wilson Regan's name and 666 to Obama, and there is the following comment posted by "Someone":

Barack Hussein Obama=666, here's why:

Barack=6

Hussein=7

Obama=5

(all possible combination)

567

576

657

675

756

765

—

3,996(total)/6=666

(Job, 2008e)

While the responses to the initial blog entry about Obama subsided after this response, the concern about Obama did not. On 14 February 2008, Job posted another entry about Obama titled: "NO WE CAN'T! BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA IS A FALSE CHRIST!" This

post asserts that Obama is part of the new Satan-inspired threat termed "the religious left". The post attacks Obama's church, the United Churches of Christ, as "one of the most liberal". It states that Obama's church in Chicago is "pastured" [sic.] by a "racist". The post then goes on to cite the "revival-like" atmosphere surrounding Obama's political campaign. Claiming to have predicted "a 'faux revival'" earlier that year, the post implores its audience saying: "I am challenging you? today to decide who YOU are going to follow, B. Hussein Obama, the most recent false messiah, or Jesus Christ, the true Messiah!!!" (Job, 2008f)

This blog entry resulted in the most comments on any open blog in the sample set. With these 21 comments, the site functioned as a location for ritual deliberation. However, it also drew the attention of outsiders, and these outsiders hampered that deliberation. Six of the 21 comments were curt and hostile. The very first comment set the tone writing, simply, "You're about five kinds of @#\$\$%^&\$." This was followed by a short barrage of similar statements. Then "Independent Conservative", a long time commenter on the site, addressed Job directly writing: "Job, it looks like the Obama fans are worse than the Romney fans [another presidential candidate at that time]. Proving Obama is a false christ, that many see as their hope." Then Job replied:

Oh, most of these fellows are being sent here by this anti-Christian blog that linked to my site [ . . . ] They are having real fun with my spiritual warfare content in particular as you might guess. Ah well, at least they are being exposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and raised from the dead. (Job, 2008f)

On that "anti-Christian blog", the blogger posted a copy-and-pasted text of one of Job's posts about Obama (Edroso, 2008a). Then, in the comments section of that post, individuals colluded to disrupt Job's blog saying: "I say we make this Job person's life a waking nightmare" (Edroso, 2008b). Once the disruption dissipated, however, 14 more posts continue to explore the possibility that Obama is a "false christ" (Job, 2008f). Somewhat ironically, the outsiders who attacked Job's blog seemed to never realize that Job actually did not write the document at all. Instead, it was yet another cut-and-pasted piece of content written by a professional minister named Bill Keller who runs a well-known Christian site called *Liveprayer.com* (Keller, 2008).

This example suggests that outsiders hostile to the End Times narrative can hamper public ritual deliberation. In turn, that suggests that when a blog is able to limit the influx of non-believers, it is more likely to become a virtual location for ritual deliberation. One clear example of this more deliberative blog environment appeared in the sample set as *RaptureAlert.com* (Mickey, 2008a). Dating back to 2003, Michael, the builder of *RaptureAlert.com*, started a *Blogger.com* blog in 2008 to augment his site (Mickey, 2008b).

A 44 year old retired police officer in the Southeastern United States, Michael posts to *RaptureAlert.com* almost daily. Unlike *666 Mark of the Beast 666* or even *Jesus Christology*, Michael elicits far more comments from his audience than any other blog appearing in the sample set. A typical exchange occurring on the site is that from 15 February 2008 titled: "A Rumbling in The Middle East". This post generates 16 comments. In this entry, Michael first refers to his post from the previous day saying, "In light of yesterday's commentary and the potential implications of recent events in the Middle East, I have to admit I got chills when I read of a magnitude 5 earthquake rattling Lebanon and neighboring countries today" (Mickey, 2008c).

The day before, he wrote an entry titled "The Middle East: Back To The Brink". In that post, he recounts the recent slaying of the leader of Hezbollah's "second in command" in Damascus. As a result of the attack, Hezbollah issued a statement "declaring 'open war' on Israel". Michael asks, "A prelude to Gog-Magog?" Citing Matthew 26: 6, he places this attack into the End Times narrative and finishes his 963 word analysis writing, "The end times drama continues ..." (Mickey, 2008d).

When the earthquake in Lebanon occurred the day after his post, Michael wrote, "Just another earthquake here in the last days or a harbinger of things to come? Only the Lord knows but I'll bet the air in and around Israel could practically be cut with a knife right now." A classic invitation to ritual deliberation among participants in the End Times ekklesia, it is deliberative because it posits a question. Further, the question it posits is about a typical End Times world news item: an earthquake. Beyond that, it is a news item relating to the area most important to the End Times narrative: the Middle East. Although the invitation is from a blogger that initiates and controls the discussions on his site, it is to an audience that is comprised of individuals who share belief in the basic End Times narrative. Many

of these individuals respond immediately by expression support. The first example is "jo anna":

WOW! I hadn't heard about this one yet. I heard about the 2 in Greece yesterday, but not this one. I've also been reading how lake Mead is drying up and then with the the problems Georgia and Florida are having and the HUGE push about global warming! And of course all that's going on war wise in the middle east. My heart is racing at how close we could be to going home! I am so ready to be with Jesus and done with this place! Oh how I pray people accept Christ quickly before it's too late! (Mickey, 2008d)

With the ritual deliberation started, Michael responds saying: "Amen, Jo Anna! A lot is going on and on a variety of fronts. Broadening the spectrum a bit, do you realize we have had FOUR campus shootings in the United States in one short week?" Then ten different people in 14 more posts consider nine different world events reported by various news organizations as other indicators that the beginning of the End Time wars is near at hand. These events include, Russian president Vladimir Putin, "making threats against western Europe", "FOUR campus shootings in the United States in one short week" and Lake Mead (a popular lake resort area in the Western United States) "drying up". The deliberation climaxed as one commenter wrote in all capitals: "I AM SO LOOKING FORWARD TO A FRONT ROW SEAT TO THE MAJOR BUTT KICKING SATAN IS GOING TO GET SOON!" (Mickey, 2008d).

After this crowning vernacular expression of shared belief, a commentor suggested that they pray for those dead and injured in the Lebanese earthquake. That plan then developed into an agreement to pray for one of the commentors' relative's infant son who was going in to have a biopsy the next day (Mickey, 2008d). As this example makes clear, *RaptureAlert.com* proved a good place for individuals interested in the End Times to engage in its characteristic behaviour: ritual deliberation.

The suitability of this location for ritual deliberation based on the End Times is no accident. A regular commenter on a variety of forums, Michael is very a savvy Internet user who is careful to maintain deliberative communication. Before even creating a blog, he chose to engage his audience in deliberation about the choice. He recounts the story in his 6 February 2008 post titled, "To blog!":

As most of you are aware, I have been trying to assess the desire of my readers to have an opportunity to leave comments in relation to the content of the site as once was the case. Based on over 1,500 visits to the page I set up for polling, it seems that some 70% of those polled either want an option to blog or don't care if there is one. Approximately 30% of the site's readers would prefer not to have a blog option. (Mickey 2008e).

In addition to polling his audience about the idea of starting a blog, Michael asked if the blog should be, "open for anyone to post their thoughts". Apparently, many in his audience suggested that he use a, "Christian forum on the web". However, because Michael didn't want to make people register before commenting, he decided to use the far more well-known and secular *Blogger.com* service. In his post describing his decision, he expressed concern that if outsiders are allowed to post to the new blog, his audience of believers will have, "to contend for the faith vigorously in some instances". Instead he decides it is best if:

Anyone to be able to comment (even anonymously) and for those comments to be moderated by me prior to posting. That will result in some delays, periodically, in posted comments appearing on the blog but it seems the only safe way for the blog to go forward without a good portion of the site's bloggers being uncomfortable. We'll take things as they come and see how it goes. (Mickey, 2008e).

In this way, Michael creates a safe place for ritual deliberation by limiting the voices able to be heard in the discussion to only those that support belief in the End Times.

## Civil Society and the Problem of the Virtual Ekklesia

In the 1990s, utopian claims about Internet use gave some researchers cause to hope that the exclusionary beliefs and intolerance associated with Christian fundamentalism would fade away in the online environment (Brasher, 2001; Howard, 1997). Since then, however, 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 alternate or dissenting ideas (Howard, 2005c, 2005d, 2006). The web of communication emergent from ritual deliberation about "The End Times", suggests that

the virtual *ekklesiae* made possible by the Internet may actually enable intolerance.

As network media empower individuals to act more out of their own volition as they construct religious communities, some of those individuals choose to engage in exclusionary communication behaviours. 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 "self-regulated forms of socialization" (2005: 188).

Unyoked from geography or institutions, a virtual *ekklesia* is comprised of weakly linked individuals (Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Csermely, 2006). These individuals are weakly linked in the sense that they share few if any material resources and seldom seek shared action beyond expressing their ideas to each other. As a result, the virtual *ekklesia* is freed from the geographic 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 beliefs themselves. The ability to pick and choose with whom to share religious information allows individuals to by-pass the forces of "civil society". As Harris Breslow has described it, "civil society" can be imagined as a discursive space in which, "all may congregate where subjective identity and social membership are made palpably obvious" (1997: 254).

While Internet technologies have freed individuals from institutional control, this radically individualized form of communication may undermine the valuable role 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 argued, the freedom to speak is twofold.

One sort of freedom is the freedom to express one's personal opinion. However, the ability to express one's self is expanded by access to the knowledge of the diversity of possibilities for expression available. Thus, the freedom to speak is enlarged by the freedom to hear the diversity of others speaking. When social institutions bring divergent voices together in the public of the "civil society",

the sheer diversity of alternative opinions challenge the voicing of absurd or intolerant claims. Claiming that a political candidate should not be voted for because she or he is "the Antichrist" is an acceptable argument for only a tiny sector of society. Confronted with a more diverse audience voicing more broadly acceptable reasoning, claims based on narrowly "self-regulated" belief are challenged by the voice of the majority.

The virtual *ekklesia* does not foster these broad audiences, however, because it connects individuals based exclusively on their own desire to share information about topics of their choosing. This radical freedom to "self-regulate" enables some individuals to engage in communicative behaviours that deny social institutions their traditional ability to create and maintain public locations for the exchange of ideas. It is true that institutions can and often do enforce homogeneity, and virtual *ekklesiae* can help individuals overcome this hegemonic power. However, the practice of online ritual deliberation about the End Times suggests that some individuals are using that freedom to limit their own exposure to new, divergent, and possibly empowering ideas. This limiting factor is a product of how individuals choose to deploy the Internet in their everyday lives. With increasing freedom to engage religiosity outside of institutions or the spheres of discourse they have traditionally created, individuals must take particular care not to abuse their new power by choosing exclusion and intolerance over diversity and compassion.

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