

RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL ORDER VOLUME 8

**RELIGION ON THE  
INTERNET: RESEARCH  
PROSPECTS AND  
PROMISES**

EDITED BY

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## RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

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# ON-LINE ETHNOGRAPHY OF DISPENSATIONALIST DISCOURSE: REVEALED VERSUS NEGOTIATED TRUTH

Robert Glenn Howard

## ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses and applies a mix of rhetorical and ethnographic analytical methods to document and analyze a small Internet community. Providing an easily identifiable and wide-spread discourse, engaging in both on-line and face-to-face discourse with American Evangelical dispensationalists creates a window on the evolving modes of Internet expression. Developing out of informal electronic expression, dispensationalist debaters utilize complex vernacular rhetorical techniques. In 1999, this community's debates were a feverish rush. In this rush, a rhetorical tension emerges between the desire to negotiate about truth and the desire to express an experienced or revelatory Truth. This article explores the possibilities and limits of the hypothesis that the medium of the Internet encourages and privileges more negotiative rhetorical techniques based on the methods it has developed for this purpose.*

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## INTRODUCTION

As a new millennium begins to dawn across the Western world, radical changes in the everyday lives of many North Americans are being driven by new technologies. Primary among these is the expansion of local area computer networks into a massive wide area network loosely called 'the Internet'.

If a moment must be chosen to mark the first conception of the Internet, one might consider the 1962 vision of an 'Intergalactic Network' of MIT's J.C.R. Licklider (Hauben, 1995). He conceived of a globally interconnected set of computers through which individuals could quickly access data and programs from any location. Unlike many of the life-changing inventions of the millennium, though, the Internet is not the product of any single human genius or moment of revelation. Instead, it is the slow evolution of applied computer technologies. From this development two key characteristics emerge that define and shape the modes and norms which on-line communication has taken, and of which any socio-cultural research conducted on Internet communication must be aware. These two key characteristics are:

- a driving desire to develop the ability to share documents openly and freely across great distances; and
- a level of computer coding that could be shared universally by all computers attempting to access the networked information.

Since the Internet was developed out of and through existing computer systems, a common reference point was needed. At the beginning, and in large part still, this reference point is the ASCII text code and the Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML).

It is precisely this characteristic of striving to share information that formed the Internet technologies as we know them today. Further, the necessity to share common base-line information encourages the adoption of similar communicative technologies. From a cultural or sociological perspective, however, this same desire and its resulting technologies create a feedback loop in which individuals using the Internet are engaging technologies whose very design encourages the open sharing of information based on common shared communicative modes.

Unlike the unilateral transfer of information characteristic of mass media broadcasting, the Internet is multilateral. Because of its design as a multilateral medium, individuals using the Internet tend to engage in complicated discourse with multiple other individuals. Thus, to try to analyze the cultural impact of this new technology using mass media models of communication, quantitative analysis, audience sampling, and so on are not enough to draw a full picture of the

developing Internet behaviors. Instead, we must accept that the multilateral communication on the Internet creates a sort of dynamic electronic community.

Relying on community-focused models of communication, my approach is rooted in the nexus of ethnography and rhetoric. Because the Internet is multilateral, it develops its own dynamic communities. Because these communities are based primarily in the exchange of language, they are identified with the help of the post-modern rhetorical idea of 'discourse'. Hence, my analysis of Internet communities is a result of my own long term participation in a specifically bounded discourse community: Evangelical dispensationalism.

A brand of fundamentalist Christianity, dispensationalism presents a rich field for analysis precisely because it is a discourse that is not typically associated with the free exchange of diverse and new ideas. I contend that all discourse on the Internet will foster a desire to exchange information precisely because the very structure of the Internet is one which was designed to make the free exchange of information and ideas possible across space and time: Licklider's vision of an 'intergalactic network'. That is to say, Internet mediated discourse will exhibit strongly negotiative rhetorical strategies.

In order to gather data to test against this hypothesis, I have had to develop new research methods. This study attempts both to describe those methods and to present the preliminary results that they have yielded. Instead of fully validating my hypothesis, however, my research has proven Geertz's famous statement about ethnography: "Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete. And, worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is" (Geertz, 1973, p. 28). My research has complicated my understanding of Internet behavior as much as it has clarified it. I hope this article shows by this very fact that the methods I have developed for the documentation and analysis of on-line communication have proven a rigorous basis for further development and application.

## BACKGROUND

I have been involved in on-line dispensational discourse since 1994. Developing quite accidentally out of my desire to locate individuals who watched the dispensational televangelist Jack Van Impe's weekly television broadcast, I emailed each of the few Christian newsgroups looking for research respondents. Having really only used the Internet for email correspondence to that point, I was shocked by the range and diversity of response. Within hours, I received responses to my query that quickly escalated into the hundreds. Soon, I was a member of various private email lists where everyday dispensationalist Christians hotly debated theological issues not unlike scholars and theologians at an academic conference (see Howard, 1997).

Since that initial research, my project has evolved to explore the socially instilled rhetorical strategies that individuals choose to employ in the everyday contexts of their lives. I have sought to do this through the examination of beliefs associated with an impending apocalypse. Apocalyptic communication is excellent for this research because it presents, based on the influence of Hal Lindsey and other popular writers and evangelists, a well defined American discourse known loosely as 'dispensationalism' (Lindsey, 1970, 1994; Wojcik, 1997).

The basic teaching of dispensationalism is that human history exists as a series of divinely mandated epochs or 'dispensations'. The current state of affairs, the current 'dispensation' is 'The Church Age'. Beginning with the crucifixion of Christ, this dispensation will end with the Rapture – the moment when all true believers will be lifted bodily from the earth to escape the onset of an age of human strife and turbulence that will finally result in the millennial reign of Christ (Boyer, 1992, pp. 86ff). Mixed with a general rise in evangelical activity in America, there is a new fixation on events surrounding 'The Tribulation' and the Endtimes.

Although the influence of dispensationalism is well documented in contemporary religious sects as diverse as the Seventh-Day Adventists (including the Branch Davidians), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Christian Identity Movement, as well as Aum Shinrikyo, and the Solar Temple, by the 1990s dispensational thinking had become diffused across general Evangelical discourse (Palmer & Robbins, 1997; Strozier & Flynn, 1997). Grounded in a common tradition of evangelical ministry, writers and preachers like Hal Lindsey, Pat Robertson, Jack Van Impe, and others have established a well defined and clear American dispensationalist discourse. The popular writer Hal Lindsey is particularly well known for works that tapped, defined, and helped normalize this premillennial discourse. In 1970, his first major book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, sold 7.5 million copies making it the largest selling non-fiction book of the decade (Wojcik, 1997, p. 8).

Discussed by televangelists and by Christians at church socials or between friends, one characteristic of this pan-Evangelical discourse has adapted particularly well to new electronic media – and, in particular, to Internet communication. Even in its obsessive focus on the conclusion of time itself, that characteristic is one of reverential debate in which the exchange of potentially important but unknowable facts takes on aspects of spiritual devotion. In his introduction to *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Lindsey stated, "I am attempting to step aside and let the prophets speak. The readers are given the freedom to accept or reject my conclusions" (Lindsey, 1970, p. 6). Much as Lindsey himself implies, many Evangelical Endtimes debaters find sanctity in debate, not in final conclusions.

In 1991, Christian vernacular expression on the Internet was small. But by 1994, a number of large and broadly inclusive Christian newsgroups were in full bloom. On those groups, however, millennial discourse came only in short bursts. In the late 1990s, the Christian Internet communities had diversified and expanded. In so doing, Christians offered themselves more niches for millennial expression. This development seems a typical pattern for contemporary electronic communication. The effect of this pattern on communicative behavior is, however, debatable.

On the one hand, more diversity in smaller discursive niches might allow individuals to limit their media and/or vernacular influences to only those with which they already more or less agreed. Some argue that such individuals would then become more easily influenced by dogmatic leaders. However, the behavior I have documented indicates that individuals involved in electronic media do not immerse themselves in a single newsgroup, email list, Web site or discourse community. Thus, they are not, for the most part, easily influenced by single-minded or dogmatic argumentative techniques.

For instance, many individuals watching Jack Van Impe's weekly Christian dispensationalist television broadcasts also talk to their friends about his show. They engage both popular media and face-to-face human interaction in a dynamic interchange of influence and expression. In 1994, many of these people were also beginning to explore the Internet and participate in email discussions about Van Impe's show, comparing its information with previously held beliefs or other discursive influences. Then, many of these same individuals also communicated with an untold number of others through chat rooms, newsgroups, and Web sites.

As these individuals widen and diversify the multiple discourse communities they participate in, they must also, by the very act of widening and diversifying, accept more and different ideas into their discourse. Internet communities who engage in dispensationalist discourse actually debate, in a continuous cycle, the same core issues which form easily identifiable narrative sets based on the popular ideas of dispensationalism and normalized into a fairly standard narrative set by such writers as Lindsey (Howard, 1997, 1998b).

In Christian discourses such as these, there are repeating patterns that can be usefully considered 'vernacular rhetoric': rhetorical techniques that are employed by individuals without formal training in rhetoric.<sup>1</sup> In the case of many Evangelical dispensationalists in 1994, I found a rhetoric of open debate which included the desire to entertain different millennial possibilities (Howard, 1997). While for other individuals, such as the Heaven's Gate group, I have found a flat rejection of debate based on a deep conviction that Truth had already been 'revealed' to that group or its leaders (Howard, 1998a).

*Revelatory Truth* is a truth known wholly and immediately. *Negotiated truth*, on the other hand, is pursued through open dialogue among different individuals. It is the formulation and reformulation of beliefs based on new influence sources. While experience can act as a final authority, negotiation can only support truth if the negotiating parties are willing to continue communication. Developing out of informal electronic expression, apocalyptic debaters utilize both of these complex vernacular rhetorical techniques – often simultaneously.

### RESEARCH METHODS

With my initial posts to and responses from dispensational email lists in 1994, I had rather unwittingly become involved in the on-line dispensationalist community at its very beginnings. To better take advantage of this involvement, I decided to more directly participate in this on-line discourse. To this end, I built *The Millennial Information Exchange* World Wide Web site in 1996 (<http://www.endnear.com>). This site provides a publicly accessible forum in which anyone can read and post their ideas.

The M.I.E. Web site functions as a way for me to participate in the on-line dispensationalist community. My actual research data, however, is encoded onto CD-ROMs and is not publicly accessible. Since the summer of 1999, I have been systematically downloading and saving Web sites, emailing questionnaires, and engaging in email discourse with millennial Web site builders. After I established relationships with individuals on-line, I have traveled to interview many of those whose Web sites I have archived. Including transcribed interviews, these electronic archives are already substantial: over 250 complete Web sites, some 50,000 emails, survey responses, and interview transcripts totaling nearly three gigabytes of data in more than 60,000 individual files.

The collection of this data is not random. Instead, it is the result of both experience within the on-line dispensationalist community and an organized effort based on methods developed out of that experience.

In the past, the study of individuals within locally defined communities in the non-electronic world could be adequately addressed by assuming that those individuals comprise a single discourse community or folk group with little or no outside influence (Redfield, 1930). However, groups such as these are an increasingly rare phenomenon. Where it has emerged, electronic communication has so radically changed the way human discourse is conducted that new approaches must be developed to address contemporary communicative events of all sorts.

On the Internet, individuals involved in multiple discourse communities simultaneously engage one another on multiple topics informed by potentially

unlimited sources of influence. By implication, no two individuals necessarily share all of the same influences. However, by defining a single discursive matrix, we can establish if and to what degree a given individual is engaged in a particular discourse. To develop this model, I have turned to terms common in the study of rhetoric, 'discourse community' primary among them.<sup>2</sup>

Discourse refers to any communicative activity that surrounds specific and observable communicated elements. Individuals who engage in a discourse comprise a discourse community. My term, 'influence community', expands this communicative domain by referring to individuals who are influenced by a single mass media source without necessarily engaging the creators and/or disseminators of that source in other discourse.

Discursive communication can be seen as necessitating at least bilateral, if not multilateral, communicative behavior in which all members of the community are both audience and expressers. Influence communities can be discursive, but do not have to be. Instead, they can encompass both discourse communities' multilateral ('two-way or more') communicative characteristic as well as mass media's unilateral ('one-way') characteristic. For example, individuals who watch a particular soap opera every day comprise an influence community, but not necessarily a discursive one. At the same time, individuals who watch that same soap opera and also communicate about it in an email discussion group participate in a discourse community based on the single influence of the soap opera.

While the examination of influence communities is highly developed in journalism and mass communication studies (see McQuail, 1994, pp. 33ff), the study of discourse has long been the purview of rhetoric. Many studying the new forms of electronic communication find them to be far more discourse-oriented than the quantitative analysis models of television or newspaper communication were designed to examine.

For this reason, my descriptive rhetorical concept of a 'discursive matrix' becomes useful. A discursive matrix refers to a theoretical model of the shared ideas or issues that are necessary to define a given communicative behavior as related to or participating in a given discourse. By using such rhetorical terms, we can consider each individual involved in more than one of these communities as a unique nexus of the various discourses and influences he or she engages in or has been exposed to.

In order to establish if a particular communication is engaging in a particular discourse, I sought to locate definitive traits of dispensationalism. Because the on-line behavior I am documenting is heavily focused on the debate of certain common issues, I have named these definitive marks 'exchange issues'.

Exchange issues are the basis for much dispensationalist discourse on-line. In order for an individual to engage in 'exchange issue'-driven discourse, both

sides of the communication must have a certain competence in the discourse. In the case of on-line dispensationalists, one of the most common exchange issues serves as an example. This issue is the 'pre-trib vs. post-trib' debate, which centers around the order of specific events that dispensationalists expect to see occur in the near future. In this case, the 'pre' and 'post' refer to whether Christians will be Raptured before or after the Tribulation.

Regardless of a particular debater's position on this exchange issue, he or she must be familiar with one of the basics of dispensationalism: that true Christians will be saved in the Rapture at some point. This, of course, implies a knowledge of the broader discourse of Evangelical belief. This, as well as some familiarity with the Bible, are necessary for competence in the on-line dispensationalist discourse.

Setting out both to familiarize myself with the basics of dispensationalist discourse and to establish a method for assessing competence in that discourse, I began to read the major modern writers of Dispensationalism. Having already analyzed Jack Van Impe's dispensationalist broadcasts for over a year, I found in Hal Lindsey's writings an almost exact replication of a basic narrative set. From this set, the typical exchange issues arise and are discussed by on-line millennial debaters.

For example, from watching *Jack Van Impe Presents* regularly over a two month period in 1994, I constructed a schematic of his Endtimes narrative. Immediately following the United States' ground assault on the Iraqi forces occupying Kuwait:

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

At the time Van Impe set out this schema, number 1 and, arguably, number 2 had already occurred. The following eight events were, by implication, on the immediate horizon. From Van Impe's perspective, all these predictions are well

grounded in Biblical teaching. While there are some interesting differences between this model and that which pervades Lindsey's work, the same basic belief structure informs both (see Howard, 1997; Wojcik, 1997).

This belief structure serves as a baseline series of narrative events that defines on-line dispensationalist discourse. It must be kept in mind, however, that an individual engaging parts of this narrative set is not exclusively or even necessarily a believer in contemporary dispensationalism. However, even though individuals engaging in debates may or may not be believers, from this discourse-centered approach when an individual debates a dispensationalist issue, even if only for a moment, he or she is involved in dispensationalist discourse.

This leads us to new and complicated questions about who the primary participants in this discourse are. Having established what sort of discourse constitutes dispensationalism, individuals heavily involved in this discourse must be located. When downloading dispensationalist Web sites, I also followed each link from those sites and downloaded the linked site. In this manner, while I have not exhaustively cataloged all dispensationalist Web sites, I have documented a core group of sites that are all linked to one another.

Because there are many hundreds of sites involved in dispensationalism even though it is a relatively small discourse, this catalog had to be limited in order to archive them in any detail. To this end, I began eliminating sites from the research which were: (a) not based in the United States, (b) run by trained ministers, or (c) part of a for-profit evangelical career of some sort. Although I have archived some sites belonging to major figures in dispensationalism, the focus of my research, in keeping with its examination of 'vernacular' rhetorics, is on amateur site builders whose use of the WWW is not their primary occupation.

Having established a catalog of over 250 Web sites, I began contacting Web site builders via email. I asked both permission to archive the site and a couple of basic questions to establish if the Web site would fit the criteria of the research. When that email was answered, I sent a second asking if I could forward a questionnaire for the Web site builder or builders to fill out and return. That questionnaire included basic demographic questions, as well as some questions to establish how *versant the individual was with dispensationalist discourse*.

As these responses were returned, they were cataloged; some raised further questions in my own mind, others had questions of their own. Each of these was responded to. In some cases, I asked or was invited to join and archive the correspondence on email lists associated with some of the Web sites. Thanks were sent and so forth, and all of this correspondence was organized as it was collected. While this went on, I began a second catalog of those individuals I might be able to interview at a later date. In the coming months, I would re-email, as many as three times, individuals who did not respond to my initial contact.

For those who had agreed to have their site archived, I downloaded and saved their entire Web sites using commercial software designed for that purpose. Placing exact duplicates of each Web site into separate folders together with their Web address, this first run of downloading went on in an intensive session during the Fall of 1999.

Interested in documenting any apprehension surrounding the turn of the year from 1999 to 2000, the second downloading run of these same sites took place in the Spring of 2000; a third run is planned for Fall of 2000. Further 'snap shots' of my primary Web sites are planned for the Spring and Fall of 2001. The current number of sample sites stabilized at 120 – some have already disappeared and a few others were added as it seemed appropriate.

While this downloading was going on, I also organized and conducted interviews with as many Web site builders as I could travel to visit. Individuals who agreed to fill out the electronic questionnaire, and were in an area I could travel to, were asked if they would be available for a face-to-face interview. When an interview was agreed to, I sought to organize interview schedules. These resulted in long road trips from Montana to Seattle, and to San Diego. Further, some air travel afforded me the opportunity to do interviews as far east as Florida and North Carolina.

As with many ethnographic interview projects, these interviews followed a basic formula which established similar data for each. At the same time, individuals were encouraged to draw the conversations in ways they thought fruitful. As time and funding have permitted, these interviews are being transcribed and added to my data archives as text files.

At this point, these archives had become rather unwieldy in size. I moved them from my computer harddrive onto CD-ROMs and made basic HTML pages to facilitate navigation in the raw data. As the addition of these HTML pages suggests, I envision these archives being useful to future researchers in both religion and Internet communication. In the future, I hope to make it available for that purpose.

While the Modern Language Association and other publication-oriented organizations try to treat WWW documents in the traditional ways which published texts have been treated, Internet documents do not share the fundamental characteristic of published works in libraries. Simply stated: published texts do not change and hence can be cited. Once cited, those texts can be located via various library and publishing systems to verify that what is cited actually exists in the published text.

WWW documents – amateur or personal ones in particular – are constantly appearing, changing, and disappearing from individual harddrives all over the world everyday. As new technologies are developed, these sites are already fundamentally changing in character and appearance.

While some sites might survive into the future as the result of random business or institutional practices and some could be resurrected via the dawning field of electronic archeology, these archives represent an organized sample of a large cross-section of individuals who share a common discourse based on the discursive set popularly established by Hal Lindsey long before Internet technologies were readily available. Why settle for archeology when we have the ability to augment such future efforts through the application of systematized ethnography and archiving? Such archives offer a series of snapshots of a discreetly bounded discourse at specific intervals during these early years of Internet communication.

In the following cases, I apply my basic hypothesis that discourse on the Internet will foster a desire to exchange information and thus encourage negotiative over revelatory rhetorical strategies to four very different Web sites that are included in the archives. I hope the utility and rigor of my ethnographic methods will become clear through these examples.

#### CASES:

*www.alphathroughomega.com*

A stark default gray background with no graphic images at all, 'Gene' and 'Susan's' Web site is the result of Gene's direct communication with God.<sup>3</sup> Gene is an employee of Intel and his wife, Susan, is a homemaker. I interviewed them together over breakfast near the Intel headquarters in Hillsboro, Oregon, on October 5, 1999. Although Gene is a skilled computer technician, he is also skilled at casting out demons.

God has led Gene to present a fairly typical Evangelical Endtimes scenario. On the front page of his Web site, he has listed representative topics for Endtimes debaters under the names: 'End Times Studies', 'Doctrinal Errors In The Churches', 'Open Letter to Satanists and Occultists', and so on. Through the link, 'End Times Studies', he has created a series of pages that outline a standard dispensationalist chronology of events associated with the Endtimes. These pages include descriptions of the 'Tribulation Period', a time when anti-Christ will take control of the European Union and persecute Christians during a massive Third World War. In addition to these standard topics, Gene and Susan also use a common argumentative style in which a Biblical quote is presented, then followed by the correct interpretation that has come to Gene through God's direct guidance.

On one such page, 'REVELATION 3:10' is the passage quoted. Here, Gene discusses the 'Rapture' (Alpha thru Omega, End Times Bible Study). The most

commonly debated topic in this discourse, it is clear that Gene is on the 'Post-Tribulation' side of the issue. Unlike Hal Lindsey or many other popular dispensationalists, Gene does not believe that the Rapture will lift the true believers from the chaos of impending apocalypse. Instead, side-by-side with the sinners, these believers will have to weather the plagues of war, disease, and natural catastrophe. While acknowledging that his view is different from other dispensationalists, Gene is not interested in exploring the possibility that he might be wrong because his knowledge is the result of direct experience with God.

On another page, it is clear that Gene and Susan are also involved in the 'spiritual warfare' movement (Alpha thru Omega, Spiritual Warfare Training). They both have a long relationship with demons. Gene showed me his 'Warlock' tattoo as proof he was "into the occult." In fact, he was so deeply involved that he became possessed by a demonic spirit. This occurred while Gene was in the Navy, before he met Susan. His personality changed. He became distant and emotionless, and he gained minor supernatural powers: mind-reading, seeing the future, and partial control of the weather. Because of these powers, he got quite a reputation aboard ship ('Gene', personal communication, October 5, 1999).

Dramatic spiritual beliefs animate Gene and Susan's daily lives: from wrong turns into demonically controlled parking lots to apartment neighbors attracting demonic attacks through their occult rituals. Both Gene and Susan believe they have been subject to earthly manifestations of demon attacks in the well known forms of fog, sense of presence, temperature drops, and other sensory phenomena.<sup>4</sup> Their belief in demons is based on these personal experiences, and are a result of Gene's turning away from the powers of Satan. From this wealth of direct personal experience, they offer advice and help for others on their Web pages. For example, another page on their Web site contains a short how-to section on 'hedges', the practice of spiritually cordoning off demonic forces (Alpha thru Omega, Hedges).

Gene and Susan present a typical scenario for the Endtimes. Their arguments against a pre-Tribulation Rapture further indicate they are aware of and participate in the Evangelical discursive community of Endtimes debate. Like many Endtimes debaters, Gene feels his very words, as he writes them for the Web, are directed by a special personal relationship with God. He knows that relationship exists because of his personal experiences of God, angels, and demonic forces.

Gene presents an excellent, if extreme, example of an individual operating in a world of revelatory rhetoric relying heavily on personal experience narratives in his appeals to authority both in person and on-line. However, his site is relatively unknown because, in part, it fails to conform to the expectations of Internet communication which demand, at least, the appearance of an openness to response, debate, and change of one's expressed opinions and beliefs.

## CASES:

<http://ldolphin.org>

At the other end of the spectrum, Lambert Dolphin's site presents an example of highly negotiative rhetoric. Based on its links from other dispensationally oriented Web sites, as well as personal testimony of interviewees, his site is extraordinarily well known. While I have been in email contact with Lambert since 1994, his site is a little bit older than that. I finally managed to interview him face-to-face in August 1999. Though not totally devoted to millennialism, his site is one of largest independent Christian sites on the Web: 69.9 megs for some 1449 files. The bulk of this material is a section entitled 'Lambert's Library' (Dolphin, 2000).

Because his site is so large and has been around for so long, Lambert is probably the best known amateur evangelist in the online Endtimes community. His resumé, which is also available on his Web site, contributes a long list of credits accumulated from a career in sound and light wave research at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. Lambert is a retired physicist, and this fact bolsters his on-line authority (Dolphin, 1996).

He told me the reason he first put up the site:

I started just filing things on my Web site . . . and it became handy to find things there and that motivated me to write a little bit more deliberately for the Web site specifically. So the email comes in and finds what I have to say interesting and worthwhile or it generates comments; so I think it is worthwhile (L. Dolphin, personal communication, September 7, 1999).

Instead of focusing on the transmission of knowledge as do Gene and Susan, Lambert considers his Web site 'worthwhile' because it 'generates comments'. The 'library' includes materials and articles he has collected and developed for use in his lectures, Bible study groups, and Sunday school programs; many of these materials are eschatological in nature. Over forty links take site visitors to eschatological articles and other materials he has written and created for the library.

One of these library links, which are periodically revised, leads to "Lambert's Chart of the End Times" (Dolphin, 1999). In two large graphic files, it presents a fairly standard Dispensationalist understanding of Endtimes events. However, the *only dates* Lambert places on his time-line are '1997' (in his upper diagram) and '1999' (in the lower); rather than predictive values these represent 'the present', the last times he updated the charts.

Unlike some Dispensationalists, Lambert's understanding of Christian eschatology can offer neither specific dates for events nor concrete descriptions of who will be anti-Christ, and so forth. Thus, neither of his timelines offers any

predictive chronology. And, as Lambert says: "In fact, it's probably perfectly acceptable to have equivalent models [of eschatology] and use the one that you feel most comfortable with – or the one that fits best to your circumstances" (L. Dolphin, personal communication, September 7, 1999).

While this makes Lambert an extreme example of an Endtimes debater using heavily negotiative rhetoric, it is still not as cut-and-dried as one might think. Lambert, Gene, and Susan have all had similar conversion experiences which include a strong sensation of euphoric joy brought on by prayer and sometimes lasting for days or weeks afterward. For Lambert, this experience plays a central role in his spiritual belief system. Lambert describes his 're-birth' experience in the following terms: "There was this feeling of being washed, and clean, and guilt going away, and this sense of peace of mind about the future, and hope, and then this new excitement" (L. Dolphin, personal communication, September 7, 1999).

This experience, however, was unlike Gene's in which he believes he has direct aural and/or visual contact with the divine. Nor did Lambert's experience offer him any final or direct Truth from God of anything more than God's grace.

Instead, Lambert insists on replicability of experimental trials: "And then I can go compare notes with other people who have had an experience like mine, and does their experience seem similar – and then I asked, 'Is this the real thing?' " I asked him if he was able to verify his experience 'scientifically'. He responded: "Is it verifiable? Not scientifically verifiable, but it is experientially verifiable" (L. Dolphin, personal communication, September 7, 1999). Even though he is a spiritual pluralist who believes that the divine can be accessed by many different, but potentially equal means, at the level of quiet personal knowledge, Lambert too relies on his direct experience of the divine.

The pairing of Gene and Susan with Lambert offers the extremes of revelatory versus negotiative rhetoric. However, most millennial believers tend toward the center of this continuum. In so doing, they exhibit much more complex rhetorical behaviors. One such case is Marilyn Agee and her Web site, 'Bible Prophecy Corner'.

### CASES:

*<http://www.kiwi.net/~mjagee>*

Marilyn is a well known Web site builder and author. Her three books have sold more than 90,000 copies. She gained particular notoriety when she was forced to recant her prediction that the Tribulation would begin on Pentecost 1998. In September 1999, I interviewed her and her husband near their home in Riverside,

California. At that time, she contended that the Tribulation will begin on Pentecost 2000 or 2001 (M. Agee, personal communication, September 4, 1999).

While the typical appeals Marilyn uses are experiential and revelatory in nature, overall, her on-line persona contains a strongly negotiative twist. Discussing with me how she claims such powerful knowledge of the divine, she stated that she spent seven years reading "everything man had written about the Bible," but was disappointed with their lack of understanding. "I wanted to know the hard things," she said. "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" (M. Agee, personal communication, September 4, 1999).

Based on this divine infusion of understanding, Marilyn commonly makes rhetorical claims to authority based on her personal experience through study. On her biographical page, she states: "I am a Baptist believer who has been studying the Bible as deep as I can go for over 38 years" (Agee, 1998a). This 'depth' comes by way of being 'led by God' in her studies.

Despite this revelatory authority, the bulk of her Web site is bluntly negotiative. The main section, some 13 megabytes in size, is devoted to what she calls the 'Pro and Con Index', and consists of over 400 individual pages. Each page contains her personal debates with an individual who has emailed her with questions or disagreements. She has posted these exchanges for visitors to review and comment upon. Still, she contends that her responses to these debaters are divinely inspired and, therefore, authoritative. In fact, starting with her first publication, all her discourse seems to have been so inspired:

So I'd been typing all day, and I grabbed my Bible by the back of it and I just pounced 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'. (M. Agee, personal communication, September 4, 1999)

Marilyn often shares this story with people she is debating, and, when she does this, it serves to divinely authorize her arguments.

### CASES:

*<http://www.mt.net/~watcher>*

In October of 1999, I drove to Helena, Montana and interviewed 'Jane' and 'John' who know Marilyn's claims of inspired authority well. Together, Jane and John comprise the on-line personality know as the 'Watcher'.

Since 1993, they have built and maintained one of the most visually appealing and influential Endtimes Web sites. Featured on the television show *Strange Universe*, an A&E documentary, they even had Ted Koppel comment negatively on their work in the aftermath of the Heaven's Gate suicides. Their case is particularly interesting for this discussion because, as it turns out, 'Watcher' emailed with Marilyn for a long time; in the end, however, their relationship soured.

Like Lambert, Gene, and Susan, Jane and John have both had conversion experiences. They both consider themselves 'born again'. Before they became Christians, John and Jane solidly believed in the UFO phenomenon. John was a lapsed Catholic, and Jane was practicing Wicca.

The reason we put the Web site up was because we wanted to combat this cognitive dissonance that's set up by the fact that UFOs exist *and* there's a Gospel. Then we wanted to point out that the Bible does clearly define what's exactly happening and what will happen and outlines what UFOs are. Then there's this idea that there's actually monuments on another planet – and that blows most peoples' minds! ('Jane', personal communication, October 17, 1999).

This work has resulted in 4 megabytes of text and images about monuments on Mars, UFO technology, government conspiracy, *The X Files*, and much more.

While I interviewed the 'Watcher' couple, I mentioned a page I found on their Web site where they specifically refute Marilyn Agee's assertion of Two Raptures. Apparently, a few years ago, Marilyn emailed Jane when she found the 'Watcher' site. Soon, Jane, John, and Marilyn were debating Endtimes topics. However, this relationship fizzled over differing interpretations of a passage in Second Thessalonians where it seems to state that Christians will live to see the anti-Christ in power (see Watcher, Rapture on Pentecost?). From Jane and John's perspective, this means that there will be no pre-Tribulation Rapture, but Agee disagrees – arguing, somewhat idiosyncratically, that there will be a two-phased Rapture. Again, this is part of the Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Trib debate, the most common Endtimes exchange issue. Talking about their discussions with Marilyn, Jane said:

We just tried so hard to say, "Marilyn, what does this passage in scripture mean then? How can you interpret it any other way, because it's in black and white, the Greek means this." And, she won't look at it because it hurts too bad. It's a very painful thing to think ('Jane', personal communication, October 17, 1999).<sup>5</sup>

While Jane was ready to move on or reconsider Marilyn's two Rapture assertion saying, 'what does this passage mean then?', Marilyn refused to continue the debate and negotiation ended. In fact, to this day, Marilyn refuses to return Jane or John's emails. From my analysis, this is not surprising. While the 'Pro and Con Index' seems to present a desire to negotiate, the rhetoric that Marilyn

uses is closed because of its basis in the personal authority of experience and revelation.

All this is not to say that 'Watcher' does not also have their own sense of experiential authority. However, both Jane and John do reject most claims to direct aural or visual experience of God – including the account of Agee's highlighted passage directing her to publish. A psychologist, John called it 'mildly neurotic'. Commenting on Gene and Susan's experiences with demons and possession, both Jane and John agreed that such beliefs are dangerously rooted in 'superstition' and myth. As they describe in their Web pages, such superstitions are a demonic tactic to lead humans away from Christ. Speaking of Gene's experience of possession by and getting rid of demons, John stated:

He's tricked! It serves a huge point because all it is is a red herring. The forces that they're playing with are all the same. Their [the demons'] agenda is only one: to get man away from the truth. So, if you can get them to think, ya know – to play good cop/bad cop, that's *super* effective ('John', personal communication, October 17, 1999).

Jane and John limit valid direct experience of deity to conversion experiences similar to those which they themselves have had. As a psychologist, John discounts Agee's experiences as mildly delusional. Gene's experiences are regarded as demonic and dangerous. For 'Watcher', the only valid experience of deity is the entering of the Holy Spirit into their consciousnesses—the 'born again' experience which is neither aural nor visual.

Although this places 'Watcher' in the experiential, if not fully revelatory frame, their interpretations are not divinely guided. They are adept at debating on the Internet, with each other, and with me, even altering their opinions to suit new facts as their Web site develops. Their understanding of the divine is, as John put it, "dynamic." Because they are clearly more negotiative than Marilyn, they are more likely to continue a debate with her long after she has given up on them.

But both Marilyn and 'Watcher' are very popular Internet Endtimes figures. Although Marilyn can successfully interact with people on the Internet, she still maintains the belief that her divine guidance in scriptural study produces fundamentally superior interpretations. And, although 'Watcher' can reject all divine experiences different from their own, they still engage in negotiative debate almost indefinitely.

## CONCLUSION

On the most basic level, I have been arguing that everyday Dispensational discourse is animated and polarized by a recurring tension between truth arrived at through individual revelatory experience and truth pursued through pluralistic

negotiation. Further, I have argued that the structure of the Internet itself encourages negotiative rhetorical techniques. While it would be entirely possible for an individual to access and participate only in discourses in which he or she would not find new or challenging ideas, the Internet itself facilitates multi-lateral communication between widely disparate individuals. It seems that, even if some individuals do avoid new ideas and foreign discourses, the appeal of using Internet technologies in one's spare time is to expand one's discourse audience.

Because the basic narrative set which defines competence in Dispensationalist discourse is widely known, easily assimilated, and open-ended enough to mesh new ideas with very old ones, Dispensationalist debate as I have documented it here is very well adapted to Internet expression. At the same time, in a sort of feedback loop, individuals engaging in this debate are encouraged by the medium of the Internet to use negotiative rhetorical techniques.

I still hold this basic hypothesis to be valid – but my understanding of it has deepened and been complicated by the data I am collecting. While Marilyn Agee is unbudgingly certain of her experienced, revealed truths, she argues on the Internet in what, at first, appears to be a highly negotiative manner. However, when faced with an equally certain debater, her ability to communicate seems to cease.

While 'Watcher' is saddened at the loss of their friend, they both asserted to me specifically that "Marilyn is saved." That is, even if she is dogmatic and wrong, she is a real Christian and, though she will go through the Tribulation with everybody else, she will be saved in the end. Of that they have no doubt. For all of these Endtimes debaters, the experience of God's grace through rebirth seems to outweigh the significance of on-line dogmatism, difference, and disagreement.

For 'Watcher' and Lambert, this experience of grace seems to be the only sort of authorizing divine experience. For Marilyn, it is one of a few. For Gene and Susan, it is one of many.

As the 1990s have come to an end and the new millennium dawns, the Internet has transformed from the realm of obscure technical enthusiasts and researchers into a commercial juggernaut that has pressed individuals into its service at every level. From ready access to information, to wildly multiplying sources for mail-order products, to complex personal debates on cryptic topics, the average North American is becoming more and more wedded to Internet communication.

At the end of 1999, the mainstream press had picked up, disseminated, and blown far out of proportion the possibility of a Y2K computer bug that might bring modern society to a standstill. Long a topic of some concern for American Dispensationalists, the change from 1999 to 2000 precipitated perhaps the greatest single moment of anticipation for the Endtimes which animates contem-

porary Dispensationalism. As the clock struck midnight, more individuals than ever before in the history of human consciousness stopped to take note of that very moment, of the passage of time itself – and, maybe, of the finitude of that time. And, of course, nothing much happened.

In a way, this fact exemplifies the most surprising result of the research I am conducting on the effect of Internet use on the personal expression of vernacular religious belief. As much as the technophiles and commercial producers of network technologies argue that every aspect of our lives will be improved by the Internet, religious expression seems to remain fundamentally the same. Devout religious believers like Marilyn can master the new rhetorical forms of Internet communication, and yet maintain the self-assurance of a medieval zealot.

At the same time, we must recognize that something has changed. The effects of that change are already far reaching and the extent to which they will continue to change religious expression and experience can only be guessed. The medieval zealot had no access to Native American or Hindu contemporaries who might hold similar or divergent religious views. If the Internet has had any effect on American Dispensationalism, it is the infusion of otherwise foreign or competing belief elements from radically distinct discourses and among individuals vastly removed in space and experience.

Although examples of this syncretism in the above cases abound, maybe the most obvious is found in the 'Watcher'.<sup>6</sup> Not just the most Internet savvy of the individuals I have discussed in this chapter, they are the most syncretic, pulling together strains of UFOlogy, conspiracy theory, world myth, and Christianity, they reject any denominational affiliation or location-bound church community. Instead, they prefer to worship in a 'virtual' way – by debating arcane topics as diverse as demon-built monuments on Mars and the spiritual significance of Grace. When I asked Jane if they thought of any church as their own, she answered, pointing to the obvious, "Yes. We have church every week on the Internet" ('Jane', personal communication, October 17, 1999). And despite their soured relationship with Marilyn, those failed debates were worship. In different ways, they were expressions of their deep spiritual conviction and their reverence for the Almighty.

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### NOTES

1. My definition of 'vernacular rhetoric' is based on Yoder's definition of 'folk religion' (and Primiano's useful extension of it). Vernacular rhetoric is comprised of rhetorical techniques which are learned outside of institutionally instilled rhetorical discourses (Primiano, 1995; Yoder, 1974). As Bascom noted in his third and fourth functions of folklore (and Toelken explored further), vernacular rhetoric is learned during informal socialization and social exchange (Bascom, in Dundes, 1965; Bascom, 1965; Toelken, 1996).

2. A discourse community is very similar to what Dundes means in his famous, all-inclusive definition of folk groups: "... the term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor" (Dundes, 1965, p. 2). Further, it coincides with Ben-Amos' description of the conditions necessary to a folkloric performance: "For the folkloric act to happen, two social conditions are necessary: Both the performers and the audience have to be in the same situation and be part of the same reference group" (Ben-Amos, 1971, p. 12). Within a discourse community, there may be varying levels of individual knowledge of the discourse and its terms. Participants may more or less actively transmit those terms which they consider to be important to the discourse, and, if they are highly active in transmitting their terms, they may introduce new terms into a discourse based on a disparate influence. For more on active transmission, see von Sydow (1965). For more on discourse communities, see Gage (1991, pp. 1ff). For parallel ideas, see also Geertz (1983) on 'local knowledge,' and Fish (1980) on 'interpretive communities'.

3. To facilitate the interview process, I have, in some cases, changed the names of my respondents. Although I did receive permission to use the full names of the individuals I am citing in this article, I assured all of my respondents that their names would only be used as necessary. In the cases of Agee and Dolphin, however, because they are both high profile individuals with their names imbedded in their Web site addresses, I have no choice but to use their actual names. In their cases, they both expressed no reservations about being cited by name.

4. For a general discussion of spirit presence associated with fogs and other common forms, see Hufford, 1982, 1995.

5. Agee's version of this exchange appears in 'Pro and Con 223' (Agee, 1998b).

6. For my analysis of the more complex and completely syncretic example of the Heaven's Gate, or H.L.M., religious group, see Howard, 1998a.

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