

Book Reviews

Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet, by Robert Glenn Howard. New York University Press, 2011. 213pp., pb., \$27.00. ISBN-13: 9780814773109.

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It is reassuring that eight years after Robert Glenn Howard's monograph *Digital Jesus* was published, the bulk of the technology and communities he describes remains familiar. There are ongoing and active Christian blogging and video blogging communities. Forums for discussing Christian Fundamentalist theology or proof texting historical events with the Bible continue through social media sites like Facebook. The basic features of the digital landscape Howard describes are still recognizable after a decade or more of rapid change. Some of the sites and persons studied as primary sources in this ethnographic work remain active and accessible, including Marilyn Agee's *Bible Prophecy Corner*, where the last entry is dated 7 Jan 2018. Without such assurances, it would be easy to assume that Howard's study is vestigial or ephemeral. As a work that looks at how Christian Fundamentalists used the burgeoning Internet and World Wide Web from 1992–2009 to build a "virtual ekklesia" or digital religious community, a curious reader would be forgiven for thinking that these sites and their authors had been left behind amid the Internet's growth. Instead, Howard's careful attention to rhetoric and language, his commitment to the framing tension of communal ritual deliberation and personal prophetic authority, and his understanding of the fragility and appeal of virtual subcultures makes this a valuable contribution to the field of religious studies and the subareas of Christian studies, new religious movements, and digital religion.

In five main chapters, Howard presents his thesis that the Internet was an impactful medium for an emergent participatory community of Chris-

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tian Fundamentalists starting in the early 1990s. As a community, the virtual ekklesia is described by the beliefs of its members, including their biblical literalism, a commitment to evangelization and spiritual rebirth, and, above all, “a belief in the End Times interpretation of biblical prophecy” (171). David Bebbington’s evangelical quadrilateral clearly lurks behind Howard’s definition of “vernacular Christian Fundamentalism,” but instead of crucicentrism, the centrality of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, we get apocalypticism. What bound the community was not a shared faith in redemption, but a shared practice of looking at world events and reading them as potential signs of biblical prophecy’s fulfillment. The second chapter, for instance, takes 9/11 as the world event and examines how Agee’s *Bible Prophecy Corner* website portrayed the attack as an End Times event. In such moments, Howard lays bare two competing modes of authority—the personal and the communal. After 9/11, online communities deliberated about the event’s meaning for Christians. “By facilitating this communication,” writes Howard, Agee’s website “gave them the discursive space to generate their virtual ekklesia” (33). The internet was essential as the place where a geographically diffuse community could share responsibility and authority to decide whether the terrorist attack was a sign of the End Times. Some sites Howard presents rested on an individual’s persuasive reading of current events, but this was done without the formality of religious training in a seminary or the physical community of a church or congregation. Technology brought like-minded individuals together, as well as gave them a way to participate in efforts to reach a determination of the event’s significance.

As Web 2.0 emerged in the early 2000s, the technical ability for more dynamic participation meant more opportunities for deliberation. The authority of key individuals weakened as advances in online forums, blogging, and video publishing led to a democratization of voices. Howard offers chapter 6 on “Toward a Truer Charity: Tolerance in an Age of Network Media” to address the ways “enclaves based on highly idiosyncratic interests” can lead to insular subcultures with “beliefs that more diverse communities would reject” (147). The lesson of the formation of Christian Fundamentalists around apocalypticism is the ease and power of a “feedback loop between individual expression and individual consumption” (157). The ekklesia was formed of those individuals bent on consuming their very particular way of approaching world events through the Bible, even as their interpretations of events became less and less recognizable to those not already in the discursive community. In a moment where social media’s effect on racism, misogyny, militant nationalism, and religious zealotry is palpable, Howard’s analysis of

the rhetorical moves by which an individual can be bought into a group or excluded from it still feels timely. Of the Christian Fundamentalists we see early communities founded by email lists and newsgroups (chapter 3), early static websites (chapter 4), and more dynamic websites (chapter 5), as a progression where at every turn the boundaries of the group are being formed non-institutionally by ideological affiliation, “a habit of thinking based on shared beliefs” (8). That this habit would be refined by the Internet and forged into ever-narrower habits and beliefs, seems inevitable in hindsight. What readers may think now is how obviously dangerous the insularity and corresponding polarization of virtual group-formation has been. If anything, Howard was too generous in his hopes that a community centered on its own certainty about End Times proof texting would ever “entertain the possibility that others might know more rightly” (176). The warning is wrapped with an optimistic “nexus of pluralism and compassion” that Howard derives from Augustine (177). This appeal to authority at the end, when the entire text has been built to dismiss authorities (or democratize them) in favor of the power invested by communities in non-institutional vernacular expressions, seems off-the-mark.

If the lesson of *Digital Jesus* is merely that the Internet fostered the growth of certain Christian Fundamentalist communities, then we will have missed Howard’s most important contributions, which are not, perhaps, really about Christians at all. Instead, this work presses us to think about the ways in which technology increasingly prefigures our expressions, our beliefs, and our identities. Free of institutional authorities, the virtual ekklesia focuses our attention on how individuals play enormous roles in the creation of communities today. That these persons and their efforts are now accessible and recoverable, or better still actively observable in contemporary media sites like YouTube or Twitter, means we should take very seriously Howard’s claim that “everyday agents are the ultimate sources of the aggregate volition that constitutes vernacular authority” (174). Echoes of this agency seem more like a chorus in the light of democracy protests in the Arab Spring of 2010–2011 or more recently in Hong Kong and elsewhere where protests are mediated (and censored) online and through an array of text-messaging apps and social media groups. In this sense, Howard’s work would have been well-served by related scholarly work on other virtual or digital communities such as Gary R. Bunt’s *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* (2009) or by the shifting sense of authority spotted about religion online at least as early as 1998 by Tom Beaudoin in *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Gen X*. Readers today have considerably more theoretical resources upon which to

build out the implications of *Digital Jesus*, perhaps foremost among them is Heidi Campbell's edited volume *Digital Religion* (2012), which would make an excellent pairing in an upper-division course for this strong and seemingly enduring contribution from Robert Glenn Howard.