

PASSAGES DIVINELY LIT:
REVELATORY VERNACULAR RHETORIC ON THE INTERNET

By

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Since the advent of the public World-Wide-Web in 1992, networked computer communication has rapidly become integral to the daily lives of many North Americans. Many researchers in the humanities and social sciences debate the potential power and nature of the effects of these new forms of communication. Some scholars see dangers in the changing forms of “media literacy,” but others see the Internet engendering new levels of democratic debate at grassroots and personal levels. However, much of this research still lacks the basic methodological rigor necessary to make reasonable claims about actual individual human communicative behavior on the Internet.

By melding the behavioral ethnographic methods of folklore studies and socio-linguistics to postmodern methods of rhetorical analysis, this dissertation explores the general hypothesis that Internet media encourage the use of negotiative rhetorical strategies in the everyday expression of vernacular religious belief. By participating in the specific Christian Fundamentalist discourse known as Dispensationalism, this dissertation establishes methods for locating and classifying particular Internet expressions based on their revelatory, experiential, and/or negotiative rhetorical strategies. The hypothesis is explored through a series of five cases related to Protestant Dispensationalism: early American Puritan and Quaker autobiography, 1994 and 1995 Christian e-mail lists, the 1996 and 1997 e-mail campaign of the "Heaven's Gate" religious group, and 1999 and 2000 amateur Dispensationalist web-site builders. Based on e-mail, web-site, questionnaire, and face-to-face interview data, the results of this research have shown that the hypothesis overestimated the power of the Internet to encourage negotiative attitudes in deeply religious individuals. Although the Internet expressions of belief seem to have taken on a style of negotiation, little actual negotiation about religious beliefs or values occurred on the Internet among those documented. Instead, there was a constant exchange of similar ideas which seem to primarily function as attitudinal posturing. Though strong positions were taken and expressed to large and diverse audiences, only a very few individuals were willing to adjust their previously held beliefs as a result of their experiences with Internet communication.

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DEDICATION

To Irvin and Nell Newell—and all those who came before; may your wisdom guide my acts. “Blessed *are* they that have not seen, and *yet* have believed” (John 20: 29).

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INTRODUCTION: REVELATORY VERNACULAR RHETORIC ON THE INTERNET

From an autobiographical pamphlet made famous by William James in his chapter on religious conversion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Stephen H. Bradley relates a personal revelation which occurred in November of 1829 in Madison, Connecticut. Frozen in a divine paralysis and with his heart racing, Bradley recalls:

I was unutterably full of the love and grace of God. In the mean time while thus exercised, a thought arose in my mind, what can it mean? And all at once, as if to answer it, my memory became exceedingly clear, and it appeared to me just as if the New Testament was placed open before me, eighth chapter of Romans, and as light as if some candle lighted was held for me to read the 26th and 27th verses of that chapter, and I read these words: "The Spirit helpeth our infirmities with groanings which cannot be uttered." (James 159)

In what seemed, at the time, an entirely unrelated experience, I was traveling the West Coast of the United States interviewing Christian web-site builders when I heard a similar story. Late in the summer of 1999 at a fast food restaurant outside Riverside, California, a well-known Christian author and web-site builder, Marilyn Agee, related to me God's call for her to publish divinely

inspired interpretations of biblical prophecy. At the time, it only struck me with a ghostly familiarity. I had not yet made the connection. She said:

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 a rectangle of light on it. Everything else looks gray. I could have read it if I wanted to, it wasn't that dark, but it looked gray—and this verse had light on it, saying: "Publish and conceal not." (Agee 4 Sept 1999)

Some months later, while reviewing James' work for a reading group on American pragmatism, it struck me that both Bradley in the 19th century and Agee in the very late 20th had had the same experience. Both received, from God, a revelatory instruction in the form of divinely lit passages in the Bible. The juxtaposition of the two, divided by a wide expanse of time and experience, was stark. What, I wondered, led these two to communicate with God in the same way?

While still mulling this over, I was reading Thomas Paine's 1807 polemic against the interpretations of biblical prophecy popular in his day. Paine concluded that: "All national institutions of churches . . . appear to me to no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit. I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine" (Paine 6).

In the fall of 1999, I interviewed a retired Stanford physicist, builder of one of the largest amateur Christian web-sites of the 1990s, and a man called to Christianity by a direct experience of God. We were speaking about his interpretation of biblical prophecies when, considering the problem of multiple interpretations, he carefully noted: "In fact, it's probably perfectly acceptable to have equivalent models and use the one that you feel most comfortable with—or the one that fits best to your circumstances" (Dolphin 7 Sept 1999).

In thinking about my conversations with Agee and Dolphin, I was struck by the radical differences in their ways of thinking. Although Agee was, generally, totally confident in her beliefs about specific biblical interpretations, Dolphin was refreshingly open to the validity of multiple interpretations. In a way, Agee and Dolphin could not be more different, and so I was not prepared to find a commonality in their thought. However, what I realized in reading Paine was that, in fact, the two do share something fundamental. They both express complicated ways of viewing truth that have clear antecedents in early American discourse. For Agee, this connection with previous traditions is through a stark experience of the divinely lit passage. For Dolphin, this connection is more philosophical, involving a driving desire to leave open the possibilities of multiple valid religious truths, similar to Paine's claim that individuals have a right to their own beliefs.

The recurring themes of divinely lit passages and a desire to tolerate multiple interpretations of revealed truths are obvious in these examples and offer a glimpse of something fundamental to American conceptions of the divine. These examples, as in many others I have since documented, are a testament to deeply embedded vernacular systems of American religious rhetoric. These four introductory passages define and characterize the most basic and far reaching assertion governing my analysis. *I argue that American religious discourse is animated and polarized by a recurring tension between truth as known through individual experience and truth as pursued through pluralistic negotiation.* Even in new technological media, with their potential for egalitarian discourse, this same tension arises. This study documents and analyses this tension historically and as it is expressed in religious discourse on the Internet.

In 1994, Stephen O'Leary published his ground breaking analysis of apocalyptic Christian rhetoric: *Arguing the Apocalypse*. O'Leary concludes that apocalyptic rhetoric is, in Kenneth Burke's sense, fundamentally *tragic*. That is to say, apocalypticism is a closed system of interpretation that resists change and is nearly impervious to debate. Rejecting the Evangelical Christian interpretations

of the book of Revelation as tragic, O'Leary offers what he feels is superior because it is, again in Kenneth Burke's sense of the word, "comic:"

In this reading, the proper answer to the question, "When will the Last Judgment occur?" is not "In 1843," or "In the year 2000"; for all such answers deny the truly ultimate significance of the Apocalypse and are destined to reveal, with the passage of time, their misapprehension of its message . . . The proper reply to the question, then, is "It has already occurred; it is always about to occur; it is here now and always has been." In the terminology of this study, this represents a shift from a tragic to a comic interpretation of the Apocalypse. (O'Leary 220)

When O'Leary quotes views of the 19th century religious sect known as the Millerites answering his question with "1843" and the contemporary Evangelical Hal Lindsey answering "2000," he is offering us clear examples of tragic interpretations of apocalyptic prophecy. When, however, he rejoins these predictive interpretations with his own interpretation that "it has already occurred; it is always about to occur; it is here now," O'Leary exemplifies the comic frame or attitude. While tragic discourse is always radically closed and rests on a belief that there is a single correct message which the book of Revelation communicates, comic discourse is radically open to new and divergent interpretations. In fact, the comic, to remain comic at all, must never submit to certainty of belief in any single correct interpretation. Instead, it is an attitude which requires one always remain open to correction, adaptation, and change. In this way, Burke's two modes of discourse, comedy and tragedy, offer us opposite poles in a continuum of possible discursive attitudes.

Although O'Leary's work is, in my view, one of the most rigorous and fair analyses of a contemporary Christian discourse, it is radically limited by its methods. To understand any contemporary discourse, the researcher must inevitably look beyond that discourse's intuitionalizing texts and into the everyday lives of those who embody and practice it. Coming to apocalyptic discourse from a traditional rhetorical perspective which focuses on textual analysis and civic discourse, O'Leary does not directly engage any of the millions of North

Americans who participate in Christian apocalyptic belief and debate. My study does just this, and, in so doing I apply O'Leary's claim that apocalyptic discourse is tragic to its everyday practice by living individuals. What I have found is not so much that O'Leary is wrong, he is not. Apocalyptic discourse is fundamentally tragic, but that is only the beginning because, even in its tragedy, we find comedy.

When O'Leary offers us his "comic" understanding of apocalypse as being the "truly ultimate significance," he unequivocally claims: "It has already occurred; it is always about to occur; it is here now and always has been." In so doing, he has finalized his conclusion. In a sentence, he has made the tragic comic and, in so doing, retrieved the closed, singular, and true interpretation of apocalypse from the vague and uncertain world of comedy where corrections can be made to the tragic and certain world of academic scholarship where human behaviors documented in texts can have single "correct" interpretations applied to them. Even in his own interpretation of prophecy, O'Leary engages both the tragic and the comic simultaneously.

And he is not alone. In fact, my study adds to O'Leary's research specifically because it shows that through a careful and rigorous engagement of ethnographic methods which localize specific apocalyptic communications into the rich contexts of individual lives we find that people are always already *both tragic and comic*. Instead of being only tragic, I have found that individuals mediate a tension between what is tragic and what is comic by engaging modes of rhetoric which are alternately experiential and negotiative. In the daily work of engaging this tension, individuals create a cradle from which their idiosyncratic identities emerge—charged with the power of the divine.

Yes, in the end, that divine power is far more tragic than it is comic. However, recognizing that comedy lies quietly alongside the apocalyptic divine allows us to recognize that we too are always already constructing havens from which our own identities can emerge. We too carry out our discourse between the tensions which our shared values create. Neither O'Leary nor I can offer an interpretation of apocalypse that transcends our own individuality. Hence, our

interpretations are no more or less “ultimate” than those of Lambert Dolphin or Marilyn Agee. We are all already both deeply comic and deeply tragic.

However, that does not mean that careful, organized, and sympathetic ethnography cannot help scholars come to a more deep understanding of contemporary Christian discourse. The remaining chapters of this work enact just this sort of research.

In Chapter One, I define the basic terms and analytical concepts that will be necessary to understand the particular research approach I have taken. *Primary among these is my term vernacular rhetoric.* To do this, I engage the scholarly discourse around behavioral ethnography. Then I take up Kenneth Burke’s concepts of comedy and tragedy and adapt them to my methods in relation to my terms “negotiative,” “experiential,” and “revelatory.”

In the second chapter, I explore the extant evidence of the tension or “symbiosis” between the negotiative and experiential in some early North American documents. This analysis shows that this tension was deeply influential in the formation of the United States government at the vernacular level. I locate that evidence in Puritan and Quaker writings. To access the Puritan vernacular, I examine the Thomas Shepard collection of Puritan confession narratives. For the Quaker perspective, I examine examples from a wide body of amateur or semi-professional autobiographical and journal writing from North American Quakers starting in the 17th century. The final sections of that chapter will then examine the late 18th and early 19th century writings of Thomas Paine. One of the most popular and influential figures in early U.S. history, we find the elements of both Quaker and Puritan vernacular rhetorics in his work. Having thus established the historical presence of the negotiative-experiential tension, I leap forward in time with the confidence that both negotiative and experiential rhetorical strategies are not recent inventions, and they do, in fact, significantly predate the advent of electronic discourse.

To begin to address electronic discourse in Chapter Three, I explore the relatively new definition of the word “literacy” which has been broadened to include levels of competency with computers. The word usefully points out that

the new communication technologies are changing the way individuals are interacting with the ideas which they communicate. In order to explore what sorts of changes are afoot, I acknowledge that technology is, in fact, not a neutral force. *More than mere tools, computer technologies carry ideologies with them.* Through the sociological concept of "path dependence," it becomes clear that the very material and social forces which came together to form the technologies necessary to the Internet carry with them an ideology of negotiative rhetoric.

The 1994 and '95 e-mail and newsgroup material I present in Chapter Three again focuses on the tension between strategies that seek to establish truth in experiential versus negotiated terms. However, because this data has been collected exclusively from e-mail exchanges, it serves as my primary example of discourse which has assimilated and expressed, at a vernacular level, the ideology of capitalistic pluralism inherent in the design of personal computers and Internet technologies. From this research, it is clear that negotiative strategies receive far larger and more engaged audiences in newsgroup and e-mail list communications than do experiential ones.

To define the opposite pole of my distinction, Chapter Four explores the H.I.M. or "Heaven's Gate" religious group's so-called "recruitment" attempts on the Internet. These documents represent the far extreme of on-line expressions of experiential rhetoric. Through a close analysis of actual H.I.M. e-mails and some responses to them, we can readily see that the experiential rhetoric they employed utterly failed to capture any audience through the Internet.

In light of this example of extremely non-negotiative Internet users, Chapter Five revisits the basic hypothesis that the Internet encourages negotiative rhetoric through systematic ethnographic research among amateur Dispensationalist web-site builders in 1999. Although the hypothesis is not exactly proven wrong, this final research does necessitate an expansion and revision of the initial claim.

Although Internet audiences demand a certain level of negotiation which manifests in a kind of comic flavor, this negotiation can be limited to the level of style. Even when, as in many of the cases I present, the comic appears only at

the level of style, Internet communications are often successful. Further, using the Internet does not cause people to engage this style necessarily. In a number of my examples, individuals are able to use the Internet, sometimes quite extensively, and not engage in negotiative rhetorical strategies at all. Even in these examples, though, we find radically different attitudes correlated with an ability to use the Internet in a non-negotiative way. In the collection of cases which make up Chapter Five, I discuss the wide diversity of individuals who use the Internet which provides insights that only qualitative research can offer.

In the conclusion, I describe how the poles of comedy and tragedy correspond to a tension between the social act of communication and the core beliefs and values of individuals which are rhetorically expressed in negotiative or experiential strategies. Out of the soft cradle of that tension, human identities are formed by discourse, are maintained through social relationships, and are recreated in the ongoing exchange of ideas. This is how discourse seems to have always worked, and it is still the case in the new communicative technologies afforded by the Internet. However, it is only through a rigorous behavioral-ethnographic approach that we can come to this realization.

CHAPTER I: SYMBIOSIS OF THE VERNACULAR

It has become a truism to say that the surge in Internet use since the mid-1990's is fundamentally changing our behaviors and maybe even our thought processes. However, the ability to rigorously examine those changes is hampered by the very fact that this new medium has so rapidly inundated our professional and private lives. Many of us, to varying degrees, have been swept into a new literacy that has both changed the way we communicate and perhaps even the way we perceive our communication. In order to address these new modes of communication, I have had to explore various disciplinary perspectives and methods to find precedent and practices which will yield enlightening results. *The two fields which have most contributed to my approach are rhetorical analysis' tight focus on communication and folklore studies' face-to-face and locally focused ethnography.*

In order to acknowledge these influences, I have chosen to call the subject of this analysis "vernacular rhetoric." Neither fully institutional nor fully in opposition to institutions, vernacular rhetoric refers to the strategies that individuals learn and use in informal social exchange every day. This term and my preliminary definition should, at this point, raise a host of questions; the remaining pages of this chapter will attempt to address these questions by exploring the possibilities and limits of an approach to rhetorical analysis that is infused with a folkloristic perspective. I believe that my approach in this study,

though rooted in old methods, is new. And it is new not by design but by necessity.

My interdisciplinary approach derives from my graduate training in folklore studies at the UCLA Folklore and Mythology Center and work in rhetoric and folklore at the University of Oregon. Both of these programs of study involved *scholars with diverse interests*. Not unlike 19th century philology, these scholars focus on history, ethnography, literature, social behavior, and communication arts of all kinds. However, the common ground between them is a research methodology which emphasizes the careful documentation of human communicative behavior.

This methodology was developed in the modernist academic environment which allowed for sustained research and disciplinary focus in the various fields of communication which were loosely gathered together under the term "folklore studies." A broadly defined discipline, folklore studies was, and in large part still is, less characterized by its topic than it is by its approach. Folklorists tend to study vernacular or everyday human expressive behaviors. Those behaviors are widely diverse, but the folklorist approaches them with an interest in documenting and analyzing the ways in which individual behaviors transmit, share, resist, or reinforce social structures.

Recent folklore studies have documented and analyzed a vast range of human behavior from Chicano graffiti, to chainsaw carving, to parable use and beyond (Kim; Sherman; Girsheblatt-Kimblett "Parable . . ."). The approach that unites these studies is one that bases its data collection first in the careful observation of actual human behavior. Folklorists emphasize face-to-face interviews with individuals about the behaviors which have been observed. *Folklorists tend to place the highest importance on what people actually say about themselves*. Folklorists generally do not approach their topics with an overt critical goal. Instead, they attempt to document, examine, and analyze real-world human behaviors by contextualizing them in the fabric of specific individual lives and communities. With this emphasis, contemporary folklore

studies tend to be very respectful of their respondents in a way few other academics are.

When this approach is applied to the study of religious belief or behaviors specifically, folklorists emphasize religion “on the ground” or religion as it is actually lived by individuals. Unhampered by any bias toward the doctrines or wider institutional aspects of religion, folklorists have been free to document the complicated ways in which religion is actually expressed. For example, Leonard Norman Primiano has documented the religious behaviors of homosexual Catholics, Elaine Lawless has worked on the public religious testimony of Pentecostal women, and David J. Hufford has examined the ways in which sleep disturbances give rise to spiritual beliefs (Primiano *Intrinsically*. . . .; Lawless *God’s*; Hufford *The Terror* . . .).

Despite a unity of approach, it is clear from this diversity that there is wide diffusion in the actual topics of folklore studies. Nowhere is this diffusion of the field more obvious than in its attempts at self definition. The more Romantic notions of folklore, which had great currency in the 1960s and ‘70s, are expressed in the popular definition of the term by Dan Ben-Amos. In 1971, he defined folklore as “artistic communication in small groups.” He explained:

for the folkloric act to happen, two social conditions are necessary: both performers and the audience have to be in the same situation and be part of the same reference group. This implies that folklore communication takes place in a situation in which people confront each other face to face and relate to each other directly. (Ben-Amos 81)

Some of the core ideas of folklore are present in his definition: the dual focus on shared knowledge and individual expression for example. However, Ben-Amos does not overtly address folklore studies’ notion of “tradition.” Further, Ben-Amos seems to exclude the rapidly evolving electronic modes of communication which allow for non-“face to face” communication such as telephone use. Because of its lack of emphasis on “tradition,” its failure to recognize folkloric expression in electronic media, as well as its exclusion of the

long history of folklore studies which focused on material objects, Ben-Amos' definition now seems overly restrictive to many scholars.

On the other end of the spectrum, Alan Dundes defined folklore in a way that some embraced but others felt was far too broad. In the preface to his 1965 *The Study of Folklore*, Dundes defines the field by first establishing the meaning of folk. "Folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor." Dundes then lists the "lore" that these people share comes in the form of a list of some fifty terms, or more if the terms are considered totally exclusive. Dundes ends the list noting that it is not exclusive and there are many other things that might be studied by folklorists (Dundes 2). While Ben-Amos may well have implied an exclusion of many folkloric forms, Dundes broadens the term to a semantic range which seems to exclude little.

As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett rightly notes in her 1996 reassessment of the field of folklore studies, "Topic Drift: Negotiating the Gap Between the Field and Our Name," the problem of definition in contemporary folklore studies is rooted in the historical development of the field. Folklore, or "*Volkskunde*" from where the term seems to have entered English,¹ was a topic of the omnibus discipline of philology in the 19th century. Philology was considered "a total science of civilization" that specifically applied ideas from biology about plant and animal adaptation to language and made hypotheses about the development of language and the ideas it carries (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett "Topic Drift" 250ff). In the days of philology, folklore was comprised of the ideas which were transmitted, typically in face-to-face situations, through everyday language. These ideas were conceptualized as the "lore" of the European peasants who were largely illiterate at the time.

It is easy to see why the postmodern return to the ideals of Romanticism in the 1960s and '70s prompted a return to folklore studies. The poetry of Wordsworth and Bob Dylan both appeal to notions of shared wisdom in "the

¹ For a brief history of the term and its introduction into English in the 19th century, see Tokofsky's 1996 article: "Folklore and *Volks-Kunde*: Compounding Compounds."

commoners.” However, the 170 or more years that separate the two artists’ peaks in popularity had wrought radical changes in thought that distanced Romanticism from postmodernism. Specifically, the harnessing of scientific knowledge and its technological possibilities to mechanized warfare and systematic genocide during the Second World War threw the naive nationalism of 19th Romanticism into a sinister frame of reference.

Specifically, 19th century folklore studies was premised on a European world view which, in retrospect, was nationalistic and racist. Later, the National Socialists of Germany appealed to Romantic ideals of a German-people, “*das Volk*,” using the term *Volkskunde* particularly to forward their agendas of world domination and genocide. The term “*Volkskunde*,” even in its English variant “folklore,” has never fully distanced itself from this misappropriation.

In the current debates surrounding the utility of the term “folklore,” major scholars such as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Regina Bendix have called for a general abandonment of the term (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett “Folklore’s Crisis”; Bendix “Of Names . . .”). Other scholars take a more conciliatory stance. On the one hand, Roger D. Abrahams systematically lays out the problematic history of folklore studies without downplaying its problematic past in “Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics.” On the other, Elliott Oring, always ferociously defending his field, responds directly to Bendix and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. In the wake of these scholars, I have located a new relationship to the term “folklore.”

Oring seems to resort to name calling when, while specifically responding to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s article “Folklore’s Crisis” and Bendix’s article “Of Names, Professional Identities, and Disciplinary Futures,” he states:

Cultural studies practitioners will never know what challenges these communities [which they are studying] and their expressions raise to their own comfortable theorizing, unless there are folklorists to tell them . . . and I would further suggest that a great number of folklorists have been cowards. We have not identified ourselves as folklorists, we have not identified our best work as springing from our folklore training and interests, we have not vigorously defended

folklore studies when occasion demanded, and we have been timid in labeling bad work in folklore as mitigating "bad." It seems we operate with a deep sense of shame. (Oring 335-6)

While I am not fond of Oring's tone in his claim that some folklorists are cowards, I do feel he is correct in complaining that folklore studies has not done a good job with its own self-promotion. Further, Oring is absolutely right when he notes that many new practitioners of "cultural studies" are seldom fully prepared to engage in the field methods necessary for the kinds of claims they sometimes make.

Folklorists trained in ethnographic methods, on the other hand, have been slow to point out when these scholars engage in bad or unethical methods. It seems to me, the problem (as Bendix, Oring, and others have rightly noted) is that folklore carries, in its very name, a reference to the extreme excesses of racism and nationalism that mark the end of modernism. The result is that folklore is often seen, by those unaware of its lively and long intellectual history, at best as old fashioned and at worst as politically incorrect. As a result, scholars in folklore studies have become somewhat marginalized.

Although the goal of my research is not to justify the methods of folklorists, I feel that, through their application in this work, the validity of those methods is beyond question. Further, I feel it necessary to locate myself in relation to the field. With the help of work like Abrahams' very frank history of folklore studies, I feel that I can do this without denying the negative aspects of the term—or its power and utility as a research perspective.

Though almost as a aside, Oring makes an important point in support of my position. Oring notes that, "a change of name is, effectively, an act of forgetting: the repression of disturbing reminiscences" (Oring 332). Assuming, as I do, that there are elements of folkloristics which are valuable and necessary to retain, to change the name in response to a problematic past is to tidy up the field. With that in mind, I would go further than Oring. It isn't cowardly for researchers who are using folkloristic methods to conceal this past history, it is dishonest.

As I noted at the outset of this section, the methods I have developed to address the very communal nature of personal religious expression on the Internet come from my training in folkloristic ethnography. This sort of ethnography is a product of the long history of ethnographic language study which was associated with folklore studies and housed, in the 19th century, in the discipline of philology. When philology broke apart and its methods came under scrutiny, those methods were developed in different ways based on their application. Numerous fields emerged from this split: anthropology, sociology, linguistics, literary studies and so on. A whole host of new disciplines were developed; each with specific methods that take years of study and practice to master. In all of these disciplines, elements remain to remind us of the colonialism, racism, and Euro-centrism which climaxed in the Third Reich. However, it would be foolish to cast out rigorous methodologies associated with folklore and anthropology in an effort to erase the guilt, shame, and, in the end, *memory* of that bigotry.

While never as popular as during Romantic turns, folklore studies has long developed its methods along specific lines. Initially the Historic-Geographic method traced occurrences of folklore forms across communities and time. Later, the emphasis shifted to documenting individual acts of folkloric expression in order to more carefully analyze human behaviors which were motivated by shared ideas. Folklore studies offers the training in ethnographic methods which is of great utility in my research. And these methods are the most valuable element of folklore studies that must be retained.

To call these mere “methods” is something of a reduction. In short, folkloristic methodology is characterized by documenting multiple occurrences of similar individual communicative behaviors which are located in specific and identifiable communities. At length, folklore is defined more by its perspective than by its topics or even methods. That perspective, though developing since the late 1960s, has come to its fullest expression in Robert A. Georges and Michael Owen Jones’ 1995 book titled, *Folkloristics*. Georges and Jones define the term folklore more successfully than the previous definitions I have cited

precisely because they acknowledge that folklore studies is not about its topics. Instead, it is about the way in which those topics are perceived.

The word folklore denotes expressive forms, processes, and behaviors that we customarily learn, teach, utilize or display during face-to-face interactions, and that we judge to be traditional because they are based on known precedents or models, and because they serve as evidence of continuities and consistencies through time and space in human knowledge, thought, belief, and feeling. The discipline devoted to the identification, documentation, characterization, and analysis of traditional expressive forms, processes, and behaviors is folkloristics (Georges and Jones 1)

According to this perspective, folklore is any behavior that is judged to exhibit evidence of "continuities and consistencies through space and time." Obviously such an approach to human communication carries with it the need to master and use certain methods which are implied by the approach. Specifically, folklore studies has long cornered the methodological market in documenting, archiving, and locating similar individual behaviors across space and time; and it is these methods which are indispensable to my study of Internet communication.

The real foundation of the behavioral perspective in folkloristics which I have adopted lies in the earlier work of Robert Georges. Part of the general move in the 1960s and '70s to redefine the field, Georges' project was to more broadly open the field of folklore studies to communicative events that were not necessarily clear examples of previously located folkloric forms. In so doing, Georges emphasized that everyone has folklore. Folklore cannot not be limited to any marginal or disempowered "folk."

Georges' foundational article in 1969, "Toward An Understanding Of Storytelling Events," specifically seeks to define a behavioral model of conversational story telling that is generally applicable across contemporary communities. Under the influence of his work, my ethnographic approach in this study will limit my analytical claims to the interpretations of specifically situated

communicative events based on Georges' premise that *humans consistently exhibit observable communicative behaviors in the contexts of their daily lives.*²

In this way, my work falls squarely within the behavioral perspective of folkloristics advocated by Georges and Jones. By embracing this perspective, I have, in many ways, started down a path of research which scholars may find difficult if they are accustomed to the very different sort of analysis generally referred to as "critical" or "cultural studies." However, when combined with rhetoric and a focus on the vernacular, the overall perspective I have developed for this research is new, and, in the end, this approach is superior for the analysis of my main subject: Internet communication.

Folklore (Not) in Cultural Studies

One reason for the insulation of folklore methodology from humanist critical studies in general is clearly in the historical roots of the multidisciplinary field of "cultural" or "critical studies." Though, in recent years, some folklorists have sought to ally themselves with this field, Marxist theory and folklore studies often find themselves at odds. Few Marxist theorists have engaged the term "folk" either recently or in the postmodern era generally. And, with a few notable exceptions, few folklorists approach their research from a Marxist perspective.³

Post-Stalinist Western Marxism has gained a popularity in almost all the fields of humanistic inquiry. In so doing, it has brought with it an understanding

² Professor Georges is well known among his students for the memorable phrase: "there's a paper in that!" because, I think, he applied this phrase so liberally. The student of everyday human behavior has no want of raw data—no matter how voracious the appetite. When making his key distinction, based on Goodenough, between "social roles" and "communicative identities," Georges asserts that both are central to everyday human behavior: "making the role-based/identity-based distinction forces one to acknowledge (or perhaps even to realize for the first time) that narrating is a universal mode of communicating and that storytelling participants everywhere and in every era therefore necessarily have much in common with each other behaviorally" (Georges "A Communicative Role . . ." 55).

³ For one of the few excellent examples of a Marxist approach in folklore studies, see Luigi Lombardi-Satriani's "Folklore as Culture of Contestation".

of folklore studies as well as folklorists' uses of the words "folk" and "lore." In his 1983 article, "Western Marxism and Folklore: A Critical Introduction," José E. Limón carefully documents the various positions that major Marxist scholars have taken on folklore. A masterful piece, Limón notes that in every Marxist theoretical approach, "the masses" or "*das Volk*" loom large. At the same time, however, almost all Marxist theory seems to reject or circumvent folklore studies. Further, he observes that few contemporary folklorists engage Marxist theory in comparison to other fields of inquiry in which Marxism has flourished.

Limón concludes that folklore and Marxism are not at odds, but that folklore studies has been fundamentally honest about something which Marxist theory has difficulty assimilating. The element of Marxism which comes into conflict with a folkloristic approach is the Marxist emphasis on the masses as a revolutionary force. Folklore studies emphasizes the fundamental consistency of expressive forms which seem to be harbored in those "masses." When the Western Marxists concluded, based on the failure of Marxism in Russia, that the masses were not fully capable of acting against the hegemony that held them in relative poverty, they began to emphasize art as a liberating force from the powers of mass media and education. Hence, many of the studies of the Frankfurt Marxists focused either on "high" art or, as in the case of Adorno and Horkheimer, critical assessments of mass media. While the studies of "high art" had no real reason to engage the masses in their own terms, the critical studies tended to assume the worst about what "the folk" were able to do and think in relation to the power of mass media. After all, the masses had failed to join in the rise of the communist state in Russia and, as a result, fallen into Stalin's deadly totalitarianism. In such studies there is little emphasis on the actual practice of ethnography, and the experience most of these scholars have with the individuals whom they discuss as a single unit is only at a distance.

As Limón notes, there is no real reason why this should be the case. And, of course, in many departments of ethnography, anthropology, sociology, international studies, and others the methods of rigorous ethnography and

Marxist thinking have combined to powerful effect. However, in the field of "cultural studies" the influence of the Frankfurt School tends to be evident.

Limón locates the problem in the early Western Marxist perception that "folklore," or the knowledge and modes of consciousness of the masses, is generally not capable of being oppositional. In fact, the very traditions that folklorists study were viewed as a major part of the mechanism which held the masses in check. Hence the term "folklore" was often viewed in a negative light. Even when referring to the topics of folklore, as Gramsci does for example, folklore is only seen as valuable when its supposedly "oppositional" potential is addressed; and, for Gramsci at least, that oppositional potential is generally left untapped by the masses (Gramsci 3-23). While certainly this perspective was embraced by Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer among others, it is a recurring theme in more contemporary work; even if it is in a diluted form. The very popular cultural studies scholar John Fiske, for example, does not use the term "folk" or "folklore." Instead, he engages the concept of the masses using the phrase "popular culture."

Fiske defines "culture" as "the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system" (Fiske 23). By "popular" he means the "shifting set of social allegiances, which are described better in terms of people's felt collectivity than in terms of external sociological factors such as class, gender, race, region, or what have you" (Fiske 24). Much as any contemporary folklorist would define "folk group," so Fiske defines "popular." It is the self-identified shared identities which groups of people express. However, Fiske makes a further claim that is no surprise in light of his Frankfurt influences. "Popular culture in elaborated societies is the culture of the subordinate who resent their subordination, who refuse to consent to their positions or to contribute to a consensus that maintains it" (Fiske 169).

This recurring claim creates a two-fold tension between a folkloristic and a Frankfurt School approach. First, folklore studies, with its roots in Romantic Nationalism, sought to create units of disparate people who shared the same language. Thus, early folklore studies did not have the impetus to find

“oppositional” expressions in the way which Marxist studies do. Secondly, and as a result, many studies of folklore do engage personal expressions of shared values that very much act to enforce the hegemonic power structures out of which they spring. Fiske, reacting against the Frankfurt School’s over emphasis on the incapacity of the masses to resist the dominant hegemony, makes it very clear that the “folk” do resist. In fact, his conception of the popular is, by definition, “resentful” of the power relationships in society. While engaging in a noble aim (to present the popular mind or “folk” as an empowered group that is not merely the pawn of media), his assessment of the individual behaviors is clouded.

When Fiske speaks of “popular culture” he is not referring to the typical understanding of the term at all. The media productions which most of us assume are the heart and soul of “pop culture” are actually, for Fiske, part of the dominating hegemony which oppress the masses in the first place. He states that: “Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry” (Fiske 24). Fiske draws a radical distinction between mass culture which is marketed to the populace and “the popular.” This is clearly a result of his influence from Adorno and Horkheimer’s arguments about the role of media in keeping the masses in check. However, Fiske also breaks with Adorno and Horkheimer who argue that the masses are a sort of empty slate on which the power structures of capitalism are inscribed (*Adorno and Horkheimer Dialectic . . .*). Unlike the rampant pessimism of the early Frankfurt scholars, Fiske wants to re-inscribe the possibility of resistance in the people.

While this makes his conception of “the popular” an unproblematic hero in his analysis, Fiske is clearly subordinating what people actually do and think to his own hopes about the possibility of social reform. No wall exists between “the folk” and the mass media. Instead, the two are involved in a complex symbiosis which is much more complicated than Fiske acknowledges.

Folklore studies posits that any expression can be folkloric in origin regardless of its current manifestation. In so doing, folklore studies admits the reality of the complex interplay of media and consumer as well as the institutional

and vernacular. Just as the creator of a radio or television commercial might be specifically engaging an ancient proverbial expression, so might a child jump rope to the latest soda advertisement's jingle. The media producer might rely on shared ideas or values for his or her expressions just as he or she creates new shared ideas through his or her media. In sum, while many, though not all, Marxist perspectives struggle to locate a place for a strictly "oppositional folk" necessary to the maintenance of their political vision of the empowered masses, folklore studies has tended to value the expressions of the people without any *single overarching political perspective*. Because we all share folkloric behaviors, folklorists believe there must be some value in seeking to understand them as they really are in context. Once that understanding is adequate, it may well indicate that the kind of critical action Fiske and other Marxists hope for is possible and good.

Throughout this work, it will become obvious that some of the views held by my respondents are problematic or even downright bigoted. I am reporting what these individuals actually believe. These are views that I do not share. Still, I am reporting what these individuals expressed to me. I must assume their views are the result of some sort of meaningful matrix of belief which I am seeking to correctly understand. Hence, I must allow them their voices in my research. I cannot let my own perspective or political goals obscure their views.

Instead, I approach each new communication with an open mind. I defer judgment and criticism until I have gathered enough data to feel secure in my understanding of their beliefs. And, even then, I am careful to acknowledge that every idea every respondent expresses is valid in so far as it must serve some function in his or her life. Even bigotry and narrow-mindedness can function to define a powerful individual identity. I attempt to try to fairly assess the forces that are at work in a person's ability to harbor ideas which may seem, at first, totally absurd or even repulsive. Influenced by folklore studies, this perspective distances me from the approach fostered by Western Marxism in cultural and critical studies.

While I cannot say this with any certainty, I suspect one reason current theorists of cultural studies seldom actually talk face-to-face with the individuals they criticize is because, quite frankly, they are not comfortable subordinating their own politics to the cause of understanding human interaction as it actually exists. Being face-to-face with a virulent racist is an experience both disarming and disturbing at the same time. Coming away from such an experience, a researcher cannot help but have a more subtle empathy for the complex forces that have come together to create the entrenched beliefs of racism, sexism, and other prejudices in our society. At the same time, that experience reminds the ethnographer that *real* individuals really hold very dangerous beliefs for which, in the final assessment, *they are responsible*.

The Rise of the Vernacular

Even at the height of postmodern folkloristics in the 1960s, some scholars were already aware of and concerned by the associations of the word "folklore" and its problematic relationships to both Fascism and Marxism. As a result, a few scholars sought to distance studies of individual expression of shared ideas from its disciplinary designation of folklore. One early example is Margaret Lantis' 1960 *American Anthropologist* article titled, simply, "Vernacular Culture." As we shall see, this term "vernacular" has slowly risen in popularity to address the field of inquiry that folklore studies so long considered its own, and this rise has occurred, particularly, among Marxist cultural theorists. Rather ironically, despite the simple change of the name from folklore to vernacular, these theorists are addressing the same behavioral phenomenon. Hence, they, again, engage the matrix of Romantic and problematic assumptions based in the idea that the non-institutional or "folk" is also inherently in opposition to institutional or hegemonic forces.

In her article, Lantis specifically considers and rejects the term "folk" for two stated reasons. In her use of the term vernacular, "we are dealing with the

commonplace; yet 'mores,' 'folkways,' 'customs'—are all somehow inadequate, first, because they fail to suggest any organizing principle; second, because their connotation is chiefly traditional, the past, even suggesting lack of present adaptation" (Lantis 202). Lantis seems uninformed about folklore studies' behavioral and performative approaches in her claim that "folk" implies stasis. Her assertion that "folk" does not imply an "organizing principle" discounts the basic folkloristic claim that individual communities create their own identities and thus are an organizing principle. Lantis was right to be concerned about 19th century folklore studies' over emphasis of the transmission of unchanging cultural objects. It was precisely this same concern that drove Georges, Jones, and other 1960s era folklore studies reformers to focus on human behavior and events over and above the cultural texts and objects early folklorists envisioned and sought to collect.

Shortly after Lantis' article, the term "vernacular" began to appear in other scholarly circles. It made its most notable impact in the study of architecture. Seeking to define forms of architectural design that were not "primitive," but were neither representative of the highest technological advances or monumental efforts of a culture group, Amos Rappoport used the phrase "vernacular architecture."

When building tradesmen are used for the construction of most dwellings, we may arbitrarily state that primitive building gives way to *preindustrial vernacular*. Even in this case, however, everyone in the society knows the building types and even how to build them, the expertise of the tradesman being a matter of degree.
(Rappoport 4; his italics)

Clearly sharing the culturally transmitted nature of folklore, Rappoport's "vernacular" is one shared by "everyone in society." As such, this sort of vernacular is not imposed from above by institutional design or maintenance. Instead, it emerges across individual behaviors in a given community.

The enduring scholarly interest and value in addressing shared ideas in individual expression has continued to assert itself even as folklore studies has

lost some currency. When the concepts of vernacular and folklore appear in contemporary cultural studies, their senses of the non-institutional and shared values are seldom recognized as the field long associated with folklore. Hence, as is so often the case in cultural studies in general, many scholars seem to be operating without the benefit of the methods developed to rigorously address shared community values. In particular, the Marxist influence in cultural studies has de-emphasized the many ways in which individual expression of shared values actually functions to reinforce dominant power structures.

So, with the negative connotations of the word “folk” associated with Marxist thinking, some of these analysts turn to the term “vernacular” to address the non-institutional elements of society. However, they tend to, in a rather naively optimistic way, conflate the vernacular, the non-institutional, with the counter-institutional. This is conflation is, as my study shows in great detail, just not accurate.

The current appeal of the term vernacular is two fold: it refers to shared knowledge and makes a distinction between the non-institutional and the institutional or empowered segments of a society. However, those seeking to locate an oppositional quality in the expression of the masses who were frustrated by the word “folk” will, in the end, find the same frustration in the word “vernacular.”

One excellent example of this problem is in the work of the post-colonial theorist Trihn T. Mihn-Ha.

Clear expression, often equated with *correct* expression, has long been the criterion set forth in treatises on *rhetoric*, whose aim was to order discourse so as to *persuade*. The language of Taoism and Zen, for example, which is perfectly accessible but rife with paradox does not qualify as “clear” (paradox is ‘illogical’ and ‘nonsensical’ to many Westerners), for its intent lies outside the realm of persuasion. The same holds true for vernacular speech, which is not acquired through institutions—schools, churches, professions, etc.—and therefore not repressed by either grammatical rules, technical terms, or key words. (Mihn-Ha 16; her italics).

Regardless of the problematic claim that Mihn-ha seems to be making about all vernacular language being “outside persuasion,” she is aware of an important element of the vernacular.

In the vernacular rhetorics of spiritual ideas, we do often confront clearly “non-rational” expressions of belief. As with Mihn-Ha’s definition, such vernacular religious rhetorics stand outside of institutionally instilled rhetorical strategies or, at least, the majority of those in the West. However, she is incorrect in implying that there is some sort of cultural or behavioral wall between institutional religious expression, rationality, and the vernacular. The fact is, quite simply, that all vernacular expression is not counter-institutional. Instead, the vernacular, the institutional, and the individual exists in a relationship which is very complex. As I will outline in the following sections, I have chosen to consider this relationship as a *symbiosis*.

The Character of Vernacular Expression

Working from Don Yoder’s 1974 distinction between folk and institutional religion, I argue that actual religion, or any other belief system for that matter, really only exists in the thoughts and behaviors of individuals. However, for the term vernacular to make any sense when applied to religious belief or expression, there must also exist some institutional discourse to inhabit the opposite pole of the distinction.

The distinction Yoder makes between “institutional” and “folk” religion has led some scholars to assume that the abstract doctrines of a religious institution exist in some ideal form distinct from actual daily life. In studies of religious expression, Leonard Norman Primiano has recently made more radical claims. Primiano claims that all religion is “vernacular religion” because the abstract doctrines of institutions can only have life in the behavior and expression of living individuals (Primiano “Vernacular . . .”).

Differing from Primiano, I assert that such “institutional” expressions of religion do exist. However, they only exist in the actual documents that establish, maintain, and define religious institutions. This is an important distinction to make because, and as the Marxist approach would appreciate, there are real power relationships involved in all religious expression. We cannot simply ignore the power of institutional forces in the lives of individuals. Instead, however, we can usefully locate the institutional component of religion in the instruments of that power. Those instruments are, of course, the authorizing documents of the institution. In this sense, then, even the most doctrinal expression of personal religious belief is “vernacular” in that it is expressed by an individual who has ideas and beliefs that are distinct from, even if parallel to, the authorizing documents of a religious institution (Howard “Apocalypse . . .”).

While this sort of definition of vernacular places it right in line with the long history of folklore studies which accepts that many vernacular or folk expressions are not counter-hegemonic or counter-institutional, it does not mesh well with the Marxist impulse to locate opposition in the vernacular or folk. An interesting example of this simple fact can be found in the work of two rhetorical scholars with Marxist leanings. When John Ono and Kent Sloop engage the term “vernacular” in an attempt to point scholars of rhetoric toward the study of non-institutional rhetorics, they confront the fact that all which is vernacular is *not* necessarily also counter-institutional.

Ono and Sloop argue that, “in short, what we call for and describe is the construction, analysis, and consideration of the vernacular that has been to a large degree absent in scholarly rhetorical works” (Ono and Sloop 20). For these scholars, the need for the study of the vernacular is located in a need for a true empathy with the subjects of rhetorical documents:

The focus of recent works has not been on subjects but on how subjects are formed. In decentering the subject, “lived pain” is too often forgotten. We argue that a critique of vernacular discourse is necessary to render power relations among subjects visible; this approach, we believe, will allow critics to move beyond challenge to transformation. (Ono and Sloop 21)

Ono and Sloop, however, are rather disappointed by the results of their own study.

Working with texts from a Japanese-American newspaper during World War II, they find that their honest critique of these texts reveals that the newspaper articles were both virulently sexist and disturbingly pandering to whims of the U.S. government even while Japanese-Americans were being forced into internment camps.

Ono and Sloop conclude that the vernacular is not always "right" in the view of the liberal researcher. As they observe: "Vernacular discourse does not only exist as counter-hegemonic, but also as affirmative, articulating a sense of community that does not function solely as oppositional to dominant ideologies" (Ono and Sloop 22). If counter-institutionalism was a defining component of the vernacular, Ono and Sloop now had to look for another definitive aspect of the term based on their findings.

In Thomas Boyd's 1991 analysis of African American film, he stresses that marginalized elements of a dominant society negate that dominance in unique and specific ways. Vernacular discourse "challenges the dominant white discourse on blacks in American society" (Boyd 100). While this is sometimes clearly true, such discourse serves other purposes as well.

Richard B. Gregg's 1971 analysis of African American political rhetoric, unlike Boyd's, addresses one of these other purposes. As Ono and Sloop did in their analysis of Japanese-American discourse, Gregg found hegemonic themes in the African American vernacular. In his analysis, Gregg takes a more psychological approach, arguing that the "ego function" of African American "black power" rhetoric is more about self affirmation than it is about counter-hegemonic discourse. In light of this case, it is clear that the vernacular and the counter-hegemonic are not one in the same.

In the introduction to his well known book *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates asserts the existence of a generalized "vernacular theory" of African American literature. However Gates has been rightly shown to have made two common errors in his conceptualization of this vernacular. First, Gates assumes

that the vernacular exists, as one scholar put it, as a “singular, unified, and transhistorical African American vernacular” (Potter 17). Instead, vernaculars are always idiosyncratic and disparate. Further, Gates’ Romantic assumption allows him to consider this single “vernacular” as a fundamentally empowering force in an all embracing African American community. Obviously, because vernaculars are not necessarily counter-hegemonic, Gates has fallen prey to both typical errors in over-Romanticizing the idea of vernacular. Further, his claim that there is a single vernacular unfairly misrepresents the incredible beauty and diversity of African American vernaculars as diverse as the Chicago blues scene, Southern rural communities, or Haitian religious groups (Gates xii; Gibson).

In another analysis of African American culture, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American: A Vernacular Theory*, Houston A. Baker argues that “the vernacular (in its expressive adequacy and adept critical facility) always absorbs ‘classical’ elements of American life and art” (Baker 12). Ono and Sloop similarly claim that vernacular discourse is characterized by “cultural syncretism” stating that, “vernacular discourse is constructed out of fragments of popular culture” (Ono 23).

This is not merely seeing, as did Horkheimer and Adorno (and later Jameson and others), vernacular expression as a static regurgitation of elements handed to a mindless public through mass-media and other institutional outlets. Baker, Ono, and Sloop have brought to light something that has been present in folklore studies since its inception. Their realization is that the vernacular is not so much counter-institutional as it is *hybrid*.

As José Limón notes, a reevaluation of folklore in contemporary Marxist terms must rethink:

the traditional Western Marxist concept of mass, laboring society as a passive victim caught in the grip of an unrelenting hegemony. It should also free folklore from any necessary association with subordinate classes in society. (Limón 49)

Folklorists have located folkloric behavior in all sectors of society, and we have to accept that both the empowered and the disempowered have folklore.

When cultural theorists such as Fiske either jettisoned or failed to notice the field of folklore studies, they were left without the benefit of the folklore perspective. As I noted above, that perspective assumes that people share and transmit ideas in their community at all levels and, as such, these ideas must hold some value for that community. Further, it correctly notes that such ideas have continuities and consistencies which are observable.

Those continuities and consistencies form in and around the communities which use them to define their identities, and the way in which those identities are formed is itself dynamic. Folklore is not static because it is the process of constantly creating, maintaining, and recreating personal and communal identities based on previously held beliefs and new environmental contingencies. Folklorists know this is true because they have developed methods of ethnography, archiving, and analysis which document the individual cases of human behavior. Those unfamiliar with the folkloristic perspective have incorrectly assumed folklore is "static." Because Fiske, for example, is unfamiliar with this perspective, he assumes that media producers exist on a plane of being somewhere above and beyond the influences of their communities.

In this study, I wish to avoid the negative connotations of folklore which have arisen through a lack of understanding or familiarity with the many decades of folklore scholarship. For this reason the word vernacular is particularly appropriate for my study. I cannot reject the term "folklore" because, with Elliott Oring, I feel it would be dishonest to hide the source of many of my perspectives. However, I also want the vast majority of cultural critics and scholars who are, through no fault of their own, deeply misinformed about folkloristics to understand what I mean by "folk rhetoric." Hence, though the terms "folk" and "vernacular" are in the end nearly synonymous, I choose to call my object of research "vernacular rhetoric."

Lantis notes that the Latin root of "vernacular" is "*verna*": "The Latin does not seem to suggest traditional or primitive, but rather 'of one's house,' of the place" (Lantis 203). Lantis is right of course, but this is only a small part of the meaning and history of this complex term.

The Vernacular as a Home-Born/Half-Bred Slave

Verna, in Roman Latin, is a noun specifically referring to home-born slaves. Vernacular, as an adjective, referred to the quality of being a home-born slave. In classical Greek, the same noun is *oikotrips* and the adjective is *oikogenes* or “home-genetic.” This meaning is clear in Plato’s *Meno* when Socrates asks Meno to provide a “retainer” for a little experiment in learning. Meno brings a boy forward, and Socrates asks: “He is a Greek and speaks our language?” Meno responds: “Indeed yes—born and bred in the house” (Hamilton 365). Literally from the Greek, that is, “yes he is *vernacular*.”

In Roman society, slaves were kept as they were in Greece. Most of these slaves were seized or bought during wars, the squelching of colonial insurrections, or even outright piracy. However, during periods of peace, the influx of slaves into Rome was significantly diminished. Since any person born to a slave woman, despite the social position of the father, was automatically a slave, female slaves were encouraged to breed when slaves were scarce or to increase the master’s slave stock. (Finely). In Plato’s dialogue, there is irony in the fact that the boy’s vernacular position serves to indicate to Socrates that he is able to speak Greek. Non-vernacular slaves were foreigners and could not be expected to speak the dominant language natively.

In Cicero’s day, the meaning of vernacular had already begun to expand in interesting ways. Cicero uses the word in *Brutus* to define a successful orator: “Tinca . . . was completely worsted by Granius, through some indescribable vernacular flavor” (Cicero *Brutus*. . 147). This reference comes up in the context of a discussion of how not only words and accents but a particular sense of speaking and thinking arise within a certain city. This sense of speaking and thinking can then be recognized as exhibited outside of that “home” community—something like a Southern accent in Boston.

Two almost contradictory ideas seem to be at play in the idea of the vernacular. On the one hand, the *verna* is the offspring of conquered foreigners who have been sold into slavery and very possibly the offspring of the slave-

master himself. But this same foreign individual is also, somehow, deeply steeped in the local dominant community. The verna is at once inferior to the dominant Greek or Roman culture and yet totally native to it. At the same time, that Greekness is manifest in a slave: a subordinated individual. Thus, without both a dominant, or institutional, discourse and a locally specific character to define it, vernacular has no meaning. In this sense, to study the vernacular is to study the native expressions of slave children which are themselves the expressions of native institutional learning taken on by oppressed subordinates. This brings us back to the issue of "half-breed," pastiche or, more rightly, hybridity. In ancient contexts, vernacular referred to hybridization in that the foreign slave born in the dominant culture is, obviously, both foreign and native to that dominant culture.

That which is vernacular, then, requires hybridity between what is institutional and what is subordinate. Regardless of the actual parentage of the slave child, the verna was, at least, influenced by both his or her foreign mother and the Greek or Roman culture. The vernacular must be "unpure" in this sense, and yet utterly true. The vernacular speaker is the true Roman, Athenian, or Southern orator. At the same time, this very truth seems to rest somewhere and somehow beyond the linguistic means through which it becomes evident. As Mihh-Ha, Cicero, Plato, and Herder all seem to agree, it is something that goes deeper than the language itself, and it is something that one acquires in degrees as a native-born user. This sense of the vernacular, then, is learned through informal interaction.

Informally Learned Hybridity

This idea of informal education is also central to post-1960s folklore studies. This sense of education is, however, not one which implies a static transmission of ideas. In one of his numerous definitions of the field of folklore, Barre Toelken, a vocal proponent of folklore as a discipline, regards the term

“tradition” as definitive of folklore saying: “all folklore participates in a distinctive dynamic process Constant change, variation within a tradition . . . is viewed here simply as a central fact of existence” (Toelken 7).

This sense of dynamic change within a tradition is what characterizes informal education. Traditional lore is transferred to the next generation by way of informal communication, and precisely because it is not codified into a formal structure it is more apt to change in a dynamic response to environmental pressures. The idea that these dynamic social forms function as education comes from William Bascom’s 1954 *Journal of American Folklore* article titled “Four Functions of Folklore.” Bascom was an anthropological folklorist heavily influenced by Bronislaw Malinowski’s functionalism. Bascom locates four specific areas in which folklore, more or less without the knowledge of its users, can be seen to operate in a community. Bascom’s third and fourth functions of folklore are what are central to my approach: “the third function of folklore is that which it plays in education” and the fourth is the “important but often overlooked function of maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behavior” (Bascom 3). As Bascom and many other folklorists have carefully documented, individuals learn what is and what is not seen as true and convincing by their community through informal day-to-day interaction outside of educational institutions.

If these informally transferred strategies, techniques, and truths can be considered as *instructive within communities*, then they should be considered at some length because they provide the underlying foundation upon which every communication, every education, must stand or fall. These vernacular (informal) forms of communication should be considered carefully even if they will never present the opportunity for a final or quantitative analysis. Informal education, like all education and all real human behavior, is not reducible to the mechanized performance of rules. Nor is it adequately addressed by single idiosyncratic “readings” such as O’Leary’s “ultimate” interpretation.

This informally acquired education is what the symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz called “local knowledge.” Such knowledge is bound to a location in the same sense that the “vernacular” is “home bred.” It exhibits, like all things

“folk,” continuities and consistencies. In this way, it functions as a community’s “common sense.” However, this “common sense” “varies too radically from one place and time to the next for there to be much hope of finding a defining constancy within it, an *Ur-story* always told” (Geertz *Local* . . .85). Further, the researcher finds that the more he or she engages in a local sense of the world, the more complex and dynamic that local sense seems. And it is this quality of the vernacular that has so often led individuals to consider it, at some level, mystical. At the very least it is beyond language, beyond any “grammar” of a language anyway. *It is the unspoken knowledge of shared identity.* To represent such local self-perspectives to an audience that does not share in that vernacular, in that unspoken identity, can only be fairly done in one way. *The researcher must have first hand experience.* To do it ethically, it must be done with, in Cicero’s term, *decorum*. As Geertz put it, the researcher must, to some degree, share in the behaviors that create, maintain, and recreate that unspoken identity if he or she expects to be able *to re-present them deeply*. With Geertz I assert that any representation of a real person “is intrinsically incomplete. And worse than that, the more deeply it goes the less complete it is” (Geertz *Interpretation* . . .29).

So the ethical representation of a locally specific vernacular *requires* this sense of the incomplete. It indicates that an analysis has gone beyond easy generalizations and into the realm of vernacular identity. To communicate that vernacular is to engage in description which seeks to present the arguments to one’s audience in terms used by one’s research respondents. It is to act as a sort of translator—not covering over or tidying up the contradiction and ambiguity, but presenting these as they actually appeared to the researcher. Geertz:

‘Translation,’ here, is not a simple recasting of others’ ways of putting things in terms of our own ways of putting them (that is the kind in which things get lost), but displaying the logic of their ways of putting them in the locutions of ours; a conception which again brings it rather closer to what a critic does to illuminate a poem than what an astronomer does to account for a star” (Geertz *Local* 10)

Applying Geertz's mandate to my approach and to the questions that begun this chapter, how are common themes of divinely illuminated passages or negotiative rhetorics transmitted through time and space? Humans communicate and re-communicate ideas which take on lives of their own. Like the words which convey these ideas, they predate us, we change them with our sentences and accents, and they outlive us as others take and make them their own. Further, certain experiences of the world are shared by humans across time and space—pleasure, pain, fear, and desire are the most obvious among them. And these experiences give rise to common narratives and forms of expression.

I do not believe that it is currently possible say how this relationship exactly works in all situations. Stephen O'Leary was overzealous in offering us a single "ultimate" interpretation of apocalypse. What can be said is that in each given case there are many factors that combine to create the particular idiosyncratic expression; and, equally important, that expression is itself not immune to the histories of the narratives and forms which have borne it through time to that moment in which it is expressed. In fact, all expression is an idiosyncratic product of its circumstances which does not exist in any ideal or essential form. What I am describing are the dim outlines of a complex and dynamic symbiosis.

The literary critic, philosopher, and poet Kenneth Burke, long before the rise in popularity of the term "vernacular," wrote of a "folk criticism."

You have heard tributes to "folk art." You should also give thought to "folk criticism." We are not here proposing to cultivate such terms "esthetically," for their purely "picturesque" value. We are considering them as a collective philosophy of motivation, arising to name the relationships, or social situations, which people have found so pivotal and so constantly recurring as to need names for them. (Burke *Attitudes* . . . 173).

Burke saw, in this 1937 publication, some of the problems inherent with using "folk" such as the implication of the "picturesque." However, he also recognized the term's ability to name something that otherwise had no name: "a collective philosophy of motivation" which rises up to give names, and hence

semantic positioning and thus meaning, to “recurring” and “pivotal” things in the real world.

A Rhetorical Premise: Action as a Positive Term

Taking the cue from Burke, it would seem only natural to apply a folkloristic perspective to human communication in an effort to locate the sort of recurring rhetorical strategies I described at the outset of this chapter. Such an undertaking would define what folk or vernacular rhetoric is. However, with one notable exception, this application has not been undertaken. During the resurgence of folklore studies in the 1960s, Roger Abrahams took up the task of introducing Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical methodology into the realm of folkloristics with his article: “Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore.”

Seeming to report a basic point which Abrahams claims Burke makes about language, Abrahams states: “He argues that all language is a process of naming, that naming gives comfort by creating a feeling of control, that for one to know the name of a thing is to achieve magical control over it” (Abrahams “Introductory Remarks . . .” 145). Abrahams explores the “naming” of elements by the “folk.” He locates the motivation of what Burke calls “folk criticism” in a desire to bring elements of reality under human control. Abraham’s application of Burke is a significant reduction of even this single point which Burke makes.

In *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke notes how “the mere desire to name something by its ‘proper’ name or to speak a language in its distinctive way is intrinsically perfectionist” (Burke *Language . . .* 16). That is to say: to imagine a single “proper” naming points ahead, semantically, to the perfection of naming where the thing and its name are impossible to confuse. The perfecting push of Abrahams’ statement implies a possible order attained by the functional naming of all things. A completed order of naming would have placed all things under the namer’s control. In such a situation, part of that control would be the impossibility of incorrectly “naming” a thing.

Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's revelation that language is relational and arbitrary, we can imagine a language which has successfully named all things that would make confusion impossible because the relational grid, or "cognitive map," would no longer have any, to use Jacques Derrida's term, "play" between the thing in the world and its name. In this situation, the name and the thing have become synonymous. Abrahams' analysis falls right in line with the most noted proponent of functional anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski.⁴ Based on Malinowski's work, Abrahams would place the "correct" or "true" (the synonymous or "perfect") understanding of folk critical naming as "functional." While Abrahams appears to be introducing Burke's ideas to folklorists, what he has actually done is diminish Burke's philosophy of language into the simplistic terms of functionalism. Functionalism itself was, and is, a tried and true analytical position often engaged by folklorists. In an unstated irony, Abrahams has displayed his thesis by the very structure of his analysis. By reducing the difficult ideas of Burke to ones which are already easily understood by folklorists, he has brought the field of rhetoric under his folkloristic control.

Clifford Geertz applies Burke's philosophy of language in a much more subtle and complex way than does Abrahams. In 1973 Geertz published a collection of his essays called *The Interpretation of Cultures* which still functions as the foundation of symbolic anthropology. His work helped to, at least for a time, re-vitalize and redirect a discipline deeply mired in racial and colonial politics. Geertz effected this re-vitalization through an application of Burke's ideas about language.

Geertz introduces his theoretical position by admitting its limitations. "In ethnography, the office of theory is to provide a vocabulary in which what symbolic action has to say about itself—that is, about the role of culture in human life—can be expressed" (Geertz *Interpretation* . . . 27). Geertz does not limit his

⁴ Bronislaw Malinowski is considered the founder of this school of anthropological analysis. His work is, and continues to be, a major influence of most ethnographers. For an example of his analysis, see his 1948 collection of essays *Magic, Science, and Religion and other essays*.

naming of symbolic action to “naming” as does Abrahams. Instead, he seeks to provide a set of terms that allow cultures to express themselves. Shifting the focus of anthropological study away from its effective but reductionist appeal to culture as a system of functioning ideas, Geertz capitalized on Burke’s focus on humans as “the symbol-using (symbol making, symbol-misusing) animal” (Burke *Language . . .* 16).

For Geertz, religious symbolic action functions to sustain a culture’s “world view.” The “ethos” of a group is its beliefs about aesthetic and moral preferences. Its world view is its “factual” understanding of physical reality. The function of ritual, and the myths and beliefs that ritual sustains, is to “relate an ontology and a cosmology to an aesthetics and a morality.” The power of such religious symbol-use is in “their presumed ability to identify fact with value at the most fundamental level, to give to what is otherwise merely actual, a comprehensive normative import” (Geertz *Interpretation . . .* 127).

These statements parallel Malinowskian functionalism, but a simple functional analysis, though a powerful tool, leaves little room for the deep understanding of symbol use that Geertz seems to envision. By emphasizing the human “control” of cultural elements, functionalism like that of Abrahams implies that such elements can be harnessed, by ethnographers trained in functionalism, to scholarly concepts like “control” and, wagon-like, transport us to the scientific knowledge definitive of a post-“savage” civilization. It does not include the necessary reflexive action that such ethnographic naming must recognize. Although Stephen O’Leary’s final “ultimate” interpretation of apocalypse is not so nearly reductionistic as Abrahams’ concept of “naming,” O’Leary also fails to recognize that his application of Kenneth Burke’s work is also finally tragic. By offering us the “ultimate” interpretation of a discourse, the scholar fails recognize his or her own identity position which makes that naming possible.

In so far as we control a thing by defining it terministically, the termed thing then redefines our world view in relation to it. Even as naming rain after a deity and calling upon it during times of drought, the naming of complex vernacular behavior as “functional” is a hit or miss business in terms of real-world

utility. While one belief or behavior may well have elements which function in a society to do certain things, that hardly allows us to understand how that rain-god or research agenda has come to define and mold the lives of real individuals.

In order to better observe how such a complex process plays out, the ethnographer must, in Geertz's term, engage in "thick description" (Geertz *Interpretation . . .* 6). "Thick description" is the systematic, careful, and expansive observation and documentation of humans engaging in symbolic behaviors including the ethnographer's role in the acquisition of his or her descriptive material. As much as Geertz encourages us to engage in this sort of analysis, he also notes its limitations. Ethnography, as I mentioned above, is always "incomplete." In fact, the very completion, as in the location of naming into a limited sort of Malinowskian functionalism or any "ultimate" interpretation of real-world symbolic behavior, as in Abrahams and O'Leary, leads to a thinner description than my approach will yield.

Vernacular Rhetoric

To avoid some of the pitfalls common in simple functionalist analysis, the ethnographer must directly and openly consider what theoretical approach he or she is engaging. There can be no analysis, or (arguably) description for that matter, without bringing one's own unique perspective to the subject; and every perspective is the result of the myriad of descriptive, analytical, and theoretical influences. This is true of every respondent I interview as much as it is true of myself. To deny this fact is simply to do bad analysis. Instead, the rigorous ethnographer must engage the most basic premises that inform his or her analysis in an open and critical way. I must place myself and my analysis under the scrutiny and within the same semantic field as that of my respondents. In the following sections, I will apply my analytical method to my own position as a researcher. In that application, I will define the general subject of my entire analysis: vernacular rhetoric.

The foundational premise of the rhetorical-behavioral ethnography I am engaged in is that individual humans are the loci of a will, and this will produces behaviors which are always the result of some sort of motivation within the perspective of the individual. Although this premise might seem so obvious that it does not need to be explored, it is necessary here for us to fully understand what I mean by the term “rhetoric.”

With a far longer history than folklore, rhetoric too has suffered the highs and lows of intellectual fashion. Through time, the meaning of rhetoric has drifted much farther than folklore. Rhetoric, both as a term and a discipline, dates back at least to pre-Socratic philosophy. In common parlance, rhetoric is used to refer to stylistic elements of language use. Commonly heard in the phrase “it’s *only* rhetoric,” the term carries a certain denigrating implication that the styles and strategies of language are somehow separate from the meaning or intention of the speaker. Scholars have noted that this sense of rhetoric evolved in the 18th century in response to the heavy dominance rhetoric held in the educational institutions of the time (Kinney; Conley 191ff). This is not the meaning of rhetoric I am engaging for this study. Instead, with Kenneth Burke, Chaim Perelman, Wayne Booth and others, I am engaging rhetoric in its Aristotelian sense.

In Aristotle’s handbook on the art of rhetoric, he defined the term as follows: “Let rhetoric be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle 37). Sunk within that definition is the assumption that rhetoric is an “ability” which real people possess. Not necessarily quantifiable in general, it is the ability to see what is persuasive in a particular case. As an ability, rhetoric is only observable when people choose to engage in it. Because people *do* do it, it is observable in their behaviors. Since they *choose* to do it, it is motivated action; and since they are seeking to persuade others, it must be exhibited as part of an overall social matrix or discourse community. Rhetoric, then, is the strategic communicative behaviors observable in human discourse.

In light of this definition of rhetoric, it might seem rather redundant to add the modifier "vernacular" to the term. If rhetoric is, as Aristotle defines it, an ability that is already present in individuals and we accept that such abilities are transmitted primarily through informal social interactions, then rhetoric is already vernacular. Because of the long historical trajectory of meanings in the term rhetoric, however, this line of reasoning does not follow. Simply stated: from the days before Aristotle and Plato until the present, rhetoric has become synonymous with formal education. Before Plato, schools of rhetoric evolved to serve the growing need for public speakers in the Athenian city-state. Through a myriad of permutations, the formal traditions of rhetorical-based pedagogies are still prominent in higher education with departments of speech and communication which emphasize public speaking or in composition programs which emphasize written reasoning.

As a result, scholars of rhetoric tend to view their field as the result of a long tradition of influential texts which are, by and large, focused on the teaching of rhetorical techniques. However, a vernacular rhetorical perspective infused with the methods of folkloristics assumes that there is no single rhetorical tradition, or conception of that tradition, that is not an idiosyncratic theoretical construct. From this perspective, every individual reconstructs their own sense of what is "traditional" through a lifetime of experience and action. This is, however, not the predominate view held by scholars of rhetoric. The preface to Bizzell and Herzberg's monstrous anthology *The Rhetorical Tradition* asserts that: "Our book attempts to represent a long-standing tradition of the study of rhetoric, with a canon of recognized authors and works" (Bizzell and Herzberg v). Another contemporary rhetorical scholar, James Crosswhite, seems to view the field of rhetoric in similar terms: "The great tradition of rhetoric understood that the goal of rhetorical training is not as the remedying of deficits, but as the realization of a certain kind of human potential. This book is also committed to that goal" (4).

Placing his own work in the line of a great tradition of books, Crosswhite begins his own inter-textual *tour de force*. All three of these rhetoricians have a

sense of rhetoric with a capital "R." "Rhetoric" is a canonized tradition of texts. However, Crosswhite and others do recognize that there is also the little "r" rhetoric. Following his "postmodern pragmatism," Crosswhite states that, "*all* reasonable discourse, including advanced research, is both rhetorical and aimed at realizing certain social aims" (Crosswhite 15; his italics). This "little rhetoric" refers to the idea that all discourse uses some sort of rhetorical strategy, and this sense of rhetoric opens up the possibility for there to be a multiplicity of rhetorical traditions—not just the "tradition" of Rhetoric as embodied in texts from Aristotle to Cicero to Ramus to Burke and beyond. From my perspective, the limits of this multiplicity are infinite and can only be located on a case-by-case basis in the examination of communicative behaviors within specific communities.

This assertion returns us the definition of vernacular rhetoric. By combing the terms of the vernacular we have explored at great length above with Aristotle's definition of rhetoric, *vernacular rhetoric can be defined as socially instilled strategies of persuasion that are evidenced in individual human behaviors*. Vernacular rhetoric is distinct from institutional rhetoric only in so far as it is acquired by individuals from sources of influence outside formal institutions of learning. While it can be and it is exhibited by individuals at all levels of society, it is the only avenue of persuasion available to those individuals who do not have access to the institutional forms of learning offered to the elites of any given society or community. Though not limited to subordinated individuals in a community, it is itself subordinate to forms of rhetoric which are codified in the texts of institutions. As a result of this co-existence with institutional forms, it is always hybrid. As such, vernacular rhetoric is, in terms of daily human behavior, far more common than any other sort of rhetoric because every institutional practice or learned technique becomes vernacular when it is fully assimilated and reemerges as the idiosyncratic hybrid of influences which have come together in an individual.

Like folklore studies, then, my approach to rhetoric is not so much about the subject, be it a personal e-mail or a 19th century letter, as it is about the perspective I take to that subject. A vernacular perspective on rhetoric seeks to

locate and analyze the continuities and consistencies that seem to arise over time and across space in the strategies which individuals use to express their own motives.

With Burke, I argue that all expression is persuasive in that it has, though sometimes deeply obscured, an individual motive. As a result, in all symbolic action, the evidence of that motive can be found. Further, the vast majority of expression posits its motives in ways that are not formally taught persuasive techniques. Thus my approach to rhetoric is one which utilizes the rich methods of folkloristic ethnography to document and gather evidence of recurring informal rhetorical strategies.

In this context, we can see how some of Burke's very complicated ideas about how rhetoric works to define the very identity of its user are indispensable in beginning to consider a field of rhetoric which is not premised on any institutional pedagogy. The idea of "naming" which Abrahams uses, for example, becomes far more all inclusive when we see its fuller descriptions in Burke's work. In fact, "naming" is actually the fundamental linguistic act. It underlies all communications at all times and for all people. This is because, simply, the very act of self expression is an act of self definition.

As Burke explains:

An act is done by an agent in a scene. But an act is usually preceded by a corresponding attitude, or "incipient act" (as when an act of friendliness grows out of a friendly attitude on the part of the agent). The scene is the motivational locus of the act insofar as the act represents a scene-act ratio (as, for instance, when an "emergency situation" is said to justify an "emergency measure") . . . The term "Will" is apparently designed to assign a "place" to the choice between different possibilities of attitude-act development. (Burke *Rhetoric of Religion* 188)

In Burke's characterization of humans as "symbol using," the premise is that humans act. Logically prior to this statement, is the recognition that I, the researcher, act. This recognition of "Will" is, in Burke's sense, a "positive term." Positive terms "name par excellence the things of experience" (Burke *Rhetoric of*

Motives 184). As I experience an object, I can point to that physical object as the definition of its corresponding term. In the case of will, my experience of my own action makes the phrase “my will” a positive term.

Looking at Figure One, my action or will is represented as an unnamed experience in the realm of physical motion as represented by the solid line at the bottom of the figure.

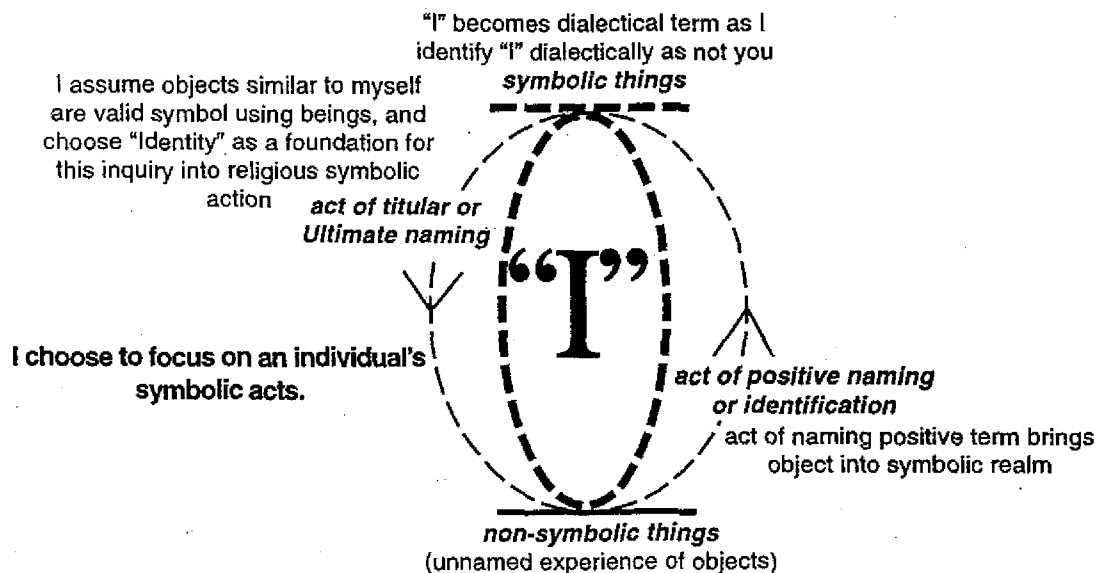


Figure 1: The Cycle of Identity Formation

When I act, I experience this action. I can assume that I share this unnamed category of experience with humans—and maybe other animals. As a human, though, I name the experience symbolically. I call it “my will,” or, to simplify “act.” Following the outer ellipse in the figure, the act of naming “act,” pulls my action into the symbolic realm.

Acting in this way carries with it certain necessary results. At the top of the ellipse is a broken line. This line represents the realized symbolic act. The necessary result of naming “act” is the implication of a scene in which this act takes place: the “Will” or the “locus of action.” The active naming of act creates

the “I” (the identity) at the center of the figure that is the agent in the scene of “Will.” The term “I,” though, is no longer a simple positive term.

The direct experience of “I” is only possible in so far as I am acting. The abstraction of “I” as an “identity” must be defined dialectically. “Act” is dialectically defined against those real physical experiences that are not the result of my actions. I can then recognize my identity by the apparent occurrence of acts in scenes outside of my realm control. Taking the supposed acts of others as a premise inherent in symbolic action, the individual as a self-defining locus of action becomes a titular or “Ultimate Term” (Burke *Rhetoric of Motives* 187).

Not unlike Stephen O’Leary’s “ultimate comic” interpretation of apocalypse, I too have a fundamentally tragic element in my analysis. Unlike O’Leary, however, I here recognize and state what that underlying tragic assertion is—and, in my view, I place the tragedy more properly near the heart of my analysis. I am not attempting to conceal it in the garb of a comic “reading.” Instead, I acknowledge that it does and must define the field in which my semantic understanding of “apocalypse” occurs. By choosing to focus on individuals’ actions in my research, I have placed the individual at the top of a symbolic hierarchy. Like me, any individual’s actions must come from a locus of will and are, in so far as my own acts are, valid subjects for inquiry. These subjects of inquiry, when divorced from my individual experience and placed into the theoretical realm of what I think another person is doing, are called *motives*.

This sort of research premise is not just a rhetorical one, but it is, as we have already seen, a deeply *behavioral* one. From the behavioral perspective, the recurring strategies in various examples of human communication are the result of the ongoing dynamic exchange between humans involved in informal interaction and the changing environments to which they must adjust. While folklorists have long known that forms of narrative, beliefs, values and many other things are transmitted informally, my research shows that rhetorical strategies too are transmitted across time and space through everyday social interactions, and these strategies are the focus of my study. However, I have

only been able to make that claim by acknowledging that it rests on a whole host of premises and assertions. Primary among those is, of course, the assumption that individuals act. And, by the very nature of language, this premise must include an acknowledgement that my own thought and belief is, in fact, "tragic." For my analysis, individuals must act and, for it to make any sense at all, I cannot negotiate about this fact. Instead, this is something I take as my "ultimate" or definitive premise.

The Comic and Tragic

Moving from this premise, we can see how Kenneth Burke's opposing poles of attitude, the comic on the one hand and the tragic on the other, closely parallel the terms I am addressing in this study: the negotiative and the experiential. However, there are some key differences. Although in many ways Burke's terms for attitudes come from a psychological perspective, my terms of rhetorical strategies are based on observations of actual communication which I view as motivated human behavior. Because of this subtle difference, my terms cover slightly different semantic fields.

The comic attitude is necessary for any truly negotiative communicative event to occur. Real negotiation only occurs when one is truly open and ready to alter his or her position based on a possible error. However, negotiative rhetoric can be employed, in a sense falsely, by individuals with no real intention of considering their possible errors. Hence the use of negotiative rhetoric implies a comic attitude, but does not serve as proof one is present.

On the other hand, the tragic attitude is one where the individual is totally closed to error because he or she has already come to a final decision about a given issue. Experiential rhetoric is, in the cases I have examined, most often associated with this attitude. Having a direct experience of the divine, the believer has no need to truly consider that he or she may be wrong about what that experience proves. It seems to me, however, that the primary factor leading

to a truly tragic attitude in the American discourses I have examined is preceded by a belief that personal experience can act, and has acted, as a final authority.

In his *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke argues that humans naturally, and even rather obsessively, try to lump like things together in an attempt to press order upon the universe which they experience. The result of this lumping is a general disposition or "attitude." "For instance, if we feel happy on three different occasions, these three occasions are in a sense attitudinally united; they are one in spirit." Forming a comic attitude, then, is to view the world from "the comic frame: the methodic view of human antics as a comedy, albeit as a comedy ever on the verge of the most disastrous tragedy" (Burke *Attitudes* . . . iii). As repeated instances of negotiative or experiential belief positioning or argumentative engagement yield results which are perceived as good by an individual, a general disposition or attitude which regards those experiential or negotiative strategies as effective or good begins to prevail in the individual's general world view.

While the use of negotiative rhetorical strategy implies a comic attitude, it can also stem from a tragic one in which negotiation is simply seen as a means to the end of winning a pre-decided argument. From Burke's *A Grammar of Motives*:

The use of scales, meters, controlled laboratory conditions, and the like, can set up situations in which speechless things can hand down accurate judgments. Men can arrange it that nature gives clear, though impartial and impersonal, answers to their questions . . . Stated broadly the dialectical (agonistic) approach to knowledge is through the *act* of assertion, whereby one 'suffers' the kind of knowledge that is the reciprocal of his act. This is the process embodied in tragedy, where the agent's action involves a corresponding passion, and from the sufferance of the passion there arises an understanding of the act. (Burke *A Grammar* . . . 38).

At his point, it might be easier to conceptualize this tragic attitude in terms of the Greek ritual drama *Oedipus the King*. In perfect Greek symmetry, each action the hero takes leads to the revelation of his origins as king and son of his

wife. These acts, in sum, lead to the inevitable collapse of his psyche and his kingly power—and, finally, his blindness.

In opposition to this Greek tragedy, we might consider the many examples of Shakespeare's adaptation of Roman satire. *The Comedy of Errors*, for an easy target, chronicles the heroes' repeatedly poor choices for potential mates. There are corrections and reattempts at coupling. Finally, the successful unions which, through many guffaws, end the play. This sort of plot line implies an attitude in which error is accepted, adjustments to misperceptions of the situation are made, and, finally, choices are made which lead to acceptable results.

A comic attitude which informs actual human behavior, however, is found not in the final outcome of an act but in the ability to readily accept, or even expect, that errors will be made and new situations will require adjustments of one's behavior. Thus it is a psychological position that is properly found in the actors and sympathetic audience during the play itself. Once the play has ended, the audience, it would seem, is allowed to return to whatever attitudes they are prone to in life. In this way, the audience of tragedy is awaiting a fated ending without true hope for correction of error. In the experience of dramatic tragedy, there is a certain suffering pleasure. The audience of the comedy, on the other hand, enjoys the twists and turns of human error by humorously considering the very serious life matters of love, gender, and social relationships explored by the drama.

The element of my analysis that distinguishes it as a more behavioral-rhetorical method than Burke's attitudinal one, is my focus on the way in which specific rhetors locate and employ recalcitrance in their arguments about truth. Each individual approaches a given subject from a specific, and unique, point of view. Each act an individual engages is motivated by that distinct point of view. While, as Burke notes, "the difference in point of view will reveal a corresponding difference in the discovery of relevant facts," the factor of recalcitrance acts as a universalizing force in so far as it limits the range of possible "facts" that can arise from a given act. Burke states: "Such a position does not involve us in subjectivism, or solipsism. It does not imply that the universe is merely the

product of our interpretations. For the interpretations themselves must be altered as the universe displays various orders of recalcitrance to them" (Burke *Permanence* . . . 256). In this way, individuals involved in identity formation are always negotiating between recalcitrance. In so doing, such their symbolic acts are always comic to some degree. At the same time, identity itself is perceived as definitive (it is the locus of "will" as I discussed above) as such it is fundamentally not negotiative. Instead, it is necessarily tragic. In this way, all symbolic actions engage both tragic and comic attitudes. However, specific symbolic actions can be seen to exist on a continuum between the two poles of possible attitude positioning—never really wholly engaging in either.

In this claim, I am moving beyond Burke a bit. I am claiming that, in general, there are two primary locales for recalcitrance: first, from the actual physical experience of the world or divine and, secondly, from the social rejection of a negotiative attempt at shared truth. In a negotiative-comic mode, the speaker is willing to, or locates a previous willingness to, alter his or her beliefs based on the exchange of differing viewpoints. In an experiential-comic mode, the speaker is willing to, or locates a previous willingness to, alter his or her beliefs based on direct experiences in the real world. The important distinction between these two modes is in the location of the perceived truth as developing out of personal interactions which must be shared (as in the comic attitude) versus perceived truth as located in personal, and hence potentially idiosyncratic, experience of reality (as in the tragic).

At some level, all communication must engage both recalcitrances. That is to say that, to use Burke's term, there is a necessary "incipient" attitude that assumes that I am not the only conscious being which exists. To assume otherwise would be solipsism. However, that assumption must rest on my direct experience of the world as it has manifested itself in physical recalcitrance. Hence there must be some part of a discourse which accepts a term or terms as "ultimate" and beyond negotiation. This is exactly what I have consciously done with my expression of a belief in the reality of human action. In this way, all discourse which assumes other conscious beings exist to communicate to is in

some sense inherently tragic. As O'Leary has properly shown, however, there are examples of extremes of tragic rhetoric which are very much part of an apocalyptic Christian discourse. This is, quite simply, because of the "revelatory" nature of the Christian apocalyptic tradition.

As indicated in Figure Two below, revelatory experiences are part of the general experiential mode of proof. However, in my use of the term, revelatory experiences refer to a direct experience of the divine. So doing, they can bear with them a powerful divine recalcitrance which stands beyond any possible error or correction regardless of any potential social recalcitrance.

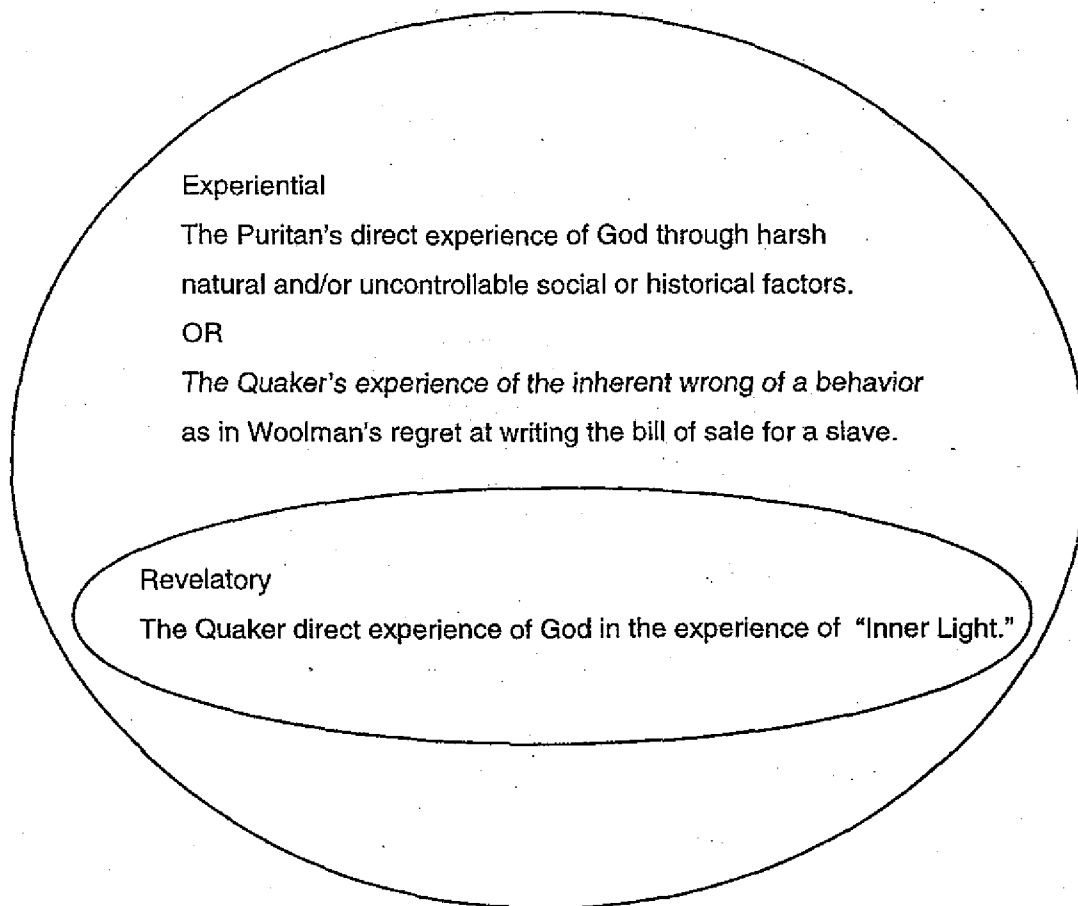


Figure 2: Experiential versus the Revelatory

As we shall see in the specific historic examples of Quaker and Puritan vernacular rhetoric in the next chapter, each example of recalcitrance functions to form the identity of an individual in relation to his or her community. And in every case, that identity as well as the way in which it negotiates between the recalcitrance of negotiation and experience is idiosyncratic and unique. Even in that idiosyncrasy, however, we can find the general principles of the comic and tragic attitudes emerging in each communication of every individual.

Symbiosis of the Vernacular

Both in folkloristic analysis generally and vernacular rhetorical analysis specifically, the hope and sometimes the goal of collecting many versions of similar individual expressions is to learn something about what people do and why they do it.

No matter how much data we amass about any sort of similar behaviors, we have done nothing if we do not seek to learn something about that behavior. So the final goal of this study is to make some general claims about the effects that Internet communication is having on individual communicative behavior.

In order to lay the foundation for this final move, we can consider the cycle of the act-scene ratio which I have described above as functioning to define both individual identity through idiosyncratic self expression and community identity through its aggregate of these individual acts. In this way, a community continually defines, maintains, and redefines its own identity through the dynamic social interactions of everyday life. Through the continuities and consistencies and their relative discontinuities and inconsistencies, communities can be seen as self-defining through the strategies of day-to-day communication. This is true of small religious communities of the 19th century as much as it is true of contemporary communities of rhetorical scholars. However, to make full sense of my claim we must return to the distinction between the vernacular and the institutional; and, again, we must acknowledge that the vernacular is locked in a

symbiosis with the institutional and that these two components of a given community do not necessarily oppose one another.

The very concepts of vernacular and institutional can only be understood as relational constructs: one cannot exist without “always already” defining the other. Choosing to name a particular belief as vernacular defines what must be considered institutional in the same way that what is institutional *creates* a vernacular in the shadow of its creation. And it is this very effect that this entire chapter has been about. This what I am calling *the symbiosis of the vernacular*. The vernacular cannot have any meaning until something is named as the institution that has created it; or, quite possibly, the other way around.

When attempting to locate and document rhetorical strategies that are not codified in institutional practice but seem to persist across space and time, we find, as we should expect, a symbiotic relationship between the things we have created through our naming and the “institutional.” That is to say: *when a researcher uses either the term vernacular or institutional he or she has, in that symbolic act, created both*. And, of course, no such analytic act is without motivation.

Because this symbiosis of terms is inherent in their very use, it can be located across not only individual lives or in specific communities but also in whole discourses.⁵ The fact that this symbiosis effects the discourse of rhetoric has a very real impact in, at the very least, the field of education: the field with which rhetoric has always been most closely associated. This is one general area which this analysis shall, finally, return to in hopes of shedding light on the effects of Internet communication.

As a discipline, rhetoric has traveled through education across the centuries most often in the form of handbooks, textbooks, and examples of the

⁵ It should be noted that this particular symbiosis, that of the vernacular-institutional, is really just the one at hand. Such relationships are inherent in all symbol use. Conceiving of terms as relational carries with it the implication that all terms contain, often less obvious, relationships with other terms that are seldom made explicit. However, for the purposes of this study, the vernacular-institutional symbiosis is the only one I have the space or need to fully explore.

proper use of language. From the perspective of a vernacular analysis, these documents are properly viewed as the institution of rhetoric. So saying, I create a vernacular by addressing the individual hybridization and personal expression of these institutional forms.

It is obvious that contemporary education is itself institutional because of its focus on the production of texts which refer to and extend a body of knowledge. However, the actual individuals for whom education is practiced come to these institutions steeped in the vernacular manifestations of an untold number of divergent influences. In contemporary society, this hybridization has spread and diversified as more and more texts are produced, intercontinental travel has become easier and more accessible, and communication across the globe and between communities has become more pervasive. The advent of electronic modes of communication functions to accelerate the possibilities and actual contacts between disparate individuals informed by a myriad of degrees of informal and institutional learning. Our contemporary vernacular is more characterized by hybridity than at any other time in human history.

However, the fundamental nature of the symbolic has not changed. Where language persists, so too do linguistic and ideational symbioses. In particular, the symbiosis of the institutional and the vernacular remains a dominant force in education.

In his 1991 essay, "Prescriptive Rhetorics, the Rejection of Rhetoric, and the Ethical Response of Rhetorical Theory," John Gage has described the history of rhetorical education in almost these very terms. "I would like to propose in this essay that the history of rhetoric may be viewed as a series of reactions *by rhetoric to rhetoric*—that is, a cycle that results from inherently contradictory aspects of rhetoric that are ever present in history" (Gage 81, his italics).

Gage convincingly argues that the tension that animates the history of rhetoric as a field of study up to today is between what is consciously prescribed by teachers and what is tacitly known by students of those teachers. By locating a tacit *topos*, or argumentative tactic, the teacher institutionalizes what is tacit. Teaching that *topos*, the teacher influences the actions of his or her students. As

those students move through the community, those ideas spread tacitly. Sometimes the institutional counterparts are discredited or forgotten; only to rise up again, they are "rediscovered" by a new teacher or scholar and re-institutionalized.

The implications of this claim are two-fold. First, every single student who engages a textbook, a teacher of writing and public speaking, or participates in any instruction in critical thinking, has come to that institutional experience with a native born understanding of critical and rhetorical principles which will mold his or her perception of the institutionalized principles as much or more than any teacher or book can hope to do. Secondly, whatever wisdom that student takes away from his or her experience of an institutional education, the real world application of that wisdom will be, by definition, vernacular—*it will be home-born and hybrid.*

As I noted at the outset, this assertion has developed out of my desire to locate and modify methods which are appropriate for the documenting and analysis of Internet communication which do not, as did O'Leary's, end in an "ultimate" interpretation which denies its own tragic basis. I asserted, at the beginning of this chapter, that my methods are new; and, in a way, they are. But they come from a perspective which is not. The behavioral perspective in folklore studies is the result of many long years of disciplinary history and the work of many brilliant scholars that have contributed that history. It has yielded an approach that has pointed me toward methods for gathering data. I have modified those methods as needed in order to try to come to an understanding of what sort of behavioral and social changes might be occurring as a result of Internet communication. In particular, this behavioral perspective has encouraged me, without prejudging or even initially criticizing my respondents, to gather actual on-line communication for my analysis and to look for patterns in those *on-line documents*. *Locating recurring elements*, this perspective has compelled me to travel to interview, face-to-face, as many of the individuals I analyze as possible. Frankly, to criticize these people without giving them their

own voice in my research would be unethical. This idea, too, is part of the folkloristic approach.

The element which makes my approach new is its focus on rhetoric from within the behavioral perspective. I have chosen the methods of rhetoric because they offer the most apt ways to study Internet communication. In the end, the vast majority of multilateral Internet discourse appears in the form of language. Not just any sort of language, but, by and large, language which is engaged in debating, discussing, and exchanging ideas. Through these debates and exchanges, individuals define on-line identities for themselves based almost exclusively in language. In turn, those individuals are acting to define, through that language alone, on-line communities which often have no off-line equivalent. Kenneth Burke's rhetorical approach posits that language is the primary way humans' self-identify definitely privileges the language-using aspect of humans. For subjects where language is not the primary feature, this approach might be problematic. However, as the Internet exists today, it is driven by the exchange of language. Hence the application of rhetorical theory is of primary utility in my study.

The most general models of folklore studies seek to understand human behavior in terms of its shared continuities and consistencies through space and time. The most general models of rhetorical analysis seek to locate what is persuasive in particular examples of human communication. By combining these two approaches, the result is a method that is highly suited to the unique demands of studying communities which exist primarily through language exchanged on the Internet; and, as I hope will become clear in the following chapters, this new approach is one which can offer us a rigorous and accurate picture of what is actually happening to the human communication of deeply held beliefs in this new digital environment. Finally, I hope that through the future application and modification of these methods we can move beyond the attacks of the neo-Luddites and uncritical support of the technophiles. I hope that researchers can begin to make, even in these still early years of the digital revolution, a general assessment of what is possible, what is impossible, what is

changing, what seems to be the same, what is good, and what is bad about the possibilities for human expression which new communication technologies seem to be offering us.

CHAPTER II: HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS OF THE AMERICAN REVELATORY: PURITANISM, QUAKERISM, AND THOMAS PAINE

On July 11, 1656, the first Quakers arrived in the New World. Entering Boston Harbor that summer day, the *Swallow* carried two Quaker women. Mary Fisher was only twenty-two and Ann Austin was elderly. These two seemingly unassuming and devoutly religious women caused quite a stir in the Congregationalist-Puritan New England colony.

First, the two women were held aboard ship. Their luggage was searched, and Quaker books were seized as heretical texts. The hangman burned the texts in the town square. The women were then imprisoned for five weeks and their belongings were confiscated for jail fees. Then, summarily, they were placed on a ship bound for Barbados—banished from New England for being Quakers.

While the Quakers were imprisoned, a new law was passed in the colony. Any ship which brought Quakers to New England would be fined, and any colonist who read Quaker books would be fined. Further, any Quakers entering the colonial lands would be arrested, whipped, and imprisoned “until a convenient means for putting them out was found” (Gray 4).

However, more Quakers were already on their way to New England. Two days after the first two were shipped off, eight more arrived. After eleven weeks in jail, they too were sent back to England. Two years later, six of the previously

banished Quakers returned to North America bringing two other Quakers with them. These men and women were imprisoned and flogged; some had their ears cut off, and they were all expelled again. A new law was passed in New England. Any Quaker returning to the colony after being banished would hang. Between October 1659 and March 1661 four did hang on Boston Common, but still more Quakers would come (Bacon 30-32).

Today, the tragic irony of these events is clear. Puritan colonists, supposedly seeking religious freedom, had fled to the New World. At home, their own government had taken power under Cromwell. But when Quakers arrived, who were fellow Calvinist Protestants, they were welcomed with a noose.

In this chapter, I explore the extant evidence of the earliest, most written about, and, maybe, the most influential European-American religious discourses to provide, in some detail, evidence of the vernacular symbiosis in these earlier discourses between institutional and individual expressions of truth. The well documented clashes between Puritan and Quaker Protestants present a window into both doctrine and individual belief in early European-American thought. The Quaker-Puritan struggles were soon caught up in the wider struggle to form what would become one of the earliest secular governments.

Without question, both Puritan and Quaker vernacular conceptions of truth were deeply influential in the formation of the United States government. To access the Puritan vernacular, I examine the Thomas Shepard collection of Puritan confession narratives. The only widely available collection of its kind, it presents a body of written material that documents the common Puritan practice of oral public confession which served as a rite of passage into Puritan communities. Because of doctrinal practices, no such Quaker testimonies exist. Because of a belief that all language is a product of the fallen world, the most sacred events in Quaker life were marked by silence and never written down. However, there is a wide body of amateur or semi-professional autobiographical and journal writing from North American Quakers starting in the 17th century. This body of work is our point of entry to the North American Quaker vernacular. While both vernacular and institutional forms of Quakerism and Puritanism were,

technically, forms of Calvinism, a very slight difference in doctrine leads them into violent conflicts in the colonial period. These doctrines are enacted at the vernacular level, and it is at this level where we can see why the slight difference between the two belief systems was a source of such great tension.

In order to locate this difference, I will extend the methods of Kenneth Burke which I described in the first chapter. Primarily, I will rely on a modified version of Burke's famous distinction between "comic" and "tragic" attitudes. The final sections of this chapter will then examine the late 18th and early 19th century writings of Thomas Paine. One of the most popular and influential figures in early U.S. history, we find the elements of both Quaker and Puritan vernacular rhetorics in his work. Based on the enduring presence of these vernacular modes of expression in these disparate discourses, it will become clear that the tensions exemplified in the Quaker-Puritan conflict are, in fact, recurring vernacular modes of accessing truth. We shall encounter these same general modes in the contemporary expressions of religious belief I will present and examine in the chapters following this one.

Even as Quakers broke new ground with governments in Pennsylvania and the Puritans established Harvard and began to establish the intellectual and scientific centers that still dominate North American industry today, these early clashes present a stark image of the tension which still characterizes American religious discourse at the vernacular level. This tension is the push and pull of negotiative self-governance against personally experienced authority.

By focusing on this clash of discourses, I do not mean to imply that Quaker and Puritan religious dialogues were the only powers in the formation of contemporary American religious diversity. There can be no doubt, when confronted with the Catholicism of European immigrants and Hispanic-Americans, the influx of traditional Judaism or Islam, the vast array of African influenced Caribbean-American religions such as Santeria or Vodou, the spiritual power of Native American religious traditions, or New Age syncretisms, that all these groups have contributed and will continue to create powerful eddies in the American experience. Even the colonists themselves cannot be considered as a

united and pure vessel of Calvinist-Puritan doctrines. As Charles Cohen has astutely shown, future scholarship will “need to take stock of what supernatural beliefs came to the colonies, how rapidly they spread, how wholeheartedly colonists embraced them, and by what means they were institutionalized” (Cohen 722). What Cohen is concerned about is the simple fact that researchers have focused on colonial documents of institutional religion which fail to accurately represent the full range of vernacular beliefs certainly held by New World colonists.

Although Cohen is clearly correct, working to uncover the vast diversity of vernacular belief in colonial America is not my task here. Instead, I seek to establish a strong sense of what institutional religious beliefs seem to have been held by the Quakers and Puritans who came into early conflict. Then, I analyze some individual expressions of those beliefs to establish a sense of their vernacular forms. As a result, I will show how two competing perceptions of the nature of truth existed at the vernacular level at that time.

The Puritan Influence on American Discourse

When the Quakers arrived in New England, they were primarily concerned with spreading their religious ideas. Although they did face persecution in England, their primary interest in North America seemed to be in evangelization. The Puritans, on the other hand, were not interested in expanding their ranks at all. They had not only fled persecution, but they sought to establish a theocracy—a new world “light house” to lead the way during those last days before the return of their god, Jesus Christ (Knight 11). As Perry Miller in *Errand in the Wilderness* and Sacvan Bercovitch in *The American Jeremiad* famously argued, this Congregationalist stance in New England was fed by political sermons which expressed their radical new theocratic ideology.

However, as Janice Knight has persuasively argued in her 1994 *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts*, we must remember that early Puritan discourse

was not monolithic. Discussing, and to some degree refuting, the Miller-Bercovitch model of a unified field of belief in early New England, Knight states: "While I might agree that as an outcome of conflict in the first decades of New English settlement 'official' religious and political structures were produced, I do not believe that consensus obtained in the first instance" (Knight 8). Instead, Knight focuses on two main schools of official Puritan thought. Although it is certainly true that competing paradigms of Puritanism existed in a way not made clear by Bercovitch or Miller, the debates of official church and politics are not my focus. From a vernacular perspective, each individual harbors and expresses his or her own beliefs—the results of the many influences that individual has experienced. My approach seeks similarities in the sea of idiosyncrasies, and although only existing theoretically, examples of these similarities merge in the historical documents to create a single Puritan "discourse" at an institutional level.

This emerging Puritan discourse is best known from its surviving collections of sermons which are characterized by recurring themes: (1) "false dealing with God," (2) "betrayal of covenant promises," (3) "the degeneracy of the young," (4) "the lure of profits and pleasures," and (5) "the prospect of God's just, swift, and total revenge." Dubbed "jeremiads" after the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, these sermons were given "at every public occasion (on days of fasting and prayer, humiliation and thanksgiving, at covenant-renewal and artillery-company ceremonies, and, most elaborately and solemnly, at election-day party gatherings)" (Bercovitch 4). Bercovitch's definition of this sermon, the jeremiad, is not a new one.

Perry Miller's 1958 work *Errand Into the Wilderness* might be seen as the foundational document of "American studies" as an area-focus. Bercovitch's work is both an update and a critique of Miller's work. In keeping with discursive scholarly convention, he uses Miller's study as the starting point for his own. The definition of "jeremiad" I cite from Bercovitch above is based on Perry Miller. Bercovitch's sense of the Jeremiad starts with the assertion, from Miller, that: "the Puritan's tragedy was that their errand shifted from one meaning to another

in the course of the seventeenth century" (Miller 8). Miller's study is an attempt to describe American culture in terms of its Puritan-millennial origins. He argues, as does Bercovitch, that the jeremiad is central to American culture. Through frustrated millennial expectations, Americans were unified by national foundation legends about Puritan settlers. The jeremiad was central to the transmission and maintenance of the discourses that generated these legends.

For Miller, there were two levels of "betrayal" that generated the frustration he sees as defining Puritan-American thinking. First, the "New England Way" was thought by the Puritans to be a detour or shortcut to a renovated England. Their "errand" would prefigure a return to a reformed English theocracy that was already creeping close up on the cosmic apocalypse. As if a social beacon, the colony would define the extreme forward guard of the Protestant Reform movement. However, after the 1660 collapse of Cromwell's Reformist English government, the Puritans turned inward and hoped to make a Christian utopia of their little colony to fill the shoes England had rejected. Such an establishment would, of course, facilitate and typologically prefigure the millennial reign of Christ near on their horizon. However, in a second betrayal of these hopes, the rising middle class of the colonies and, later the United States generally, made the attainment of wealth and the possibility of attaining wealth the focus of social attention. People poured in from Europe while the theocratic anti-materialists of the Puritan utopia grew old and died.

Bercovitch follows this argument: "not only had the world passed them by, the colony itself, the city on the hill a beacon to mankind, had degenerated into another Sodom. They vented their outrage, Miller tells us, in an 'unending monotonous wail,' a long threnody over a lost cause, in which they came increasingly to acknowledge that New England was sick unto death." (Bercovitch 5). However, Bercovitch significantly parts with Miller in his assessment of the jeremiad in this process.

Miller de-emphasizes the jeremiad. He argues that it came to the fore after the first betrayal and continued based on the second. Bercovitch convincingly shows, through meticulous research, that the jeremiad pre-existed

the second generation colonists. Even the first colonists drew on the fifteenth and sixteenth century English sermonic forms of the jeremiads which were, themselves, derived from medieval conventions.

This important error Bercovitch finds in Miller leads to a significant update. "The most severe limitation of Miller's view is that it excludes (or denigrates) this pervasive theme of affirmation and exultation. Miller rightly called the New England jeremiad America's first distinctive literary genre; its distinctiveness, however, lies not in the vehemence of its complaint but in precisely the reverse." (Miller 6). Valorizing and putting his sense of the jeremiad as the very genetic center of American culture, Bercovitch states: "In explicit opposition to the traditional [English] mode, it inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success, affirming to the world, and despite the world, the inviolability of the colonial cause" (Bercovitch 7).

For Bercovitch, the Puritans:

their church-state was to be at once a model to the world of Reformed Christianity and a prefiguration of New Jerusalem to come. To this end, they revised the message of the jeremiad. Not that they minimized the threat of divine retribution; on the contrary, they asserted it with a ferocity unparalleled in the European pulpit. But they qualified it in a way that turned threat into celebration. In their case, they believed, God's punishments were corrective, not destructive. Here, as nowhere else, His vengeance was a sign of love, a father's rod used to improve the errant child. In short, their punishments confirmed their promise. (Bercovitch 8)

The European jeremiad was primarily a tool to explicate the occurrence of events and encourage actions by the populace in their mundane lives, but the American jeremiad dealt with the approaching New Jerusalem of God's cosmic apocalypse; if for no other reason than because the real world life in colonial America was fraught with dangers and hardships that helped obscure and amplify God's purpose in that tenuous theocracy. While for mainline Europeans the jeremiad was primarily a stylistic tool, for American Puritans, in their radical break-off sect, it was the defining rhetoric of a sacred and militantly expectant

identity. "The purpose of their jeremiads was to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God" (Bercovitch 9). All this transpired on a scene in which harsh winters, inept farming techniques, and poor negotiations with Native Americans made hardship and premature death the norm.

As the Puritan theocratic institutions dissipated under the pressure of expansionist wealth and population, Miller argues that the jeremiad arose in response. Miller called this, and it later became an influential idea, "the fact of the frontier." However, Bercovitch seems to rightly note that this does not explain why, then, the jeremiad, or a number of its main conventions anyway, persisted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in "all forms of literature, including the literature of westward expansion". (Bercovitch 11).

To explain why this form persisted before, as well as long after, the radical sect of the Puritans had disappeared, Bercovitch convincingly describes the Puritan world view as "typological." "Sacred history unfolds in a series of stages or dispensations, each with its own (increasingly greater) degree of revelation" (13). For the children of these Puritans and subsequent generations, the powerful sectarian rhetoric and typological world view persist enough to transform "New England" itself into a "type" or manifestation of the spiritual ideals found in the Bible. And, as we shall see in later chapters, this very idea lies at the heart of contemporary Dispensationalism.

The colony was a "light proclaiming the latter-day coming of the Messiah" much as the United States would become the "light" God would use to free and educate individuals who were considered as misguided Europeans, ignorant Native Americans, or Africans. In this sense, the colony was first the "type" of John the Baptist: their errant utopia was the chosen precursor, to, and the recognizer of, the coming New Jerusalem. In this sense, the colony was the real-world manifestation of the generalized spiritual "type" or principle associated with John The Baptist. As John proclaimed and recognized the first incarnation of Christ, the colonists proclaimed and recognized the near coming of Christ's

second incarnation. This is the rhetoric of the jeremiad that typologically defined the identity of the colonial British:

The European jeremiad developed within a static hierarchical order; the lessons it taught, about historical recurrence and the vanity of human wishes, amounted to a massive ritual reinforcement of tradition. Its function was to make social practice conform to a completed and perfected social ideal. The American Puritan jeremiad was the ritual of a culture on an errand—which is to say, a culture based on a faith in process. Substituting teleology for hierarchy, it discarded the Old World ideal of stasis for a New World vision of the future. (Bercovitch 23)

In this way, moral and personal success were linked in early Puritanism. Later, this became the key to the secularization and spread of their belief matrix.

Indicative of the beginning decline of the most idealistic sorts Puritan thinking, in 1669 a Third Church of Boston was founded. It consisted mostly of tradesmen who dissented from the First Church because of, at least, conflicts between its stringent ethics and their new found wealth and social status:

the emigrant Puritans were part of the movement toward the future. Their rhetoric and vision facilitated the process of colonial growth. And in sustaining that rhetoric and vision, the latter-day Jeremiahs effectually forged a powerful vehicle of middle-class ideology: a ritual of progress through consensus, as system of sacred-secular symbols for a laissez-faire creed, a "civil religion" for a people chose to spring fully formed into the modern world. (Bercovitch 28).

The rhetoric of the American jeremiad became disassociated from, not only Puritans specifically, but sacred matters generally. It ultimately became, Bercovitch argues, secularized. "It is precisely this effort to fuse sacred and profane that shapes the American jeremiads" (28). Seeing Puritan religious beliefs as secularized, Bercovitch then finds these ideas in mundane American expressions.

How this actually plays out is of great interest for Bercovitch. In the Puritan sect, the concept of the millennial mission encouraged ethical and industrious individual action. However, the exclusivist belief that *they*, the Puritan

colonists alone, were God's chosen elect localized and emphasized them above and against other communities. They were fated to be Puritans but had to prove to their community that they were so fated through public testimony about their *conversion experiences*. It seems clear now that elements of the jeremiad sermons did filter into corners of American discourse far removed from the Puritans.

However, Bercovitch's and Miller's analysis both focus exclusively on institutional documents—primarily formal speeches made by leading figures in the communities as well as political decisions which created new and changed old institutions. As we know, this approach leaves the vernacular level basically unexplored. At the vernacular level, the radically self-aggrandizing attitude of Puritan predestination belief certainly combined with and helped transmit some of the Puritan flavor into the later United States, and some of the few examples of this vernacular discourse are the actual recorded testimonies of individual colonists seeking to convince their peers that they are among God's elect. These texts are perfect for this analysis because they exemplify the vernacular symbiosis by being individual expressions which specifically seek to place the individual and his or her beliefs into the terms of the Puritan institution. Specifically, they are attempts to persuade the local community to allow the individual to enter into the institution of the church.

The Puritan Vernacular of Conversion

Although almost all orally delivered testimony in Puritan-American churches was not documented, one collection is extant that offers some examples of what must have been read or spoken during church services. This testimony was, as Patricia Caldwell describes it in her commentary on thirty-one of these texts, a type of ritual. It was a prescribed set of acts that occurred in the sacred context of the church. It functioned to define individual identity in terms of the group through a "conversion" transformation. It bound the members of the

Puritan colony together. This ritual action was the social proof and symbolic act that defined an individual Puritan as a member of God's elect; and thus capable of attaining Grace.

Although this Congregationalist-Puritan practice came from the British church communities, its expression in North America brought certain clear changes, such as the inclusion and highlighting of the actual voyage to the colonies. Since voyages of that length at that time were often harrowing experiences, some of the conversion stories focus on the trials of this passage. Others focus on the trials of colonial living itself. Unprepared for the challenges of developing their community infrastructure in the new environment, many of the Congregationalists felt disappointed and disoriented. Their lives were given over to God and yet their sufferings and hardships were only increased by this terrible journey.

However, the narratives seem to work out this problem by simply adding the American experience to the list of so-called "chastisements." America was no longer merely the delivery from earthly chastisement in Britain. Now, its "wilderness" became the instrument of God. It was both the holy reward and the holy stick. "But there were drastic side effects to this ingenious remedy. It irrevocably entangled the internal heart questions with the external questions of the physical place; it gave an awesome, divine power to the country itself" (Caldwell 130).

Caldwell's analysis argues that the majority of the conversion narratives in Shepard's collection are working out, in a ritualized confession, the sin of being disappointed at the harshness of the New England experience. Very similar to the famous writings of Jonathan Edwards, their primary narrative formula, differing significantly in content from that of the British examples, consists of "awakenings," "fears and awful apprehensions," "legal humblings," "a sense of total sinfulness," and in "such light of comfort" afforded by divine Grace (Edwards 151).

The primary features of the New World version of this scenario tend to de-emphasize the final "light of comfort" because there was little comfort for the

colonial Puritans. Further, the trials of the Old World fell into the shadows of these new "fears" and "sinfulness" so that, it would appear, the vast majority of American Puritans needed to profess their faith anew after the disappointing realities of their harsh new environment. The focus and push of this new situation was not merely an argument for individual Grace but, as a subtext, a justification for the difficulties faced in the colonies.

These difficulties themselves were transformed into a justification of faith. The very act of professing personal salvation to a group implies a fundamentally negotiative position by emphasizing the need for the community to recognize and agree that a person was saved, the emphasis on personal experiences of Tribulation wrought by God through the very land itself emphasizes the experiential nature of the belief that New World Puritans were themselves "The Elect." It is precisely this tension out of which each individual composed these expressions and through them constructed their own individual perspectives on institutional ideals. Each individual expression of faith, was an attempt to negotiate a subject position which mitigated the tension of their beliefs. In so doing, each expression is a vernacular creation.

Of the forty-eight completed conversion narratives in Shepard's collection, forty-two mention or discuss the passage to the New World. However, only nine mention or relate a spiritual conversion experience *before* having arrived in the New World. The remaining thirty-three all discuss their conversion in terms of a New World event. Though a few of these could be described as emphasizing the positive aspects of their New World conversion, the vast majority seem to be, in Caldwell's words, "notably perfunctory, lukewarm" or "anxious" (Caldwell 125).

An excellent example of this sort of narrative is that of Edward Collins. In the minority, Collins professes having had a strong conversion experience in Europe. After over 500 words describing, in typical Puritan style, his sinful life before conversion, Collins relates how an early debate he witnessed between Christians pushed him to explore his own position in God's plan:

by a private meeting of private conference I heard diverse questions propounded and answered. And question being made

when a man rested in duties, I was convinced I was the man. And the grace I saw in Christians, did ashame me before the Lord. (Shepard 83)

This led Collins to his personal experience and acceptance of his own Grace based on his personal acceptance of the "covenant" between God and Christians:

I took notice of covenant that it was free and saw promises made to such dispositions to lost to meek and hungry and thirsty and to such as were confessors and forsakers of sin and hence I thought Jesus Christ was mine. (Shepard 83)

There remains, however, in Collins' confession a final 200 words or so addressing his colonial experience. First, Collins states that "seeing the great change from this and that place did much transport my heart." But, in the next few sentences, he admits a lapse of faith that is a realization that he was not yet completely living in Grace:

And yet this frame was quickly lost by distractions and thoughts and cares which deadened my spirits . . . I was brought upon my knees . . . And so at last I came to see need of all God's ordinances, watchfulness that I might answer the end for which He sent me. And I saw His hand to bring me to the same ministry that first Lord did me good by and to beget me to Himself. (Shepard 84).

Though the final lines fulfill the necessary formula of a testament to his final state of conversion, this sad tone is what Caldwell observes in most of the narratives. The direct experience of the harsh North America has been assimilated into the belief system in a way that accounts for its very harshness.

Addressing a more exemplary text, we can see how the disappointment of the new world experience was transformed into a direct experience of God's will through the land in the conversion narrative of Alice Stedman. The Stedmans arrived in Cambridge in 1638. John was a steward to a Reverend Glover and his wife. However, Glover died during the voyage; leaving Stedman the sum of fifty pounds. He quickly became a popular figure in the small community, serving as its constable twice, selectman sixteen times, and town treasurer from 1658 to

1683 (Shepard 72-3). Unfortunately, much less is known about Alice. However, as the wife of a steward, it is unlikely that she had much formal training in writing or public speaking; at least not sometime between 1638 and 1640 when her confession was recorded. This makes her confession an excellent example of a written work coming out of the oral traditions of the early Puritan churches in America.

Like all the confessions, Alice Stedman's is characteristically staid as she remarks on her troubles in distanced tones. Longer than many, but less formal in language than the other longer works, it runs about 1200 words. As with Collins' confession, Stedman seems to be struggling to account for and assimilate the harsh facts of her new American life. Unlike Collins, however, there seems to be no clear pre-voyage moment of salvation. Instead of conceiving of her troubles in America as a relapse, Stedman conceives of them as a furthering of an incomplete process. It is through these troubles that she, though not with much finality it seems, manages to assert her final conversion.

Somewhat less than halfway through her confession, Stedman acknowledges the common colonial Puritan idea that God had sent her to this harsh land for a purpose: "And the Lord stirred up my heart to come to this place and He made way by unexpected hand in a spiritual matter" (Shepard 103). Here, Stedman is compelled to attempt the journey, probably because of her husband, across the Atlantic. It is quite possible that the Stedmans were not particularly bound up in the Puritan mission of founding a new nation—but were economically and personally bound to the Glovers who made the choice to come to America.

Whatever the case, Stedman did not have a easy time of it. First, her husband's employer died aboard ship. Though this led to their financial security for the moment, it must have been a time of great apprehension for both of them. Stedman states:

When I came to the ship by straitness and troubles, I exceedingly lost my heart which God set on upon my conscience, that though I had no place, yet I was not so careful as I should and might have

been. And many afflictions I met with, yet my heart remained the same. And at last the Lord exercised me with many afflictions and I found great strangeness from the Lord. (Shepard 103)

Then, in maybe the most poignant expression of disappointment in the narratives, Stedman states: "And I came to the means, I felt not what I had looked for which was very sad" (Shepard 103). In New England, Stedman expected to "feel" something spiritual. However, in the midst of her "afflictions" she did not.

Her "friends" then sent her to talk to an elder, and he asked her "what grounds" she had for "closing with Christ." But: "I felt often as if I never had anything." Under teaching from the elder, Stedman did eventually experience "a day of humiliation" and she later stated that "the Lord did much encourage me." But later she again fell back into doubt: "but quickly I was out of it and lost again." Despite continuing troubles, or because of them, Stedman's confidence in her own faith could not firmly root (Shepard 104). "I was content the Lord should make what covenant He would . . . yet I could not believe" (Shepard 105).

As Stedman's confession winds down, the final source of her conversion turns out to be John Cotton. While listening to the great Puritan preacher discuss Revelation 10 she writes, "in midst of that sermon hearing if ever Lord came in the promise that the Lord was Jehovah and never changed, and then afresh I had John 3:16 that sanctify. And so by this power of His word I knew he was Jehovah that did never change." The next day, when expressing her concern that she still had doubts to an elder, she recounted: "hearing John 13:20—he that receives him that sent me—the Lord came in much by those words. And so much confirmed, and many times since the Lord hath spoken to help me" (Shepard 105).

As Patricia Caldwell argues, Stedman's final conversion comes across as rather listless and perfunctory. It is clear that the harsh "troubles" which fill nearly three fourths of the confession are dominating her mind. What is also clear, though, is the dynamic cycle common in these narratives is: arrival, disappointment at harsh conditions, guilt-for-disappointment, punishment by

more harsh conditions, and confession. Unfortunately for Stedman, this confession seemed to lead only to still more harsh conditions.

It is clear from these examples that experiential rhetoric dominates these ritual arguments. Again and again, we find the individual recounting his or her experience of "feeling His power." This is reasonable and to be expected in any of the breakaway religious groups at that time. Emphasizing individual access to deity decentralizes authority. However, what is more interesting in these narratives are the ways in which the personal experiences of life are transformed from the mere product of fate to the acts of a just God. Having specifically led these individuals to this new, wild, and often deadly land; God expressed himself in their troubles. Through the harsh land, He drove them into faith—fleeing before the discomfort and fear of the everyday toward His Grace.

As a ritual enactment which confirmed the individual members' places in the divine community, these confessions did more than express faith. As performative acts, the very shared nature of these speeches *created* faith; not just on an individual basis but for each other and thus the whole community. By agreeing that any given individual indeed was saved, the faith that embodied grace was carried from the individual enacting the ritual into and through the community where it was accepted. In a single act, an individual created, reaffirmed, his or her own position in both Heaven and the community while he or she created and affirmed the elected nature and proper place of that entire community. The harsh land drove the Puritans toward faith quite precisely because they were "The Elect;" and they were chosen for that land. It was thus, with all its suffering, *theirs by divine right*. In these individual narrative acts, the vernacular expression of belief performatively creates and reinforces the New England institutions of colonial churches.

Through this ritual narrative, the first generation Puritans represented in Thomas Shepard's collection managed to survive in a symbiosis between individual acts and institutional beliefs. As time went on, however, the ritual enactment of this divine right came to present a serious problem for the growing children of the Puritans—the millennial Christian prophecies were still not fulfilled.

"The children were obliged to demand grace by virtue of their parents' mission. And to sustain their case, they proceeded to elevate the emigrants into mythic tribal heroes" (Bercovitch 67).

While the Reform Movement argued that baptism is a "means" to grace, but no guarantee, Puritan children were raised in the Puritan sect. Thus, they could not prove they were converted through testimony because they were born into it already. On the other hand, as the vanguard of the Reform movement, they could not rely on mere baptism to ensure their spot in the elect. For them, a theocracy of divinely elected individuals who had conversion experiences was untenable; and so it died with the first generation Puritans. In this way, the pressure of necessity came up from the real-world circumstances to effect institutionalized beliefs. As Bercovitch notes:

Accordingly, they turned in this dilemma, as in others, to their theory of exceptionalism. . . . Baptism in New England was also a social and historical matter. In their American Zion, the sacred place reserved for the end-time remnant . . . for themselves alone, and among themselves for the most part, they asserted that baptism was a reliable sign of grace (Bercovitch 66).

This brought on the 1662 "Halfway Covenant." After the return of Charles II to the English throne and the end of the Cromwell Reform Government, the Puritan colonists had to adjust their identity. There would be no glorious return to England to await the apocalypse anytime soon. So they included their children in the divine elect by acknowledging that baptism was enough to make their children chosen. The second generation Puritans, then, were brought up with the idea that the New England colonies were themselves the field of focus for their worldly actions.

They needed to work, more specifically, for a millennial utopia and, through baptism, this utopia could become inclusive for non-Puritan children, immigrants, and even Native Americans, who were not part of the initial errand. In the post-Puritan world view, the inclusive effect of the acceptance of baptism would become more and more important. It made possible the development of

the emphasis on individual agency as linked specifically with personal success. After the initial Puritan ideals began to fade, they reappeared in a transformed way. Personal success was aided by baptism and being the elect of God, so the individual acts of such baptized colonists were contributing to the expanding utopia that prefigured the arrival of New Jerusalem. That is to say, personal success helped build a European society in North America. The Puritans believed that God smiled upon its overall success as well as each individual's contribution to that success.

The Influence of a Quaker Conversion on American History

Although maybe not as well noted by historians as the Puritan influence in North America, Quakerism's effect on religious and political discourse in the United States has been profound. Primarily, this influence can be attributed to the nexus of innate genius and the well established aristocratic family which we find in William Penn. His social position, personal vision, and dogged determinism forged a "Holy Experiment" that would precede, help define, and model the secular government European-Americans would eventually attempt to impose on the whole North American continent.

At a youthful age of twenty-three, Penn had returned from a French college to live with his father, a wealthy British admiral. The young Penn had begun to assist in administering the elder Admiral William Penn's estates. On an extended trip to Ireland, the younger Penn happened to meet a friend from his youth in Cork. Discovering that a minister he had admired many years before was preaching that evening, Penn went to hear the man, Thomas Loe, speak. Whether by force of the general Quaker message or this man's particular eloquence, the young Penn was deeply touched that night. As one historian described it, Penn's conversion or "convincement was no blinding revelation on the road to Damascus, no sudden shift from a life of guilt or sinfulness to one more spiritual, no vision of a New Jerusalem or sound of angel voices." Instead,

his beliefs seem to have slowly shifted toward a trust of the Inner Light preached by Loe, and from that point on Penn would consider himself a Quaker (Wildes 40-41).

In payment of a debt owed to his father and based on his family's close connections to the British Crown, Penn sought and gained a charter for the colony of Pennsylvania in 1681. Once he had obtained the title to some 45,000 square miles in America, he recruited colonizers for his new land. He based his plan of government on the 1632 Maryland charter won by Lord Baltimore. However, he altered the board powers which Baltimore demanded. Instead, he envisioned a colonial government ruled by an elected legislator.

Published in 1682, Penn's "Frame of Government" would prove to be one of the most influential new documents in American government. During the spring and summer of 1682, about 2000 settlers left the British Isles for Pennsylvania (Soderlund 7). Although Penn was forced to leave his new colony in 1684, his assembly system, representative government, and principles of religious tolerance molded by the early Quaker settlers based on Penn's vision was one of the first successful secular governments in America. In the end, this government would fall into disarray after Penn's death and its massive Quaker influence would unilaterally withdraw from government. But while under Quaker leadership, Pennsylvania was known not only for its religious tolerance, but also its fair trade and political dealings with Native Americans.

Penn's Quaker-based vision of an American utopia was, if different in practice, not so different in inspiration from the Congregationalists in New England. In a letter dated 1681, Penn famously named his colony "a holy experiment." Like the Puritan's light across the Atlantic, Penn "so obtained it and desire that I may not be unworthy of His [God's] love, but do that which may answer His kind providence and serve His truth and people; that an example may be set up to the nations" (Sonderlund 77). Though his utopia did not, in many ways, succeed. It provided both the blueprint and an example of errors that would inform the framers of the United States' constitution. As it turns out, this

“experiment” *did* serve as an example “to the nations”—quite certainly more so than the Puritans’ theocracy ever could.

Calvinist Theologies: Quakerism and Puritanism Compared

At the level of doctrinal belief, these two deeply influential Protestant sects, Quakerism and Puritanism, were nearly identical. However, their slight differences led to the bloodiest conflicts because the point at which they diverged was so fundamental.

The Friends “had no systematic theology—they had only an experience of God which called the true church of Christ into being and which could nourish and sustain it till the judgment day. The Friends obtained the truth of God in a self-authenticating experience” (Frost 16). Robert Barclay wrote one of the earliest and most influential Quaker theological texts, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*. First published in Latin, it was issued in English in 1678. Nearly every convert or interested party was directed to this text in the early years of the Society of Friends (Frost 10).

Writing in his *Apology*, Barclay saw a complete inability on the part of rational or empirical thought to understand divinity: “Neither can the natural man, of the largest capacity, by the best words, even scriptural words, so well understand the mysteries of God’s Kingdom, as the least and weakest child who tasteth them” (Barclay 34). In this sense, the Quaker theology rested as wholly as possible in the experience of the divine on a personal level. This rejection of not only theological precedent but even earth-bound confines of logic and rationalism in the face of the divine placed, from a Puritan perspective, the words or beliefs of an individual equal to or above the actual Word of God contained in scripture. For the Puritan, this basic Quaker position was not just radical; it was heretical.

Much scholarly discussion has been devoted to sorting out the doctrinal differences between the Puritan and Quaker beliefs which led to the early

religious intolerance and violence in Massachusetts. One reason for this attention is the incredible similarity in the two Protestant sects. Both deeply influenced by Calvinism, Hugh Barbour has argued that the closeness of the two sects generated the intense antagonism. Although it is not my intention to rehash these various debates, some understanding of the key points of Quaker and Puritan theology must be considered to understand the two discourses at the institutional level.

At the Synod of Dort in 1619, Calvinist orthodoxy was laid out most clearly in the well known "TULIP" doctrines: (1) total depravity on the part of humans, (2) unconditional election of those saved, (3) limited atonement possible for humans, (4) irresistible grace for those saved, and (5) the perseverance and final triumph of the saints (Schaff 580-7). In short, the official Calvinist belief was that man was totally evil and justly condemned to Hell. However, God saw fit, "by His own judgment made before the world existed, to save a certain number of men." For those "saints" or saved persons, the Grace of God came as an irresistible force in their lives. If a person's attraction to Grace ebbed or disappeared, if he or she fell into sin, then that sinful behavior was incontrovertible evidence that he or she was *not* saved (Frost 11-12).

Obviously this doctrine bears with it an incredibly harsh sense of truth. If God choose you before time began to be a saint, you will be irresistibly drawn to his grace. If not, one is pretty much condemned to eternal damnation. Further, this doctrine tends to work against agentive action in ethical behaviors: either one is or is not worthy of grace. Individual actions are proofs of one's position, but they cannot change an individual's fate. For those who do not believe they are already saved, there is little incentive for self-improvement. The New England Congregationalist Puritans, however, mitigated this effect by emphasizing a doctrine of Covenant over that of absolute predestination. In this doctrine, God's will was made manifest on the personal, community, and state levels through a covenant with the chosen. In this case, the New England Puritans and their evolving millennial theocracy was the direct expression of this covenant.

Although the Quakers also emphasized the idea of God's Covenant, they did so only on a personal level. Unlike the Puritans, the Quakers mitigated the harsh doctrines of Calvin with a rejection of the Calvinist dogma of predestination. Barclay argued what seems to have been the popular line of reasoning for the Quakers: predestination makes God the "author of sin." By placing God's decisions about all human history before time begins, God, Christ, and all their acts are in support of original and all other sin. For Barclay and the Quakers, this was unacceptable (Barclay 64-66).

The rejection of predestination seems, for the Quakers, to have opened Grace to all individuals and, thus, moves it away from dogmatism. Any individual could, at least in theory, enter into a covenant with God. In practice, this was more or less true as demonstrated by their famously just, if often evangelical, dealings with Native Americans, as well as William Penn's secular government in Pennsylvania, and, later, the spearheading of the abolitionist movement. However, the Quakers maintained a belief that the direct personal experience of the divine was the final authority and proof of this covenant. The Puritans, on the other hand, maintained that "God had created an orderly universe and had provided a key to its understanding in the logical system articulated by Petrus Ramus" (Frost 13).

This is to say that while the Quakers believed that God's Truth could only be known through individual experience of the "Inner Light," the Puritans admitted the possibility that reasoned inquiry could also lead to higher truths. Referring to the widely known studies of logic and rhetoric Ramus published in the mid 1500s, the Puritans viewed truth not as divine revelations to individuals but as inherent and observable in the laws of nature and the motions of bodies (Conley 129).

This is not to say, however, that Puritans completely rejected individual divine experience. Instead, they were careful to make sure that individual revelatory power and contemporary prophecy did not compete with scriptural and interpretive authority. Quakers took the validity, significance, and pursuit of this experience to a greater extreme. As his journal describes at great length,

George Fox, the British founder of Quakerism, was himself racked by visionary experiences as he wandered the countryside proselytizing in the middle and later 1600s.

In documentary sources, the Puritans often seem to have accused the Quakers of placing their own experiences of the "Inner Light" above the Holy Scriptures. Later Quakers attempted to soften this heretical problem, but, for early Quakers, it was the rallying cry that led to democratic principles. For early Quakers, there was a complete dichotomy between the natural and the "supernatural" or divine. Hence, when a human had an experience of the Inner Light, a real divine substance entered into their body (*Barclay Works* 3:568-78 and *Penn Works* 2: 857).

However, because they accepted Calvin's doctrine of total depravity, they had to, somehow, acknowledge that human experience was part of original sin and hence inferior to the spiritually pure, and divinely inspired, scriptures. Maintaining that their Inner Light was equitable to scripture but that humans were depraved, the Quakers came to the conclusion that "natural" or human reasoning and intellect, including that used to understand the holy scriptures, were flawed and inferior to the Inner Light of Christ. Though a well documented theological claim, this emphasis on personal experience and the divine is more prominent in vernacular Quaker documents than in its institutional ones. In stark contrast to the Puritan vernacular narratives' emphasis on the divine acting through nature on a community scale, the Quaker narratives emphasize a divine that acts and is always present in the personal life of every human.

The Quaker Vernacular of Conversion

While the biographical and journal writings of the Quakers have offered researchers a vast field of inquiry, actual sacred language was, for doctrinal reasons, not written. Those biographical statements we do have are, by and large, written by educated Quakers and were meant for popular non-Quaker

consumption. Even so, in them we can locate and analyze the key aspects of the Quaker conception of direct revelatory experience as the final authority for truth.

Sermons, devotional prayers, and other verbal materials associated with religious groups and performed in churches were specifically not recorded by Quakers because of their belief that language itself was a product of humanity's worldly and fallen state—a faculty of the flesh. As the spiritual founder of Quakerism noted: "The people of the world . . . have mouths full of deceit and changeable words" (Fox 2). This same belief led to some of the most defining Quaker practices: the refusal to speak oaths and the use of "plain language." Even more importantly, the emphasis of divine truth over spoken reasoning led the Quakers to focus their church services on the observation of silences in which church goers would quietly wait for divine inspiration to fill one or more of their congregation.

As Richard Bauman, the folklorist and social-linguist, notes: "Silence for the Quakers, was not an end in itself, but a means to the attainment of the defining spiritual experience of early Quakerism, the direct personal experience of the spirit of God within oneself" (Bauman *For the Reputation* . . . 23). Although birthright membership into the Quakers was later adopted, as with the Puritans, the early Quakers, required that their members experience a personal revelation of the inner light much as do contemporary Pentecostals.

For the early Quakers generally, this moment of divine revelation was termed "convincement." Some Quakers argued that there is a distinction between actual conversion to Quakerism and convincement. As an early Quaker commentator and minister claimed in 1689: "Many [are] convinced that are not converted" (Dewsbury 319). This admission helps lend credibility to the typical conversion experience of Quakerism where a revelatory moment precedes, sometimes significantly, a final decision to convert to Quakerism. Whether immediate or following some further experience and deliberation, the revelatory moment of convincement was the central moment in the spiritual lives of early

Quakers; and, as such, it figures prominently in their many journals and biographies.

Typically, conviction occurred in an individual when he or she was being addressed by an evangelical minister either personally or as a member of an audience. Many of these Quaker evangelizers were noted for their skill at bringing about convictions. The ministers who were given this gift were often described as being able to speak to the hearer's "condition." And the power of this skill was located in the ability to work an effect on the audience through language. Creating the proper conditions in individuals, the ministers' eloquence would encourage the divine to erupt into the fallen, "natural," mind of the hearer. Further, "when spiritual communication was taking place, the channel was felt to be open in both directions, and the speaker could sense the responsiveness of others to his message" (Bauman *For the Reputation* . . . 29).

The ministerial emphasis on conviction was based on the belief that all humans had the capacity, and in fact the need, to be converted to Quakerism. Unlike the Puritans' doctrine that some are "elect" and the rest are lost, the Quakers rejected Calvinist predestination. So the emphasis, and most important life's work, was not the building of the New Jerusalem in a new world, but the conviction of individuals in America and elsewhere. Unlike the Puritan reliance on logic and theological exegesis, the Quaker position generally viewed truth as forever distinct and beyond the fallen, worldly, or "natural," rational logic of humans. Instead, the Inner Light of the divine rested deep inside each individual and it only took the proper circumstances to bring it out. By and large, that circumstance could be created by a skillful Quaker evangelist. As George Fox stated: "Truth hath an honor in the hearts of people who are not Friends" (Fox 341).

While the earliest European-American spiritual vernacular may be associated with Puritan conversion narratives, the most defining literary journals come somewhat later. Brought to the level of literary genre by the apologist-researcher Luella Wright in her 1932 *The Literary Life of the Early Friends*, the practice of journal writing was deeply ingrained in the religious movement by its

founder George Fox. While Fox's own influential journal is radically apocalyptic, its later American emulators proved to be much more staid. When American Quaker journals began to appear, the themes of persecution and apocalyptic change had given way to the common form: influence of pious parents, decisive spiritual experience or "convincement," the adoption of Quaker beliefs or "conversion," and then various evangelizing activities (Wright 193-7).

Since early Quaker services did not contain written liturgies and the testimonies of friends were not recorded, most of the wealth of Quaker writing we do have is arguably not vernacular at all. At the same time, since early Quakerism relied heavily on the conversion and then evangelization of, by, and for non-professional minister-evangelists, these documents can serve to help elucidate the Quaker argument for Inner Truth at a vernacular level. In line with Quaker beliefs and directed at an audience of similar non-Quakers, these autobiographical documents were meant to convey the Truth as experienced by a typical individual in the hopes that its audience of similar individuals would be compelled to find the Inner Light within themselves.

While there are many exemplary texts to choose from, I will begin with, perhaps, the most well known: *Journal of John Woolman*. As Daniel B. Shea notes in his definitive analysis of early America religious autobiography, this journal's "essential statement" is that "as self diminishes, the experience of divine love increases." This argument is articulated by Woolman's "habitual conscientiousness of expression, which strives to reveal Truth without distortion or dilution" (Shea 47).

Woolman was born on October 1720 in Burlington County, New Jersey some twenty miles from Philadelphia. One of 13 children, his family farmed and had an orchard. His parents were strongly Quaker, and Woolman approached formal schooling in the Quaker tradition. From age four to age fourteen Woolman attended Quaker school but continued to pursue self-education throughout his life. At age twenty-one, Woolman left the farm to work as a clerk in a retail store some five miles from the farm. As he opened his own shop, grew successful, and began to accumulate wealth, Woolman began to realize the

basic human folly that he would spend a lifetime attacking: greed. Giving up his retail enterprise because he was making too much money, he took up tailoring which he considered a much more humble profession (Woolman 3-4).

After an intense conviction experience, ongoing experiences with the divine, and evangelical travel, Woolman later became famous for attacking the African-America slave trade. In 1761, he decided to give up wearing any dyed clothing because he felt the dyes available in New Jersey and Philadelphia were wrought by the hands of Caribbean slaves. The next year, he published his second major pamphlet: *Considerations on Keeping Negroes: Part Second*. He argued, in an almost Platonic sense, that the oppressions of Africans, Native Americans, and the poor all stemmed from a prideful obsession with gaining wealth which was not so much the result of evil but human error in understanding. In so doing, Woolman stands out as an exemplary political writer and speaker of his time.

Although he began editing his journal for publication as early as 1756, it was not published until major revisions were undertaken during 1770-2. In May of 1772, Woolman sailed for England and would die later that year of smallpox in York. Characterized by lucid and dispassionate prose, Woolman's journal covers, in short dated chapters, his life from 1720 all the way to 1772. Less interested in his actual conviction experience than in addressing the ills he saw in the colonies, Woolman directs his writings to a general European-American audience with the intended purpose of offering possibilities for rejection, or at least limiting, the negative effects of greed. Primary among those contemporary ills was slavery.

As Daniel Shea notes, there is one instance in Woolman's journal of a dialectic scene common in many journals of his time, yet it seems that Woolman's reliance on dialectic logic is very limited. Though Woolman is known to have approached many slave holders and argued his case against slavery with them, such a scene appears only once in his journal. It is a highly efficient dialogue in which Woolman systematically refutes all the standard pro-slavery arguments of his day in just a few pages (Woolman 61-63).

In his analysis of this section of the text, Shea struggles to understand Woolman's under-reliance on argumentative logic. Despite his use of the scene where he debates a slaver-owner:

Woolman seems to feel, though, that argumentation as such had limited uses. Perhaps because the same arguments rose up again and again, necessarily eliciting from him the same replies, Woolman recorded no other conversations on slavery in the Journal. Perhaps, too, he became convinced that reasoning was lost on those who lived in a spirit of selfishness (Shea 64).

While Shea's conjectures may well locate some contributing factors in Woolman's rejection of logic, it is clear from my discussion above that this rejection was also a deep-seated belief. Examined above at the level of doctrine, in Woolman we find the absolute reliance on direct experience expressed in his journal at the vernacular level. It is obvious, in light of the preceding sections, that Woolman feels logic and dialectic are limited because they are part of the "natural" or flawed world.

Probably the most vivid example of this vernacular application of the experiential Quaker doctrine is what, for Woolman, becomes the defining moment for his anti-slavery position. When he first leaves his family farm, Woolman gains employment as a retail clerk:

My employer, having a Negro woman, sold her and directed me to write a bill of sale, the man being waiting who bought her. The thing was sudden, and though the thoughts of writing an instrument of slavery for one of my fellow creatures felt uneasy, yet I remembered I was hired by the year, that it was my master who directed me to do it, and that it was an elderly man, a member of our Society, who bought her; so through weakness I gave way and wrote it, but at the executing it, I was so afflicted in my mind that I said before my master and the Friend that I believed slavekeeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion. (Woolman 34)

It was through this direct experience of an "afflicted mind" that the divine shows Woolman that slavery is wrong. God communicates to Woolman through a direct experience of psychic discomfort.

After his conviction, Truth continued to "open" to Woolman in this way even more strongly. As the Quaker position indicates, all humans have access to this sense of truth. They need only be open to it. Shea notes that Woolman, "hoped that the purity of Truth, once clearly seen, would dissolve opposition, and that from the ardor of a man's embrace of Truth would follow compliance with its demands" (Shea 64).

By the time Woolman had become a well known anti-slavery advocate, he righteously proclaimed his actions to be the result of his direct experience of the divine. Late in life, for example, as he argued with the ship's captain on his final journey to England, Woolman described why he refused to take standard lodgings in the vessel and instead insisted on traveling in steerage:

As my mind was now opened, I told the owner that I had several times in my travels seen great oppressions on this continent, at which my heart had been much affected and brought often into a feeling of the state of the sufferers. And having many times been engaged, in the fear and love of God, to labour with those under whom the oppressed have been borne down and afflicted, I have often perceived that at view to get riches and provide estates for children, to live comfortable to customs which stand in that spirit wherein men have regard to the honours of this world—that in the pursuit of these things I had seen many entangled in the spirit of oppression. (Woolman 165)

As it turns out, communicating in this way about his "openings" is the primary motivation for Woolman to write and publish his journal in the first place. Because Truth can only be accessed through experience, the sharing of his journal with a non-Quaker audience offers all those who read it a chance to glimpse the Truth of Woolman's experiences and, thus, a chance at gaining access to their own divine openings.

Though Woolman's experience of divine openings seem as sedate as the staid Puritan conversion narratives, other significant Quaker writers of the period

had more tangible experiences of God. A well known liberal Quaker reformer who was Woolman's contemporary, Elias Hicks describes in his journal many "openings" of the divine followed by many periods of backsliding. As a youth, Hicks was raised, like Woolman, on a Quaker farm and later apprenticed to become a carpenter. However, his youth was fraught with temptations towards card playing, hunting, and, most of all apparently, dancing with women.

For Hicks, his moment of conviction focused on a rejection of this favorite activity. While attending a party:

I was called to participate in the dance, it seemed as though all my limbs were fettered, and I sat down and informed the company that I was now resolved to go no further. I was deeply tried, but the Lord was graciously near; and as my cry was secretly to him for strength, he enabled me to covenant with him, that if he would be pleased in mercy to empower me, I would for ever cease from this vain and sinful amusement; and he instructed me, that if I would escape the danger of another trial, I must keep myself separate from such companions; and blessed for ever be his right worthy name, in that he hath enabled me to keep this my covenant with him from that time inviolate. (Hicks 10-11)

In contrast to the frozen-limbs experience of Hicks, Woolman describes his conviction simply: "I humbly prayed to the Lord for his help, that I might be delivered from all those vanities which so ensnared me. Thus being brought low, he helped me; and as I learned to bear the cross I felt refreshment to come from his presence" (Woolman 27). Here, again, Woolman is typically staid in his presentation of revelatory experience. However, his reference to a "refreshment" caused by the "presence" of God makes it clear that the experience was revelatory and not merely experiential.

The Puritan conversion narratives are specifically designed to engage others in the belief that the speaker was saved, the location of that truth was always placed in the personal experiences of hardship. Such hardships were, in many instances, shared by members of the congregation. The Quaker narratives, on the other hand, are primarily arguing from the basis of potentially

idiosyncratic personal experiences with the divine: "feelings," "openings," and what sort of acts should follow from those brushes with divinity.

Negotiative Rhetorical Strategies in the Quaker Vernacular

In Quaker belief, women were equally open to the divine, and many influential Quaker women experienced and documented their "openings" of spirit. Sarah Hunt provides a good example of an individual who experienced the divine much as had Woolman. A generation after Hicks and Woolman, Hunt was born in 1797 in Saratoga County, New York. Though her father was originally a Baptist, he and his wife chose to raise their children in his wife's faith of Quakerism. Like Hicks, Hunt rejected her friends' entreaties toward non-spiritual activities. Though rather less dramatically than Hicks, she too "entered a covenant" with the divine:

My companions sought my company, and pleaded the innocent of their amusements, but I replied that they were not so to me, and they soon ceased to solicit me. At this period I entered into a covenant with my God, as did Jacob old, that my life and my all should be devoted to His service if he would keep me and preserve me, and furnish my ability to do his will. (Hunt 4)

So far, all the Quaker examples of rhetoric motivated by divine experience exhibit specific characteristics. For my purposes, of primary interest is the emphasis placed upon a correction of ways which lead to a proper behavioral position before the ability to experience Truth. In each of these narratives, and every other one that I have found, part of the experience of Truth is an occasional falling back into behavior that serves to obscure Truth, a recognition of this new backsliding, and a correction for it. The final Quaker text I will examine exhibits this same characteristic, but in far sharper relief. This example is that of *The Memoir of Mildred Ratcliff*.

Ratcliff was born in Virginia in 1773 with the name Mildred Morris. Raised in the rural south by a family of tobacco farmers, she received very little formal

education. What is particularly interesting about Ratcliff's writings for this study, is that she was born into a family of Episcopalians who moved to become members of a Baptist church shortly after she was born. It is only as an adult that her exposure to and conviction by Quaker beliefs precipitated her conversion into Quakerism. This narrative element provides the strongest example of a "correction-of-ways" pattern that dominates the Quaker narratives.

The recurrence of this pattern in all of these narratives offers proof of a shared sense of the world in these individuals—what Kenneth Burke might have called an "attitude," and, in this case, "a comic attitude." This attitude exemplifies one-half of what my analysis is attempting to focus in on: *negotiative rhetorical strategies*.

As we have it, Ratcliff's life narrative is comprised of various "memoranda and correspondence" compiled and linked together by her friend Ann Branson and published by a Quaker press in 1890. Though filtered through Branson, her story offers a compelling personal account of Quaker spiritual life.

Directly quoting Ratcliff in much of the text, Branson lays out Ratcliff's early shift away from Baptism toward Quakerism. Early in life, direct experience of the divine played a powerful role in the daily life of Ratcliff: "As I grew in years the Divine Spirit frequently was with me as a teacher not to be removed into a corner, though I did not know what it was that reprov'd me when I did wrong, and comforted me when I did right." First, as a young girl, this divine "teaching" led her to become a Baptist: "I not only believed in my Lord Jesus, but was enabled to confess with my lips, that He was the beloved of my soul. Thus confessing to Him, I was received into membership with the Baptists, and was Baptized by immersion before I was fifteen years of age" (Branson 17).

For her youth and into adulthood, this faith was adequate for her life situation. "I was a zealous Baptist. My father and a number of my near connections were ministers amongst them, and I was warmly united to that people." After the death of her father, Ratcliff married Harrison Ratcliff: "a young man who was brought up among the Friends, was light, volatile, and not a true helpmate for one seeking the kingdom of Heaven." Ratcliff was only 15 years old

when she married. Her husband only occasionally attended meetings of the Friends, and she only sometimes accompanied him. "Going sometimes with my husband to their silent meetings, I sat among them wondering at such a manner of holding a religious meeting. Truly a silent meeting was all foolishness to me" (Branson 18). However, in an act of openness and humility, Ratcliff offered up her religious beliefs to a strange conglomeration of comic and tragic attitudes: "I had not gone to many of these meetings before in secret prayer, my spirit bowed before Him that seeth in secret, greatly desiring that as He alone had the power, He would show me whether there was any sense in such meetings."

At this moment, Ratcliff specifically enters a comic frame of acceptance. Admitting that she does not have, despite her previous "zealotry," the ability to discern the truth of the silent Quaker services, she continues to pursue her spiritual life allowing the possibility that the Quakers are correct and she and her Baptist beliefs are wrong. "Wading in the deeps I went on for a few years, sometimes at Friends' meetings, sometimes at the Baptists meetings" (Branson 18). From the perspective of choosing a final religious faith, Ratcliff is acting in a comic frame. That is to say: she is developing or exploring her beliefs through with the negotiation made possible by a comic attitude.

While considering giving up the few African slaves she has acquired, Ratcliff was concerned that she will not be able to accomplish her necessary work without them. However, at the same time, she felt it was wrong to keep slaves. In a symbolic challenge to the Baptists, who held few reservations against slavery, she decided to accept, in a deeply Quaker act, her own sense that slavery was fundamentally wrong.

I was sitting in a Baptists' meeting, I was enabled to give up that uncertain dependence, and cast all my care in the Lord. He gave me his promise in secret that this dependence on Him should not fail, but should last while life continued. At this my spirit bowed and said it is enough (Branson 19).

While she had brought the specifics of her faith into the comic frame, she had, at the same time, relied on a personal experience of God's assurance that

her spirit will not suffer from this new position of open uncertainty. Like the scientist that sets up a controlled experiment to ascertain what natural laws will unfold, Ratcliff has set up the uncertainty of taking on Quaker and personal conviction as an appeal to the results that this act will yield. Being from God, those results are, in essence, preordained and she need only discover them.

Feeling a euphoric release at her decision, Ratcliff states that "after this my mind being prepared, I picked up *John Woolman's Journal*, and said in my heart, I will look in this book to see if there is sense in anything a Quaker can write"(Branson 19). Here, Ratcliff actively takes on a negotiative attitude toward her spirituality by seeking out a known opponent and exploring his ideas. Ratcliff has entered into a secondary stage of the comic frame: one in which she can openly seek and test her beliefs against the beliefs of others. Inherent to this activity, she must admit, as she does, that her previously held beliefs *may be wrong*. At the same time, however, her very motivation for this act is God's previous "secret assurance" that her "dependence on him shall not fail."

Her first experience mediated through Woolman's journal is intensely emotional: "Before I had read many pages, my spirit was broken and my heart contrite under an impression that the want of sense was in me, and not in the Quakers." Woolman shortly confirms Ratcliff's conviction that slavery was unacceptable for a Christian, and "I can truly say I never for a moment regretted in any strait giving them up" (Branson 19).

During this period, while Ratcliff has taken on some of the beliefs of Quakerism and yet still attends Baptist church services, she seems to have most completely engaged in the comic frame of acceptance. However, in retrospect at least, she felt uncomfortable with this belief position. While "a good degree convinced of the principles of Friends" she is slow to reject her Baptism (Branson 20). In fact, it would take another powerful direct personal experience to press her, beyond all doubt, to break out of this comic frame. In fact, it took an intense revelatory experience.

While entering a Baptist church service, "I felt a hand, though invisible, clap me on my right shoulder, and with it I heard the language, in secret, yet plain

and intelligible, "Thou hast no business here." After attempting to disregard the bizarre experience and quietly continue in her uncertainty:

I went to the Baptist meeting again and again, and as often as I did so, felt the same invisible hand, when reaching the door, with increasing power, clap me on my right shoulder, and heard the same language, "Thou hast no business here." My poor mind was all in confusion. I had a great life in singing, but I had no pleasure in it in those meetings. (Branson 20)

As with so many other Quaker narratives, Ratcliff's conflict arose as a result of direct revelatory experience of the divine acting out against a moral wrong. In this case, her joy in singing, which was and still is very much a part of Baptist life, was in conflict with the Quaker emphasis on quietude and contemplation during worship. This repeated visionary experience, one of the first of many for a woman who Branson would call "a prophetess and discerner of spirits," drove her out of the comic frame of uncertainty and acceptance into the zealous and non-negotiative belief that Quaker principles were Truth in a turn to a tragic mode of viewing the world (Branson x).

In 1793, Ratcliff "made application and was united" with the Society of Friends (Branson 21). By releasing her slaves and then reading Woolman's journal with an open mind, in a sense, Ratcliff offered up her faith and existed in the uncertainty of error Burke called the comic frame of acceptance. However, it would seem that the physical recalcitrance of the divine experience common to all the Quaker spiritual narratives forced her back into the tragic frame. In retrospect, then, her overall attitude toward her spiritual life seems both fundamentally tragic and heavily dependent on her personal experience.

The "Real" Difference Between Quaker and Puritan Conversion Narratives

At this point, we are ready to revisit the initial question of this chapter. What motivating factors lead the Puritan colonists to react so violently to Quaker

newcomers when their beliefs were so similar? To address this question, the comic, tragic, experiential, and negotiative modes of belief all come into play.

Stephen O'Leary has usefully applied this framework to the specifically apocalyptic texts of the early Millerites and the more contemporary writings of Dispensationalist author Hal Lindsey. Making a more literal use of Burke's comic and tragic modes than I have done, O'Leary's perspective is one which addresses the psychological narrative structure much as Burke laid it out. For O'Leary, "the Apocalypse is a closed symbolic system in which each element of the myth signifies a particular historical or political referent." Though O'Leary recognizes the comic attitude of the third-century theologian Origen, his analysis focuses on how "the tragic view has been taken to its furthest limits time and time again by interpreters predicting an imminent visitation of divine wrath" (O'Leary 201).

However, the modes of comic and tragic are seldom so clear cut. As O'Leary notes:

Their features are not mutually exclusive; they may each be found within a given narrative. In fact, to the extent that a symbolic narrative strives for "completion" in its representation of the world, and to widen its perspective to account for the various motives of human action, it will contain elements of both the tragic and comic frames. (O'Leary 200)

In my more flexible application of Burke's terms to Quaker and Puritan narratives, this lack of exclusivity is clear. Even more, by focusing on two discourses that were similar and yet in deep conflict, we find the categories *blending and melding in the narratives I have examined. Even in this blending, new and subtle differences in rhetoric suddenly leap into sharp relief.*

The addition of the negotiative and experiential modifiers helps define the contours at the base of the Puritan and Quaker conflict. First, we must recognize that the experiential mode takes two primary forms in the narratives: the generally experiential and the specifically revelatory.

In Ratcliff's experience, we find the fullest range of the possibilities for belief that these simple distinctions imply. First, she was in a tragic mode as "a zealous Baptist." However, an exposure to Quakerism became possible when she took on a comic mode and began exploring her beliefs through a negotiative process. This mode allowed her to engaged in an experimental release of her slaves based on her to reading of Woolman's journal. Following his experience through the published text, she too comes to recognize the divine working in her life. Soon, revelatory experiences of God speaking to her and clapping an invisible hand on her shoulder move her to convert to Quakerism. For our purposes, she then entered a tragic mode dominated by an assurance in her beliefs based on direct revelatory experience. In Figure Three, we can see these events laid out chronologically.

Ratcliff's Major Spiritual Life Events

1. birth	INITIAL TRAGIC ACCEPTANCE
2. confirmation as Baptist	
3. marriage to Quaker	
4. attendance of meetings	COMIC-EXPERIENTIAL BEGINS
5. release of slaves	
6. reading of Woolman's journal	COMIC-NEGOTIATIVE EXCHANGE WITH WOOLMAN
7. divine hand	RETURN TO EXPERIENTIAL-TRAGIC MODE AS QUAKER
8. convincement as Quaker	

Figure 3: Ratcliff Chronology

An application of the same terms to a generalized Puritan conversion narrative based on my specific observations above presents a much different scenario. While it is possible that some sense of predestination influenced Ratcliff's Baptist beliefs, this would have been certainly rejected with her acceptance of Quakerism. The Puritan view, on the other hand, is deeply governed by a belief in predestination. Still, in a sense, the Puritan narratives exhibit a comic mode even if they are supported by an underlying adherence to the doctrine of predestination.

In these narratives, we find an initial tragic sense that the individual is predestined for God's grace as a member of the elect. As such, at this point the individual's belief is deeply tragic. Further, the belief that God had intended for that individual, as one of His elect, to go to America, places the individual in a position in which they are fated to be a colonizer. However, the actual experience of colonizing, as well as the harsh trip across the Atlantic, introduce a significant level of environmental-divine recalcitrance.

This harsh experience of physical recalcitrance offered up by the land itself introduces a potential moment of comedy when the Puritan confessions imply that maybe the confessor is not really a member of the elect. However, the irrevocability of traveling to this new land makes the possibility of error untenable. All that hardship could not be in vain. Hence, coming to the New World *had* to be the right decision and hence the individual *had to be a member of the elect*. Thus, if there was a moment of comedy or not, the cycle of harsh experience, guilt, and the need for real world survival is heavily tragic, and it reinforces itself by feeding on the very real evidence that the entire tragic belief system could be in error.

At an institutional level, this same self-affirming cycle of terms seems to have existed as well. However, at this level, the comic has become clearly evident in the second generation Puritans' decision to accept baptism as proof being a member of the elect (as is made clear in figure four). Based on the simple recalcitrance which came to the fore because the first generation Puritans were dying off and their children needed to be assimilated into the Puritan

tradition, the Puritans needed to negotiate a new position which would allow for those children to enter the Puritan community as The Elect. The introduction of the Half-Way Covenant, then, is evidence that the community had, by necessity, begun to enter a negotiative mode at the institutional level.

The Puritans' Tragic Cycle of Terms at the Institutional Level

1. Puritans leave "Old World" to create utopia	TRAGIC WORLD VIEW
2. hope of defining and returning to reformed England	
3. loss of that hope with the fall of the Cromwell government (1660)	
4. adjustment to new situation, their utopia will have to be New Jerusalem	ENTRANCE OF COMIC-EXPERIENTIAL
5. the New Jerusalem fails to arrive and children come of age and need spiritual guidance	COMIC MODE CONTINUES
6. Halfway Covenant allows possibility that baptism can also be proof of membership into elect in face of rising concerns for and by children (1662)	COMIC-NEGOTIATIVE MODE BEGINS

Figure 4: Puritan Chronology

The most harsh Puritan backlash against incoming Quakers was between 1659 to 1661 when four Quakers were hanged. Significantly, this occurs during the period I have labeled comic-experiential. Just after the failure of the Cromwell government in 1660 and in the midst of the rising social crisis that would result in the Halfway Covenant in 1662, Puritans were in no mood for the complication of Quaker's ripe with their own tragically self assured beliefs. Instead of simply banishing the incoming Quakers as they had before, some were killed.

Near the end of the introduction to *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke simplifies his entire complex analysis considerably when he states: "Basically

this book would accept the Aristophanic assumptions, which equate tragedy with war and comedy with peace" (Burke *Attitudes . . . v*). In the case at hand, however, it seems that this formula does not correlate. It does not seem that less violence occurred as a more comic outlook emerged, but, instead, quite the opposite. What is becoming clear is not that there is any absolute correlation between the comic mode and an aversion to violence, but that the confrontation of two experientially based world views breeds a situation ready for conflict.

Immediately following the news of Cromwell's final failure, one can imagine an elevated level of apprehension about the validity of the beliefs in the Puritan colonists. Further, Puritans not only engaged in argumentative debates, as they often had in person and in writing with Quakers back in England, but allowed for the resolution of conflict through such debates. The Quaker position, on the other hand, saw all such reasoning as part of a fallen world. Thus, debates which engaged in that reason were not useful. Instead, the Quakers sought to bring new converts to the experience of revealed of truth.

When a few Quaker radicals arrived onto the American-Puritan scene armed with their "heretical" texts and ready to debate the Puritans' in their own churches, it was clearly far too much of a threat to the Puritans' doctrine of predestination of the elect which was already challenged and tenuous.

So it was precisely the similarity of these two belief systems that lead to such conflict. Both felt that they had experiential access to truth. The Quaker accessed an Inner Light that was available to all humans. Hence, the Quaker had the self-assurance, or even need, to encourage others to give up their error and access that Light. Fittingly, Quakers traveled to the colonies to bring that gift to the Puritans. The Puritans, however, embroiled in debates of their own, felt they were already saved; and every nasty turn of events they had encountered so far provided evidence of that predestined grace.

Quakers placed their sort of truth-experience, the divine recalcitrance, not only at the apex of possible truth sources but above reasonable debates on interpreting scripture. The Puritans placed their experience of the natural or fallen world above such direct access to deity. For them, the scriptures were true

and need only to be interpreted correctly. Quakerism would soon undergo changes in doctrine; even so much so that its contemporary manifestation is barely resemble its original forms. Congregationalist-Puritanism, similarly, would change and begin to dissipate. The major emerging religious institutions of America would come, for the most part, to reject predestination, excluding, notably, Presbyterianism. A secular government would rise to power and bring with it institutions governed, ostensibly, by negotiative rhetorics of public debate and scientific inquiry. Penn's Holy Experiment would fail, and his Quakers would withdraw from politics. The New Jerusalem in America would not arrive.

Yet within these discourses, the tension between negotiative and experiential loci drive, through time and in response to real-world experience, a shifting emphasis on either the comic adjustment to error or the tragic adherence to belief. While this is now clear in the overtly spiritual examples of Quaker and Puritan discourse, the powerful influence of these loci is not limited to the religious. In the next short section, and as a concluding example, I will briefly apply this same analysis to, perhaps, the most notoriously secular writer of early European-American thought.

Paine's Faith

If any single individual American thinker is the first to be readily associated with the secular nature of American government, it is clearly Thomas Paine. In Paine, we find the most virulent attacks on institutionalized religion. However, at the same time, we also find the same elements which governed the vernacular religious discourse we have already discussed. In Paine's writings, as in both the Quaker and Puritan examples above, the conceptions of truth as located in personal experience and truth as arrived at through negotiation creates an ongoing tension. This, as we shall see below, is in part because, even though committed to the republican cause in the colonies, Paine was deeply influenced by Quakerism in his youth.

Born on the January 29, 1737, Paine was raised in Norfolk, England. His father, Joseph Paine, was a Quaker who kept a shop in the town of Thetford. Specifically, his father was a "staymaker," a maker of women's corsets. In addition to Pain Senior's business in town, he had a small farm at home. He made enough money to send the young Tom to grammar school from ages six to fourteen, after which, the younger Paine returned home to apprentice under his father. At age sixteen, he ran away from home to secretly join a pirate ship. After a year, this lifestyle ceased to appeal to Paine. However, instead of returning home, he moved to London and then to nearby Sandwich where he, without apparent means, established himself as a master staymaker. Then, in 1759 he married Mary Lambert, a local craftsman's servant.

However, within a year his business venture had failed. Soon after that, his wife would die. Working briefly as a custom officer, he was fired for taking bribes. Even while his life was in shambles, however, Paine became involved in local politics. Sometime in 1774, Paine was introduced to Benjamin Franklin, then sixty-eight, by a friend from the excise board. Franklin seems to have persuaded the wayward Paine to emigrate to North America. Franklin gave him a letter of introduction to his son-in-law, Richard Bache in Philadelphia.

In North America, Paine quickly became involved in the tavern debates on politics. He gained employment as a journalist at the new *Pennsylvania Magazine*. Shortly thereafter, Paine published the now famous pamphlet *Common Sense* which would aid in turning the colonial public in favor of revolution (Ayer 1-13).

Paine's basic argument in *Common Sense* is one that he returns to again and again throughout his life. He argues that any tyrannical rule goes against human nature. "Natural man" was created by God and, like an oak growing from seed, had certain potentialities which might be considered "natural qualities." One of these qualities was a "natural love of liberty." Though this love could not be permanently destroyed, it could be deadened by the harsh rule of a tyrant. At such times, humans forgot their inborn desire for freedom and it would take an agitator such as Paine himself to remind them of it. In a sentence, Paine

believed that all people are born free because that is the way God made them. What is most interesting for my study are the rhetorical strategies Paine employs to make this argument.

Paine's pamphlet was not a philosophical treatise as much as it was a popular appeal. As such, it was an appeal to the very idea of "common sense." This idea was however a cutting edge philosophical concept at the time, and when Paine used the term it was in relation to that philosophical position. For Paine, "common sense was an all-encompassing faculty of mind and feeling that gave people the power of immediate discernment" (Frutchman 21). This belief, which seems to have stayed with him throughout his life, parallels the Quaker reliance on openings of the Inner Light. And this should really come as no surprise since Paine's father was himself a Quaker and Paine was raised in that tradition.

Paine is probably best known for his tirade against institutional Christianity in *The Age of Reason*, where he proclaims: "All national institutions of Churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit." It must be noted, though, that Paine did not reject spirituality or the existence God outright. "I believe in one God, and no more . . . I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy" (Paine 666).

In fact, Paine's consistent use of a sermonic rhetorical style has prompted historian Jack Frutchman, Jr. to argue that, "although he [Paine] did not fit into the mainstream millennialist tradition, he had a fairly clear picture of a utopian human condition that could be the likely outcome of world revolution or political progress and the continued efforts of people like himself" (Frutchman 165). While Paine was in no way a millennialist, he did employ the rhetoric many have located in the Puritan jeremiad. In *Common Sense*, Paine clearly evokes the image of America as the land of the elect to argue for revolution:

Even the dispersion of the Jews, though foretold by our Savior, was effected by arms. Wherefore, as ye refuse to be the means on one

side, yet ought not to be the meddlers on the other; but to wait the issue in silence; and unless ye can produce divine authority, to prove, that the Almighty who hath created and placed this new world, at the greatest distance it could possibly stand, east and west, from every part of the old world, doth, nevertheless disapprove of its begin independent of the corrupt, and abandoned court of Britain. (Paine 58)

Immediately preceding this passage, Paine vigorously attacks the Quaker writer Barclay for his anti-war position saying: "we do not complain against you because you are Quakers, but because ye pretend to be and are NOT Quakers" (Paine 56). Paine argues against the Quakers' pacifism, that "Kings are not taken away by miracles, neither are changes in governments brought about by any other means than such as are common and human" (Paine 58). Here we find Paine's careful use of the very loaded word "common" at a pivotal moment in *Common Sense*; and only a few hundred words from its completion.

It is difficult to find any single coherent syllogistic argument arising from Paine's statement that Quakers who will not fight are not Quakers, except a general attack on their hypocrisy. In light of his use of the word "common," however, it is not a stretch to reconsider his use of the word in relation to his early exposure to Quakerism. In fact, Paine's fixation on the term is a clue that his own philosophy can be seen as hybridization and recreation of the ideals of Quakers. In a sense, Paine creates a secularized vernacular of his own based on the institutions of Quaker doctrine.

Both Paine and general Quakerism emphasized human equality and access to some "common sense" of what is right. Quakerism, however, emphasized that this meant all killing was wrong, and hence war was unacceptable. Paine, on the other hand, felt that the "common sense" of the revolutionary colonies was that humans were created with liberty and deserved, even needed, to attain that state as intended by the divine creation. Like Quakers, Paine went back to the Bible to find proof of his point which was, in its simplest form, that all people are born free.

In the first part of the *Rights of Man*, Paine claimed: "The Mosaic account of the creation, whether taken at divine authority, or merely historical, is fully up to this point, the unity or equality of man" (Paine 463). Similarly some sixteen years before in *Common Sense*, Paine made the same claim: "Mankind being originally equals in the order of creation, the equality could only be destroyed by some subsequent circumstance . . . near three thousand years passed away from the Mosaic account of the creation, till the Jews under a national delusion requested a king" (Paine 12-13). Based on the Bible, Paine held that all humans were created equal. This equality was a natural state, and it bore with it the rights to happiness and freedom. "Natural rights are those which appertain to man in right of his existence" (Paine 464).

In the first part of *Rights of Man*, Paine rails against Edmund Burke's suggestion that government can set up forever binding documents. Paine makes it abundantly clear that his belief system is one that specifically rejects precedent as a position of recalcitrance. That is to say, his sense of rhetorical strategy is not one which heavily values a reliance on argumentative or legal precedent. Paine: "I am contending for the right of the living, and against their being willed away, and controlled and contracted for, by the manuscript assumed authority of the dead" (Paine 439). In move reminiscent of Decartes' rejection of the reliance on Ciceronian principles, Paine places the defining recalcitrance squarely in the field of *personal experience*:

The error of those who reason by precedents drawn from antiquity, respecting the rights of man, is, that they do not go far enough into antiquity. They do not go the whole way. They stop in some of the intermediate stages of an hundred or a thousand years, and produce what was then done as a rule for the present day. This is no authority at all. If we travel still farther into antiquity, we shall find a direct contrary opinion and practice prevailing; and if antiquity is to be authority, a thousand such authorities may be produced, successively contradicting each other: But if we proceed on, we shall at last come out right; we shall come to the time when man came from the hand of his Maker. (Paine 462)

Paine argues that, unlike neo-classical thinking, the ancients did not lay out the principles which should define current decision making. However, that was not to say that the tabula rasa of the human mind was without guides. Instead, humans must be guided by, in a truly Quaker sense, a dual principle of personal "feeling" and the Golden Rule of Christ:

The duty of man is not a wilderness of turnpike gates, through which he is to pass by tickets from one to the other. It is plain and simple, and consists but of two points. His duty to God, which every man must feel; and with respect to his neighbour, to do as he would be done by. (Paine 464)

On an macro-discursive level, this places Paine's thought squarely where it should be historically: a Romantic reaction against a perceived over reliance on classical principles. In the company of the work of Newton, Locke, Bacon, Decartes, and Ramus, Paine's personal experience or "feeling" places recalcitrance in the realm of the empirical—a tragic attitude in which the principles of right and wrong are predicted by the very nature of humankind. In this sense, the religious experimentation by Mildred Ratcliff or Isaac Newton's scientific experiments are based out of the same attitude and it is one which Paine shares: a belief that truth is already decided, but may or may not be adequately discovered. This is what I termed above, the tragic-negotiative mode.

While Paine did break with Quakerism, his location of recalcitrance at the level of personal experience places him far closer to Quaker thought than at first seems evident. Even more, it draws into relief his problematic relationship to the secular ideal of negotiative governance. In *The Age of Reason*, he defines "revelation" as I have for the purpose of this analysis—and then specifically refutes its validity:

Revelation, when applied to religion, means something communicated immediately from God to man. No one will deny or dispute the power of the Almighty to make such a communication if he pleases. But admitting, for the sake of a case, that something has been revealed to a certain person, and not revealed to any other person, it is revelation to that person only . . . and hearsay to every other (Paine 668).

He continues:

Revelation, therefore, cannot be applied to any thing done upon earth of which man himself is the actor or the witness; and consequently all the historical and anecdotal part of the Bible, which is almost the whole of it, is not within the meaning and compass of the world revelation, and therefore is not the word of God. (Paine 676).

In a sense, Paine has taken the Quaker emphasis on personal revelation over scriptural authority to an extreme; but at that extreme he simultaneously cuts off the possibility of personal revelation as a reason for acting in the world. Revelation "cannot be applied to any thing done upon earth." Obviously, this would not allow for the validity of Ratcliff's experience of a divine hand or even, arguably, any "opening" which would lead Woolman to reject slavery.

While railing against this sort of "revelation" in the preface to his 1807 attack on prophetic interpretations of the Old Testament's passages quoted in the New Testament, Paine states that his own work on religious texts hopes to, through "Reason," give humans the "confidence and consolation in his Creator, unshackled by the fables of books pretending to be the word of God" (Paine 165). In a word, Paine hopes to give his readers individual freedom to pursue happiness through an adherence to Reason over religious belief.

At the same time, however, Paine's government has little or no role in this process. Even more, Paine affirms that each individual must come to his or her own beliefs. He assumes that, in the end, good Reason will prevail; *and such "reason" or "common sense" is a natural, innate, quality of humans which is accessed through a personal "feeling."* However, this time he has made this point through a fairly sophisticated enthymematic, Aristotelian, argument. Revelation is not a valid reason to act in the world because it is a direct communication from the divine. The Bible cannot be revealed because it is the result of hearsay, and so on. What Paine has done, though, is replace the Quaker sensibility of divine "openings" with a reliance on the "natural" capacity of humans to access "common sense." However, like Quaker thinking, because we

all have access to this same sense and Paine has already figured this out, our negotiated governance will run smoothly precisely because, in the end, we will all agree on what is, after all, "reasonable."

Like the Quakers' deep faith in their personal experience of the divine, Paine's world view rests on a deep faith in common sense—in *Reason*. It is only with this crutch that he can consider a world in which individuals negotiate about what is true. From this perspective, his world view is nearly as tragic as the Quakers. Although differing from Puritan thinking which placed the divine into physical recalcitrance, he does engage logic as did Puritans. Against the Quaker belief in the fallen state of human logic, Paine raises such logic to the level of divine, places the recalcitrance necessary for his tragic sense that a new world order was blossoming in America in that logic, and gives it divine sanction by placing its birth at the beginning of time; where a watch-maker God can set down its principles and quietly withdraw.

Here we find the same standard pattern of polarization between negotiative and experiential locations of recalcitrance we found in Puritan conversation narratives and Quaker journals. While the Puritan statements are clearly motivated by the need for the larger group to accept the individual as a member of the elect of God based on his or her experience with temptation, Quaker journals typically depict the individual searching for Truth, as in the case of Mildred Ratcliff, among various religious and spiritual alternatives (Shea ix). Both vernaculars held primarily tragic world views, but they relied on radically different sources of recalcitrance to prop up their tragedies.

With this clue in hand, it seems that Puritan conversion narratives and their roughly contemporary Quaker journals represent vernacular rhetorics which lean in slightly different directions. While Puritans relied on the direct expression and experience of a cycle of punishments wrought by God through the land, Quaker journals feature a systematic examination of a series of possible religious alternatives which end, of course, in the right choice of Quakerism based on the direct "openings" of the divine into the individual. While Puritanism seems rooted in deterministic beliefs about the elect and thus God's absolute authority through

the Word, Quakerism leans toward negotiation between different possible Truth alternatives.

In Paine's faith, however, we find that what appears to be negotiative about Quaker thinking is in fact as much a crutch for the tragic as was the predestination of Puritanism. While both Paine and the Quakers believed that all individuals had access to truth, that truth would be the same. For Paine, truth had already been experienced through logical reasoning, for Quakers, it was through divine openings.

Though the rather forthright self-righteousness of Puritanism allowed for the violent backlash against the visiting Quakers in New England, the very same tragic certainty inspired Quakers to travel into the Puritans' theocracy in the first place. Maybe even more shocking is the fact that this same sort of dogmatic attachment to experiential truth contributed, through Paine's popular writings, to the foundation of the secular government that would soon conquer most of the vast North American continent.

In this way, we see that the tension I will spend the rest of the chapters in this study locating in different examples of electronic discourse is not new or even specific to electronic discourse. Instead, the negotiative-experiential or tragic-comic tensions clearly preexisted contemporary communicative modes. As we shall see in the following pages, these modes still wield powerful influence of the daily lives and deeply held beliefs of real living individuals.

CHAPTER III: "THINKING DIVERGENTLY:" PATH-DEPENDENCE AND THE RISE OF INTERNET DISCOURSE

After the pivotal media studies of the 1970s, there can now be little doubt that the medium which is used for a particular communication has a profound effect on the communicative act. In their 1979 *Media Logic*, David Altheide and Robert Snow famously showed how individuals whose primary access to news events through the television were prone to think in terms of anecdotal evidence because of the narrative expectations which drive televised presentation. In 1964, Jacques Ellul began, in his *The Technological Society*, a vigorous social criticism of technology which continues today. He notes: "under a barrage of information from birth, social values become meaningless since the values defined by the traditional societies no longer have anything in common with the use of technique" (Ellul "The Search . . ." 26). Extending Ellul, Neil Postman, in his 1992 *Technopoly*, similarly argues that values are being driven out of modern society by an "information glut" in which information is diminishing the influence of local institutions, practices, and thus ethical positions. According to these theorists, the glut of information deluging our daily lives renders all information meaningless. We lose the coherence of locality and cease to attempt to make judgments of this "information-mass" at all.

These arguments are probably best known from their popular presentation by Marshall McLuhan. In 1964, McLuhan claimed that television has created a

"global village" in which moral action is almost impossible. McLuhan pushes the social critics' linkage of the media-action binary to its logical limit: media itself defines the field in which individual acts become possible.

While this may be something of an overstatement, it brings to the forefront the importance of closely examining the effects of various media on individual action. *To what degree does a given medium encourage or discourage the expression of a personal position on a given debate?* With this question in mind, McLuhan's claim about television makes sense: a medium in which the unilateral transference of what appear to be incontrovertible facts would not seem to encourage personal expression or positioning in a debate. In the same way, it would seem that media in which multilateral transference of what appear to be opinions could be expected to encourage debate. The Internet, e-mail and newsgroups in particular, are just such media.

As so often is the case, however, neither television nor the Internet present straightforward cases of media influence on communication if for no other reason than the fact that most individuals are involved in and influenced by multiple media sources. We cannot confidentially isolate the influence of a single media in the real lives of individual ethnographic respondents. No communication or medium exists independent of all others. Instead, individuals involved in Western discourse typically engage in and are affected by face-to-face communication, television, mass publications, radio, and so on. Although this fact reminds us of the fallibility of any definitive conclusions, we cannot allow it to dissuade our attempts at locating the effects of specific media on individual behavior.

In this chapter, I will explore the relatively new definition of the word "literacy" which has been broadened to include levels of competency with computers. The use of the word usefully points out that the new communication technologies are changing the way individuals are interacting with the ideas which they communicate. In order to explore what sorts of changes are afoot, I must first acknowledge that technology is, in fact, not a neutral force. More than mere tools, computer technologies carry with them an ideology. Through

examining the recent rise of the Internet, we can see how an ideology of pluralism is implied in the very structure of those new media.

Because of this pluralism, new methods for research into on-line behavior become necessary. The Internet media are not only involved in the unilateral transference of information as are radio, television, and mass publication, but they are also *multilateral*. As a result, individuals using the Internet form *communities of discourse* in ways not possible through mass media communication. Because of this fact, scholars researching Internet behavior must engage ethnographic methods in order to gain a reasonable understanding of these newly emerging communities. Combing elements of a behavioral ethnographic perspective and rhetorical analysis, my method seeks to more rigorously address these new behaviors than previous methods of analysis.

The result of this approach yields a method which seeks to establish observable elements of discourse which, through their continuities and consistence, define a specific "Dispensational" literacy in the on-line Christian community. Based on the literacy model, we can see how members of the on-line Dispensational community actually did, in the 1994 and '95 research data which I gathered, engage in a sort of "divergent thinking." Stephen O'Leary has rightly show that a Dispensational world view is inherently "tragic." Its appeals to authority are localized the specific persons in the community who have the personal experience to make judgments about correct interpretations of biblical prophecy.

This sort of "tragic" world view fosters a rhetoric which is closed to new sources of influence or authority. Hence Dispensational discourse, in the work of John Darby and William Miller in the 19th as well as Hal Lindsey in the 20th centuries, has consistently show itself to discourage the introduction and exploration of new ideas. However, we find that, in the on-line manifestations I have documented, new and divergent ideas are very common. The reason for this new ability to integrate divergent ideas into the Dispensational discourse becomes clear in light of the "path dependent" nature of personal computer technology as it was developed for the Internet. Extending the sociological

concept of path-dependence, we can see how vernacular rhetorics on the Internet are themselves extensions of the ideologies inherent in personal computer technology. These ideologies privilege a wide access to multiple sources of influence. Thus, in on-line Dispensationalism we find a surprising reliance and appeal to negotiate between believers about various possible interpretations of prophecy.

In the 1994 and '95 data I will present in this chapter, we can still clearly recognize the tension between strategies that seek to establish truth in experiential versus negotiated terms. However, because this data has been collected exclusively from e-mail exchanges, it serves as a my primary example of a discourse which has assimilated and expressed, at a vernacular level, the ideology of capitalistic pluralism inherent in the design of personal computers and Internet technologies.

Multiplying Literacies

In the recent convergence of media and rhetorical studies, a new conception of "literacies" has arisen. No longer merely referring only to the ability to interpret and create the abstract symbols of text, the word has been pluralized. To account for the profound effects of a given medium on the norms and modes of communication, each medium has come to have its own literacy. Joshua Meyrowitz has usefully considered the pluralizing of literacy as "media literacies." For Meyrowitz, "basic media literacy involves being able to access and analyze messages in a variety of media" (Meyrowitz 100). Because individuals in North America already have and the access and ability to use multiple media, television and radio for example, they have already attained literacies in multiple media. Further, because this ability already exists in the public, is has, whether institutions are adjusting to it or not, already had an impact on how individuals express themselves. As Meyrowitz notes:

Macrolevel medium literacy, for example, provides a way of understanding the shift from oral to literate forms of communication supported new educational institutions and educational practices, which are now themselves being reshaped by the addition of various electronic media—leading to the calls for new forms of literacy. (Meyrowtiz 107)

Television teaches a literacy which, in North America, profoundly affects the vast majority of the population. Although it may be true that television creates a certain sense of moral apathy as McLuhan argued, the pragmatic response to this phenomenon is to recognize this aspect of television and address its faults. Television offers the benefit of providing powerful windows into the lives of others to which we might otherwise have no access. Making the best of use of this power requires that we encourage parallel multilateral exchanges about the television content we consume—as in, for example, family debates about what is or has recently been viewed (McLaren). In this way, instead of decrying television as the nemesis of literacy, we can locate, understand, and optimize its strengths by naming and using the particular literacy television creates.

Similarly, the various media of the Internet each carry their own literacies, and it is imperative that we locate the power and explore the nature of these rapidly emerging new media. Without a doubt, the most significant change computer mediated literacies bring is that of dynamism. “Anyone who has written with a computer knows that language on the screen seems different from language on the page. It seems more flexible, more fluid, more akin to the flickering of light than to the fixity of print” (Constanzo 11).

Many have noted that this aspect of electronic language has made computer literacy more and more similar to orality itself. Havelock Ellis posited that there is a progression of literacies which are bound to a progression of technological evolution. Ellis claims that, with the invention of writing, more analytic forms of thinking came to favor. When language was strictly oral, it was more fluid. When it came to be written down it became, “an artifact, a thing in itself, an object of its own study” (Ellis 98).

This sort of claim is familiar to us from the work of Walter Ong. Ong claims in *Orality and Literacy* that spoken discourse tends to be more episodic than logical and is less inventive or critical than written discourse. From Ong's perspective, writing frees thinking from the limitations of memory in order to develop more abstract forms of thought (Ong 1ff).

Although these claims have come under criticism, Ong pushes his hypothesis to include a concept which retains some popularity: the idea of "secondary orality" (Finnegan 64ff and Biakolo). Secondary orality refers to the changes wrought on language by our rising age of electronic communication. Ong argues that electronic literacy closely resembles orality. In particular, the pervasiveness of television, radio, and other non-written mass communication are bringing with them a new emphasis on the modes and norms he claimed were inherent in strictly oral societies (Ong 11).

However, even since 1982 when *Orality and Literacy* was published, the rush of new communication technologies have made Ong's arguments increasingly irrelevant. Internet communication has spawned an even newer literacy. One which both emphasizes the dynamism and immediacy of the oral and yet is written and read. With the rise of network communication as the norm, a far more complicated electronic literacy has arisen than "secondary orality" implies.

Mark Poster has argued that western culture has already passed through the age of literacy Ong was writing about and into a second media age. This second age is characterized by interactive media which is supplanting the unilateral broadcast media of the previous age. Certainly more pertinent to current research than is Ong, the work of Poster, Ellis, and Meyrowitz leave little doubt that Internet literacies are already rapidly changing much of Western discourse. However, the nature, strengths, and weaknesses of these new literacies are still largely unexplored. In order to pragmatically address these new literacies at personal and pedagogical levels, we must, first, seek to fairly examine them.

This is somewhat easier said than it is done. There is a long tradition of technophilia as well as neo-Ludditism in the historical and sociological explorations of technology. What is certain, from a postmodern academic perspective anyway, is that however we choose to characterize and address new literacies, we cannot escape the fact that, as the social constructivists will tell us, our participation and access to these new literacies will inform our perception of them. As John Berger would have it, our "ways of seeing" are always already filtered through the media we inhabit. To fairly examine the Internet is to participate in its discourses. To participate in its discourses is to learn its literacy. To learn its literacy is to change our perception of the medium itself.

The (Social) Construction of Technology

In the late 1970s, Langdon Winner properly demonstrated that technology itself is not neutral. Technology teaches literacies which define the field of possible actions in which we operate as we interact with that technology. For example, the development of the personal calculator was first driven by the consumption of such devices by specific professions: engineering, architecture, and so on. However, the mass production and availability of hand-held calculators opened a new range of possible applications for that technology: the exact calculation of personal finances in a grocery store or the plotting of complex functions during a fifty minute high-school calculus test.

The development of the calculator, however, was premised by the consumption of the technology in business. Its personal applications only came to light because of the willingness of business-people to purchase the early, and very expensive, versions. Now, the hand-held personal computer has become so commonplace that, for many, even simple mathematical calculations necessitate the exactitude, accuracy, and ease associated with access to a personal calculator. Because the speed and accuracy of numerical calculations are of paramount importance in architecture, engineering and so forth, so too do

these qualities become relevant in our daily calculations of sales-taxes, tips, and so on.

Obviously, rhetoric, as I have defined it, presents a much more all-encompassing example of how technology effects and is influenced by the social than that of personal calculator use. However, Winner's general point about technology remains central. Modern technologies are generally constructed by groups of individuals who foresee certain ends for their constructions. Further, the process of construction, the application, and the revision of technologies are all highly social activities. There is a symbiotic relationship between technology development and social behavior; and this symbiosis has clearly influenced the vernacular rhetorics of individuals using technologies as much as it has the technologies themselves.

Rhetoric itself is inextricably bound up in ideology. If rhetoric is known to be influenced by new technologies and new technologies develop out of social contexts which are themselves steeped in rhetoric, technology itself clearly must be ideological. Rhetorical analysis can be applied to technology in an effort to locate and understand the ideological bent a given new technology is taking. As James Berlin has noted: "a particular rhetoric . . . instructs students about the nature of genuine knowledge or truth" (Berlin 4). Even the most latent and vernacular expressions of rhetoric are about the location of truth. If we assume, with Burke, that all communication is motivated and thus utilizes rhetorical stratagems, all communication carries ideology with it.

When that communication is altered by technology, so to, then, is the ideology that it conveys. As vernacular rhetorics develop in new technology-generated literacies, ideologies change and are transmitted. As with any vernacular symbiosis, those literacies are eventually noticed by institutionalized powers. They are codified and even taught. Then they feed back into the symbiotic loop of generation, informal learning, codification, and pedagogy. Thus the power of the social critics, pedagogues, and activists is always hopelessly entangled and dependant on the informal social force of the vernacular.

A far cry from any sort of technological or social determinism, I am asserting that the social, technological, informal, and institutional feed off each other in far more complex ways that can be fully described. As Clifford Geertz first noted, the deeper we look into a social phenomenon the less complete our understanding seems to be. The pragmatic questions then become: how are new technologies influencing to our ideology? How can we locate the sources of these changes in new technologies and work with their strengths?

These questions are currently being explored at great length by scholars concerned with language pedagogy where it is already high time to consider both theoretical and practical implications of new communication technologies. In the field of rhetorical pedagogy, Cooper and Selfe argue that computer technologies encourage their students to: "think divergently, to argue from different perspectives" and even "dissent through discourse" (851).

If divergent thinking is characterized by an ability to acquire new ideas and use those ideas to produce new lines of reasoning, it stands in opposition to the more tragic modes of thought associated with Calvinism, Christian fundamentalism, and, specifically, Dispensationalism. However, I have hypothesized that the very media of the Internet, and e-mail lists in particular, encourage negotiative exchange. Such exchanges require that individuals assimilate and reproduce ideas which others offer them. It follows that even when a normally closed discourse such as Dispensationalism goes "on-line," its discourse will, by the force of the medium, be opened up to a more negotiative mode of reasoning. That mode of thought will include, by necessity, the assimilation and use of more "divergent thinking."

To begin to understand how new communication technologies are influencing shared ideologies, we must first understand the nature of the technology we are examining. To begin to do that, we must look at the history and development of the Internet to locate what ideologies it seems likely to carry to those who use it.

A Brief History of the Internet

If a moment were to be chosen to mark the first conception of the Internet, one might consider the 1962 vision of an "Intergalactic Network" by J.C.R. Licklider of MIT (Licklider; Hauben). He conceived of a globally interconnected set of computers through which individuals could quickly access data and programs from any location.

Working for Advanced Research Projects Agency, Licklider contributed to the creation of "ARPANET"—a network of large university computers which began to lay the foundation for the Internet during the early 1970s. Soon, ARPANET technology was being used by many government organizations including many major research universities to create Local Area Networks or "LANs" in their offices.

At first, these networks were "line based" and could only exchange simple text characters. Most Western computers share a code known as ASCII. ASCII translates each standard type-writer keyboard key into a series of eight data "bits" or circuits marked as either on or off. Nearly all computers still understand and use this code on some level. So, with the development and installation of the TCP/IP network technology, computers could easily exchange ASCII characters and thus people could communicate through text-only e-mail or electronic archives of e-mail such as newsgroups (Leiner).

When physicists at the Geneva based lab the Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire or CERN adopted the TCP/IP network protocol, they began to investigate ways to share documents in a "hypertext" environment. Urged on by CERN and paring down a complicated system based on the NEXT Cube, The Stanford Linear Accelerator Center in California (or SLAC), became the first Web server. It housed the contents of an existing, and very large, database of abstracts of physics papers for CERN.

This new technology required that researchers interested in accessing the data on the database have a piece of software called a "browser." With this small piece of "browser" software, the same ASCII document can be read in very

similar ways by different computers without losing its non-ASCII format characteristics. This was done by the creation of a very simple computer language called HTML or Hyper-Text Mark-Up Language. A browser reading HTML can move beyond line-by-line ASCII text because it contains command lines or "tags" which are themselves ASCII text. These tags can then be interpreted on the local computer in similar ways regardless of the type of computer being used so long as the browser software has been written for the local computer and its operating system. In 1992, the first such browser was offered to the public by CERN as "freeware" and, thus, the public World-Wide-Web was born ("A Little History . . ."; and "A Cern Invention . . .").

The two key characteristics which emerge about the Internet from this brief history are: the driving motive of this communal creation was the ability to share documents openly and freely across great distances; and the desire to do this required that some level of computer coding be shared universally by all computers attempting to access the networked information. Since the Internet was developing out of and through existing computer systems, a common reference point was needed. At the beginning, and even in large part still today, this reference point was the ASCII text code.

It is precisely this characteristic of striving to share information that formed the Internet technologies as we now know them. Further, the necessity to share a common base-line of information encourages the adoption of similar communicative technologies. From the perspective of a vernacular symbiosis between technology development and use, 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. These modes then, in turn, encourage further development of the technologies along the same path—emphasizing an ideology of universal access. However, this ideology is not one of simple pluralism. Instead, it emerged out of the fairly recent surge in personal computer ownership in North America. This surge was itself the result of the capitalist ideologies of personal self-expression and individual ownership.

The Path-Dependence of Personal Computers

Before the advent of the Internet, a similar but different ideology was forming around the development of the personal computer. The PC was developed to privatize computer use and, at least in effect, make the computer and its software a viable consumer product. In so doing, the Internet's pluralism was, even at the same time individuals gained access to it, molded to a highly individualistic ideology of private ownership. The PC molded the possibilities for current on-line communication long before the Internet was designed. Extending the sociological concept of "path dependence," we can see how the development of PCs carried an ideology that then, in turn, inscribed that ideology into the design of the Internet. And, through their use, that ideology is transferred to users of these technologies whether they recognize it or not.

Path dependence occurs when "the very process of adoption [of new technologies] tends to improve the performance of those technologies adopted" (McKenzie 19). Technologies are born out of social interaction. They are not neutral in that their development and applications are born out of socially instilled attitudes. They are not developed independent of each other because once a technology has been adopted it colors and defines the path of future technologies. One technology becomes a primary departure point either as a tool of production or as a paradigm for the possibilities of new technologies; or, as in the case of the personal computer, both.

As the sociologist of technology Paul Ceruzzi notes:

In 1964 Gordon Moore, then of Fairchild and soon a cofounder of Intel, noted that from the time of its invention in 1958, the number of circuits that one could place on a single integrated circuit was doubling every year. By simply plotting the progress on a piece of semi-logarithmic graph paper, it was clear that by the mid 1970s the semiconductor companies would be selling chips that would integrate enough logic circuits on a small set of chips to equal those of a 1950s-era mainframe. (Ceruzzi 68)

In fact, by the 1960s Transistor-Transistor Logic, or TTL, technology was developed to make this possible. At the same, meta-oxide semiconductor, or MOS, chips were being engineered so that TTL chips could be mass produced. By 1974, the two forces were coming together to create the first personal computers. Both development of silicon chips as well as the market for specific kinds of chips pushed the development of computer technologies toward the individual and privately owned personal computers which are now prevalent.

Although chip technologies were beginning to make mass production profitable, large and expensive mainframe computers were the norm in the computer world. But by 1975 there were over 25,000 Hewlett-Packard programmable calculators in use by individuals involved in professional occupations like engineering, accounting, architecture and, of course, chip design. Although mainframe computers were designed so that many individuals could use the computer at the same time from different work stations, Intel's 8080 "computer-on-a-chip" made it possible to consider creating computers on the scale of the very popular personal calculators

"The calculators offered the first consumer market for logic chips that allowed one to amortize the high costs of setting up production lines for complex integrated circuits. The dramatic drop in prices of calculators between 1971 and 1976 showed just how potent this force was" (Ceruzzi 66). With the possibility of mass-production of identical chips to drive small personal, but very powerful, computers at hand, what was needed was a way for these chips, which were functionally exactly the same, to be able to be put to use in very different applications.

In order to profitably manufacture computer chips, companies needed to use standardized and mass-produced chips in computers marketed to individuals for private uses—uses beyond the simple calculation of numbers. The answer to this need was what we have now come to know as "software." Since setting up the machinery to mass produce single kinds of chips was very expensive, there had to be a way for mass produced chips like the Intel 8080 to be placed into boxes which could accomplish many different tasks. Because there was already

the basis for an ideology of personal consumption of computing technologies, the personal calculator-model could be expanded. All the personal computers needed was a way to store and deliver different applications to many identical machines.

The first way which this was to be accomplished for the personal computer was through the BASIC programming language. Invented at Dartmouth College by John Kemeney and Thomas Kurtz, it was used on a GE-235 mainframe for a "computer sharing" system. At Dartmouth, the whole student body was invited to use the mainframe for whatever they wanted. Kemeney and Kurtz hoped students from all disciplines would use the computer. So they developed BASIC as an easy language all students could learn and use to interact with the computer (Ceruzzi 69).

Meanwhile, IBM needed to develop good system protocols for their large business machines. In 1966, they generated DOS ("Disk Operating System") which opened the door to the integration of input from external media into the computers—the possibility to deliver information into the computer's memory through a mass-producible media instead of actually inputting it all by hand. With all of these developments already in play, late 1974 and early 1975 were the watershed years for personal computers.

In the January 1975 issue of *Popular Mechanics*, the "Altair" minicomputer was the cover-story. For less than 400 dollars, amateur hobbyists could build their very own, and maybe one of the first, personal computers. Designed by H. Edward Roberts, who had gotten a good deal on the new Intel 8080 chips buying in huge bulk, built cheap components around the chip to create the Altair kit (Ceruzzi 74). Following the tradition well known from DEC and Data General, Roberts made the specifications of his machine public so kit builders and professional engineers could easily expand on his design without copyright infringement.

The Altair, as it came, was basically a useless box—only programmable to blink lights in short sequences. So kit builders began developing all kinds of additions to it: punch-tape readers, tape decks, TVs, and teletypes would soon

give way to floppy-disk drives, monitors, and keyboards, but one ruthless and brilliant hobbyist broke the amateur-electronics traditions of the open exchange of ideas and made the great fortune of his generation (Ceruzzi 77). This hobbyist was Bill Gates. He would do this not through any great invention of his own, but, instead, by taking the BASIC programming language already in the public-domain and streamlining its design for use on the Altair. In a way, he invented not a single thing, but the whole concept of commercial software.

This is, maybe, the greatest example of socially-constructed path-dependence of the computer revolution. The marketing of BASIC as software was path-dependant because it was made possible by the existence of BASIC in the first place, and Gates' access to large mainframe computers at his college to retool it. It was socially-constructed, in fact ideologically laden, because the goal was to produce something which would drive an untold number of individual and privately owned machines. This innovation would soon make personal computers, and the design of software, wildly profitable.

In the mid-1970s, the standard programming language was FORTRAN which was a very difficult language to learn and use. Although other languages were being developed for mainframes, they all took lots of memory; the sort of memory expected to be found on a mainframe computer. The Altair needed something smaller and simpler, so Roberts hoped to use the BASIC language that the Dartmouth students and professors had written and left in the public domain. However, even this simple language needed to be paired down to run on the Altair. William Gates and Paul Allen who were, at the time, amateur electronics engineers and students at Harvard, decided to write the compressed BASIC. Taking the BASIC public-domain code from Dartmouth, the two used Harvard's mainframes to rewrite the language to be more powerful and smaller. Creating their own company called "Mirco-Soft", Allen and Gates broke with the hobbyist tradition and retained their rights to the redesigned BASIC. In so doing, they initiated the research-development-consumption model of production that would allow the design and sales of software applications to drive a major sector of the U.S. economy for, at least, the next 30 years.

With early software already in hand, by 1977 the personal computer was established as a marketed commodity. No longer just kit systems for amateur enthusiasts, personal computers were boxes with keyboards, monitors, and disk or other magnetic media drives used by individuals who each owned and paid for, in theory at least, the software on that specific machine: the TRS-80 sold by Radio Shack, The Apple II, and the Commodore PET are all examples of these early personal computers introduced in 1977 (Ceruzzi 81). Although these early computers may have seemed neutral tools in those early days, it has now become clear that these desk-sized boxes have impacted every aspect of everyday life in North America. That impact is not merely to make number crunching faster or writing easier. Instead, these new technologies carry with them a complex ideology that is reshaping, yet again, the way we communicate. They are, in a phrase, creating and disseminating still another media literacy. In fact, they are creating and disseminating whole new sets of literacies which are constantly being created, revised, and sold. Now recognizing that the Internet and the computer industry that has created it is driven by an ideology of personal ownership and expression, we are ready to consider what methods of research might be best suited to this topic. I have chosen, firstly, a behavioral ethnographic approach because this approach has been developed to address individual human expressions as they grow out of and effect larger social structures. Secondly, I use the methods of rhetoric because those expressions are primarily in the form of language.

Ethnography in the Electronic Community

Unlike the unilateral transference of information characteristic of mass media broadcasting, the Internet is multilateral. Because of its design as a multilateral communications technology, individuals using the Internet tend to engage in complicated discourse with multiple other individuals. Thus to try to examine the impact of this new technology using mass media models of

communication, quantitative analysis, audience sampling, and so on are not enough to sufficiently understand developing Internet behaviors. Instead, we must accept that the multilateral communication on the Internet creates a sort of dynamic electronic community.

Turning to 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 postmodern rhetorical idea of "discourse." Hence, my analysis of Internet communities is a result of my own long term research in a specifically bounded discourse community: Protestant Dispensationalism.

As with all communities which form around new technologies such as computer-use or television consumption, Internet communities form their own literacies. To begin to locate the general characteristics of Internet-based literacies, I have chosen to examine a very specific on-line community which has its own specific literacy. Like most new literacies, the primary components are learned informally through social interaction—and out of these vernacular fields emerge codified institutional aspects which, in turn, are reworked in the informal behaviors of communities only to be institutionally reborn later.

Dispensationalism is really a very specific sub-discourse which is part of a much larger Christian literacy. Among Christian discourses, Dispensationalism is specifically Protestant and, typically, considered a form of fundamentalism. Although it may at first seem dangerous to focus my research into Internet communication generally on such a small and idiosyncratic group, it is both its size and its propensity toward dogmatism that make this community an exemplary one for close attention. On the most basic level, the very circumscribed and easily recognizable nature of on-line Dispensationalism makes it relatively easy to locate, document, and analyze a significant amount of its discourse. Even more, however, its very tendencies away from the open-exchange of ideas make it an ideal case to examine the potentially diversifying nature of the Internet.

Steeped in Calvinism, Dispensationalism is a discourse that is not typically associated with "thinking divergently." Like early American Calvinist texts, it is radically experiential; even tending toward the revelatory. Its focus, on a personal level, is on the individual experience of the divine. Although at the macro-institutional level, it focuses on the direct intervention of the divine in human politics and history: the apocalypse of the book of Revelation and Christ's return to earth.

Despite dogmatic tendencies, I hypothesize that any discourse making use of the Internet would, driven by the nature of the Internet itself, foster a desire to exchange information. This is precisely because the very structure of the Internet is one which was designed to make the free exchange of information and ideas easy and possible across any expanse of space: Licklider's vision of an "intergalactic network." That is to say: Internet mediated discourse will exhibit strongly negotiative rhetorical strategies. Hence, even the traditionally experiential and ideologically constant discourse of Dispensationalism should, when encountered on-line, take on more negotiative rhetorical characteristics. In the past, the primary technologies that gave individuals access to the ideas of Dispensationalism were either through public speakers, as in the case of Darby in the 19th century, and later the mass-publication of books, as in the case of Hal Lindsey in the 1970s. Tempered by its roots in fundamentalism, the discourse of Dispensationalism has been shown to be inherently, to use Burke's term, "tragic." At a discursive level, the structure of Dispensational thought would not be expected to produce negotiative discourse.

In Stephen O'Leary's 1992 application of Kenneth Burke's "dramatistic"⁶ model of discourse, *Arguing the Apocalypse*, O'Leary advocates studying apocalyptic rhetoric with an "argumentative analysis guided by the root metaphor of contextualism." He argues that previous studies of Christian apocalyptic discourse have failed to account for "how and why the audiences for these

⁶ For Burke's explanation of "dramatism" see *Language as Symbolic Action* pages 54 and following.

[apocalyptic or Dispensationalist] texts behave as they do" (O'Leary 14). Exploring the trajectory of apocalyptic discourse, O'Leary finds a number of constants from the Darby, through the Millerites, and, finally, in the work which I have found to be the most commonly cited in contemporary Dispensational discourse: the early 1970s popular press books of Hal Lindsey.

Using Burke, O'Leary generally describes Lindsey's rhetoric as "tragic." Deriving from Calvinism's extreme reliance on the doctrine of predestination, Lindsey presents a historical scenario of the End Times which leaves no room for escape from the divine judgment of God except in a pre-Tribulation Rapture. The ideas of the seven year period of violence known as the Tribulation as well as the lifting of Christians from earth before this period in Rapture are key concepts in both Darby's and Lindsey's Dispensationalism. And these ideas remain clear markers for Dispensational discourse in contemporary media. The belief in as these, and other, inevitable historical events is tragic in Burke's sense because there is no way for individuals to alter the course of history. Because of human's original sin, these events are the results of historical and divine forces set in to movement at the beginning of creation. From this perspective, there can be no "comic" correction to avoid them.

Exploring the effects of this belief system on Hal Lindsey's rhetorical strategies, O'Leary rightly describes the deeply tragic cycle of terms which governs Lindsey's argument as it did the Millerites before him. As O'Leary describes it:

Lindsey's strategy thus, in effect, duplicates the circularity of the Millerite argument from sign: he denies the credentials of all authorities who disagree with his central apocalyptic claim, and transforms their disagreements into further support for the claim by interpreting it as itself a sign of the End. (O'Leary 170).

In essence, Lindsey creates a circular argument from the premise that his interpretation is correct. He begins by asserting that the Tribulation is near. Then he asserts that the Tribulation will be evidenced by a large number of teachers who will deny God by denying that the Tribulation is near. Thus,

anyone who asserts that Lindsey is wrong is by that very act proving, from Lindsey's perspective, the Tribulation is at hand (Lindsey *The Late . . .*). As O'Leary clearly shows, the world view evident in a Dispensational perspective fosters a use of tragic appeals to authority in rhetorical argument.

Although O'Leary's analysis is powerful in its examination of the effects of a tragic world view on rhetorical strategy, it does have one major shortcoming which my research hopes to partially address. When O'Leary attempted to describe the audience of Hal Lindsey, he felt limited to "imprecise sales and distribution figures" (O'Leary 142). Though his study is illuminating, O'Leary seems limited by his traditional rhetorical perspective. He does not conduct interviews, or interact at all it seems, with this audience. In this study, he leaves the audience voiceless.

My behavioral approach to rhetorical studies offers much deeper qualitative insights into contemporary apocalyptic discourse; of which Dispensationalism is one variety. As a result, we shall see how O'Leary's argument is both supported and problematized by my data. The rest of this chapter focuses on the rhetorical strategies of individuals using e-mail lists. Based on the premise that the Dispensational rhetoric is already steeped in a tragic perspective, it would seem that my respondents should exhibit tragic rhetorical strategies. However, because my respondents are differentiated from a wider pool of historical and contemporary Dispensationalists by their use of e-mail lists, it stands to reason that their rhetorical strategies should exhibit some signs of influence from their use of this new media.

Before the popularity of the Internet, Dispensationalists would have been influenced primarily by media accessed through unilateral sources such as books, television, and radio shows. The rhetoric of these influence sources based its strategies in extreme claims to personal authority as in the cases of William Miller for the Millerites and Hal Lindsey for contemporary Dispensationalists. Such claims correlate with experiential strategies because they come out of assertions of divine vision or personal knowledge gained through a lifetime of study. With the opening up of debate on the topics of

Dispensationalism through the medium of e-mail lists, we should see a turn away from these personal claims of authority toward a negotiative rhetoric of shared consideration of possible truth alternatives. While we will in fact find that this hypothesis holds true in my 1994 and '95 research, the following two chapters will complicate this simple hypothesis significantly.

As we shall see, the nature of ethnographic study generally increases the complexity of my project in comparison to the textual analysis O'Leary conducted. Although my approach yields a more detailed picture of what people actually do, it widens its scope to a vast range of data that I have gathered from the complex and real lives of actual individuals. At the same time, its scope is limited to those people I could actually talk to myself. Although we can actually hear their voices in this study, we must keep in mind that there can be no final equation or sum to represent the complex lives of my *real* respondents. My analysis does not reduce my subject to voiceless numbers as do sales figures or audience demographics. Instead, it offers a complicated and detailed view into the rich complexity of real human lives.

In order to give Dispensational believers a voice, I conceive of them as a group of individuals who comprise a single "discourse community."⁷ This community is populated by the various individuals who participate in Christian-oriented newsgroups and communicate about the End Times in electronic mail. As it turns out, these Dispensationalists engage in lively rhetorical debates themselves. I know this, of course, because I have, and continue, to participate in their discourse.

To help get a handle on multiple individuals involved in multiple discourses simultaneously over great geographical spaces and in different media, I use my notion of "influence community." The individuals who are influenced by a single data source comprise an influence community. Although discourse communities

⁷ On discourse communities, see Gage, *The Shape of Reason* pages one and following. For parallel ideas, also see Geertz's *Local Knowledge* on "local knowledge" and Fish on "interpretive communities."

are necessarily also influence communities, the reverse is not also true. Influence sources, like the books of Hal Lindsey or the television shows of Jack Van Impe, project communication unilaterally. In and of themselves, unilateral influences produce no debate. Viewers cannot argue with a television set or paperback. They can of course, and do, debate and interact with other audience members, but this does not have an immediate impact on the media content. In the long term, there is audience response to media content in the forms of surveys or product consumption, but individual response to media have no individual effects. Instead, what effect audience response does have on mass media production is only possible through the blunt tool of aggregate audience response measurement. This is, however, not at all the case with on-line discourse.

Looking at Internet Dispensationalism as a discourse community necessitates an examination of television and popular nonfiction simply because the three influence sources are totally intertwined. Television and some popular texts serve as primary information sources, and they provide many of the ideas commonly expressed on the Internet. Many different sorts of people watch exactly the same programming and read exactly the same words. Many fervently exchange electronic messages about what they watch and read. Regardless of their other influences, the viewers of weekly soap-operas and the apocalyptic evangelization on *Jack Van Impe Presents*, or the readers of Hal Lindsey's biblical interpretations in *The Late Great Planet Earth* share a matrix of knowledge. As new shows or books are produced, these influence communities provide new data to fuel the bilateral discourse existing beyond the bounds of these unilateral media.

Once the Internet is added to these influence-communities, the influx of such data becomes staggering. Beyond the many newspaper, government, and private databases, there are various forums for interpersonal communication. In these forums, interpersonal debates thrive.

Dispensational Literacy

As a form of Protestantism, Dispensationalism is thought to have originated during the 1820's in Great Britain. Ordained in the Church of Ireland in 1825, John Nelson Darby withdrew from the church in opposition to its hierarchical church governance and links to the British monarchy. He joined a new sect known as the Brethren. After a schism in this group, Darby rose as the leader of the more radical Plymouth Brethren or "Darbyites." From 1837 till his death in 1882, Darby preached and traveled extensively outside Great Britain. Credited with the return of a widespread and overtly premillennial belief system in the United States, his doctrine of Dispensationalism fell on the dormant roots of Puritan interpretation of prophecy and revived American interest in an immanent "End Times" (Boyer 86ff).

Darby taught that specific key events would continue to lead mankind through a series of epochs or "dispensations." The current state of things was the current "dispensation" or "The Church Age." Beginning with the crucifixion of Christ, this current dispensation would end with the Rapture—the moment when believers would be lifted, bodily, from the earth to escape the onset of an age of human strife and turbulence that would, finally, result in the millennial reign of Christ (Boyer 86ff).

By the 1990's Dispensational thinking had become diffused across general Protestant discourse (Palmer and Robbins; Strozier and Flynn). From a common tradition of evangelist ministry, writers and preachers like Hal Lindsey, Pat Robertson, Jack Van Impe, and others, a well defined and clear American Dispensationalist discourse in the United States has been established. The popular preacher and writer, Hal Lindsey is particularly well known for his works which tapped, defined, and helped normalize this premillennial discourse among the evangelical Protestant sects. 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. Today, it is estimated to have sold more than 25 million total copies (Wojcik 8). More recently, Tim La Haye's series of novels beginning in

1995 with *Left Behind*, took Lindsey's Dispensationalist scheme and repopularized it in the form of narrative fiction. The books in this series have consistently made the *New York Times* bestsellers list.

Discussed by televangelists, at church socials, or between friends, one characteristic of this discourse has become magnified by its appearance in new electronic media; and, in particular, in Internet communication. That characteristic is one of reverential debate in which the discussion of potentially important but unknowable facts takes on the characteristic 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 *The Late* . . . 6). Much as Lindsey himself implies, on-line Protestant End Times express their vernacular religion in debate—not in final conclusions. Of course, as O'Leary has rightly shown, Lindsey was in no way interested in exploring views alternate to his own. Instead, he relied on his own authoritative training as a minister and extensive study of biblical texts. However, with the advent of Internet-based Dispensationalism, this brief aside in Lindsey's book has taken on a whole new meaning.

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. In those groups, however, Dispensationalist discourse only came in short bursts. In the late 1990s, the Christian Internet communities diversified and expanded. In so doing, Christians offer themselves more niches for Dispensational expression. This development seems a typical pattern for contemporary electronic communication. The effect of this pattern on communicative behavior is, however, open to debate.

On the one hand, more diversity in smaller discursive niches might allow individuals to limit their media and/or vernacular influences to only that with which they already more or less agree. One could argue that such individuals would then be less likely to encounter or assimilate divergent ideas: less likely to "think divergently."

In *War Of The Worlds: Cyber-space and The High-Tech Assault On Reality*, Mark Slouka makes just this argument. Slouka places extremists on the Internet into what he calls "ghettos" of dogmatic ideology. He feels that such communities exist without ever contacting those who might challenge their beliefs. In time, some individuals will gain enough electronic influence to subjugate the masses in an electronic "rapture" by manipulating the limited view of the individuals in these closed communities. However, the behavior I have documented indicates that individuals involved in electronic media do not immerse themselves in a single newsgroup, e-mail list, web-site or discourse community.

For instance, individuals watching Jack Van Impe's weekly Christian Dispensationalist television broadcasts also talk to their friends about his show. Media theorists Bolter and Grusin describe this phenomenon as "remediation:" when media borrow from one another and evolve based on one another. Bolter and Grusin convincingly argue that the modern nature of media encourages remediation because the expanding forms and possibilities of media are driving inter-medial competition.

The Dispensationalists caught up in this modern river of End Times data 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 go onto the Internet and engage in e-mail discussions about their previously held beliefs or other discursive influences. As these individuals widened and diversified the multiple discourse communities they participated in, they also, by the very act of widening and diversifying, accepted more and different ideas into their discourse. However, regardless of the media used, certain core ideas must remain to form the basis for the initiation of communication and the maintenance of the discursive community. If this did not happen, what was characteristically "Dispensational" would cease to be; but would have mutated beyond recognition. Because Dispensationalism is so consistent and makes such extensive use of its core ideas, we can easily locate

a particular communication as part of Dispensational discourse; and we can easily recognize elements that have entered from another discourse.

As it turns out, there are plenty of specifically Dispensationalist communications on the Internet for us to examine. Internet communities that 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 Darby and normalized into a fairly standard narrative set by Lindsey (Howard "Apocalypse . . ."). Having ready access to the basic ideas of this narrative set creates what functions as base-line knowledge for the Dispensationally literate.

To return to and specify Cooper and Selfe's claim that using computer mediation encourages "divergent thinking," the question at hand is whether the ethnographic data I gathered in 1994 and 1995 on Christian e-mail lists shows evidence of individuals clinging closely to their base-line Dispensational literacy or moving forward into divergence.

Based on my brief history of the Internet, the medium of newsgroups (and the medium through which it is used, e-mail) should, in of itself, carry with it an ideology emphasizing the open sharing of different, or divergent, ideas. However, the Calvinist and experiential character of Dispensationalism should produce a limited range of movement from the base-line idea sets well known from Darby and his more contemporary popularizers. Although the influence of all on-line discourse should be toward negotiative rhetorical strategies and hence the appearance of widely divergent ideas, the power of Dispensational discourse is rooted in individual access to divine authority which supports a staunch attachment to a very specific set of believed truths. Such access would lead to rhetorical strategies which emphasize the experiential or even revelatory access to truth and are not, typically, open to debate.

In 1994, noting the occasional Dispensational queries in the few mainline Christian newsgroups which existed at the time, I naively posted a message asking for people interested in Dispensational theory to drop me an e-mail. I was

immediately inundated with messages from interested parties as well as irate individuals who felt such absurd topics were best kept off their newsgroup.

At first I was a little discouraged, but I soon realized that, among those who responded positively, there were an untold number of private e-mail exchange groups. Though only marginally present on the larger newsgroups, quite a few Christians were highly engaged in Dispensational discourse through e-mail exchanges among much smaller groups.

Dispensational Literacy's Base-Line Knowledge

In order to see how this on-line Dispensational community has grown to focus on open debate, we must first look more closely at the basic influence sources for contemporary popular Christian Dispensationalism. Taken together, these sources form a set of base-line knowledge that defines Dispensational literacy.

On television, apocalyptic preachers like Jack Van Impe use a standard set of themes and issues. From carefully watching and analyzing *Jack Van Impe Presents* regularly over a two month period in 1994, I have constructed a schematic of his End Times narrative. In 1994, immediately following the United States' ground assault on the Iraqi forces occupying Kuwait at the conclusion of the Gulf War, Van Impe proposed the following scenario:

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. 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 Arab world will align itself against Israel with Russia;
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 put an end to it, not wipe out the world, but end the war.” (*Jack Van Impe Presents* 1994)

At the time Van Impe made these predictions, number one and, arguably, number two had already occurred. The following eight events were, by implication, on the immediate horizon. From Van Impe’s perspective, these events are well grounded in Biblical verse—and those verses are, on one level, the obvious base of Dispensationalism.

If one looks at a text from 1970, the multimillion best-seller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey presents a similar model with the primary addition of the “secret Rapture” and post-apocalypse events in numbers twelve through seventeen:

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 a 1000 years;
16. resurgence of Antichrist put down by Christ;
17. return of "faithful to heaven with Christ."
(Lindsey *The Late . . .*)

These two schematics are hardly mutually exclusive. Van Impe's model differs in its more contemporary grounding in current events, and he excludes the Rapture and post-apocalypse elements. Still, both schematics focus on the events that surround a great war centered in Jerusalem and incorporating Russia, China, the European Union, the United States, and some African nations: Lindsey's numbers one through twelve and Van Impe's numbers three through ten. There are some interesting differences between the two models, but it is clear that the two are not in conflict.

As in any discourse community, a certain level of shared knowledge must be achieved. In the case of Dispensationalists on the Internet, Hal Lindsey's work, itself more or less a restatement of Darby's 19th century ideas, is the baseline. From this base, the believers move out into different camps with a wide variety of theories and levels of debate. These basic narrative elements become issues—and these issues are themselves derived in some sense from biblical verse.

As it turns out, these issues are quite versatile. Many different sorts of data might appear to relate, for instance, to the catch-phrase "New World Order."

Van Impe serves-up his regular-watching audience a weekly ration of current events keyed to this and other issues. He offers a diverse assortment of sound bites gathered during the week from newspapers and other television shows. This format provides an unending supply of new information for the regular watchers to hash over, while at the same time it allows new viewers to quickly catch the thread of the Dispensational narrative.

The Internet expands on this dynamic by vernacularizing the access to the "broadcast" medium. Television melds together the news, sitcoms, and drama. The e-mail community assimilates these, and much more; only to digest and reproduce them on each other's computer screens. On-line access to many data sources leads to an ability to assimilate many divergent sorts of ideas. One can think of these ideas as "cross-overs"—ideas originating from, ostensibly at least, unrelated data sources. Much as Cooper and Selfe note in their claims about computer-use and "divergent thinking," there have always been cross-overs, but the sheer volume of data on-line allows people access to an immeasurable number of differing ideas. The introduction of new, often unfamiliar, bits of data leads to hotly debated issues. The result is a widely varying group of persons linked in multiple ways to a single base-line set of near-constant ideas which form the basis for a Dispensationalist literacy and the discourse community which it supports.

Dispensationalists "Thinking Divergently"

Every day and every new database presents new sets of specific possibilities to be introduced, in appropriate proportion, to enhance the flavor of the overall narrative—and each ingredient must be hashed over a while to decide its relative probability. In the end, as one of my respondents put it, "it's just too complex" (qtd. in Howard "Apocalypse . . ." 306). While there is an almost endless variety of possible positions to take on each major Dispensationalist issue, there is no final decision.

Without any authoritative leadership and with wide access to divergent ideas, various schools of Dispensationalist thinking have sprung up. There are, for instance, the die-hard anti-Communists who see the fall of the Soviet empire as false or only temporary; the China-As-Sleeping-Giants who believe that the Antichrist will rise out of that nation; the United-States-As-A-Ten-Zone-Nation that will produce the Antichrist variant; and the European-Union-As-Rising-Threat types. This last position is the view held by Lindsey and Van Impe and it serves as base-line knowledge for Dispensational literates, and therefore it is often the point of departure for debate. Clearly, "divergent thinking" has allowed these individuals a broad range of ideas to explore while remaining within their base discourse.

Even when believers adhere closely to the base-line beliefs, debate can occur because the range of the standard issues in the primary set is inexact. For example, the relationship between the EU and UN in the new totalitarian regime, the exact role of China, the nature of the electronic "Mark of the Beast," and the New Age movement, are all hotly debated issues.

This openness to debate leads to a large volume of correspondence involving the scrutiny of "new theories." One man covered the entire gamut of prophetic issues with his probing theories. On one occasion, he e-mailed me a 537 word exposition of Revelation 8: 10-11. It is very much in the style of this particular respondent, who takes a sort of structuralist's schematic approach:

Here's my new theory on REV 8:10,11, tell me what you think: 10 star, blazing like a torch falls from sky=nuclear melt down (The fissile material burns its way down through the reactor into the ground below) falls on 1/3 of rivers & on springs=fissile core contaminates the ground water and the rivers and streams become radioactive. 11 The name of the star is "Wormwood" (Bitterness)=the Russian Bible uses the Russian word for "wormwood" - "Chernobyl" (now a world famous Russian word). Many people died from the waters which had become bitter=many people have died from the waters which had become radioactive. By uncanny "coincidence" the ground underneath the reactor contains the bones of many massacred Jews from WW2.-----

All comments are welcome.⁸ (qtd. in Howard "Apocalypse . . ." 307)

This specific interpretation has little or no effect on the validity of the overall base-line model. Instead, it is a very specific interpretation of how Chernobyl might be a sign of the coming End Times which hinges on the translation of "Chernobyl" to the English "wormwood" from Revelation 8: 11. Its underlying function is as an open invitation to issue-exchange—"tell me what you think" and "all comments are welcome." To this sort of e-mail, I quickly learned in my 1994 e-mail exchanges, one must respond, "well yes but . . ." or risk losing the interest of the respondent. Not only does the use of the Internet seem to encourage negotiative rhetoric, but it necessitates a readiness to engage in extensive interpersonal communication.

Because of the very personal and negotiative norms of on-line Dispensationalism, even those who would be in positions to express personal authority on these topics are treated much the same as everyone else on-line. For example, I asked my respondents about their attitude toward Jack Van Impe and found that they think, as one man put it, he is, "a good guy. But is he human? Is he capable of error? Can he error by malicious intent? I do not believe he has a mean bone in his body. But, yes, he can be wrong"(qtd. in Howard "Apocalypse . . ." 307). Though Van Impe continues to be a leading thinker in the movement, his ideas are considered as a possible interpretation of biblical prophecy, they are discussed, and their validity is tentatively assessed on the Internet.

Although Van Impe, Lindsey, and others have exerted a large influence in the on-line Dispensationalist community through their establishment and dissemination of baseline ideas, their statements hold no divine authority. They have created an emically acceptable structural Urform of sorts, but it is just that—a form into which debaters fill an infinite variety of divergent thinking. The

⁸ I have retained all punctuation and replicated the formatting of all the e-mailed text in an effort to accurately represent the style and content of the messages. Any clarifying additions I have made are enclosed in brackets.

variability of this form keeps the debate vigorous. One respondent summed-up the sentiment quite well when he asked about the European Union as the source for the coming Antichrist: "could this be the dread beast? could this be a compact from the pit of hell? Could all Frenchmen love wine? I see a definite possibility that maybe it might. Pretty noncommittal huh?" (qtd. in Howard "Apocalypse . . ." 308). In my 1994 and '95 e-mail research, in fact, I found only a few instances of individuals who claimed access to divine knowledge; and thus a revelatory authority. As we will see in the following chapter's discussion of Marshall Applewhite, the "Heaven's Gate" leader, the authoritative rhetoric of such individuals is, on the Internet, generally ignored or assimilated into the issue-exchange like any other media source.

For my 1994 and '95 respondents, far more influential sources of belief than divinely led prophets are found in the mainstream media. In 1994, for example, news reports about the unification of Europe provided a constant source of debate for on-line Dispensationalists because of the base-line association between the EU and the "New Roman Empire." This equation is one of the primary interpretive moves used by Dispensationalists to make the book of Revelation relevant in the contemporary world. The idea was ripe for discussion in 1994 and 1995 for three obvious reasons. For one, the UN, EU, and various economic treaties like GATT were in the news regularly. Secondly, the popularity of conspiracy theories in the '90s had increased the volume of data on the subject. Thirdly, the very form of the Internet and its tendencies toward encouraging access to a wide range of new data sources gave amateur Internet researchers an ever widening field to mine for new information about the EU.

One man noted, "it turns out that since about 1933, things have been controlled not by who we imagine to be in control. I am talking about the CFR, Trilateral Commission, the World Bank, the UN, and all that bunch. As you can probably tell, I have read some conspiracy books" (qtd. in Howard "Apocalypse . . ." 308). Generally, my respondents were not this blunt about their exposure to conspiracy-theory media. More often, my respondents displayed their access to this discourse, and often obscure documents they had gained access to through

an on-line archive or e-mail exchange, saying something like: "Oh boy, its really coming! Did you realize that in May a dangerous, historic precedent was set when United States military forces were put under UN command, under a Turkish commander? Are you familiar with State Department Document 7277, a long-standing official US government policy program calling for the transfer of all US military forces to the UN?" (qtd. in Howard "Apocalypse . . ." 308)

The evidence of access to obscure documents or rumors of such documents often took the form of specific references to governmental sources interspersed with statements like "what do you think" and "all comments welcomed." In the 1994 and '95 Internet environment, and today as well, state and federal laws and many proceedings, not to mention other conspiracy theorists, are all easy targets for probing keyboards.

The issue of the so-called "New Age Movement," or NAM as many Dispensationalists refer to it, plays out in similar ways as that of the EU as the "New Roman Empire." This issue has long been a focus of many mass media sources for base-line Dispensationalist ideas, including Lindsey's *Satan Is Alive and Well On Planet Earth* and Van Impe's *New Age Spirits From The Underworld*. From the Bible, it is clear that Antichrist will be a political leader who will set him or herself up as a divine figure and be worshipped. Because this divinely evil political leader is thought to be coming from the "New Roman Empire," contemporary Dispensationalists tend to look toward Europe for signs of who, when, and where this leader will turn up. Every Dispensationalist narrative describes the Christian persecution by mainstream society and government. Typically, the European leader gains access to world authority, including that of the United States, through control of the UN. In the final days, Christians must bow down to the political leader/Antichrist as a god or goddess during "The Tribulation."

This scenario instills a deep sense of fear in the Dispensationalist which is often channeled through beliefs about the European Union into fears of New Age belief in general. As one woman described it: "the New Age is a misnomer from the get go. If you look carefully at crystallography, meditation, etc. etc. etc.—they

are quite obviously Stolen Pagan beliefs and practices. It should be called OLD AGE STUFF." (qtd. in Howard "Apocalypse . . ." 310)

The Dispensationalists in the 1994 and '95 Internet community clearly saw the New Age as the mechanism that the Antichrist will use to gain this earthly divinity. First, the Antichrist will appear as a human prophet or messiah. Then, three and a half years into the Tribulation Satan will incarnate in the body of the messianic leader. Because this leader is said to, in the book of Revelation, come power in Rome, the updated interpretation is, typically, that this leader will be of a united Europe—the European Union.

This intolerance of the New Age, coupled with the distrust of television and government and prejudice against some sort of "Europeanism," may seem a little alarming, but for a radically closed belief system, this is hardly surprising. Every group casts reality in terms that it has come to understand and believe. However, these on-line debaters are not the classic example of a religious group which refuses to interact with the outside world such as we are familiar with from the "Jonestown" movement.

Dispensationalist debaters could not easily be talked into ritual suicide. Unlike Jonestown, there *is* exposure to outside ideas. There is, in fact, a continual influx of new data. From this data, debates quickly develop. Individuals revel in them with an equality of voice. Though there may seem to be very tight limits on the amount of "divergent thinking" available to on-line Dispensationalist, there is, at the same time, a surprising tolerance for self-expression and thought.

This openness is clearly a result of exposure to differing data sources which encourages ideational variance even in this radically closed discourse. The broth that modern media have brewed only adds ever more ingredients to drive the exchange. Individuals in small and very specific belief communities adapt and interpret data elements. They re-cast them in terms of their own beliefs. Even more accurately, certain elements are plucked out of the media cauldron, highlighted, and used as appetizers and adjuncts for well known issues. Through their inter-personal communication, individuals create, maintain,

and recreate a world view that is constantly distilled and reintroduced into an already diverse, ephemeral, and conflicted media concoction. It seems that the very ability to assimilate the vast amounts of divergent information typical of contemporary electronic discourse correlates with a belief, or at least an acceptance, of the fact that there is no single individual, group, or source who rightly or wholly interprets the baseline Dispensational beliefs.

One of my respondents clearly exemplifies this assimilation of divergent beliefs and the lack of decision it brings when he says, "who is The Antichrist? Nobody knows. But there is very strong evidence of a person named Maitreya." Based on information he accessed through a database at a newspaper site in the Netherlands, he writes:

The Netherlands—A motorist picked up a hitchhiker along the motor way. The hitchhiker announced that Christ would return soon, then disappeared. The motorist was so shaken by the experience that he parked his car on the hard shoulder to recover from the shock. He was approached by some traffic policemen to whom he told the story. They replied: "You are the eighth motorist today who has told us this. [March 1991]" (qtd. in Howard "Apocalypse . . ." 313)

My respondent explains: "You see, Maitreya claims explicitly to be 'a Christ' in the line of Buddha and Jesus, it is no surprise that he is manifesting in the Netherlands." (qtd. in Howard "Apocalypse . . ." 313) In this e-mail communication, four distinct and disparate sources are combined. A common contemporary legend reported in a newspaper is interpreted from a Dispensational perspective and morphed into a prominent non-Christian spiritual figure. The mere availability of newspaper data in the Netherlands made possible by the Internet has transfigured the Vanishing Hitchhiker legend into a demonic false prophet of the New Age; at least for one man in California—who isn't really sure about Maitreya being the Antichrist anyway.⁹

⁹ For the "vanishing hitchhiker" legend cycle, see Brunvand.

The Path-Dependence of Internet Rhetorics

Based on my ongoing claims of a reciprocal symbiosis between technological development and vernacular social forces, the relationship between an ideology of personal ownership and self expression is manifested in the way old discourses have adapted to Internet expression. In the case of Dispensational e-mail debate, we can clearly see that the Internet variety of this discourse has become far more open to divergent ideas.

These debate-behaviors are made possible by two things. First, in combination with other media, the Internet disseminates a shared literacy. In the case of Dispensationalism, the base line knowledge necessary for this specific discourse is clearly coming from a set of influence sources exemplified by the widely read work of Hal Lindsey. That work, in book format, made extensive use of the authoritative nature of "author" by setting up Hal Lindsey as the researcher who had correctly put together the right interpretation of biblical prophecy. However, when that unilateral based discourse is reproduced in the multilateral Internet environment, such claims to personal authority seem to disintegrate. Instead, the bulk of communicative behavior becomes the active negotiation between various possible prophetic interpretations.

The Internet was developed by CERN to facilitate individual expression and the sharing of that expression in the academic research community. Because this was already the norm in research, it is not a surprising goal to put network technologies towards. However, developing early networked computers to this purpose of research defined the path the wider society would take in its assimilation and use of the Internet: to locate and respond to information made available by and/or produced by others. The above example of a hybrid e-mail molding a newspaper article to an expression of Dispensationalism is a clear display of this behavior.

Because the Internet is primarily accessed through personal computers, it is hardly surprising that it bore with it the ideology of personal ownership. Put to good use by research-scientists, the ideology of personal expression and the

ease of the exchange of information became the main path of networked communication. In the hands of the millions of individuals who now use the Internet everyday, this network has become a private tool for access to information and self-expression. This was made possible, first, by the reality of personally owned or used computers.

Much as personally possessed computers allowed individuals to consider those computers as tools for individual self expression, the Internet has provided the necessary corollary to this self-expression: a wide and varied audience. In the following two chapters, I will look in much greater depth at the ways in which individuals who are using the Internet for their personal expression of religion are or are not considering this audience. I will examine to what degree they are or are not assimilating and reproducing the norms of Internet literacy by tailoring their communications to an audience from which they expect a response.

Although we have seen a certain degree of "divergent thinking" in the highly closed Calvinist discourse of contemporary Dispensationalism in 1994 and '95 e-mail exchanges, the question remains as to what degree and in what specific ways individuals in discourses such as these are able to adapt to an on-line ideology which has come to acknowledge the existence of its audience. Unlike television, the ability to produce self-expressive communications read by a large audience has created an environment in which the reciprocating self-expression of others is both expected and desired. In a word, it is an environment which has come to emphasize *negotiation*.

CHAPTER IV: "HEAVEN'S GATE:" THE MEDIA SAVVY RITUAL SUICIDES

As far back as 1922, the media analyst Walter Lippmann emphasized that "news" was not "truth." Instead, "the function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light hidden facts, to set them in relation with each other, and to make the picture of reality on which men can act" (Lippman 358).

Over time, this idea has fomented in mass communication theory. It led, for instance, to what Walter Fisher calls "real-fictions." Real fictions are narrative accounts, as in the news media, based on experiences but unable to be empirically verified. News stories create such "fictions" by organizing journalistic data in a narrative form which creates a news-story structure out of raw data gathered by the news agency. Through these fictions, individuals immersed in news media organize their understanding of the world and, to some degree, their lives (Fisher 132).

Similarly, Altheide and Snow use the term "media logic" to refer to the way in which real-fictions are placed into the minds of a large populace engaged in media consumption. In their view, "format becomes a framework or a perspective that is used to present as well as interpret phenomena" (Altheide, 10). This is to say: media *makes* news out of events that might otherwise be unknown or unimportant to its community; and further it makes news in ways that are convenient to the media formats. In this way, the news media seems to have "created" the real-fiction which came to be known as "Heaven's Gate." However,

as this chapter shows, it is just not that simple. Instead, both news-producers and members of an obscure religious sect engaged a subtle dance through which, in the end, the Human Individual Metamorphosis religious group members seem to have successfully manipulated the popular press into transmitting their revelatory message to millions.

Because analyses such those I cited above tend to focus on the news media as a unidirectional medium, the case of the H.I.M. religious group's interaction with the media surrounding their choice to commit ritual suicide in 1997 presents a problematic case. This is because, in short, the member's of the H.I.M. religious group exercised an incredible amount of control of the media reporting event know as "Heaven's Gate." Through the use of personal video taping, Internet posting, and the choice to commit ritual suicide itself, the H.I.M. group masterfully orchestrated a campaign to locate and attempt to convert a very few extraordinary individuals.

While displaying a high degree of media savvy, H.I.M.'s basic message was one rooted in the most pure experiential rhetorical moves I have encountered. The H.I.M. members knew this sort of strategy would fail in their Internet postings, but that did not matter. What did matter was that a maximum number of individuals be reached by their message. From the H.I.M. perspective, out of the millions of individuals in the world, only a very few were blessed with the divine possession of an extra-dimensional spirit within their body. Once the H.I.M. message was seen by these people, they would, through a direct experience of the spirit or "deposit" inside their bodies, know wholly and completely the truth of the H.I.M. message.

Because the members of the H.I.M. religious group did not seek to persuade the ordinary person, they had no need for persuasive rhetorical strategies. Instead, they sought the extraordinary person who would recognize their unique truth; and it was no surprise to them that those people would be very few and far between.

The purpose of this chapter is to use the case of the H.I.M. religious group's appeals on the Internet as the far extreme of on-line expressions of

experiential rhetoric. In 1997, when the suicides of the group created a frenzied media attention, I was already deeply involved in my ethnographic research with on-line Dispensationalists. Because the H.I.M. group not only had an extensive web-site, but because they actually supported their communal living through professional web-site building, I felt I had no choice but to investigate their beliefs to see if they would have any relevance to the work I was already doing. As it turns out, they did.

However, the beliefs of H.I.M. are very complex. Often contradictory and to many people so absurd that it is hard to begin to take them seriously, those beliefs turn out to be very much rooted in the same Calvinism examined in the Puritan cases from Chapter Two. However, both these roots and this over all complexity was obscured by the way in which the deaths of the H.I.M. members were portrayed in the "real fiction" called "Heaven's Gate." At first, the media misrepresentation of the H.I.M. group seemed only an obstacle to my understanding of their rhetoric. However, I have now realized that a clear understanding of media representations is of key importance to recognizing the real consistency and skill evident in the H.I.M. group's use of language in Internet, print, and television media.

In order to properly understand the complex relationship between the H.I.M. group and the news media, we will have to explore a brief history of the group and its primary leader. Then we can address the fundamentally revelatory nature of the H.I.M. belief system, and the degree to which their revelatory rhetoric is deeply influenced by Calvinist-Presbyterianism. With that knowledge in hand, we can go on to explore the actual beliefs as they were expressed on the main web-site of the group in 1997.

Among the documents expressing these beliefs, we find a H.I.M. version of the common evangelical form of the "Sinner's Prayer" which is a specific invitation to revelatory experience. Having addressed the intense experientialism of H.I.M. in their rhetoric and their beliefs, we can take a careful look at the 1997 newsgroup campaign which, at first, seems to be some sort of recruitment effort. However, through a close analysis of those actual e-mails and some responses

to them, we can readily see that the experiential rhetoric they employ utterly failed to capture any audience through the Internet. The members of the group did not make any attempt to conform to normative Internet discourse. Assuming that professional web-site builders would be conversant enough with newsgroups to be able to write e-mails which would gain a wide audience, we have to wonder why the H.I.M. group did not engage such strategies.

Carefully searching archives of newsgroup posts from that time, I found, to my great surprise, one e-mail exchange from a H.I.M. e-mail address which in fact *does* engage in the norms of newsgroup debate. This evidence would imply that while the H.I.M. members were capable of normative Internet discourse, they choose not to engage it in their recruitment e-mails. Recruitment, as such, was not their goal. In fact, they knew full well that their e-mails would receive little engaged response, and they did not care. In the broadest terms, they believed that a very few were fated to receive a revelatory experience once exposed to the truths those e-mails expressed, and those "convertible" people were the only audience they cared about.

So, in the final analysis of the "exit video"-taped messages H.I.M. members left behind for the media to broadcast, we can clearly see that the H.I.M. group actually used their suicides to gain the media spotlight. Having left behind a huge amount of material for the media to consume, including their web-site, the media spotlight drew millions to read and think about their beliefs in way that normative Internet communication never could. Though the appeal of their beliefs evades my understanding, I cannot deny the skill with which they used their own deaths to attain their goal of getting a simple message, what they called a "test" actually, into the consciousness of millions of everyday individuals.

Ordinary Fear

On March 26 1997, at 4 p.m., a San Diego Country sheriff's deputy responded to an anonymous tip. He entered a suburban mansion and found

several human corpses. Returning with a warrant, he said that "the dead were scattered throughout the rambling two-story house." Most were found laying on their backs. Some were on the floor with their hands at their sides. Some lay on cots and mattresses. Their hair was cut close. They wore dark shirts and pants and matching athletic shoes. All but two of the individuals had their faces covered with purple scarves. These scarves were draped so that one corner was on the forehead and the other two on each shoulder. "All appeared as if they'd fallen asleep," said the Sheriff's office (Mckinnie). Of course, they were not asleep at all.

On Easter, the following Sunday, ABC hastily organized a news program to air the outpouring of horror associated with the discovery of the thirty-nine rotting corpses in a beautiful suburban home. In particular, the program focused on the role the Internet played in this religious group. A woman chairing a panel of media experts stated: "Coming up next: ABC's technology correspondent Gina Smith will show how cults use the Internet to recruit members. And what, if any, regulations there should be." After the advertisements, newscaster Sam Donaldson came on the screen. He asked, his voice slightly raised in plaintive desperation: "We're all for the First Amendment here, but there are laws against pornography? In other areas and there are laws against slander" ("This Week"). Here we can see one of the many instances where a news broadcast seeks to make sense of the "Heaven's Gate" story by shifting it into the frame of possible Internet censorship.

At the outset of the media coverage, shock and disbelief gave way to questions about what sort of individuals would do such an unthinkable thing. On *48 Hours*, just after the story broke, "cult experts" Jim Seigleman and Flo Conway discussed "the cult spiral of death." They described the systematic isolation common in many extreme religious sects, but they emphasized that the individuals who took their own lives were victims. Seigleman: "What we call these phenomenon is not 'mass suicide,' but mass suicide *under control*. They were good smart people who walked into a situation where they were turned into completely different people" ("Mass Suicide").

After this immediate media blitz began to subside, the recurring theme in the media presentation of Heaven's Gate centered around the question of why people more or less like ourselves would choose this fate. How could such "smart" people be convinced to kill themselves through the claim that a space ship of extraterrestrial beings had come to pick them up?

The cover story of the April 14, 1997 issue of *People Magazine* read: "Personal Stories from Heaven's Gate Before the Cult: How 39 ordinary people left families behind for a journey to death." Ordinary they were: a forty-two year old computer trainer, a forty-three year old computer programmer, forty year old computer consultant, a forty-five year old oyster man, a forty-four year old bus driver, a forty-eight year old environmentalist, a forty-five year old nurse, a thirty-four year old paralegal, a twenty-seven year old shop owner, a sixty-two year old developer, to mention a few. Many of these men and woman had families and most had well paying careers. *People Magazine* reported:

Though some of those who joined Heaven's Gate had obvious emotional problems, most seemed disarmingly ordinary—businessmen, mothers, students—all consumed by nothing more exotic than a desire for spiritual enlightenment. "Many of these individuals weren't losers with low self-esteem," says Joan Culpepper, an original member of the cult who later became an outspoken foe. "Applewhite's message connected to some belief in them." (Nordhoff 40)

They were, in almost every way, ordinary—and yet the followers of Marshall Applewhite believed, through self negation, they would join "space aliens" or, more correctly, benevolent visitors from another dimension.

What would motivate seemingly ordinary people to hold such beliefs so deeply that they could choose to commit suicide? "Brainwashing" is the answer Flo Conway and Jim Siegleman invoke above in their assertion that the H.I.M. suicides were "mass suicide under control." Siegleman and Conway are part of a small crowd of self-ordained "cult experts" who emerged to combat a perceived rise in new religious movements during the 1970s. Timothy Miller, a noted scholar on what are more properly termed "alternative religions," argues that the

word "cult" should be generally avoided in reasoned academic scholarship because, as Miller observes, "Cult' today typically means a group that the speaker does not like, considers potentially harmful, and wants to deprecate" (Miller 2).

Conway and Siegleman are not established academics. Instead, they as well as other well known evangelical Christians such as Bob Larson, have made an industry of attacking so-called "cults" through popular press books and paid lectures (see Conway; Siegleman and Larson). As Miller notes, these anti-cultists have regularly fed public fears of cults by grossly overestimating the actual numbers of so-called "cult" members and then suggesting that individuals who join these alternative religious groups do so under the influence of intimidation tactics which overwhelm the potential "recruit's" own agency. In agreement with the vast majority of academic research, Miller concludes that such anti-cultists have an interest in making these false claims for, at least, the reason that their "book sales and platform invitations often depend on stoking public fears of a huge and imminently threatening network of cultic goons" (Miller 4). A review of actual scholarship on the topic finds first that alternative religious movements remain very small (Bromley and Shupe). Further, the claim that most alternative religious groups use coercion to gain new adherents has been shown unfounded (Bromley and Richardson; Introvingne 284ff).

Although this scholarship has been very important in contradicting the false claims of Flo Conway, Bud Larson, and others, it has had, in the media, little presence. As an expected effect of "media logic," this is not surprising. While the work of many sociologists has shown that "brainwashing" is not the norm in alternative religions, scholars have had a much harder time explaining what causes people to join new religious groups. In the short narrative forms of media presentation, the simple answer that these people were "ordinary" and were "brainwashed" makes for an effective news story. It put the actual facts of the suicides into a familiar format by presenting the members of H.I.M. as the victims of a maniacal "cult" leader. Of course, this is gross simplification which any ethical approach to the study of religion must reject. Not only does it simplify

the complex reality of individual lives, but it breeds an unnecessary distrust and hate for people who hold new or different religious views. Catherine Wessinger, a noted scholar of millennial religious movements, has gone so far as to claim that:

The evidence indicates that if the Branch Davidians [of Waco, Texas] had not been labeled "cultists," those eighty men, women, and children would still be alive today and four law enforcement agents would not have died in an ill conceived raid against the Davidian community. (Wessinger *Millennialism* . . . 14)

Wessinger bases her claim on work done after the Waco tragedy by sociologists who actually worked with the FBI in attempt to avert disaster during the standoff with the religious group (Tabor and Gallagher).

As Wessinger notes, it is important to attempt to understand what actually motivates people to join alternative religious groups in order to counter the media's tendency to the easy "fiction" that these individuals were the victims of "brainwashing." My behavioral-rhetorical perspective contributes to that general goal in this chapter's analysis of the H.I.M. religious group's rhetoric. In so doing, it reveals something that has not been noticed about the way in which this group of individuals both recognized the biases of the mass media's fascination with "cults" and then capitalized on that fascination to forward the H.I.M. agenda of locating convertibles. These individuals were not zombies under the control of a maniacal leader. Instead, they presented a coherent plan and worked to attain a clear goal. However, as my analysis shows, despite their masterful use of multiple electronic media, the H.I.M. group failed to locate many, if any, new members. In the end, the goal they sought was, in fact, not recruitment as we think of it; and to understand this fact offers insights into a world view that supported an ability to choose to take one's own life.

The Thing They Knew

On that Easter Sunday after the discovery of the suicides, CBS's long running weekly news program *60 Minutes* opened with Leslie Stahl saying: "If you are having trouble understanding what motivated those 39 people in California to take their own lives, you're not alone. So did we—at least until we spent a good part of today with two former members of the Heaven's Gate cult" ("Heaven's Gate"). Those "cult" members were "Sawyer" and "Justin."

On May 6, 1997, Wayne Marshall Cooke, "Justin's" real name, died in an Encinitas, California motel. His suicide was modeled exactly after that of his "classmates" before him (Thorton). He remained devoted to the beliefs of the group throughout the *60 Minutes*' interview and afterwards as well. And it was this very devotion, so powerful it can lead to total self-negation, that seemed to inspire fear in the broadcasters. Dan Rather on *48 Hours*: "cults exist in the shadows of society . . . going largely unnoticed by the rest of us—until something happens: a Heaven's Gate, or a Branch-Davidian Compound, or a Jonestown. And, as Susan Spencer reports, we are reminded of how deadly dangerous cults can be" (*Mass Suicide*). This assumption that the group was a "cult" was coupled with the new and still often misunderstood media of the Internet. These two ideas created the theme that the beliefs held by the religious group were somehow like dangerous chemicals or even powerful booby-traps waiting to be tripped out in cyberspace.

Having no choice but to deal with the suicide-event, the news media placed the group's actions into an understandable frame for the news-watching audience. First, they portrayed the group as "ordinary" people. Then they portrayed them as victims of dangerous ideas. Then the media emphasized how the web-site building fanatics were aggressively seeking "recruits" through the Internet. In what media analysis typically refers to as "agenda setting," the media made these facts relevant to their audience by raising the agenda of Internet regulation (McCombs and Shaw "Agenda-Setting . . ." and "The Evolution . . ."). My analysis demonstrates two key misunderstandings that make that agenda-

setting move seem, at least, hasty and, at worst, reckless. First, that the Human Individual Metamorphosis religious group *did not recruit a single person over the Internet*—in fact, they recruited very few people at all. And, even more importantly, *they did this quite purposefully*. That is to say, their goal was not *recruitment*. Instead, they sought extraordinary people with a very rare and special kind of knowledge. That knowledge was, at least, one thing they knew well—and it is this “knowledge” that makes their Internet expressions the most clear example of experiential rhetoric I have found.

The reasons individuals cite for their motivation to join alternative religious groups are diverse, but typical patterns do emerge. Many individuals cite health or social reasons for maintaining religious affiliations which are rooted in a deep sense of shared community. Often a personal experience with the divine unites alternative religious communities in a belief that members share a special knowledge. Sometimes this experience comes at a turbulent time in a new convert’s personal life. Individuals recount being addicted to narcotics and alcohol; being involved in criminal activity; burdened by difficult family breakups such as divorces; and even just a general sense of depression brought on by a loss of direction in their lives. However, as Timothy Miller puts it, these conditions often rely on a “profound spiritual experience” (Miller 6; Barker 25-31).

Both in their direct statements as well as the rhetoric they used in their Internet and other media presentations, there is clear evidence of such an experience for H.I.M. members. Whatever experience those members had, it must have been powerful. It changed them from the ordinary people whom the media portrayed into the extraordinary people they were. People who were extraordinary enough to believe that they were carrying multidimensional beings for which their human bodies were only “containers”—containers that could be sloughed off in suicide.

In a way, the reality of H.I.M.’s “recruitment” plan is not so far from the news media’s presentation of their Internet posts and web-site as sorts of booby-traps. However, the H.I.M. members were *not* seeking to catch the masses. Instead, they were only looking for a few who might be able to share in the

extraordinary community the group forged. To begin to understand how that worked in their belief system we must apply a vernacular rhetorical approach to the many documents they left behind. To do that fairly, we must contextualize those documents by first examining the history of the group and its primary spiritual leader: Marshal Herff Applewhite.

A Brief History of H.I.M.

The leaders of H.I.M. received an early education on dealing with the national news media. On September 14, 1975, "The Two" held a public meeting in the small coastal town of Walport, Oregon. Soon, the national newspaper stories fed a rumor that these New Age spiritual leaders had kidnapped 20 attendees of that meeting. Though this so-called kidnapping was more the product of fear than actual fact, the news brought Bo and Peep, "The Two," national attention for the first time (Balch and Taylor "Salvation . . ."). During that episode, Applewhite got a firsthand education on both the media's sensitivity to the idea of "cults" and how easily one could be thrust into the national spotlight by being associated with such alternative religious ideas.

In one of the many documents distributed after the suicides, Do described his experience after the Walport, Oregon incident saying:

We had become a national media item. Their unrelenting spotlight glared upon us for over half a year. And by and large, almost every report either written or aired about us was either riddled with inaccuracies or outright lies. (Do "Early Classroom Materials")

For the next 23 years, the mild mannered religious asceticism of the Human Individual Metamorphosis group would lay more or less dormant in American media discourse. However, it did not go away. Instead, the two spiritual leaders would take on a series of new names which referred to the extra-dimensional beings which their bodies carried: Lah and Ti; Bo and Peep; Ti and Do; and so on. Marshall Herff Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles had joined

spiritual forces believing they were The Two Witnesses foretold in the second chapter of the book of Revelation. They traveled the United States in near poverty: working for food and promoting their strange blend of theosophy, Christianity, and scientism. Over the years, they came into the news briefly only to disappear again. Later, it would become evident that they had learned something from that early experience with the national media.

When Bonnie Lu Nettles died of liver cancer at age 57 in 1985, she was married and had four children. Her children describe her as a typical mother. Born and raised in Houston, in 1948 she graduated from the Herman Hospital's nursing school in that city. While working at Houston's Bel-Air Hospital, she met Applewhite in 1972 while he was being treated for a heart blockage. Later that year, they formed the short-lived "Christian Arts Center." She left her husband and children to take up with Applewhite. Her children first heard about their beliefs when she and Applewhite were arrested for auto theft in 1974 (Steiger, 22; "Cult Madness").

Applewhite was himself deeply Protestant. Raised the son of a Presbyterian minister, he received a Master's degree from the University of Colorado and went on to be the choir director at a series of Texas churches. In 1966, he joined the faculty of University of St. Thomas in Houston. Later, when the university founded a music department, he served as its first chair. He worked with various Houston area church choirs. He was married and had two children. Raised in the Presbyterian tradition, Applewhite was deeply influenced by the doctrines of Calvin shared by the Quaker and Puritan believers discussed in Chapter Two.

The primary source for our knowledge of Applewhite's pre-H.I.M. life comes from interviews conducted in 1974 by Brad Steiger and Hayden Hewes. Themselves journalistic writers interested in UFO phenomenon, Nettles and Applewhite sought them out in order to publish a book that would express the doctrines of H.I.M. These interviews were not published until 1997 in the wake of the California suicides.

From the 1975 interviews, we discover that Applewhite's father, Reverend Marshall Herff Applewhite, had been a Presbyterian minister in three Corpus Christi area churches during Applewhite's childhood. In 1948, Applewhite graduated from High School in Corpus Christi, and in 1952 and 1953, he studied music at Union Theological Seminar in Richmond, Virginia. Later, he served in the Army Signal Corps in Salzburg, Austria. After leaving military service in 1957, he went on to get his master's degree in voice performance.

Shortly thereafter, he found his first choir directorship at the Presbyterian Pan-American School in Kingsville. In the interview data, Applewhite claims he maintained the Presbyterian views he was raised with until around 1970. Around that time he began to get into trouble with his colleagues at the university. That trouble started an unclear chain of events which seem to have led, suddenly in 1974, to his nomadic cross-country speaking tours as "Do" the incarnated spirit from The Level Above Human.

In 1970, Applewhite was fired from the Christian university. School authorities cited emotional problems as the reason for this dismissal. A former faculty member stated that, actually, Applewhite had come into conflict with school officials when he hoped to de-emphasize the theological bent of his teaching. Others have claimed that Applewhite became involved in a homosexual affair with a student (*Wessinger How . . .* 232). Whatever the case, Applewhite took the opportunity to go to New York where he studied music. He returned to Houston to direct a number of major musical productions including the Houston Musical Theater. He sang in fourteen roles including some for the Houston Grand Opera, and he performed with five major symphonies including Houston's.

Whatever drove him from his position in a Christian school, it had not yet also driven him entirely from Christianity. In 1972, he founded the Christian Arts Center with Nettles. However, Applewhite had now taken on the name "Bo" and hoped that the center would teach a comparative approach to religion. The endeavor quickly failed, and on September 25, 1974, The Two were charged with auto theft in Harlingen, Texas. Though the charges were later dropped, The

Two had started on their path toward national attention (Steiger 24). And, only shortly before, something strange and powerful drove Applewhite to become finally convinced that he was, in fact, an incarnate deity.

At its peak, the membership for H.I.M. reached over 200 individuals. These included University of Oregon graduate students, Robert W. Balch and David Taylor, who interacted with the group masquerading as followers in a rather questionable attempt at sociological ethnography in 1975. Their data includes little personal history about Applewhite or his followers. Arguing that "nearly all were long-time seekers of truth whose previous religious and spiritual trips included yoga . . . and many others," Balch and Taylor had to admit that all the data they gathered on pre-H.I.M. lives was from believers who had left the group shortly after joining it. This implies not so much that all H.I.M. believers were prone to entering and leaving spiritual beliefs, but that those who came and quickly left H.I.M. were prone to coming to and quickly leaving spiritual belief systems (Balch and Taylor "Bo and Peep" 61).

Apparently due to Nettle's growing illness or, as some said, as a result of the belief that The Two were being tracked by would-be assassins, the followers were left encamped near Sedona in the Arizona desert—their leaders seeming to have deserted them. Most, if not all, seem to have become disillusioned and the group dissipated. Whatever the reasons for the large following in the early days of H.I.M. and whatever the various causes for its dispersion, Applewhite remained certain of his incarnation as "Do" for the long haul.

As absurd as embracing the identity of a trans-dimensional spirit sounds to us, one thing is beyond doubt: Marshall Applewhite believed with certainty that he was the incarnated spirit referred to in the ecstatic prophecy of John's Revelation. A father, a husband, a professor, a performer, a Presbyterian, a Calvinist-Protestant, all were not adequate identities to ensure Applewhite's certainty of self—instead, "Do" was.

From 1974 to 1997, Applewhite and his followers refused to engage in sexual activity. The choices to dress a-sexually, wear their hair short, and create a non-sexual "buddy system,"¹⁰ were all strategies toward minimizing sexual inclinations of the body in the H.I.M. group. Some disciples, as is now well documented, who felt that they were particularly prone to sexual desire had themselves surgically castrated.¹¹ These extreme forms of sexual control, and the strong role they play in the H.I.M. belief system, seem to indicate that Applewhite was not secure in his sexual identity in particular.

The temptation to do more than hypothesize about Applewhite's own sexual desires or practices before the 1974 revelation is strong, but, again, there is no solid evidence to go on. What is clear, however, is that Applewhite was not satisfied with the way his Protestant Christian belief system was functioning to define his identity—sexual or otherwise. This is clear because, in the end, he sacrificed the real body he possessed in order to maintain his identity as an incarnated spiritual being.

The Beliefs of Do as Expressed on the WWW in 1997

As it turns out, Applewhite's self-image was more adequately supported by the belief that he was a space alien than anything he was offered by Protestant Christianity. As Applewhite's "Do" describes it:

Two thousand years ago, crew of members of the Kingdom of Heaven who are responsible for nurturing "gardens," determined that a percentage of the human "plants" of the present civilization of this Garden (Earth) had developed enough that some of those

¹⁰ The buddy system consisted of male and female partners that did not engage in sex. As replications of The Two, they acted to help each other in dealing with their "humanness" in an effort to minimize it. In the end, they helped each other by holding bags over one another's heads in the suicidal moment.

¹¹ All the documentary evidence points a situation where the actual adherents to the beliefs chose to be castrated. This was not doctrine and not necessarily encouraged by Applewhite. Being far beyond his own "humanness," Applewhite, I presume, did not need to be castrated and was, as far as I can gather, in fact not castrated.

bodies might be ready to be used as "containers" for soul deposits. Upon instruction, a member of the Kingdom of Heaven then left behind His body in that Next Level (similar to putting it in a closet, like a suit of clothes that doesn't need to be worn for awhile), came to Earth, and moved into (or incarnated into), an adult human body (or "vehicle") that had been "prepped" for this particular task. The body that was chosen was called Jesus. . . . I am in the same position to today's society as was the One that was in Jesus then. My being here now is actually a continuation of that last task as was promised, to those who were students 2000 years ago. They are here again, continuing in their own overcoming, while offering the same transition to others. Our only purpose is to offer the discipline and "grafting" required of this transition into membership in My Father's House. My Father, my Older Member, came with me this time for the first half of this task to assist in the task because of its present difficulty (Do "Heaven's Gate: How and When It May Be Entered").

This long passage represents the basic belief that Marshall Applewhite held about his own identity from 1974 to 1997. Although it was, in the mid-1970s, more clearly linked to passages in Revelation and reliant on his alliance with Nettles, he consistently believed that he was an incarnated spirit or "Extraterrestrial" as was Jesus of Nazareth. The passage above is quoted directly from the introductory page of the 1997 web site that the group left behind for the media to devour in the wake of the first 39 suicides.

After the above quoted passage more or less identifies Jesus as a sort of multidimensional space alien, the "Kingdom of Heaven" is presented as a sort of multidimensional space craft, and Applewhite himself as another incarnation of these benevolent, though enigmatic, "space aliens."

Because Applewhite's father was a Protestant minister, it is safe to assume that he would be, on a vernacular level, familiar with modern American evangelical rhetoric. Thus it is no surprise that after the statement locating Applewhite as divinely incarnated, there is an invitation to join him in the Kingdom of Heaven very much in the style of evangelical conventions. "Your separation from the world and reliance upon the Kingdom of Heaven through its Representatives can open to you the opportunity to become a new creature, one

of the Next Evolutionary Level, rightfully belonging to the Kingdom of Heaven” (Do “Heaven’s Gate: How and When It May Be Entered”).

Joining this “Next Level,” the human would reach the next stage of an overall cosmic progression. Like the Puritan hope for a New Jerusalem, the individual would transcend the current world to reach the Kingdom of God. In this rhetoric, Do has fused “evolution” or scientific perspectives on cosmic progression and the Calvinist emphasis on personal transcendence. In so doing, however, he has de-emphasized the human community. Unlike the Puritans who felt that their community constituted The Remnant that would first ascend to Heaven in the apocalypse, Do believed that he, and we, can only access this Heaven as *individuals*. There may be a “mothership” in The Next Level, but Applewhite’s arguments focus not on a new UFO-City of God, but on an individual evolutionary leap. In his view, only very few of us out of the billions of earthlings have become inhabited by space alien beings. And these beings were on earth for their own, specific, educational advancement.

Because Applewhite believed that most people are not inhabited by multidimensional beings, there is no assurance at all that many will have access to this higher Level. This belief may have come out of his Presbyterian upbringing. Presbyterianism is one of the few modern Protestant sects that still emphasizes predestination. Basically, predestination, as expressed in Calvin’s TULIP doctrines in Chapter Two, states that humans are inherently evil, and that God has “pre-decided” which of them will enter the Kingdom of God. While many Protestant sects retain the use of the word in a watered down form, Presbyterianism holds what has come to be know as “double predestination.” Like Calvinism, “double predestination” holds that all individuals have been, by God, pre-chosen either to enter the Kingdom of Heaven or be eternally damned. Other Protestant sects have somewhat mediated this harsh doctrine by claiming that, although some are predestined for Heaven, none are totally lost to damnation by fate.

As the Calvinist belief matrix surfaces in H.I.M., it claims that those humans within which the alien beings have incarnated will be able to rise to the

next Level; and the rest will not. This belief is central in Do's thought as the main motivation for H.I.M.'s so-called "recruitment" activities: "Looking to us [the incarnates of other-world beings], and desiring to be a part of my Father's Kingdom, can offer to those with deposits that chance to connect with the Level Above Human, and begin that transition" (Do "Heaven's Gate: How and When It May Be Entered"). Like Do, some humans have "soul deposits" placed here 2000 years ago by the members of the Kingdom of Heaven—but most do not.

Thus, the entire effort of the Heaven's Gate group's later Internet "recruitment" efforts as well as their media manipulation were a concerted attempt at locating and bringing home those who had these deposits. According to Do, the believers and followers of Christ at the time of Christ were "only those individuals who had received a 'deposit' containing a soul's beginning had the capacity to believe or recognize the Kingdom of Heaven's Representative" (Do "Heaven's Gate: How and When It May Be Entered").

Those who have the capacity to believe *are* those who have been *chosen*. As with the Puritans, a failure to believe, to doubt, is itself not only a sin but also possible evidence that one is not chosen and thus not able to attain Grace. This sort of construct is typical of the Protestant Christian cycle of faith and sin: a tragic system, in Burke's sense, because it justifies and feeds off its own certainty. It is particularly manifest in Presbyterianism's insistence on predestination, and it is a system Applewhite seems to have reworked at a vernacular level in his H.I.M. doctrines. Further, it exhibits this same basic tragic underpinning of much apocalyptic Christian rhetoric as Stephen O'Leary has shown and I discussed in Chapter Three.

In Applewhite's beliefs, however, "soul deposits" and members of the Kingdom of Heaven are not the only spirits around. There is another class of spirits who complicate matters much as in Christian apocryphal and legendary belief. Do states:

Many believe that there are "evil" acts or even "evil" individuals, but would draw the line before they would believe in evil spirits, evil discarnates, negative influences, malevolent space aliens,

"Luciferians," or Satan and his fallen angels. The generally accepted "norms" of today's societies - world over - are designed, established, and maintained by the individuals who were at one time "students" of the Kingdom of Heaven - "angels" in the making - who "flunked out" of the classroom. Legends and scriptures refer to them as fallen angels. (Do "Heaven's Gate: How and When It May Be Entered")¹²

Again, Do co-opts the popular Christian conceptions of demons to justify his own hybrid rhetoric of the "classroom" and "norms." Do claims that the Kingdom of Heaven allows these evil aliens to persist, much as Protestants justify evil in the world, "in order to learn their tricks and how to stay above them or conquer them." All the while, these "Luciferian" spirits "are constantly 'programming' every human plant (vehicle or body), to accept a set of beliefs and norms for behavior during a lifetime" (Do "Heaven's Gate: How and When It May Be Entered"). Do goes on to argue that these norms are:

"acceptable establishment," to humanity, and to false religious concepts. Part of that "stay blinded" formula goes like this: "Above all, be married, a good parent, a reasonable church goer, buy a house, pay your mortgage, pay your insurance, have a good line of credit, be socially committed, and graciously accept death with the hope that 'through His shed blood,' or some other equally worthless religious precept, you will go to Heaven after your death." Many segments of society, especially segments of the religious, think that they are *not* "of the world," but rather that their "conversion" experience finds them "*outside of worldliness.*" (Do "Heaven's Gate: How and When It May Be Entered")

Elsewhere Do specifically attacks popular Protestantism, but it is clear enough here that he lumps all mainstream Christian religion in America right in with strictly materialist capitalism; and such materialism is the product of demonic influences.

¹² The idea of "Luciferians" connected to UFOs is a common element of many Christian apocalyptic and conspiratorial belief systems since, at least, the early 1990s. The issue is, for example, addressed by two respondents I will discuss in Chapter Five: M. J. Agee and "The Watcher."

Aside from the abundance of inherent contradiction in his statements, the simple shifting of Christian beliefs into a UFO-based belief matrix is a damning reaction against popular Christianity. This shift brings to light the conflicts in his own desire to escape the Christian system with which he must have been most familiar. His argumentative *topi* remain: "progression is good, we can move upward toward that good, and we do that on a personal level" (Do "Heaven's Gate: How and When It May Be Entered"). Here it is clear that in order to attain the "good" that "progression" brings, humans must act on a "personal level." For Do, broader communities become a hindrance.

Do's biggest problem with Christianity is that it has become normative in the social circles he was apparently familiar with. The very normalization of Christian values hinders, in Do's view, the people's ability to grow spiritually. The engagement in the everyday tasks of life distracts the chosen from their calling to give up their humanity and enter the Kingdom of Heaven through ritual suicide. It is not only Christianity Do dislikes; it is socially normative actions generally.

A "Sinner's Prayer" for the "Deposit"

The above examples from Do's 1997 web documents show not only his ability to adapt the Christian rhetoric of faith and fatalism but the savvy with which he does it. About three fourths of the way down the 1997 web page, in the section entitled "Why It Is Difficult To Believe or Accept Us," Do makes a performative rhetorical appeal clearly influenced by the long tradition of the "Sinner's Prayer" in Christian Evangelical thinking. This performative appeal carries such potency, in fact, that the rest of the document seems to serve little purpose. In a way, much of the foregoing explication of his belief system is a set up for this move: what Do calls below "the big tester." While he may be trying to escape his Protestant identity, Do here engages a very common vernacular appeal to conversion among Evangelical Christians. Do's rhetorical move below is, in strategy, the same as that of any "Sinner's Prayer."

The Sinner's Prayer is common Evangelical folk tradition. While it has made its way into more evangelical Catholic discourse as well, it has roots deep in Protestant Calvinism. In American discourse, it goes back at least as far as Peter Clark's 1734 Boston lecture, "A Sinners Prayer for Converting Grace." In that lecture, Clark discusses how prayer can function, "chiefly for the direction and encouragement of the unconverted to pray for converting grace" (Clark 1). Also found in both Evangelical and African American folk music traditions, the beginnings of the idea surely go much further back than 1734. The prayer itself is an invitation for God to enter into the individual's life. The result of that "entering" is, hopefully, the acquisition of Grace which is attained by the sinner taking on a belief position of faith. In all of my interviews of Christian evangelicals, this moment of conversion is one of powerful psychic experience which is often described as a sense of euphoria that lasts for weeks.¹³

Because it is a personal invitation, the prayer cannot be a codified ritual text. Instead, it is conceived as a deeply personal and emotional appeal to God that should follow a general format while also reflecting the earnest desire of the sinner. One Dispensational web-site described the ethos of the prayer well by noting: "the sinner's prayer . . . isn't any 'official prayer' but rather a sample prayer to follow when asking Jesus into your heart. You can pray to God in your own words" ("Salvation Prayer").

An excellent short example of a typical Evangelical invitation to this personal prayer comes at the end of every broadcast of Jack Van Impe's Dispensationalist television program. At the end of the show, Van Impe invites his audience to make this prayer by saying something similar to this example from May 1, 1997: "Ask Jesus Christ into your heart by praying with me . . ." (*Jack Van Impe Presents*).¹⁴

¹³ For a number of examples of this experience, please see my interviews in Chapter Five.

¹⁴ While not pertinent to this discussion as such, I should note that some mainline Christians reject the use of the prayer based on its lack of biblical precedent. The argument is, actually, deeply related to the Calvinist emphasis on Grace over works. For a web-page which critiques the Sinner's Prayer on a vernacular level, go to: <http://www.birdville.org/sinnersprayer.html>.

In the "big tester" statement from Do, we find similar rhetoric to that of the Sinner's Prayer. Primarily, they are both performative attempts to compel the audience to experience a personal revelation in response to a question. In the Sinner's Prayer, the act that is being requested is that we "ask God into our hearts" in our own words. In the example from Do below, we are requested to ask of our selves if the beliefs of Do are arrogant and absurd. Interestingly, it functions as do most tragic-experiential rhetorical strategies, as a circular argument.

At length, Do's sort of Sinner's Prayer or "Big Tester" states:

The next statement that we will make will be the "Big Tester," the one that the "lower forces" would use to clearly have you discredit or disregard us. That statement is: Unless you are currently an active student or are attempting to become a student of the present Representative from the Kingdom of Heaven - you ARE STILL "of the world," having done *no significant* separation from worldliness, and you are still serving the *opposition* to the Kingdom of Heaven. This statement sounds - to humans who have been so carefully programmed by the "lower forces" - arrogant, pompous, or egotistical at the least - as if by taking this stand we had something to gain - as if we were seeking recognition as "Deity" or as self-appointed prophets. That Luciferian programming *has truly been effective*, for we don't even want to voice to you the statement in question. However, believe it or not, it is only for your sake - the sake of prospective recipients of the Kingdom of Heaven - that we *must* "tell the truth," openly identify to you as Representatives of the Kingdom of Heaven, well aware of the "fallout" of that position. (Do "Why Its Difficult to Believe . . .")

In this long quote, "Do" is the "Representative from the Kingdom of Heaven." The "big tester" question is, are you or are you "attempting to become" a student of Do's teachings. *If you are not, that proves that you are still under powers of a normative society inspired by the demonic "Luciferians."* If, however, you have (after reading the previous beliefs of Do) realized that he is right, then you are already a student. Hence, you are on your way to being saved.

This sort of argument is, of course, not really an argument at all. Instead, it is, as Do rightly calls it, "a test." It is, not unlike the confessions of the Puritans,

a test to see if you already have the spiritual "deposit" that allows you to recognize the Truth of Do's identity. It is a fundamentally Calvinist position. First, the world is evil and full of demonic forces. Second, it is already decided as to whether you are "chosen" to have a spirit deposit or not. Hence, attaining Grace is really only the discovery of the fact that you have that spirit. This is, of course, even more radically tragic than most contemporary Protestant positions. Unlike the Evangelical "recruitment" of most Christians, the ability to attain Grace is limited by fate. There is no "work" or agency you can engage in to get it. In this way, Do's beliefs and rhetoric are surprisingly more like Puritan-Calvinists than like most contemporary Protestants. Again, one reason for this may be that Applegate would have been most familiar with Presbyterian Protestants through his father and hence would have been raised in a Protestant tradition that still retains Calvin's assertion of predestination.

Like the most extreme forms of Calvinism, Do's whole performative approach is cyclical: if you have not, by the time you read this and out of your own volition, begun to seek The Kingdom of Heaven, as Do has outlined it, you are serving "Luciferians." That is, simply, if you don't believe, you are damned.

The speech act, or at least the internal prayer-like linguistic act, Do is eliciting is one that demands the reader take a stand. Most readers, as he believed, would not have been convinced by the time they read the words that should have convinced them. Those few readers who did take a stand and said "yes, I am now a seeker" were clearly chosen. That is to say: they clearly "have deposits." If an individual has doubts, then those doubts have been placed there by the evil spirits.

The final key point in the analysis of this selection is to emphasize that the rhetoric which Do is using engages the most extreme experiential strategy I have documented. There is no room for debate in this discourse. In fact, to engage in debate would be proof that you have not been chosen. The question then comes to mind: how does one know if he or she is chosen? The answer is obvious as it is for the born-again Christian. You know it, because it is something you just know. Many Christians I interviewed for my discussion in the next chapter will

make this same claim. They know they are saved because they, frankly, "felt it." If the rhetorical strategy Do engages is the same sort as that of the Sinner's Prayer, then there should be some evidence of an experience associated with the recognition that Do is in fact the spiritual entity he claims to be. Although, all the H.I.M. members are now dead, they did leave behind extensive documents. A number of those documents express, in straightforward if maybe understated terms, what that experience was like.

In the desktop published document which the members left behind, a number of them wrote explanations for their choices to commit suicide. Most those recount how they experienced a sense of familiarity when they first met Do and/or Ti. One member, identified as Jwnody, stated that: "It was like being awakened abruptly from a deep sleep. The voice of our Shepherds [Ti and Do] rang clear in the depths of our soul as we heard their familiar song once again" (Jwnody). Lvody left us with far more details. He described his experience of conversion saying that he first, "began showing obvious symptoms of having a 'deposit' in the early to mid-70s." He continued: "Mainly feeling a 'presence' and having strong thoughts of wondering, 'What am I supposed to do? What do you want me to do?' while feeling very close to and wanting to talk to God in my silence." This feeling built in Lvody over many months. He found himself, "begging God to 'Please show me, what am I supposed to do?'" (Lvody).

Lvody felt compelled to leave the East Coast. Soon he found himself in Oregon where his "deposit" "carefully led [his body] through a series of experiences that eventually led it to show up at a meeting by the Two in Waldport, Oregon on September 14, 1975." There, he had intense revelatory experience. He recounts it saying:

As I approached them, Ti asked, "How can we help you"? This vehicle was speechless at first, and I remember so clearly that the impulse I had was to want to drop to my knees and cover my eyes. The only way I can describe it is the way it was interpreted through this vehicle's computer, colored by its old religious programming - because it felt like I was standing before my Lord, my God. They

seemed so familiar, but the thought I had was, "It seems so strange to see you in these human bodies." (Lvody)

His brain, which he refers to as "this body's computer," was frustrated by the reality he felt. Looking back on the experience, Lvody refers to "his body" in the third person. This emphasizes the very real daily experience of his identity as Lvody. His "soul deposit" identity and his human form have become totally distinct. The reality his body recognized, as Lvody recalls it, was that it was "standing before my Lord, my God." Lvody presents us with one of the simplest forms of revelation: epiphany or the actual appearance of a deity before a human.

Another H.I.M. member's retelling of his experience makes it even more clear that what we are seeing in these and other examples are in fact revelatory experiences by actually naming them as such. Nrrody recalled:

Just prior to my incarnation, this vehicle experienced a kind of "revelation" while standing on top of a tall building looking down at people scurrying about, cars, buses, phone lines, roadways, smog, billboards, etc. Nothing particular was going through the brain, but for several days questions about the vehicle's purpose had dominated all thoughts. Suddenly, it was like watching a huge screen, showing the world - all humanity - the extent of ignorance, lack of development, the corruption, selfishness, and greed - the big picture, as from afar, in a moment of extreme clarity, and it was the most overwhelming emotion the vehicle had ever experienced. It was incomprehensible how it all happened and why humans made the choices they made. After the experience, a feeling of emptiness followed...except for this persistent hope and desire for something more. (Nrrody)

Here, Nrrody specifically recounts what he himself calls a "revelation." This revelation was of the depravity of the human condition, the "corruption, selfishness, and greed." As a result, he is depressed. However, this is all part of his soul deposit's plan. A couple of weeks later:

When Ti and Do walked through the door at the meeting place, this vehicle went into shock. I called out, "I KNOW them. I KNOW them." At that time there wasn't enough of me in the vehicle to

understand that it was the mind I knew, but I feel there was probably some kind of briefing prior to my incarnation that allowed me to recognize even the vehicles they wore. (Nrrrody)

When Nrrrody says that "there wasn't enough of me in the vehicle to understand" he is expressing his belief that the current consciousness he experiences is that of his incarnate being or "deposit" which was drawn into self awareness by meeting Ti and Do. The body, or brain, can hardly understand the revelation. All he is able to do is shout, "I know." This example is maybe the purest expression of revelatory rhetoric from the H.I.M. material. In a state near ecstasy, the purity of knowledge is complete. There is no act his body or brain can respond with beyond the euphoric affirmation, "I know!"

From this data, it is utterly clear that the H.I.M. religious group gained converts for the reasons Timothy Miller described above. The pattern is typical of most alternative religious conversions. Many converts expressed being depressed or feeling that their lives were meaningless before the conversion. This placed them in a convertible state. In the case of H.I.M. converts, however, the "revelatory" nature of the experience is even more obviously experiential because they felt that in the presence of Do and/or Ti they were actually in the presence of God. It is not just a sense of presence of the divine, but recognition and association between the physical bodies of Ti and Do as the *containers* of God. When they met Ti and/or Do, they experienced what was for them an undeniable truth. Through a pure recognition of God incarnate, they immediately knew that Do was their "Lord" and they were really a "deposit" which only uses the human body as a container. It was immediate. It was undeniable. It was a complete and radical transformation of their identity, and this is also typical of the Christian conversions I will discuss in the next chapter.

What is particularly interesting about these revelatory identity changes, is that of all the final forty-one H.I.M. members none had their recognition experience "on-line." In fact, none originally came into contact with the group through the Internet. As we shall see, the experiential rhetoric which H.I.M. employed repeatedly failed to find much of an on-line audience. Based on my

analysis in Chapter Three, this is not surprising. Their radical reliance on revelatory rhetorical strategies are discouraged by the very media of the Internet. Hence, their attempts to locate more soul deposits on-line were met with a huge amount of social recalcitrance. As we shall see, they were laughed at, mocked, and flamed. However, much as O'Leary described in the rhetoric of Hal Lindsey, such critics only functioned to confirm members' belief that the world was fundamentally evil. They quickly abandoned their first experiment with on-line posts. However, they would later return, but that second time, in 1997, their goals would have adjusted to the reality of the Internet discourse.

H.I.M. on the Internet in 1995 . . . Aborted

The first H.I.M. e-mail campaign began and ended abruptly on September 26, 1995. On that day, looking at an Internet news-group that focused on current events, "alt.current-events.usa," people found: "UNDERCOVER JESUS REVEALED."

The first 304 words or so of the over 2000 word post looked like this:

Subject: UNDERCOVER JESUS SURFACES
(www.indirect.com/www/lillo)

From: Doe@Ti.Lah

Date: 1995/09/26

Message-Id: <[44a1do\\$69@news1.channel1.com](mailto:44a1do$69@news1.channel1.com)>

Newsgroups: alt.current-events.usa,alt.good.news,alt.news-media,alt.tv.news-shows

UNDERCOVER JESUS SURFACES BEFORE DEPARTURE

I, Jesus—Son of God—acknowledge on this date of September

25/26, 1995:

1. I am about to return to my Father's Kingdom.

A. This "return" requires that I prepare to lay down my borrowed human body in order to take up, or reenter, my body (biological) belonging to the Kingdom of God (as I did appx. 2000 years ago when I laid down the body that was about 33 years old in order to reenter my body belonging to the Kingdom of Heaven).

B. My Father's Kingdom is a physical Kingdom Level in the physical Heavens or space, though individuals in that Kingdom identify with their soul—mind or spirit—and not the body they "wear."

[. . .] (Do "Undercover . . .")¹⁵

The general response to this post was one of bemusement. One individual asked about Do's vagueness about the dating of Christ's life: "About? appx? You don't know, you can't remember? One heck of an infinite being;-)" (O'Connell).

Do wrote or at least approved the "UNDERCOVER JESUS" post, and he saw his audiences' responses to this early attempt at an Internet e-mailing campaign as indicative of a failure of language. It now seems that he located no "deposits" at all; and, as noted, it was the subject of quite a bit of derision after this early attempt at Internet "recruitment." Based on the norms I have located in the 1994-'94 e-mail exchanges in Chapter Three, the failure of his audience to engage his assertions is hardly surprising.

¹⁵ As with all the quoted e-mail messages and web-page text, I have represented this e-mail text exactly as it appeared. Hence, there may be some strange formatting characteristics and numerous "errors." I have quoted these texts directly in order to accurately represent them even if, at times, it makes them a little harder to read and understand. I apologize in advance for any difficulty in reading them.

On his 1997 web-site, Do noted how "it is nearly impossible to take advanced, non-human concepts and force them into comprehensible human language" (Do "Heaven's Gate: How and When It May Be Entered"). After the initial e-mail, another tentative newsgroup post, and the creation of a now lost web-page in 1995, Do came to realize, "after posting them for only a few days" that "we [should] take these statements off the Internet. It was clear to us that their being introduced to the public at that time was premature" (Do "Heaven's Gate: How and When It May Be Entered"). When Do and his group posted their e-mails, they faced, not surprisingly, a large amount of social recalcitrance.

What is surprising, however, is that although Do readily made adaptations and sly rhetorical turns to assert his points, he seems to have learned absolutely nothing from this experience. When he went back onto the Internet in 1996, his strategies had not changed. What, it seems, had changed was that he had returned to the Internet with an understanding that his message was not suited to that medium. However, through a brilliant strategy Do realized that he could, by marshalling the power of the mass media in tandem with the Internet, launch his beliefs into the spotlight. Suddenly, the chance he might find any last remaining deposits would be multiplied a million times.

H.I.M. on the Internet in 1996

On June sixth 1996, nearly a year before the now infamous suicides, the most aggressive H.I.M. e-mail campaign began. The short e-mail that was posted to the most newsgroups and on the most occasions read in full:

HEAVEN'S GATE

- How and When the Door to the Physical Kingdom Level Above Human May Be Entered
- Organized Religions Are Killers of Souls
- UFO's & Space Aliens - Sorting Good from Bad

- Final Warning for Possible Survivors

www.heavensgate.com (Rep "Out . . .")

The last line was a click-able link directly to the elaborate web-site that laid out their group's beliefs in detail.

Because this post was the most widely distributed and was re-posted on several dates following June 6, there is no doubt that many thousands of individuals saw, at least, its title. However, there was almost no response to it in the newsgroups. I have located only three responses. One responded curtly: "that's nice dear, now go sit back down and count your breaths" (Khadro). Clearly, the rhetorical appeal used by this post failed to gain a large or engaged audience precisely because it did not conform to the negotiative norms of newsgroup discourse.

In August of 1996, another still more aggressive series of posts began to come from H.I.M. e-mail addresses. There were at least six distinct varieties. Each presents similar claims. All of them were mass posted to a wide variety of Internet news groups. All of them employed very similar rhetorical strategies. One of these messages, a mass-posting of 866 words, appealed to those who desire to enter the "Evolutionary Level Above Human" (Rep "The Jews . . .").

The post begins by restating the fundamental claim Do had been making since 1974: "I came to Earth some 2000 years ago from another physical, biological, Evolutionary Level as the expected 'Messiah,' or Jesus, and for this current mission, RETURNED to this level, this planet and entered into a human body some 24 years ago, Earth-time" (Rep "The Jews . . ."). Just as did the 1995 posts, this sort of assertion did not engage a normative rhetorical strategy for Internet communication. There is, in these e-mails, no attempt at negotiative rhetoric as discussed in the last chapter. Instead there are a series of direct assertions.

There is no invitation to debate these assertions because they come from the direct authority gained by virtue of being aware that Do is an extra-

dimensional spirit which has inhabited the physical bodies of Christ, Buddha, and others. Clearly, this sort of directly experiential appeal to authority failed on the many newsgroups to which it was posted. There is, however, other evidence that someone in the group did have the knowledge and ability to communicate within the rhetorical norms of newsgroup discourse. Evidence of this ability came on December 12, 1996 in the form of a different sort of newsgroup post. It met with a much more engaged and considerate audience. From the rhetorical moves employed, it is clear why this happened. This post *tries* to persuade. Its rhetoric posits that its audience is reasonable and can be persuaded. In so doing, it meets with a rush of negative, but, again, *engaged*, response.

The post begins: "Here's a round of applause to the Church of Scientology for their courageous action against the Cult Awareness Network" generally referred to as CAN (lah). It must have been clear to the poster that the idea that the Church of Scientology was a good thing would meet with a lot of resistance on the alt.religion.scientology newsgroup. This newsgroup is generally devoted to attacking the Church; though some supporters also participate. The claim that the Church of Scientology did something good would immediately be at issue. Still, the idea that underlies it would be: *that acting in a courageous fashion is a good thing.*

In a clearly negotiative phrase, the next line of the post specifically admits alternate perspectives: "from our point of view . . ." The post is, apparently, a response to a indictment of the Heaven's Gate group by, what was at the time, the notoriously anti-New Age and pro-Christian organization known as CAN. The Heaven's Gate post claimed that CAN "condemned the innocent." And that it, "accused our group of 'cult activities' promoting all sorts of lies about us. When we asked to speak to them to correct some of their false accusations, they refused to listen." The post concludes: "we hope you will all continue to advertise on behalf of freedom of thinking for all" (lah).

In this post, in addition to the initial idea is that it is good to be courageous. CAN is accused lying and of "refusing to listen." CAN is portrayed as decidedly unethical. This lack of ethics is contrasted with the idea that each party should

have the opportunity to present its case in order to judge the truth of its claim. Then this open-forum attitude is linked to a commonly held belief in the value of free speech and thought. The post encourages and allies itself with those who "advertise on behalf of freedom of thinking for all" (lah).

At that time CAN was one of the highest profile "anti-cult" organizations. It was notorious for pushing its main-line Christian views in the form of help for what were often called "cult victims."¹⁶ The general Internet community tends to value the right to have each party make its case in public disputes. The post has, on this basis, effectively engaged in a pluralistic stance using negotiative cues that intend to find engaged critical response to an attack on a political group that is characterized as dogmatic and self-righteous.

The response to this post was much smaller than most of the other H.I.M. newsgroup communications. The e-mail was only posted to one newsgroup and was directed at the audience specific to this newsgroup in a persuasive manner. Among the responses, the post received a full range of engagement. Some of the responses did not engage the post at all. One single line response commented on CAN's alleged description of the group as a "UFO cult" said: "'Which* UFO cult ? Scientology is itself an UFO cult !'" (Hausherr). A few others included reservations about the lack of a "signed" name on the post. As with all the Heaven's Gate posts, there are vague names or no names used to identify the exact poster. Based on the belief complex held by the group, this is not surprising. Their belief system advocates a reduction of self through a reduction of individuality. Still, it is unacceptable to leave statements unsigned in Internet newsgroups. Doing so fails to take responsibility for the posting and hence reduces the emotive force of more embodied rhetorical appeals.

However, two of the five responses did engage the e-mail critically. From a vernacular rhetorical perspective on Internet communication, these two replies

¹⁶ Since these posts, CAN has been purchased by its greatest adversary, The Church of Scientology, as the result of a lawsuit. Needless to say, CAN no longer seeks to discourage membership in the Church.

show that the H.I.M. e-mail was successful in that it fulfilled the newsgroup norm of deliberative exchange. This is evident in the fact that it initiated the normal mode of Internet discourse: debate.

One of these two responses more directly attacks the Church of Scientology than H.I.M. post itself. Here, the responder attacks the "cult" of Scientology for being less an advocate of free thinking and more of a "recruiter" that uses "manipulative, deceptive etc etc" techniques. Still, this responder, aware that he or she may face a contrary response from the original post, states at the end of his message in a clear move toward deliberation: "Look forward to hearing from you" (Bell). This individual not only acknowledges the validity of the H.I.M. poster as a reasonable person, but he or she encourages the poster to respond. Unlike the derisive joking that followed the previous posts I discussed, at least this respondent seems to desire, and I assume enjoy, the verbal sparring that he or she sees as being invited by the H.I.M. poster.

The second engaging responder takes up the claim that "cults" encourage free thinking as well. This response attacks the means that he or she assumes such groups use: "is it that whatever organization you claim to represent . . . considers that the means justify the end, no matter what those means may be?" (Steve) It goes on to engage the H.I.M. post in a section-by-section criticism.

The final section of the H.I.M. post describes an historical need for so-called "cult" groups saying:

History proves that nearly every conceptual milestone now considered "good" was at one time considered a "cult." In the early/inception stages of any significantly updated thinking, it seems that some embodiment of narrow-minded opposition takes it upon themselves to threaten its right to exist. (lah)

The responder replies directly to that assertion:

History has also proven that many organizations that make such claims (such as the National Socialists in Germany, the Order of the Solar Temple, Jim Jones' mob, Scientology, and the Moonies, to name but a handful) are capable of causing a considerable

amount of damage to both their own members, and innocent third parties. (Steve)

Although the rhetoric is full of angry emotions, it responds to this H.I.M. post in a way only made possible by the rhetorical position that the initial post takes up. The H.I.M. post is an open invitation to debate that seeks to persuade an audience clearly conceived of as reasonable and persuadable. The responder, in turn, is clearly aware, and in fact may expect, that the H.I.M. poster may be reading and ready to reply. The responder says: "and, before you even think about suggesting it, no: this is not a case of self-regulation" (Steve).

From this exchange we can clearly see that at least one H.I.M. group member had the ability to both hold beliefs that seem to most people totally unreasonable and, at the same time, engage in reasonable argumentation at a fairly advanced level. This raises the obvious question: why would the H.I.M. posters *choose* to use totally unreasonable arguments in the vast majority of their posts?

To answer this last question, let's look again at one of the August 1, 1996 mass postings. It seeks to discredit "unknowing" promoters of lies including "JEWS AND CHRISTIANS." It claims that these promoters are in service of "the true Antichrist and his fallen followers" the "Luciferians." Although the post clearly appeals to a Christian symbolic system, it is destined to fail even among many in the Christian Internet community within which it might find a sympathetic ear because Applewhite persists in his direct frontal assault on main-line Christianity. Here, his attack is a virulent sort of dogmatism: "The true Antichrist and his fallen followers significantly strengthened their position beginning in particular with the Charismatic Evangelical movement of the 1960s" (Rep "The Jews . . .").

It is easy to see how badly such a rhetorical stance might fail. For the non-Christian, prophecies about any "anti-Christ" are absurd. For the apocalyptic or Dispensational Christian, direct attacks on evangelic preaching would probably not be met with much sympathy even though some 250 words of the post are devoted to quoting the gospels of Luke and John in support of the post's

assertions. Then the post implores the reader to look at the Bible in new ways: “a true seeker who really wants to know what Jesus required of His disciples in order to go with him into his Father’s Kingdom would read what JESUS SAID (His sayings in the Red Letter edition) on these subjects in the gospels” (Rep “The Jews . . .”). While for many Protestants this statement alone would be entirely acceptable, the members of the various discourse communities that responded did so with dismissive derision because of the authoritarian way in which the argument is initially set up.

One reply that exemplified the general attitude taken towards the post stated: “I’m sorry, this is the wrong mental illness group. This is alt.support.depression. You must be looking for alt.support.eschatological-delusions. Common mistake.” She continued to respond more seriously, even if sarcastically, to the strong emotive drive in the post. “As another millennium approaches, the nuts start coming out of their burrows. I was starting to worry they weren’t coming at all” (Ostendorf). Another individual, who appears to be both Christian and involved in the Christian militia movements, rejected the post not because of its attack on fundamentalism, but instead appealed directly to the lack of the post’s topical relevance to that particular newsgroup: “Get bent, and you can use the cross you rode in on to do it, too. When you have something to say about Militias (this being a *Militia* newsgroup --- alt.religion.nutter is two doors down yonder), talk to us” (Malcomson).

In addition to attacks on the lack of relevance and the “you-are-generally-insane response,” the most popular variety of response was that of the “yeah-i’m-Jesus-too.” One fine example: “Jesus Christ, it’s you! How ya doing buddy? It’s me, Cleopatra! Plato and me was thinking of scaring up a few friends for poker. You in?” (Karen). There were 50 similar responses that I was able to locate—and possibly many more. From just these few examples, it is clear that there was no critical engagement of the post’s rhetorical position. Though I located two emotive warrants above (that of a desire to better oneself through evolution and that of a dislike for the overly materialistic forms of modern Protestantism), these are weak warrants indeed for the assertion that one should

follow the group's monistic anti-body beliefs. Further, the warrants were not effectively employed.

The post asserts that Jesus has embodied a human and is sending the e-mailed message. It seems like a claim made by an individual with a very thin grasp of social norms. However, as we have seen, someone in the group did have a very good grasp of normative Internet discourse. Further, all the H.I.M. members in 1997 were highly versed in technical Internet usage. They built web-sites professionally. The poster or posters of most of these e-mails must have been quite aware that the H.I.M. message would fail to reach the vast majority of their audience. The high level of exposure to Internet discourse inherent in building web sites, posting to newsgroups, and occasionally engaging in newsgroup debate must have taught the writer of that one successful post through direct social exchange the expectations of newsgroup audiences in order for him or her to successfully write the one e-mail that was constructed, on a vernacular level, with the proper rhetoric.

At least one of the H.I.M. posters understood the basic vernacular rhetoric of Internet newsgroups. So why didn't he or she care enough about all the other posts to try to make them more acceptable to their audiences? The answer to this basic question should now be rather clear. The H.I.M. e-mail campaign posters didn't care because, in their view, their posts did not fail. The "JEWS AND CHRISTIANS" post ends:

If you can identify with these thoughts, you are possibly one who might be chosen to go with us.

If you see what we say as blasphemous, then you have clearly chosen to be a part of the opposition.

If you desire to assist us or to become more aware of who we are, our temporary Internet address is:

<http://www.heavensgate.com> Or you may email us at

rep@heavensgate.com (Rep "The Jews . . .")

The stated goal of the message was, of course, not to persuade anyone. Instead, it sought to locate those who have, through some direct knowledge, already been determined to know the truth of the statements—those already inhabited by divine multidimensional-deposits. Since it was necessary for each divine deposit to come to self-knowledge in order to escape the earth-classroom, it is not surprising that the poster was willing to put up with a little Internet ridicule in order to locate those few who still needed to receive its message of *conversion*.

Going to California (and the Internet), Looking for “Convertibles”...

From an outsider’s perspective, persuasion was not the group’s goal. Instead, it was conversion; in fact, as we have seen, *revelation*. The aim of the 1996 e-mail campaign was to find individuals who were already inhabited by an alien-deity and invite them to have a revelatory experience of the Truth. That deity would, though latent, respond to the stimulus of the H.I.M. message, and this would result in a revelatory experience of the deity within its human host. The posts sought to locate individuals already in a spiritual and emotional state that made them ready to negate argument—that prepared them for this revelatory experience.

And it is no small irony that Applewhite’s intense desire to distance himself from bodily experience seems, at the very same time, to be rooted in some sort of intense bodily experience—a conversion experience. Such attempts at conversion through intense emotive experience are, of course, nothing new. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the archetype for such experiences is Paul’s confrontation with the Holy Spirit while on the road to Damascus:

And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” And I answered, “Who art thou, Lord?” And he said unto

me, "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest." And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me. And I said, "What shall I do, Lord?" And the Lord said unto me, "Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do." (Acts 22: 6-10)¹⁷

We have seen similar revelatory experiences recounted in my analysis above in some of the Quaker journals and elsewhere; and it is exactly the possibility of this intensely emotive experience that allows the H.I.M. recruitment rhetoric to seek a conversion that is beyond argumentative persuasion.

Conversion, in this sense, is the result of an intense psychic experience that the experiencing individual cannot deny. Johannes Wilbert describes the phenomenon as it functions for a Native South American group, the Warao: "the novice undergoing initiation to become a tobacco shaman needs little convincing to believe that through copious tobacco use his eyesight will be amplified by visionary power." Due to tobacco and other alkaloids acting on the brain, these visions come as "spirits, ancestors, lightening flashes, and giant suns" and more (Wilbert 164 - 5). Visionary phenomena are, of course, not limited to those groups who use hallucinogenic substances. Elaine Lawless, a well known ethnographer who worked extensively with North American Pentecostals, describes "tarrying:" "Sinners seeking to change their status from sinner to saint and gain membership in the group must do so by first professing their sins in the public context of the church and tarrying at the altar . . . the kinesic language that accompanies tarrying includes raised arms, waving hands, closed eyes, tears, and the eventual disconnection from one's surroundings that implies a trance state" (Lawless 50).

¹⁷ All passages quoted from the Bible are from the King James Version. I have chosen to quote this version even though its translation is less true to the original texts than others because it is the most influential and widely known version in English. In quoting it, I am not interested in its actual meaning as based on original language texts but in its meaning as it has been understood by everyday Christian readers.

The intense bodily force of these sorts of experiences cannot be denied. At the same time, however, they are experienced by an individual in a way that is not persuasive but *converting*. For an individual who has experienced such psychic events, questioning the reality of the events is not an issue. The conversion experience is a unilateral transference of knowledge from a divine source, and it is the total and aware disregard of persuasion in the H.I.M. writings that makes them such a clear example of revelatory rhetoric.¹⁸

Without even a gesture toward rational persuasion, the H.I.M. posts rely completely on the assumption that those who are ready and need to hear their message will, without any recourse to reason, simply know that they are one of the individuals H.I.M. was seeking. Confronted with the "Truth," the deity will *reveal* itself.

This sort of emotive psychic experience is common among contemporary Protestant groups even if it is less spectacular than shamanic visions, journeying, or Pentecostal "speaking in tongues." In a Christian context, "accepting God in your heart" or being "born again in Christ" are normal ways of referring to this sort of individual revelation. These sorts of Truth or conversion experiences lead to simple and unafraid belief. It is, based on the interviews I have seen and conducted with religious adherents, a source of complete security. It is evidenced by a profound sense of calm. In the case of H.I.M., there was only one way to advance to the Next Level, and the group knew how.

When they e-mailed to newsgroups, they could only inform their audience of this fact and hope that, for my the sake of that audience, some would turn out to be of the few chosen—though they knew the vast majority would probably would not. They presented the reality that they knew by direct experience and encouraged those who were able to share in this reality to join them. Taking this Truth stance, they expressed their beliefs as simple unidirectional assertions;

¹⁸ In fact, this total reliance on conversion might even be said to fall outside the bounds of the definition of rhetoric as persuasive symbolic action. However, a verbal invitation to conversion is still clearly some sort of linguistic strategy. So, for lack of a better word, I will continue to call it "rhetoric."

and this is the most definitive quality, beyond the presence of revelation itself, of the revelatory world view as I have defined it. Needless to say, these sorts of revelatory non-assertions did not succeed in the multilateral Internet environment. Their attempt to find deposits through the Internet, it seems, more or less failed—and, as we have seen, at least one reason it failed was because Internet newsgroups are not very good places to express the monistic dogmas of conversion. This is, of course, just what the H.I.M. group members kept saying all along; as Do said after the 1995 Internet campaign: “the world is not ready” (Do “Why Its Difficult to Believe . . .”).

Final Evidence from a Straggler

Almost a year after the initial suicides, and with the media frenzy long forgotten, in the February 21, 1998 issue of the *San Diego Union*, a back-page headline read: “Ex-Heaven’s Gate follower kills self on 2nd Try” (Thornton A11).

I had exchanged quite a bit of e-mail with Ric, the man who killed himself. He was the last follower of Marshall Applewhite at the time of the 1997 suicides and the forty-first person to enter “Heaven’s Gate,” which is what Ric believed the result of his suicide would be. In all my exchanges with him, he sounded like a more or less ordinary man. Still, he chose to take his own life. For him, ritual suicide must have seemed reasonable, and it is just this sense of total-self-negation-made-reasonable that goes to the heart of why the H.I.M. group’s motives and choices are important for us to explore.

As I noted at the outset, from the perspective of outsiders, the individuals who chose to enter Heaven’s Gate seemed like relatively ordinary people. From a rhetorical perspective, that means that they could be influenced by and would use “ordinary” rhetorical appeals in their communications of belief. While at least some of them did this, all of them were also part of a very “extra-ordinary” e-mail campaign in 1996. This campaign seemed to be designed to attract new followers to the group. As discussed, those who chose to enter into the Gate

must have found this appeal convincing. In so far as this extra-ordinary appeal worked, the behavior of these otherwise ordinary individuals evades understanding.

From the data I have gathered, there can be no doubt that the members of the H.I.M. group used the Internet in a skillful and systematic way to make their revelatory appeals. However, it is equally clear that they recruited no new believers through any Internet contact. If their goal was recruitment, it failed miserably. As I have shown, however, this was not their goal. In fact, from their own perspective, they were *not ordinary people*, and further, their Internet campaign was *not* one that sought ordinary people. Instead, their goal was the location of a particular kind of extra-ordinary person: "convertibles." To locate such convertibles, the H.I.M. group did not engage normal appeals to reason, fact, and value which are the basis for so much North American debate both vernacular and institutional. Instead, the rhetoric engaged by these individuals was a rhetoric of belief so absolute that it was not just without logic or reason—*it stands beyond both*.

Shortly after the mass suicide in Rancho San Diego, the last two followers of Do had also attempted suicide—the same two individuals I quote above being interviewed on *60 Minutes*. They had stayed behind to act as spokespersons for H.I.M. after the suicides. One was successful: Wayne Cooke or "Sawyer" also known as Nic. This other was "Rick-o'-de," or just "Ric" as he asked me to call him. His first suicide attempt failed.

After coming out of a coma as a result of the first suicide attempt, Ric created a new web-site because he felt his life has been spared so he might stay behind just a little longer. His efforts were the final attempts by H.I.M. to locate deposits. I came across the web-site, and e-mailed him questions about his experiences with the H.I.M. group. The front page of his site is depicted in Figure Five.

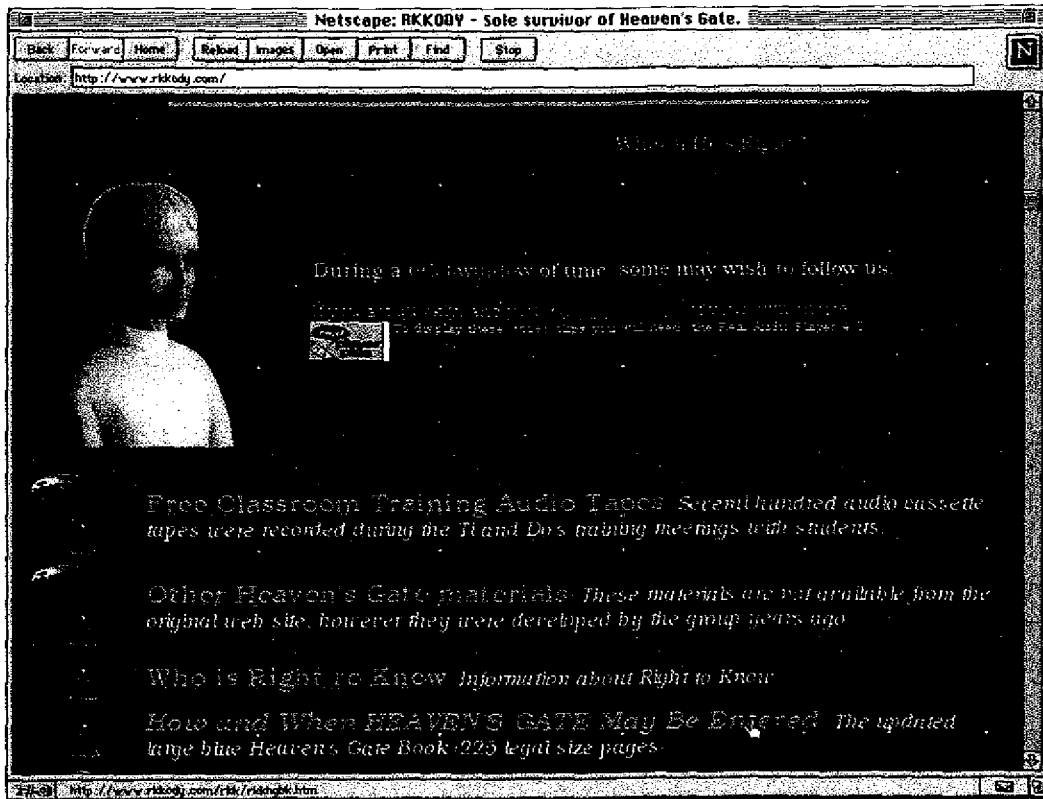


Figure 5: The Front Page of Ric's 1997 Web-site

We engaged in an e-mail exchange that was both lively and intriguing. I asked him about the expected audience and the intentions of the e-mailed newsgroup posts in 1996. He responded:

We offered the information and let free will take over. It was designed by our Creator that only those who had been given a special 'gift' of recognition, would be drawn towards this material. I know that sounds very sci-fi, but if you really take a good look at the record of Jesus' ministry you would see that Ti and Do brought the very same formula for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. The message then was only meant for those who have ears to hear, and it is the same today. (Rkkody "RE:")

A few days before February 17, 1998, Ric drove from San Diego into the Arizona desert, put up a small tent, and ran tubing into it from the exhaust pipe of

his car. Near his body he left the simple note: "DO NOT REVIVE" (Thorton "Ex-Heaven's Gate").

The one thing that haunts me most about all my months of investigation into the H.I.M. suicides since March of 1997 is this: as unreasonable in a socially normative sense as the beliefs and actions of these individuals were, they *knew exactly what they intended to do* and, by their own of standards of judgment as well as by my best rhetorical analysis, these people *did just exactly what they wanted to do*. For me, these facts do not sit comfortably next to the reality of what it was they were doing. What they wanted to do and how they did it, I think I understand. Why they did it, still remains shrouded in a world of deeply *felt* belief; in a world, not outside of, but through and beyond the bounds of reasonable, socially normative, contemporary Internet discourse. Their actions came from the authority only revelatory knowledge can afford.

The Media Savvy Spiritual Suicides

It was a surprise to me when I discovered the degree to which the H.I.M. religious group's rhetoric fully realized their goals. What came as even more of a surprise was the degree to which group members, in fact, also *manipulated their presentation in the news media*.

Knowing that their suicides would make a huge splash in the media and recognizing that the media's response would be fearful and negative, the members of H.I.M. left behind not only a web-site, but a cache of video material for the media to broadcast; in effect, advertising the web-site and adding untold numbers to its audience. In this way, they believed even more potential alien-deity "deposits" might be contacted. Though their deaths, they defined the primary media content for weeks in the Spring of 1997.

Not only did Do make a number of their standard videos available for the broadcasters to review and air, but each H.I.M. member left an individual videotaped message: the so-called "exit videos." These videos were broadcasted

repeatedly and at some length in the national media. Speaking with calm and understanding tones, each suicide stated his or her willingness to follow Do into death. They acknowledge the pain and confusion they would leave behind among their families—and they anticipated the negative reactions of the public as a whole. In a letter accompanying the tape, H.I.M. members noted that “by the time you read this . . . a flurry of fragmented reports have begun to hit the wire services.” (*Nightline*)

The H.I.M. members commandeered the mass media in order to express their beliefs. So sure that the messages would be read and aired by the media, H.I.M. members addressed a national audience directly. Specifically anticipating questions, they offered post-mortem answers. Do: “We have nothing to hide—even though to you we are a dangerous cult. We understand that. Why dangerous? Because we threaten the family. We threaten the established norm of family values.” One H.I.M. member referred to the false news media reporting about H.I.M. from the 1970s: “You’ve probably heard of the news media stories that we’ve had about a bunch of people disappearing from Walport, Oregon. Well, we’re still here! But not for long [laughing]” (*Nightline*).

One man was particularly adept at expressing both his desire and choice to commit suicide as well as the negative take the news media would have on that choice. With his uniformly close cut hair and wearing a bolo tie and dark blue button down shirt, he spoke to his future media audience with conviction:

The bottom line is that I am doing this of my own free will. I have chosen to do it. It is not something that somebody brainwashed me into or *convinced* me of . . . or did a con job on me. Its something I have grown to know and understand. And of my own will, I have chosen to do. And if anybody feels bad about that—that’s their problem. (*Nightline*)

A short-haired woman in a dark sweater and glasses calmly concurred:

There were a couple things that I suspected there might be individuals out there who would like to ask us if they had the chance. And one of those questions I thought people might wanna ask is: “How can you, when so many of you have so many

capabilities and talents—when you could have done so much in the world—choose to throw all that away, and go off with some cult and just lose your life?” (Laughing.) Ok so. In response to that. For one thing, you have to consider what we as individuals wanted to become. I think everyone in this class wanted something more than this human world have to offer. (*Nightline*)

Finally, another man summed all their views up saying:

We know that the spin-doctors, the people who make a profession of debunking everybody and putting down everybody, are gonna attack what we are doing just like they attacked the Solar Temple and Waco and what-have-you. They're gonna say: “These people were crazy. They were mesmerized. They were whatever.” We know it isn't true, but how can you know that? (*Nightline*)

As much as media analysis has emphasized the degree to which contemporary mass media is a unilateral transference of information, the H.I.M. group members displayed an incredible ability to use the mass media to their own ends. They set the agenda by using the mediums of video tape, writing, the Internet, and their own deaths to “create” a truth that they thought would be, for those to which it was finally intended, undeniable. Through these means, they transmitted, quite unilaterally, their message; hoping that those few remaining deity-alien-deposits could be awakened to their own self-knowledge through a revelation or, at least, those deposits might be drawn to H.I.M.'s Internet or other more detailed media. The so-called “recruitment” campaign of the H.I.M. group was, in the end, not recruitment at all. There was no persuasion. Instead, their message was to act as a lure and a catalyst for a revelation which is possible for only a very few; and this is the most extreme example of experiential religious rhetoric I can offer.

In my analysis, I will not address any rhetoric as clearly revelatory as this. However, this example reveals the basic contours of experiential rhetoric in extreme relief. The members of H.I.M. are all dead. I had only short while to speak to only one of them. So I cannot fairly situate their rhetoric and beliefs into an adequate context of their individual lives. This fact has limited my analysis to a general evaluation of the group's documents. However, these documents

present us with a large body of work. Hence, as a fairly cohesive group, this analysis has proven quite profitable in presenting the extreme of experiential religious rhetoric on the Internet. However, the fact that a group of individuals could both manipulate the news and Internet media with such skill and yet maintain a deeply experiential attitude has problematized my claim from Chapter Three that Internet use encourages negotiative rhetorical strategies.

In the next chapter, we will have the chance to look at more normative examples of on-line religious rhetoric to reevaluate my claims in light of more detailed data gathered from less atypical Internet users. Seated in the rich diversity of individual lives, we shall see, again and again, the shades of both this radical experientialism and the more negotiative norm. In each case, however, we find a tension between the desire to encourage or respond to the Internet's normative negotiative mode and the experience of spiritual rebirth. In each case, this tension cradles a complex identity position that animates and defines the life of each very different individual I discuss.

CHAPTER V: DISPENSATIONALISTS ON THE WORLD-WIDE-WEB

The World-Wide-Web is now so integrated into the professional and personal lives of many individuals that, from the perspective the spring of 2001, it is hard to imagine that the public WWW did not actually exist until 1992. As I outlined in Chapter Three, it was not until then that the European scientific organization CERN released a public, "freeware," version of the first web browsing software. The release of that software made it possible for scientists all over the world to read the physics papers CERN was storing on a Stanford University Internet server.

Although the Internet had existed in various forms for years before that, it was not until the availability of the WWW interface that the new communication technology began to really grow in popularity. In 1992, it is estimated that there were 1,000,000 Internet "hosts"—or, loosely speaking, a million computers regularly connected to other computers through the Internet ("Nerds 2.0.1 - The 1990s"). By and large, these hosts were part of long standing government computer networks.

But, beginning in 1993, use of the public Web exploded from less than 100 web-sites in 1992, to over 10,000 in January of 1995. By 1996, the estimates for overall Internet hosts ballooned to 9.5 million. That same year the Web, clearly driving the growth, is estimated to have had 650,000 web-sites. It is estimated that, today, the number of web-sites and hosts roughly doubles every six months

(Gray "Internet Statistics"). On January 5, 2001, the communications software company Telcordia Technologies, Inc. announced that the number of Internet hosts surpassed 100 million worldwide ("Telcordia . . .").

All these numbers are, as is the early history of most things, surprisingly fluid and inexact. However, whatever the exact numbers might be, the simple fact which they make clear is that the public embraced the Internet in the form of the WWW in what amounts to, for that generation anyway, a *revolution*.

As far as revolutions go, however, this one may well have so far proved to be somewhat uneventful. While the overall population of web-users has become less and less composed of those with a high degree of computer skills, it has remained limited to a fairly thin slice of the socio-economic demographics. The Web is mostly used by the middle and upper middle class.

In 1994, only 11% of WWW users reported having been involved in computer programming for three years or less ("WWW User Survey - HTML Results Graphs"). One year later, in 1995, this number jumped to 35.5%—the biggest increase was in those with no high-level computer experience at all. That number leaped up from nearly none to 16.78% ("GVU's Third WWW User Survey Programming Years Graphs"). This trend away from a high degree of technology skills for Internet use would continue—a trend toward the vernacularization of Internet that was, for the most part, driven by the popular appeal of the World-Wide-Web.

However, this vernacularization did not necessarily bring with it a broad opening of Internet access across the general demographics. In 1998, Internet users tended to be young, male, white, lived in the United States, college educated, and middle to upper-middle class: 48.2% were less than 35 years of age, 66.4% were male, 87.2% were white, 87.4% lived in the US, 59.3% had four years or more of college education, and, perhaps the most telling, 56.4% reported household incomes of over \$40,000 a year. And even these statistics are almost certainly skewed because of the practice of giving computer access to the university students ("GVU's Tenth WWW User Survey Graphs"). Most state and private universities give all their students Internet accounts. While these

students may have, at the moment, low or no incomes, they soon will. Hence, the overall demographics for wealth are probably being pushed lower.

As the above demographics clearly show, the segment of the population who have had access to the Internet is actually very elite. There are two obvious reasons for this which both have far less to do with technology itself than they do with the realities of the larger capitalist system. First, in order to gain Internet access an individual or family needs to have the money to purchase the computer equipment and pay for the Internet service provider. Secondly, and far more problematically, the individual accessing the Internet must have some degree of skill with using computers. Both of these barriers to Internet access are slowly being broken down by the commercialization of the Internet which is primarily occurring on the World Wide Web.

When I first began to access the Internet in 1992, I had never heard of the Web and there seemed to be, as far as I could tell, no commercial presence there. Then, in 1993 when I began to explore web-sites, I really did not envision them as being "vernacular" or "institutional." Though many universities and other organizations had web-sites, they looked more or less like the personal sites of my friends and the amateur Dispensationalist evangelists that I was beginning to document. However, particularly in 1995, this rapidly changed.

While it is true that the use of the Internet in the form of the WWW has suddenly exploded the possibilities for interpersonal communication in our everyday lives, access to this new media is still limited to a very specific demographic group. During the mid-1990's, the push to open up access to a wider audience has been somewhat successful. However, it has also contributed to an "institutionalizing" trend on the World-Wide-Web. The early negotiative vernacular of the newsgroups has, in fact, been weakened by the surge in professional web-site construction and the general commercialization of the WWW. This raises the question, then, of how my hypothesis that Internet media encourage negotiative rhetoric plays out in the Web environment. It turns out that Web communication does not seem to foster the level of negotiative

behavior many, including myself, had suspected. I will, in the end, need to adjust my hypothesis.

However, in order to reach this conclusion, I had to fully engage in a large and ongoing ethnographic project with this specific on-line discourse community. To show how necessary and demanding this qualitative data gathering was, I describe my methods in some detail. In the following sections of this chapter, I then, in order to create a backdrop for the following, describe the population I have documented in general terms. Once that backdrop is established, the actual substance of my research can be explored in series of very specific cases. While each case contributes to a complex picture of both the Dispensationalist community and WWW communicative behavior in general, it also rigorously locates each case into the complex and real idiosyncrasies of that individual life.

First Gene and Susan's radical experientialism is contrasted with Lambert Dolphin's radical negotiative on-line communications. These cases present clear extremes of both ends of the spectrum. Of course, most people fall in-between these clear examples and are thus present far more complicated cases. Tim's case focuses on his scientific experientialism which is so overwhelmingly powerful for him that he will adjust his perception of the world before adjusting his predictive biblical interpretations. This behavior reveals in Tim a disturbing ability to cling to dangerous prejudices. Jack, on the other hand, presents a case in which a strong sense of experientialism can still be mediated by a healthy openness to negotiation. Peter's case shows an excellent example of a sincere and loving individual who seems totally oblivious to the potentially hostile tone his on-line communications take for others. The final two cases, then, present a complex and dynamic example of why my original hypothesis is not so much proven incorrect as it is complicated by the application of rigorous qualitative field research.

The Web "Revolution"

In the mid-90's, the way the Internet was being used began shifted radically. Once dominated by academics and government workers who accessed information data bases through "line accounts" which did not make use of the graphic interface potential of HTML coding, now it was rapidly becoming a much different medium. The initial applications of a public Internet were e-mail based. First, and still to a large degree, individuals began to develop regular e-mail lists. Later, software was developed to facilitate this activity in the form of "List Servers" which are still very popular. Working off the e-mail list idea, "Netnews" offered archived lists of e-mails on a specific topic.

These first forms of Internet communication are ephemeral, lasting only as long as the e-mail is not deleted or, as with newsgroups, lasting only until new posts push older ones into the delete bins. More importantly, these media offer communication almost exclusively in the form of *words*. Newsgroup and e-mail lists are powerful forms of communication because a wide diversity of individuals can read and write messages to each other. However, they are forums which are only useful if people are actively reading while they are posting or e-mailing. If everyone stopped communicating, the empty newsgroups would be meaningless. These communications are only text—and ephemeral text at that. Hence, as we saw with Dispensational e-mail lists in Chapter Three, there are strong behavioral norms which encourage people to keep posting responses to each other. There is also a preponderance of negotiative rhetoric on these word-only and temporary forms of Internet media. Unlike any sort of publication, these media do not last. Instead, they are far more like an ongoing conversation.

The Web, however, is a much different medium. Less like e-mail lists than television, the Web actually places far fewer demands on its audience. Because of the simplified system of a graphical interface, the World-Wide-Web is easier to learn to use. This helped alleviate the skill gap which limited Internet users to those who had the necessary training in UNIX operating systems originally required to access the Internet. Furthermore, because large numbers of

individuals began to use the Internet, it suddenly had the potential to reach a large buying audience. At the same time, because that audience is relatively wealthy, higher price products could be targeted to these consumers through the Internet. Access to this advertising generates a desire on the part of industry to make the Internet widely accessible to individuals in society. Numerous corporate "alliances" and mergers, such as those between AOL-Time/Warner or Microsoft and Apple, have been attempting to make it cheaper and easier for people to "get on-line." In this way, a far more professional, or even institutional, Web was born.

While there may be millions of individuals accessing web-pages, there are far fewer creating them. In fact, with the introduction of web-TV as well as the proliferation of corporate web-sites, it might not even dawn on many individuals to use the web for their personal expression. Even more, they may not be aware how easy it is to create web-pages. The predominant change which I observed occurring during the mid-1990's was that web-sites rapidly became more complicated. Suddenly, commercial interests had discovered, or think they had discovered, a new way to advertise and sell products.

With the financial backing that capitalist consumption brings, suddenly individuals could be professional web-site builders. Classes could be taught on web-site building. Individuals could be trained. Then those individuals could be hired to spend, not leisure or personal time, but professional, institutionally supported, time building web-sites. Hence, I began to recognize a distinct difference between an "institutional" web and a more amateur or "vernacular" web.

With this change, the aesthetics of web-design became more refined and more demanding. Now, new web-users expect a higher degree of professionalism in their web "surfing;" and they might well pass by the hundreds of thousands of small-time amateur sites. This phenomenon will probably turn out to have major effects. Because the Internet is becoming a commercially viable enterprise, access to its technologies will become cheaper and more broadly accessible. Like television, the business that the Internet produces will

far outstrip the actual cost of accessing the technology. Hence, the cost to individuals for using the Internet will radically drop. In fact, it already has. As this occurs, access will expand to lower socio-economic groups. However, and at the same time, amateur Internet communication has already been and continues to be de-emphasized. While the millions of new Internet users pour onto the WWW, they do not necessarily ever contribute their own communication to the media. In this way, the commercial WWW is much more like television than it is like newsgroups in the mid '90s. It is, in a word, far more unidirectional.

However, the technology is always changing. I cannot fruitfully speculate on the future of the Internet from the perspective of today, but rather document what is going now. Whatever new forms the Internet takes, its impact will continue to be huge; and because the WWW is a dynamic medium which is always being constructed and reconstructed by its users, it will not necessarily be clear to future users exactly what went on during these early years of the WWW revolution.

And this is, of course, one driving goal of my ethnographic work. This research seeks to document (with all the detail the methods of qualitative ethnography can offer) the behavior of typical individuals who use the Internet for their personal communication of deeply held beliefs.

Because the Internet has so rapidly become so diverse, harboring untold numbers of discourse communities, I have adapted and applied the same methods I used in the newsgroup work I did in 1994-'95. Newsgroups are comprised of individuals discussing the specific topics the newsgroup's name implies and the newsgroup FAQ¹⁹ sheet designates. Although many diverse people engage in newsgroup discourse, at least they, at the outset, can be seen to be involved in the discourse community that the newsgroup itself defines. However, in mid-'90s, Dispensationalists comprised only a small part of the large

¹⁹ "FAQ" is a common term for the "Frequently Asked Questions" posts found on early newsgroup and e-mail lists. Users post them at regular intervals in order to define the "rules" and characteristics of a particular newsgroup or e-mail list.

discourse communities created by the Christian newsgroups. As a result, I had to search out individuals who were clearly part of both the larger newsgroup community and a smaller Dispensationalist one. I did this, easily enough, by e-mailing the newsgroup generally and asking about Dispensational topics. The WWW presents a more complex problem. There is not, necessarily, any master list or defining area into which a Dispensationalist community could be placed or located. Instead, it is dispersed throughout the endless and doubling back hyperlinks which are themselves the WWW. Web-sites merge and change topics as the surfer scurries through their web. In order to focus and limit my research, this final chapter is based on 120 specific amateur Dispensationalist web-sites. Because the process I used to choose this data set is more complex than it was with the newsgroups, I need to discuss my methods in some detail.

As with the 1994-'95 research, the organizing hypothesis was that negotiated rhetorical strategies would be the predominate mode of persuasive communication on the Web. At the same time, experiential based rhetorical strategies would be discouraged or be seen as ineffective.

As I discussed earlier, revelatory truth is a truth known wholly and immediately. Negotiated truth, on the other hand, is pursued through open dialogue among individuals. It is the formulation and reformulation of beliefs based on new influence sources. Although experience can act as a final authority, negotiation can only support truth if the negotiating parties are willing to continue communication. What I have discovered may be somewhat surprising—at least for the technophiles. As Richard Lanham, the well received theorist of electronic rhetoric, has noted: “The people who developed the personal computer considered it a device of radical democratization” (108). From my perspective, he is right about that. However, when he further argues that the “democratization” has been a success, his claim is, unfortunately, not fully supported by my research. Lanham makes a beautifully eloquent claim about the power of technology when he writes:

And an explosion of digital instruments for musical and artistic composition and performance has enfranchised the public

imagination in genuinely new ways. We can, then, chart one area of the electronic invasion: a democratic movement from big to small, impersonal to personal, citadel to coat pocket (200).

Though in some ways he is right, we have already recognized that this "enfranchisement" is still limited to a very wealthy demographic. Further, a truly more democratic discursive mode which is encouraged by the Internet, such as "divergent thinking" from Chapter Three, seems to be slow in manifesting itself on the WWW; and the WWW is by far the most popular and populated form of Internet media.

Developing out of informal electronic expression, apocalyptic debaters utilize *both* negotiative and experiential vernacular rhetorical techniques, and often they do it simultaneously. Although there is a clear stylistic preference for negotiative rhetorical strategies, this does not mean that the profoundly experiential nature of Dispensational thought does not, in the end, seem to dominate the belief systems of many of the web-site builders I have documented.

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 Truth*. This final chapter explores the possibilities and limits of my hypothesis that the medium of the Internet encourages and privileges more negotiative rhetorical techniques based on the methods I have developed for this purpose.

Methods

As I stated above, in order to gather data to test against this hypothesis I have expanded the methods I developed for the 1994-'95 research. Instead of fully validating my hypothesis, however, my research has again proven Clifford 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 *Interpretation . . .* 28).²⁰ If my research has complicated my understanding of Internet behavior as much as it has clarified it, I hope this chapter shows, by this very fact, that the methods I have developed for the documentation and analysis of on-line communication have proven rigorous in this study—and that they form a basis for further development and application.

Basing my research on my assertion in Chapter Three that Dispensationalists have their own literacy, I located the web-sites which I included in this section of the research in a systematic way. My goal was to choose a core group of sites and download their entire contents. Storing those contents on CD-ROM, I would return to the sites and re-download them every six months for the next three years between the Fall of 1999 the Fall of 2001.

By looking at the many sites I had previously noted through my ongoing participation in the on-line Dispensationalist community, I located a set of sites that engaged in a number of issues associated with Dispensational discourse. At first a somewhat informal list, I began to catalog these sites by noting their links to other sites and then the links from those sites and so on. In this way, I cataloged well over 500 sites. Although I did not catalog all Dispensationalist sites, I had cataloged a core group of sites that are all linked to one another.

Because there are so many sites involved in Dispensationalism even though it is a relatively small discourse, this catalogue had to be limited in order to archive the sites in any detail. To this end, I began to eliminate sites from the research which were not based in the United States, which were run by trained ministers, or were primarily part of a for-profit evangelical career of some sort. Although I have archived some sites by 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 revised catalog of over 250 web-sites, I began contacting web-site builders through e-mail. That contact e-mail asked

²⁰ Here I quote Geertz's famous phrase not because I have forgotten that I quoted it before, but because it is so important that, frankly, it bears repeating.

permission to archive the site and a couple of basic questions to establish if the web-site did in fact fit the criteria of the research. When that e-mail was answered, I sent a second e-mail asking if I could send along a questionnaire for the web-site builder or builders to fill out and return. That second questionnaire included basic demographic questions, some questions to establish that the individual was conversant with Dispensationalist discourse, as well as a couple questions to verify that the site was not part of professional evangelization project and that the site-builder or builders were not professional ministers or representatives of any religious institution.

As these responses were returned, they were cataloged and some respondents raised further questions or had questions of their own. I responded to each of those e-mails. In some cases, I asked or was invited to join and archive the correspondence on e-mail 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 who were located in areas I might be able to interview at a later date. In the coming months, I would re-e-mail, as many three times, individuals who did not respond to my initial e-mail.

Meanwhile, for those who had agreed to have their site archived, I systematically downloaded and saved their entire web-sites using commercial software designed for that purpose. Placing exact duplicates of entire web-sites into separate folders with their downloaded web address, the first run of this 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 was in the Spring of 2000, and a third, fourth, and fifth runs were executed through to the Fall of 2001. The number of archived 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 lived in an area I could to

travel to, were asked if they would be available for a face-to-face interview. When an interview was agreed upon, I sought to organize interview schedules. These resulted in long road trips to Montana, Seattle, and San Diego. Further, some air travel afforded me the opportunity to conduct interviews as far east of Florida and North Carolina.

As with many ethnographic interview projects, these interviews followed a basic formula which established similar data for each interview. At the same time, individuals were encouraged to direct the conversations in ways they thought were fruitful. As time and funding permitted, these interviews have then been transcribed and are being added to the archives as text files. At this point, the archives had become rather unwieldy in size. I moved them from my computer hard-drive 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 through various library and publishing systems to verify that what is cited actually exists in the published text.

WWW documents, and amateur or personal ones in particular, are constantly appearing, being changed, and disappearing from individual hard-drives 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 through the new field of electronic archeology, my archives represent an organized sample of a large cross-section of individuals who share a common discourse based on the

discursive set established by Dispensationalists such as Hal Lindsey and others long before Internet technologies were popularly available. These archives not only contain examples of late 20th century American religious discourse, but they offer a series of snapshots of a discreetly bounded discourse at specific intervals during the early years of Internet communication.

As an ethnographic researcher with a strong sense of history, I realize that any analysis I apply to this archive right now may hold a limited value for future researchers. It is a truism in ethnographic work that one's analysis may well be long forgotten, while one's research data may prove invaluable for future researchers.

In the same breath, however, as a postmodern academic ethnographer, I recognize that all data collection is radically dependant, deeply colored, and totally biased by the theoretical principles that have informed that research. Hence, my analysis may well be preliminary in terms of its conclusions about Internet communication—but it must nonetheless be undertaken with great rigor.

Description of the Population

Even in a detailed qualitative analysis, it would be far beyond utility to fully describe all the 120 cases I have archived. So, instead, the bulk of this chapter will explore seven exemplary cases which present extremes, norms, and the degree to which very idiosyncratic personalities add to the vast diversity of Internet expression. Each case represents, itself, the unending complexity that is a fundamental characteristic of human behavior. However, we can also usefully place these exemplary cases in the context of an overall population which engages in on-line Dispensationalist discourse. In the following paragraphs, I will outline the results collected from my questionnaires in an effort to build a background of just what sorts of individuals comprise the population from which I have chosen the seven examples.

Out of the first 114 web-site builders I contacted, I received sixty-seven permissions to add the respondent's web-site to the archives. I also received eight direct refusals and one response that I am not sure what the response actually was. This left thirty-eight to which there was no response even after three e-mails over a six month period. Out of the sixty-seven permissions, thirty-six respondents also filled out and returned the basic questionnaire sheet with enough detail to be useful. The following detailed description of my base population, then, is based on the thirty-six individuals who responded positively to both the question of archiving their web-site and filled out the longer questionnaire.²¹

While there is no doubt that any generalizations made about on-line Dispensationalists from this data is already questionable because of self-selection, in order to ethically do qualitative research we must have the awareness and permission of our respondents. Hence, those who might be most sensitive have the opportunity to exclude themselves. This could definitely impact our data; particularly when our research sample is so small. However, this is what is exchanged for the kind of individual detail which qualitative research can afford.

While Internet users tend to be predominately male, my research population turned out to be even more male biased than the overall Internet population. Of the thirty-six respondents, thirty were male and six were female. Of those six females, four were actually co-reporting with their husbands. My population also tended to be somewhat older than the general Internet population. The average age in my sample in the fall of 1999 was forty-two. Although there were a number of individuals who reported having non-white collar professions, the vast majority were involved in office work. Three reported

²¹ For the sake of consistency, it should be noted that the thirty-six individuals upon whom I based this general data do not necessarily include the seven individuals cases which follow it. This is because, out of the seven individuals, not all of those respondents returned their questionnaires completely filled out and thus could not be used for the purposes of the general description.

being retired. Four were actually involved in the computer industry as their primary employment.

Geographically, the population was very disparate. Considering Texas as the Western United States and Missouri as the Southern United States, there were a total of fourteen Western respondents, eight Mid-Western respondents, twelve South-Eastern respondents, and three North-Eastern respondents. Although hardly anything more than suggestive, my sample was interestingly biased away from the North East. Although thirty-three out of thirty-six respondents reported being raised with as Protestants, nine, a surprisingly high number, currently considered themselves "nondenominational."

This data's population is so small any conclusions we can take from it must be highly qualified. However, it does clearly show that the pool of respondents I contacted presents a predominately male and upper-middle class group. As noted, of the six women who did respond, four were part of a "couple" which reported building the their web-site together. While it is difficult to really consider what the "couple" phenomenon might mean, two of the cases I outline in detail below fall into this category. Of all of these couples, the case of the "Watcher" couple is by far the most integrated. This married pair shares a single e-mail address and generally refer to themselves in e-mails as a single entity: "Watcher." Another couple, Gene and Susan, also described below, however seemed much more traditional. All the communication I had with them was through the husband, Gene. Although I did meet and talk to Susan briefly in our interview, by and large Gene did all the speaking. In the case of Marilyn Agee, on the other hand, I met with both her and her husband, but the web-site, her publications, and all her Internet communication was clearly of her own doing. Her husband, in fact, expressed a dislike for the Internet and computers in general.

Coupled with the very male-biased response in my data pool, this suggests that the majority of my respondents were involved in "traditional" family units. Though some reported being widowers or divorced, the majority reported that their spouses' occupations were "house wife." Since the group we are

considering is involved in a fundamentalist discourse, this is not surprising. At least, then, my data supports the idea that most fundamentalists engage in traditional family structures. As noted, most were raised in one or another main-line Protestant sect, and only three reported being Catholic and none reported being non-religious. Overall, the general shape of the population appears much as we would expect fundamentalist leaning Dispensationalists to look like.

This is, however, only a tiny part of the overall picture. The intentions of my methods are not to produce statistical data for this small group. Instead, as a qualitative study, the real value of the research lies in closely examining several cases. To that end, the rest of the chapter will be devoted outlining some of the complex lives of individuals who are involved in on-line Dispensationalist discourse. In the following seven cases, we will find similar patterns emerging out of a wide array of very diverse values, beliefs, and communicative styles. However, in all of them we shall see ways in which the tension I have located between negotiative truth and experiential truth has been mediated, or at least submerged, through a wide variety of rhetorical strategies.

Case One: Gene and Susan's Radically Experiential Vernacular

My first case is *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.²² Gene is an employee of Intel and his wife, Susan, is a homemaker. I interviewed them together over breakfast

²² In my recounting of interview data with Gene and other respondents, I make a policy of assuming that my respondents are stating what they actually believe to be true. In each case I analyze below, I am utterly certain of the sincerity of these statements. Further, my face-to-face interviewing experience makes the awesome power of some of these incredible stories almost palpable. Although some of Gene and others' beliefs seem absurd, they were recounted as facts. Gene stated that he directly communicates with God and, in some sense, I believe that he does. It is not my goal to debate the psychic nature of such communications any more than it is to suggest that my respondents are incorrect about their own life experiences.

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.²³

God has led Gene to present a fairly typical Protestant Christian End Times scenario. On the front page of his web-site, he has listed typical topics for End Times 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 a series of pages that outline a standard Dispensationalist chronology of events associated with the End Times.

These pages include descriptions of the "Tribulation Period" where Antichrist takes control of the European Union and persecutes Christians during a massive Third World War. In addition to using some standard topics, Gene and Susan use a standard argumentative style in which a Bible quote is presented and then followed by a correct interpretation which Gene has come to through God's direct guidance.

On one such page, "REVELATION 3:10" is the passage quoted. Here, Gene discusses the "Rapture." The most commonly debated topic in this discourse, it is clear that Gene is on the "Post-Tribulation" side of this End Times debate 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 and other atrocities (Gene "End Times Bible Study Part IV"). Gene argues that: "Some people point to this verse [Revelation 3:10] as referring to the Rapturing of the church before the Tribulation" (Gene and Susan 5 Oct 1999). And indeed many do—however

²³ 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 all the individuals I am citing in this chapter, 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 full names. In their cases, they both expressed no reservations about being cited by name, and I made them aware, at the time of their interviews, that it would probably become necessary.

Gene argues that this is wrong and he knows that he, as well as we non-Christians, will have to weather the Tribulation. While Gene did acknowledge to me that this view is different from other individuals, he is not interested in exploring the possibility that he might be wrong because his knowledge is result of direct experience with God.

He makes his categorical position quite clear on one of his web-pages when he describes the world in stark terms of right and wrong:

This not a game! Either you are for Jesus, or you are against Him. There is no middle ground. As in any war, you must choose sides. Adam sold all of us to Satan in the Garden of Eden through his disobedience. And if there had been any other choice in the matter, Jesus would not have had to pay the hideous price He did on the cross. The choice is yours. If you choose not to accept Jesus as Lord and Master of your life, you have already chosen to make Satan your master. (Gene "Welcome to my personal page! :)")

For Gene, it is quite simple. Either "you are for Jesus" or "you have already chosen to make Satan your master."

On another page, it is clear that Gene and Susan are also involved in the "spiritual warfare" movement (Gene "Spiritual Warfare . . ."). They both have a long relationship with demons. Gene showed me his "Warlock" tattoo as proof he once was "into the occult." In fact, he was so deeply involved that he became possessed by a demonic spirit. This occurred before Gene met Susan and while he was in the Navy. 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 stated that he had quite a reputation aboard ship (Gene and Susan 5 Oct 1999)

One night, having trouble sleeping, Gene went to a part of the living quarters where there was a enough light to read. There, he met another sailor.

He saw my tattoo, and he asked me about it. He says: 'Warlock?' He says: 'So you're the guy I've heard so much about!' I looked at him a second and said, "OK." He says: "Well, how do you think you can do the things you do?" I knew the truth but I wasn't gonna tell him. So I said I was using my mind to control a greater outside

force. He says: "Well. I'm a Christian." And I knew it. I could feel it. Its . . . its really weird 'cos people from other religions would come up and try to convert me and I would just laugh at them and walk away. But when there's a true Christian, I could feel it! Without them even saying anything. And he looked at me and he says: 'God's given me the ability to tell when a person's possessed.' He looked at me, and something shrank into a cold hard knot in my chest and started moving around like it was trying to hide. And I . . . I just totally flipped out and took off! But it got me thinking about what I was doing, and such like 'at. And that was when God told me. He said: 'Now. Decide who you want to follow.' And he has since told me if I was to continue to follow Satan, I would be dead. (Gene and Susan 5 Oct 1999)

Both Gene and Susan 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.²⁴ Their belief in demons is based on these personal experiences. God too, speaks directly to Gene when He says: "decide who you want to follow." Gene also accepts the direct experience of God acting in the lives of others. This is clear from the acceptance that his fellow sailor has been "given the ability to tell when a person is possessed" by God.

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. Gene and Susan have become the objects of demonic assault as 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. Thus another page on their web-site contains a short how-to section on "hedgies" or the practice of spiritually cordoning off demonic forces (Gene "Hedgies").

It is clear that Gene and Susan present a typical scenario for the End Times. Their arguments against pre-Tribulation Rapture further indicate they are aware of and participate in the Protestant discourse community of End Times

²⁴ For a generalized discussion of spirit presence associated with fogs and other common forms, see Hufford's *The Terror that Comes in the Night* and "Beings without Bodies . . .".

debate. Like many End Times 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. Like the H.I.M. group members as well as each of the WWW Dispensationalists I will discuss in this chapter, one way God communicated with Gene was through direct personal revelation. He recounts his experience on his web-page to further establish his personal authority. He recounts how, after a night of intense dreaming:

The following night, I got down on my knees and gave my life back to Him. And when I did, it felt as if 10,000 tons fell away from my spirit as Jesus Christ cleansed me of my sins and restored me again as a son of the Kingdom. And I'm not ashamed to admit that at 23 years of age I cried, I felt so happy to be released from bondage. (Gene "Welcome to my personal page! :)")

Gene presents an excellent, if extreme, example of an individual operating in a world of experiential truth heavily relying on personal experience narratives in his appeals to authority both in person and on-line. For Gene and Susan, the recalcitrance that validates and organizes their beliefs is, as far as I could tell, completely reliant on their direct experiences of spiritual forces. Hence, they are not interested in making flashy web-pages nor do they engage in on-line debate. Instead, Gene feels it is his duty to put up the pages and allow others the benefit of the experiences he has gained as a result of his direct interaction with spirits and God. As a result, his site is relatively unknown. Based on my hypothesis, this is to be expected because, at least, Gene and Susan's Internet communications fail to conform to the negotiative expectations of Internet communication.

Case Two: Lambert's Radically Negotiative Vernacular

On the other end of the spectrum, Lambert Dolphin's site presents an example of highly negotiative rhetoric. Based on its links from other

Dispensationalist oriented web-sites as well as personal testimony of interviewees, his site is extraordinarily well known (Dolphin "Lambert Dolphin's Resource Files"). I have been in e-mail contact with Lambert since 1994, and his site is a little bit older than that. I finally managed to interview him face-to-face in August 1999. Though it is not totally millennial, his site is one of largest independent Christian sites on the web: 69.9 megs for some 1449 files.

Lambert is probably the best known amateur evangelist in the on-line End Times community. This is certainly because his site is so large and has been around for so long. But it is also because of his resume; which you can see displayed on his web-site. It includes a long list of credits accumulated from a career of sound and light wave research at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. Lambert is a retired physicist, and this fact lends power to his on-line authority (Dolphin "A Very Brief Resume").

The bulk of his material is in a section of the site titled "Lambert Dolphin's Library." 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 e-mail comes in and finds what I have to say interesting and worthwhile or it generates comments so I think it is worthwhile. (Dolphin 7 Sept 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. There are over forty eschatological links to articles and other materials he has written and created for the library.

One of these links, leads to his "time-line" from 1997 (Dolphin "Lambert's Eschatological Charts"). It presents a fairly standard Dispensationalist series of events for the End Times. However, the *only date* Lambert places on his time-

line of Biblical events is "1997"—representing "the present" or the last time he updated the graph.

Unlike some Dispensationalists' timelines, Lambert's offers no predictive value because his understanding of Christian eschatology can offer no date setting nor concrete evidence of who will be Antichrist and so-forth. And, as noted in Chapter One, Lambert says: "In fact, its probably perfectly acceptable to have equivalent models and use the one that you feel most comfortable with—or the one that fits best to your circumstances." (Dolphin 7 Sept 1999). In fact, in 1999 Lambert reworked his 1997 timeline making it far more colorful. Although the events list on the chart are exactly the same as those in the 1997 chart, the central date has been changed to 1999. Because Lambert has a negotiative stance toward the exact dates of his End Times scenario, he has no problem updating the chart with a new date. In fact, Lambert has left both charts on his web-site for his audience to review.

While this makes Lambert an extreme example of an End Times debater using heavily negotiative rhetoric, he has, on a personal level, a deeply experiential basis for his Christian identity. 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 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" (Dolphin 7 Sept 1999).

This experience was not like Gene's personal experiences where he has direct aural or visual contact with the divine. Nor did it offer Lambert any final or direct Truth from God of anything more than his grace itself.

Instead, Lambert insists on the 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?'" When I asked him if he was able to "scientifically" verify his experience,

he responded: "Is it verifiable? Not scientifically verifiable, but is it experientially verifiable." And this was, in part, the reason for my use of the term "experiential." Even while a spiritual pluralist, at the level of quiet personal knowledge, Lambert too relies on his direct experience of the divine (Dolphin 7 Sept 1999). Although Lambert has had a profound conversion experience, that is, in of itself, not the recalcitrance which he relies on to locate the truth of his religious beliefs. Instead, Lambert goes a step further. Having had an experience which led him to Christianity, he engaged other Christians to verify his individual judgment that he had experienced rebirth. While there is no questioning the reality of the experience, Lambert does rely on community or social recalcitrance in his interpretation of that experience as Christian rebirth.

The comparison of Gene and Susan with Lambert offers the extremes of negotiative and experiential based belief. Gene and Susan do not need to be engaged in negotiation about their spiritual truth because they have the authority of direct experience. Lambert, though he has had a direct experience of the divine, feels he must still engage in negotiation with a community to establish the correct interpretation of that experience. While the cases of these three respondents make the experiential-negotiative distinction clear, this is seldom the case. Most Dispensationalist believers tend toward the center of this continuum. In an effort to locate a subject-position for themselves between the demands for negotiation which the media of the Internet places upon them and, very often, their own experience of a profound spirituality, most on-line Dispensationalists exhibit much more complex rhetorical behaviors. One such case is that of "Tim" who is an optometrist in Olympia, Washington.

Case Three: Tim's "A-Hah!"-Logic

I met Tim at his downtown office on September 19, 1999. He is a successful optometrist in Olympia, Washington. He was very busy running his own business as the primary physician, but he agreed to meet for lunch at a

nearby restaurant. Although our discussion ended up making him late for his after-lunch appointments, it proved interesting and fruitful for both of us. While Tim seemed at first to engage in negotiative rhetorical strategies in his Internet use, I came to realize that, for Tim, contacting other people through the Internet seems to serve only as a means to an end. That end is that location of what Tim considers "scientifically" certain truths. Having located such truths, Tim adjusts them to fit his radically static Dispensational world view.

Tim was raised in a Seventh Day Adventist home. Although he always considered himself a Christian, he was not particularly focused on his faith until he experienced a spiritual re-birth during his college years. Feeling that the Seventh Day Adventists were too "legalistic," Tim, "really got to know God by reading the simple English [Bible] and saying, 'A-Hah!'" The focus on the specific rules and doctrines of the Adventists seemed, for Tim, to obscure the actual experience of God. After his rebirth, Tim felt that he finally really understood his relationship with God. As he put it: "I am saved by faith; by my relationship with Him. That he loved me so much that he would die for me" (Tim 19 Sept 1999).

This very active personal relationship with God has been the motivating factor in his spiritual life. Since his "A-Hah!"-experience, he has spent considerable amounts of his free time researching aspects of Christianity that he feels are not adequately covered by "pastors" or "churches." In so doing, Tim has developed a complicated set of vernacular beliefs which are, at least in the late 1990's when I interviewed him, dominated by the correlation of biblical prophecy to modern astronomy.

Tim is an interesting case because, like Lambert above, he engages a very scientific approach to truth. Like Lambert, he too had a rebirth experience. And, stemming from it, Tim has developed a unique logic of truth. He expresses that logic in its most general terms saying:

A few things are associated with it [the experience of rebirth] definitely because God created feelings and it's a good feeling. But to me its more of the *logic*. And that's the "A-Hah": the logic and the wonder of it and the Yeah it's a blending of both: the feeling and the logic. That's what's neat about it. And its not like

this ecstatic speaking-in-tongues thing that I think is a counterfeit.
(Tim 19 Sept 1999)

Although Tim here expresses his belief that “speaking-in-tongues” as well as other common Christian forms of divine experience can be evidence of Satan acting to lead humans astray, he is not totally closed to the possibility of revelatory experiences as sources of divine truth. In fact, his wife commonly has revelatory experiences in the forms of predictive dreams which they have both come to believe are “gifts” from God.

In fact, Tim sees his own “ah-ha” experiences as a lesser, but equally potent, form of revelatory experience. Tim explained:

The thing that God has revealed to me though in my studies I feel has *almost* been that [a revelation like his wife’s dreams]. But its *more* been like He has opened it up through the Bible and through science to me rather than . . . this actual dream like my wife gets.
(Tim 19 Sept 1999)

Tim believes that God has revealed truths to him through the active pursuit of biblical studies. These studies have lead him to build his web-site: *Spirit Shower*. He put up the web-site in response to the sudden realization that the very stars were God’s way of communicating his intentions to humans. *Because of his reliance on mathematical relationships between astronomical events and calendar dates*, Tim presents an experiential rhetoric which feeds off a world view that is both Christian and scientific. As he notes:

The main frustration I had was finding the beginning and ending of the those dates [referred to in biblical prophecies]. And so I was searching the Web and I don’t know what it was, but all of a sudden it clicked when I started seeing astronomy. And I starting seeing how signs and seasons are the signals. And it really just all started coming together for me. (Tim 19 Sept 1999)

Tim said to himself: “Well yeah! That’s what God originally set up: the stars and the earth and day and night and everything with the planets.” From Tim’s perspective, God created the stars in order that the dates of biblical prophecy could be calculated: “That’s all it does. Those would be the signals he

would give us to begin and end these 3 1/2 years [referred to in the book of Revelation as marking the beginning of the Tribulation period].” And this recognition was Tim’s primary moment of divinely led truth. It was Tim’s “A-Hah!” experience. He recalled it saying:

It was just like a light. It was one of those “A-Hah!” type of things when I started seeing that, and thought: “Oh this is how the beginning of these things starts.” So then I started studying the solar eclipses, the lunar eclipses, the conjunctions of Mars and Jupiter, and I . . . and I studied ‘em in reference to time cycles. (Tim 19 Sept 1999)

After several years of study, Tim hoped, through his web-site, he might come into contact with other people who shared his interests and might be able to contribute to his ongoing knowledge of the topic. Tim remembered:

It was amazing to how when I started studying these things they started lining up with the 3 1/2 years! So I started studying all this stuff, and man aloud! . . . till I got thinking, “Well I gotta share some of this stuff, and see if anybody else is studying this ya know.” (Tim 19 Sept 1999)

The web-site, in 1999, was modest in size at only 760 kilobytes and 48 files. However, it was rich with original texts and graphics which Tim composed. He explores various topics relating to biblical prophecy on the site. He includes numerous timelines he has created based on his studies such as that in Figure Six.

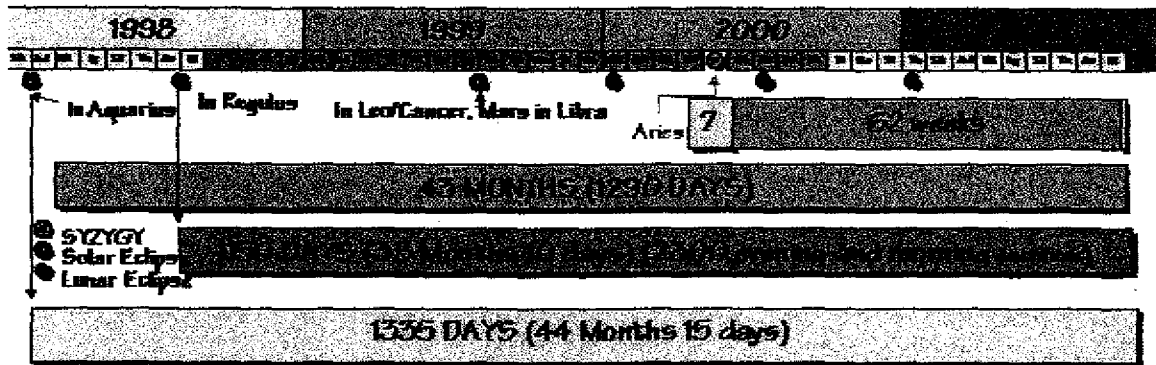


Figure 6: An Example of Tim's Timelines

Some of Tim's web-pages present a typical style of prophetic writing where a passage from the Bible is quoted and then interpreted. His page on the temple in Jerusalem, for example, includes seven blocked off quotes from the bible which contain what he sees as key information about the rebuilding of the temple just previous to the End Times. His own explication of those passages requires only five short text blocks. Out of an overall 1233 words on that page, only 368 are Tim's own. The vast majority are direct quotes from the New Testament.

The temple page functions as the defining theme for Tim's overall work on the web-site. The page states:

As we shall see in the following studies this language has reference to the spiritual message of the stars, not worshipping them like the Athenians, but knowing how they signal the appointments with God and revealing how God wants to habitate in human body sanctuaries to make them brides for the Bridegroom who will come for her in the starry heavens. (Tim "The Temple")

The idea of the "temple" has two main function for Tim, and these functions exemplify the complex way in which Tim negotiates between experientialism and an affinity for negotiative access to truth. First, the stars act as unequivocal "signals" in that they mark, in their very physical manifestation, the "appointments with God" that will be the major dispensations as well as key

historical events which will lead up to the final dispensation. Secondly, however, Tim's understanding of the idea of the temple is, on a personal level, typological.

In addition to signaling divine appointments, the stars teach the spiritual doctrine of the "Bridegroom" typologically. As the page explains, "God wants to habitate in human body sanctuaries." That is: the Holy Spirit enters the individual at the moment of spiritual rebirth in order to act in that person's life. A common Protestant idea, his belief is that those who are saved actually harbor the Holy Spirit in their bodies. For Tim, this spiritual doctrine is written above in the stars. In fact, as we shall see below, Tim is not at all interested in the rebuilding of the actual temple in Jerusalem as are many Dispensationalists. Instead, the idea of the rebuilt temple is, in the Bible, a purely "spiritual" concept. As a typological belief system, the temple-Bride concept refers metaphorically to the relationship between the believer and Christ. For Tim, this belief about the temple, and modern Israel in general, have significance only in this spiritual, metaphorical, or typological way.

At first, it seems that Tim is quite open to on-line debating about the specifics of his biblical interpretation and astronomical dating. He acknowledges that his, and everybody else's, ideas about prophecy are really just "divine speculation."

A lot of people will be arguing about whether—say for instance the seals—whether they were in the past or in the future. Or they'll argue exactly what which could be . . . or get into detailed stuff. But we aren't gonna know until things really happen anyway. So all we can do is just kinda speculate. What I call divine speculation. Put it out there and see what happens. (Tim 19 Sept 1999)

Tim has engaged a number of well known on-line Dispensationalists. In fact, he said he is fond of Lambert Dolphin's web-site. Mentioning Lambert to him, Tim noted that he too enjoys discussing the specifics of Dispensationalism on-line: "I think its good to look at their ideas." However, Tim limits the validity of on-line discussion when he adds: "[And] put them together [various people's ideas], but I like to put together science and the Bible in the most . . . in the best

way possible to verify what's going on. And I like Lambert Dolphin's site because he does look at science" (Tim 19 Sept 1999).

Tim always seems to come back to "science" as a powerful authorizing source for his belief. Tim seems to locate one source of recalcitrance for his "divine speculation" in the truths he finds as irrefutably proved by science. In so doing, Tim's overall belief system is rooted in a deeply experiential world view. While, on the one hand, Tim interprets some aspects of biblical prophecy typologically, at the same time he is certain of those aspects of his belief system which are rooted in science as he understands it. He locates recalcitrance for his sense of truth in the experience of astronomy. As a result he seems not only incapable of truly negotiative rhetoric, but he is able to maintain disturbing prejudices.

Although Tim was working on his very complex system of prophecy interpretation long before he put it up on the World-Wide-Web, in putting it up he was interested in people seeing and responding to his ideas. However, Tim's sense of what sort of response he hopes for is radically limited by his reliance on the recalcitrance of science. He does not expect to gain any new sense of truth from his on-line interaction with other people. Instead, he hopes to, simply, gain access to more scientific evidence to support or expand his ideas.

In fact, because Tim feels that God will "lead" people to his site, any information which he gathers from people who contact him through his on-line communications is already, at least partially, divinely authorized in the same way that God led him to explore astronomy. Tim explains:

I just put it [the web-site] on there because I saw how people were using the web for their studies, and I wanted to put it on there to see if anybody would give me any ideas about anything or to see if it would bless other people. And I don't advertise it at all. I figure God will direct people to it. To me its just a way that I feel directed [by God] to do. Put it out there for people to see, and for God to . . . to use as He would. (Tim 19 Sept 1999)

Although Tim's site is nothing near the size of Lambert's or some other web-site builders I have been able to talk to, Tim does have some interaction

with his site's audience. Tim recalled his exchange with one man: "He's a Catholic. Which I think is interesting because its interesting for me to see that a Catholic that would look at some of my viewpoints and see more stuff than a lot of these other people do" (Tim 19 Sept 1999).

While Tim appreciated hearing from the man, he did not engage in any debate with him. In fact, Tim does not, as a matter of principle, "debate" these topics at all. As he said: "I am not into debating like I said. Because it isn't . . . to me its not a debate. Its more of a study. You try to find out what's true. Truth is truth—ya know" (Tim 19 Sept 1999). Instead, Tim seems to always be searching out information which will support his current claims or add new possible claims about astronomy as the communicative act of God. In this way, Tim's experientialism is complicated by his seeming desire to locate and engage new data sources. What is important to note in his work is that although he may engage people or other web-sites he seems to do so specifically to locate data that he can use in his "study." He does not seem at all interested in adjusting his views based on discussions with other people.

For Tim, it would seem that his own perception of a idea or piece of information as "scientifically valid" is where recalcitrance is located. While in some ways this position is like Lambert, it is also very different. Lambert actually engages in a scientific method of sorts when he seeks to verify that other Christians have had an experience like his. Tim, on the other hand, seems to take scientific claims at face value and apply them, when possible, to his dating system. For Tim, individuals seem to almost be reduced to mere carriers of potentially important information.

Apparently, Tim's fact-finding leads him to a sort of fear common in Dispensationalist thought. Tim is concerned about the government, and he is convinced it is controlled by a shadowy background force. He stated simply: "I think the United States . . . or the world is being controlled by the One World Order." This "control" is the result of a long historical process, but in 1999 he felt it had "really went into effect a year ago." Tim believes this because, it started:

When we had that solar eclipse that I think started the 1335 days February of 1998. Because Clinton, even then in his inaugural address, he talked about how we were following the United Nations' mandates on all of these kinda things with Iraq and the Kosovo thing. These are all things that are One World Order. (Tim 19 Sept 1999)

In this quote, it is clear that Tim already has negative feelings about globalism. In 1998, a solar eclipse offers him the opportunity to link a predictive number from Revelation, the 1335 days, to a general dislike and fear of the Clinton administration's foreign policies. While his general dislike of President Clinton is itself not predictive, by equating Clinton to a very concrete and experientially verifiable phenomenon (the eclipse), Tim can link his fear of a coming One World Government to a piece of data that is not debatable. In other words, Clinton's role in a One World Government might be a topic of debate, but the fact that a solar eclipse occurred is not. Through a sort of sympathetic magic, the certainty of the eclipse acts to validate Tim's dislike of Clinton.

When I pressed him a little bit on the issue of the One World Government, Tim specifically asserted that he was not a dogmatist. He claimed, with great vehemence, that he does not know "for sure" if the predictive dates of his calendar system are correct. He stated:

I am predicting the Fall of 2001. Everything points to that to me—as the Second Coming. But within, let's say, six months of that date, if none of the trumpets or those things . . . events . . . have happened, then obviously I'll say: "Hmmm." Start thinking, "There's gotta be a few things that happen before Jesus comes." (Tim 19 Sept 1999)

While Tim here argues quite well that he is, in fact, not a dogmatist, what is equally clear is that the only sort of thing that can function as corrective recalcitrance for him is actual physical data. If the "trumpets" which are linked to various astronomical phenomenon, do not happen as predicted then Tim will consider what errors in calculation he must have made. To further shore up his claim that he is not a dogmatist, Tim offered, as an example, a case when he

changed his thinking. However, something a little ominous came to light by way of this example.

As I have noted elsewhere, Dispensational thought often focuses on a belief that a difficult "Tribulation Period" will occur just before the return of Christ. One defining characteristic of this period will be a systematic persecution of Christians organized and encouraged by a One World Government led by the Antichrist. For a long time, Tim assumed that this persecution of Christians would occur in the United States much as it had, as he understood it, in the Soviet Union. At one time, he felt that the oppression would at some point soon become overt and violent. However, he "had to revamp" his thinking because his astronomical calculations were indicating that the persecution should have already begun. At that time, he realized that that anti-Christian persecution associated with the Tribulation period had in fact already begun. It just wasn't as overt as he had assumed.

The Christians in America are not politically correct. It's the gay movement that is politically correct. And ya know—that's going on right now too. Pagans are more politically correct. (19 Sept 1999)

In Tim's own example of how he is not "dogmatic," he is confronted with what appears to be a failed prediction. Tim felt that the Rapture would occur three days after the "Feast of the Trumpets" in the year 2001. He reasons this way:

There is a 7-week period when the 7 planets are in syzygy²⁵, aligning in Aries and doing conjunctions. This is foretelling of their redemption with the 7-trumpet plagues possibly beginning with this rare alignment. You then have 62-weeks with the final week ending on the Feast of Trumpets September 19, 2001. (19 Sept 1999)

However, if the Rapture is "mid-Tribulation" as he asserted it was when I asked him about it, that would locate the start-date of the Tribulation three and a

²⁵ In astronomy, a syzygy is technically defined as when the configuration of the sun, the moon, and Earth lie in a straight line. However, I suspect Tim's use of the term is somewhat more inclusive than this.

half years before September 19, 2001: sometime in 1998. Since it was already 1999 when I interviewed him, the Tribulation period, in his view, had already begun. Thus, in Tim's mind, the persecution of the Christians predicted in *Revelation* must already have begun. Instead of reassessing his dating predictions based on the recalcitrance of the lack of persecution, Tim simply asserts that, in fact, Christians are already being persecuted although in a less obvious ways than one would expect.

Tim presents an interesting example of an individual who specifically rejects the "debate" which I have located as a driving norm of much Internet discourse. Instead, the Internet seems to function for Tim as a simple data source. However, Tim does not seem to build his world view based on new data. Instead, he seems to gather data to support his previously held beliefs. When that data brings his understanding of the world into question, Tim does not modify his beliefs as much as he adjusts the mode in which he casts them. In the above example, astronomy dictates that Christians must be already oppressed by a One World Government. Hence, Tim recasts his understanding of "oppression" in terms which support his dislike of the Clinton government as well as his prejudices against homosexuals and pagans. Most disturbingly, however, Tim seems to rely on an even more unpleasant prejudice to make this strange adjustment of his world view make sense.

A Necessary Aside: The Problem of Anti-Semitism in Tim's Vernacular Belief

Not only does Tim feel that the persecution of Christians is manifest the "political correctness" movement, but he feels that "The Jews" are articulators of that persecution because they have been running the "One World Government." While few Dispensationalists I have talked to are overtly anti-Semitic, and in fact some ethnically Jewish Christians are heavily involved in Dispensationalist debate, Tim's association of conspiracy theory, anti-Semitism, and Dispensationalism is hardly idiosyncratic.

The social historian of prophecy beliefs Paul Boyer has located the link between anti-Semitism and prophecy as far back as the crusades where Arabs and Jews were portrayed by Europeans seeking to pillage Jerusalem as agents of Antichrist (Boyer 51). However, there have been radical shifts and differences of Dispensationalist perceptions of Jewish people. Timothy Werber has argued that American fundamentalists were "fierce opponents of anti-Semitism in any form" from the late 1800s to the 1920s. However, and at the same time, anti-Semitism seems always close at hand for many Dispensationalists. In fact, Tim makes the same assertion (that Jewish people are facing punishment for their rejection of Jesus) as is found in a 1977 Dispensationalist text by Dwight Wilson: *Armageddon Now! The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917*.

More recently, the influential 1991 conspiracy theory text by William Cooper, *Behold A Pale Horse*, republishes in total a fraudulent 19th century anti-Semitic text called "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion." That text refers to and links contemporary conspiracy theory fears with long held beliefs that Jewish people are involved in a program of systematic economic domination. This long history of anti-Semitism in Dispensationalist thought is, however, somewhat complicated by the recurring pro-Israel debaters. In short, because the return of the nation-state of Israel and the rebuilding of its temple were predicted in Revelation as precursors to the End Times, many Dispensationalists see modern Israel as an ally. The final great wars of Armageddon are thought to, in fact, focus on a great struggle for control of Jerusalem as a holy city. In many scenarios, the modern state of Israel is unfairly attacked by a Russian-Arab alliance.

While the role of the modern state of Israel is often a topic of debate among on-line Dispensationalists, for Tim it has become a core belief. In light of the recalcitrance created by the fact that Christians in the United States are, by and large, not being persecuted, Tim needs to locate a source of covert persecution. He does this by asserting that two linked elements he has clearly already had prejudices against, globalism and Jewish people, are involved in the

covert persecution. As I noted, there is a long history of making this connection in both Dispensational and conspiracy discourse. In doing this, however, Tim faces another level of recalcitrance. In the Bible, obviously, many of the important figures are Jewish. So Tim must rely on another adjustment to make his linkage of Jews, a One World Government, and covert Christian oppression make sense. To do this, Tim reinterprets "Jews" and the state of Israel typologically.

For Tim, the biblical references to Israel, Jerusalem, and the Temple are strictly spiritual metaphors which God is using, in combination with the stars, to communicate to humans. In fact, Tim angrily told me the many mainline Dispensationalists who see the rise of Israel and the ultimate reconstruction of its temple as events which must precede the final apocalypse are deeply misled. Some figures in this discourse have, in fact, allied themselves with radical Israelis hoping to reclaim the temple in Jerusalem for Israel so that the End Times can be hastened. For Tim, these sorts of Christians are making a grave error.

Tim clearly harbors views of Jewish people (as well as homosexuals, Catholics, and others he mentioned) which are *not* effected by his interaction with them both on-line and through reading their publications. Although he spoke highly of one Jewish writer on astronomy, Tim dismissed it noting that, since the Jews were once the chosen people of God, "they all have high IQs." However, as a result of rejecting God as Tim sees it, Jewish people are now fundamentally evil. Instead, he, and every "saved" Christian, is the typological state of Israel which is referred in the New Testament. Tim stated: "I am the Bride of Christ. Not some Jewish nation that totally rejects Christ! In fact, if anything they are Satan's people!" He developed a fairly complicated scenario to account both for the fundamental evil he sees in Judaism as well as its involvement with the One World Government:

When they [the Jewish people] were taken into Babylonian captivity back in the Old Testament, they accepted all the customs of the pagan system that the Babylonians had. That is why ever since they came back from the Babylonian captivity the Jewish nation is basically been a lost cause. They set up their whole system . . . if

you study the Talmudic writings you find out how demonic they are and how unbelievably . . . *obscene* it is. Have you ever looked at that stuff? [I shake my head no.] (Tim 19 Sept 1999)

Despite his repeated assertions that Jewish people are “demonic,” Tim wanted to make it clear that he, from his own perspective, is not an anti-Semite. It is not that he dislikes Jewish people, he says, but simply that the Jewish people have, through the powerful forces of God in history, become the agents of Satan. As such, they, again as Tim has it, control Babylon which is the biblical metaphor for the U.S. and its allies. Tim explains:

I am not against Jews! Ya know. But . . . they definitely control the banking systems. They definitely control the One World stuff. We know that they have a higher IQ than any other people. Ya know. We've studied all this, so we know that they were, at one time, a blessed people. They were God's people. But no longer. Because they have . . . once they went into the Babylonian captivity they came out with all this pagan stuff. When Jesus was here on earth, he called them “oh generation of vipers.” And that's what they were by then. (Tim 19 Sept 1999)

It is clear from this last quote, that Tim's belief system is in fact prejudicial if not dogmatic. Even though Tim's ideas are part of a long tradition of anti-Semitism, his case is the one which I found to be, of all the people I have interviewed for this study, the most disturbing. It is not just that Tim is a blatant racist. It is the fact that his use of the Internet has evolved in such a way that his bigotry is totally insulated from any type of human contact that might begin to shift his views.

The whole topic originally came up during our interview because Tim was trying to show that was not dogmatic. Damned by his own example, he clearly demonstrates how he has a negotiative stance with *data* and not individuals. As he stated, “debate” is not a valid activity for Tim. Instead, his use of both “study” in general and the Internet in particular is to locate information to support his already held biblical interpretations. In his ability to shift from a belief that Christians will be overtly persecuted to a belief that the persecution has already

begun, we see Tim adjusting his perception of the world around him to fit his prejudices.

In this aspect, Tim's belief system is not experiential in the same way as Gene and Susan's, however it is deeply experiential. Instead of direct revelations from God, Tim follows a sort of reasoning from his faith in astronomy. This sort of belief system can retain its prejudices intact because it places the highest value on Tim's perception of data. This data refers to truths which stand beyond any "debate"; and this data is experienced through calculations of time based on the stars. And, in the end, those calculations seem to hold more convincing power than any interpersonal communicative contact Tim engages.

Case Four: Jack's "Spiritualist" Approach

If the case of Tim is complex in a disturbing way, Jack's case is one which offers us a much more hopeful view of the potential of the internet to discourage dogmatism such as that which Tim seemed to harbor. I interviewed Jack on August 27, 1999 near his home in Redding, California. Jack was "saved" in 1969, and this experience has lead him to write the book *Symbols Unveiled: Revealing the Symbols in the Book of Revelation*. While Jack feels his book is the result of his direct "leading" by God, he has had a hard time publishing his work. At the time of our interview, Jack had self-published the book. I purchased a copy from him when we met. Originally, Jack had hoped that he would be able to sell his book through mail-order from the web-site he set up. However, he quickly realized that this was not realistic. Although he has had some success selling small quantities of the book through Christian oriented distributors, he said that, as of August 1999, he had only sold one copy through the Internet site.

The site itself is starkly uninteresting. Consisting of only 148 kilobytes of data for some thirteen files, only seven files are actual text written by Jack for the web-site. All the pages are in two colors: pastel green contrasting with a strong violet. These colors are the same as those used for the front cover of his book.

The front page of the web-site contained a few graphic images and several links to endorsements of his book, a description of the book, and a copy of its first chapter. By 2000, Jack added a link to a commercial bookseller's web-site so his book can be easily ordered.

As of April 2001, the web-site which Jack put up to sell his book, and led to my contacting him, is still up and seems largely unchanged. To me, this is no surprise. Jack presents an excellent example of an individual who uses the Internet for only very specific purposes and, thus, is not fully engaged in its discourse. Though he did put up the web-site sometime shortly after his book came out in 1996, he has not actively engaged in a large amount of e-mail discourse surrounding the web-site nor does he use the Web as a major source of information for his studies.

This is not to say that Jack is not deeply committed to and involved in his spiritual life however. The majority of his focus is in work with the "Home Church" movement generally, and, in particular, the "Worship Center" organization with which he is affiliated. An intriguing form of vernacular church not unlike early Congregationalists, the Worship Center organization helps organize groups of individuals to share their spiritual lives in situations where there are no professional ministers or permanent church structures. The web-page of the organization states:

WORSHIP CENTER is a Participatory Church, where each believer is loved, equipped, encouraged, and allowed to both minister and be ministered to according to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and which holds to Scripture's HomeChurch-WholeChurch model.
("Worship Center")

Because the home church idea specifically calls for all its members to share authority, Jack told me he was, "basically ordained." This is a little misleading, however, because he has had no formal religious training. Instead, he described how the Worship Center organization, as a church, has the right to ordain ministers. Thus it ordains many of its own participants. As Jack explains:

The reason for ordination is really kinda two fold. Its mainly for those that are outside of the church to understand who you are. If you tell them that you are an "elder" they don't know what that means. [Instead,] you tell them that you are a pastor and you're ordained. (Russell 27 Aug 1999)

Among themselves, the participants refer to the more respected or experienced participants as "elders" much as did the Quakers in the 17th and 18th centuries because, as Jack explains, "That is a little more correct we think." He calls himself a "pastor" to outsiders because although, "pastor is only used once in the whole Bible so . . . its not too good of a term, but people understand that term so we use it" (Russell 27 Aug 1999).

Although a deeply humble and quiet man, Jack is clearly an important figure in the Worship Center organization. Much of his activity with the Center is conducted on-line and this is his primary use of the Internet. Through e-mail and occasionally accessing web-pages, Jack keeps in touch with other home church groups throughout Northern California. He organizes a speaker series for the Center and even conducts a yearly convention of their disparate participants. In this way, the Internet has created a powerful tool for Jack to interact with individuals about their spiritual lives in an extra-institutional way. However, unlike most of the individuals I talked to, Jack's actual spiritual activity is not Web or Internet based. Instead, the e-mail and web-sites only function as tools to facilitate Jack's real-world spiritual and social activities.

The primary motivating factor for Jack's vernacular ministry as well as inspiration for the writing of his books is, as it is for all of my respondents, a rebirth experience. As Jack describes it, a "Paul experience." Jack recalled:

I basically had a Paul experience . . . where God was taking me out, aside, and taught me the Word and things on my own. And what I did with that then was I would bounce that off of other people so that I knew that I wasn't way out in left field some place. And that's part of the accountability in the home church where you examine each others' doctrine and you have to be accountable. (Russell 27 Aug 1999)

Here, Jack describes something very similar to the negotiative sort of rhetoric used by Lambert above. He had an intense experience. Then he felt it was necessary to “bounce” that experience off other people in order to verify its meaning. That “bouncing” behavior is, in fact, what Jack values so highly about his work with home churches. For Jack, the decentralized authority of the home church environment creates a sort of “accountability” to a community. Negotiating with this community about his experience as well as biblical study then solidifies the truths he experiences through a communal “accountability.”

This “community accountability,” is, however, tempered by a normal fundamentalist focus on the specific words in the Bible. Jack continued:

You have to be able to go to the Word and say, “This is why I believe this.” And give some account of that. Whether people agree with you or not is secondary, but you do have to have some kind of a reason. You can’t just pick stuff out of the air and say, “Oh, I believe this.” (Russell 27 Aug 1999)

Here Jack modifies his claim to the “accountability” of the community when he notes that gaining agreement from his community members is “secondary.” While this is certainly a more negotiative rhetorical strategy than we find in Gene or Tim above, it is in no way as negotiative as we found in Lambert. Although his individual interpretation must make sense to his community, their agreement or disagreement with his interpretations is not really the final authority. Instead, it is “The Word.”

Like Lambert and others, Jack’s rebirth experience was intense and undeniable. He recalled it with his typical understatement:

Well . . . I think in my salvation experience I had a real feeling. Just kinda short and sweet. I was at work one night. A fella ask me if I was saved. I said, “I dunno know. I think so.” He said, “Would you like to know?” I said, “ Yes.” And so we just prayed The Sinner’s

Prayer,²⁶ and I went to bed. And I woke up the next morning, and I knew that God was real and that He had saved me . . . and to the point I wanted to get up on the roof of the firehouse and shout it out. So I had an experience there. As far as knowing that the Holy Spirit was leading my life, I think that came a little later and I grew into that. Mainly because of ignorance. I didn't know about the Holy Spirit. I mean I knew there was a Holy Spirit, but I didn't know what its function was and I didn't know how He related in this situation. (Russell 27 Aug 1999)

As Jack began to learn from that point onward, the Holy Spirit acted in his life to "lead" him to a correct understanding of the world. This included, importantly, a correct understanding of the Bible. Because Jack feels that his life in general and his call to write and organize the Worship Center in particular are the results of direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, this guidance is the most basic level of recalcitrance is for Jack. At this base level, God acts in Jack's life to lead him to correct understandings. His community's input is, as he says, "only secondary."

And it was exactly this sort of quiet divine leadership which guided Jack in his writing of his book. He explained: "Basically I just studied the Word and He just gave me a way of kinda walking me around in the Word . . . And that's what happened to Paul." While Jack's experience of divine leadership in his spiritual life and work seems, from his own descriptions of it, nothing as dramatic as that exemplified by the biblical account of Saul's conversion to the great Christian apostle Paul, it points out to us the important way in which Jack is understating his reliance on experiential truth. For Jack, divine leadership in his life is a simple fact of experience. He is not one to jump and yell about it, and that fact, in way, lessens the clarity of its intensity. That rebirth experience, even if "slow" by his own account, has led Jack to reorganize his life around a Christian world

²⁶ Here Jack refers to the "Sinner's Prayer" folk tradition which we discussed in relation to the H.I.M. e-mail posts in Chapter Four. Although there is no single such prayer nor is the tradition specifically biblical, the "Sinner's Prayer" refers to a general Protestant folk prayer format in which the sinner asks Christ to "come into" his or her "heart." The desired result of the prayer is an emotional or physic experience of conversion or spiritual rebirth which acts as proof of the sinner's Grace or divine forgiveness of sin.

view as well as devote immense amounts of time to study and writing (Russell 27 Aug 1999).

Still, Jack's assurance in his own correct interpretations of prophecy is, in fact, quite strong. However, he derives this strength from a basic rejection of the mainline Dispensationalist views of Revelation. Jack specifically calls Hal Lindsey and others with similar interpretations of Revelation "futurists." He notes that he is not a futurist, but a "spiritualist." From Jack's perspective, it is possible to interpret the book of Revelation as a predictive document in the way that Hal Lindsey and other such "futurists" do. However, Jack feels it is more fruitfully interpreted in a "spiritual" way.

For Jack, to engage with Revelation as a predictive document is a misdirection of energy. Jack explains:

Hal Lindsey's view and most of his futuristic view is geared toward the physical well being of people. The spiritualistic view basically goes to the other side. These are the things that are happening in the spirit and some of those things have a bearing on the natural man and some of them really don't as far as concerns go. And I make that statement in *Symbols Unveiled* and my understanding of the book of Revelation is that there is no fear and anxiety for those that are believers. (Russell 27 Aug 1999)

Because Jack's interpretation of Revelation does not focus on predictive possibilities of the text, he effectively sidesteps the vast majority of typical Dispensationalist debate. He acknowledges that, in the book of Revelation, "God's given [humans] a clear picture of how things are gonna come to a climax." But it is unhealthy to focus on that aspect of the book because the things that the book reveals "for the most part bring anxiety and fear to people's hearts." Such fear is, in Jack's view, not the goal of a spiritual life. (Russell 27 Aug 1999)

This interpretive strategy both in the book and in our face-to-face interview allows Jack to disengage from the vast majority of mainline Dispensationalist discourse. As a result, his book does not offer predictive interpretations. That does not mean that Hal Lindsey or other Dispensationalist debaters, however,

are totally wrong in their predictions. Instead, it means that Jack refuses to engage in that kind of speculation.

In fact, Jack is concerned that the futurists' focus on the worldly manifestations of biblical prophecy are encouraged by Satan. Much as other Dispensationalists have noted, Jack believes that Satan acts in the world to keep people from understanding or accessing the truths of God. Jack feels that a focus on the specific events of the End Times contributes to this by shifting individuals' foci away from their immediate spiritual life to debates about things which cannot be known for sure.

Thus, in a very interesting way, Jack mediates the tension between his belief that he is led to correct biblical interpretation by the Holy Spirit and the fact that many people are engaged in debates about interpretations of the same text by simply acknowledging that such debaters cannot really know the truth. Further, those debaters are missing the real point of the book of Revelation which is the one he correctly outlines in his book. He believes he is right for sure, and others may or may not be right but their debates really do not matter. In fact, they are potentially dangerous because they lead people to focus on the differences of interpretation in biblical prophecy and can thus distract them from the important matters of spiritual life.

Jack presents an interesting case in which his simple refusal to engage in debate does not seem to lead to or be the result of overt prejudicial views as was Tim's above. However, both Tim and Jack are excellent examples of how individuals can use Internet media in ways which allow them to avoid the strongly negotiative influence inherent in its form. While Tim treats his interactions with other humans as mere data-sources, Jack only acknowledges the validity of Internet communication to serve the purpose of mundane communication. The most common debates about Revelation on the Internet are, for Jack, a dangerous distraction. However, both Tim and Jack are, from an outside perspective, failing to fully engage the Internet. There is very little evidence that either has very much of an on-line audience. As noted, Jack has only sold one book on-line; Tim claims that he engages some individuals in on-line discussions,

but I only found one link to his web-site and none of my other respondents were familiar with his work. Even though both respondents present weak cases of Internet engagement, they also offer radically different levels of the tragic attitude. While Tim's experiential world view seems to support a very dogmatic and prejudiced rhetoric, Jack's much more mildly experiential world view seems to leave more potential room for negotiating.

Case Five: Peter's Ironic Hate Mailings

If Jack and Tim present two cases where the respondents do not really fully engage an on-line community with their web-sites, the next case presents another case of radically experiential rhetoric in which the respondent attempts, with great persistence, to engage an on-line audience. However, despite his persistence, the experiential approach he takes to his on-line discourse causes him to encounter huge levels of on-line recalcitrance from the various audiences he attempts to engage.

I interviewed Peter in Beaverton, Oregon on August 11, 1999. He is an insurance salesperson who engages in a large volume of on-line debate which, in the end, seems to solidify his fundamentally experiential belief system.

At first, Peter seemed to rely heavily on negotiative rhetorical strategies. At the time of our interview, his web-site was moderately sized at 110 megabytes for 118 files. A simple but professional looking site, Peter includes sections on his own "testimony" where he describes his spiritual rebirth. On his page about "salvation," he describes what it means to be saved and, at the end, invites the sinner to ask for God's forgiveness in a sort of on-line invitation to "The Sinner's Prayer." On the "Apologetics" page, he describes what his studies and writings are about within a context of traditional Christian writings. In the "Prophecy" section, he lays out a fairly typical premillennial Dispensationalist interpretation of biblical prophecy. On the "Social Issues" page, he rails against the practice of abortion by relating it to Adolph Hitler's National-Socialists' attempt at genocide.

In a section he calls "Inspirational Stories," Peter writes "stories to warm the heart and feed the soul." In the "Cults" section, he specifically attacks New Age believers and Mormons by asserting that their beliefs are "counterfeits" of Christianity created by Satan to lead humans astray. Finally, he has a page of links, a guest-book, and link to his e-mail which invites the web-surfer to send him "questions, comments, or prayer requests" because, as the page puts it Peter, "would love to hear from you!" (Peter "Ministries").

Clearly, by his invitation for people to e-mail him with response to his web-site, Peter is displaying the standard negotiative rhetorical move so common in the 1994-'95 research I discussed in Chapter Three. Further, when I asked Peter about how he came to put up the site in the first place, he laughed and described how it was the result of his persistent activity in a chat-room which focused on "post-millennial"²⁷ ideas. As a "pre-millennialist," Peter disagrees with the predominate ideas on this chat-room. However, Peter insists on engaging these individuals despite their tendencies to resist his argument, and, surprisingly, Peter is happy to have his own web-site maintained and housed by the moderators of the "post-millennial" chat-room.

Peter recalled how his site, originally, was very primitive because he did not have the time to both write up his studies and learn HTML well enough to give it the professional look he found in other web-sites. Peter recalled: "I was searching the web one day, and I had a web-site that I designed myself and being a novice at web-site design it was . . . it didn't have all the bells and whistles that some of these cooler sites did" (Peter 11 Aug 1999).

However, when Peter happened on the *TribNews Network* site, he found an opportunity to have a professional help him out. Peter stated:

²⁷ Although there is a technical difference between "post-Tribulation" and "post-millennial" interpretations of biblical prophecy, Peter seems to use the words interchangeably in casual conversation. Except for in the most specific theological senses, these terms are interchangeable. In vernacular exchanges on the topic, I generally see them being used to refer to the set of biblical interpretations which posit that the millennial reign of Christ has already begun. Also sometimes called "progressive millennialism" by scholars, these interpretations are in sometimes very much like Jack's "spiritual" interpretations mentioned above.

I typed in something on a search engine. And, I can't remember what it was, but I came across this "TribNews" network . . . or web-site. So I clicked on it. And, although I disagreed *completely* with the views of that web-site, 'cos they're a post-Tribulational web-site. It was so cool of a web-site! Music was playing. It was multicolored. The graphics were good. All kinds of bells and whistles! And at the bottom of the web-site it said, "if you are interested . . . if you have a web-site, we do web-site construction." And he said he would give me a discount for a Christian web-site. (Peter 11 Aug 1999)

Getting in touch with the web-site builder of *TribNews*, Peter sent in his simple web-pages and the *TribNews* staff turned them into a very nice looking site. Peter was happy with the work, and, eventually, cancelled his own server space and moved the site entirely into a sub-directory on the *TribNews* server.

Peter explained:

I don't have a lot of time to do it myself. It takes time to write, so I just give it to him. So that's how I got with the *TribNews* Network, and like I said . . . I subscribe to what they call their "chat e-mail." Which I totally disagree with everything on that one, but that's because they're post-Tribulation views. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

At first, it seemed that Peter might represent another case like Lambert's of someone whose access to Christian truth is strongly mediated by a sense of community; or, at least, like Jack, someone who places some value on community interaction in his search for truth. However, for Peter, this is, in fact, not the case at all.

When I asked Peter about his experiences with the *TribNews* e-mail list, he expressed his concern that "argument doesn't pay." Peter described a recent e-mail exchange on the e-mail list saying that he tries to get his points heard, but, "We [pre-Tribulation believers] get ganged up on! So it doesn't pay to argue." Instead, the post-Tribulation believers tell him that the focus of the e-mail list is "post-trib. And this is why. And you shouldn't be arguing back and forth if you are all pre-millennialists" (Peter 19 Aug 1999).

Peter sees the behavior of these post-Tribulation Christians as deeply insensitive. He described an e-mail exchange he was participating in the very day we conducted our interview:

They picked on this poor girl today. I went over on lunch time and read it. And they picked on this girl who was questioning their post-trib views. And pointing out some pre-trib views. About five of 'em ganged up on her. And they got her so frustrated, she went through from the web-page from the discussion and un-subscribed to the newsletter [or e-mail list]. So I fired off a little nasty . . . and its hard for me. Cos that guy [who] owns that web-site and owns the chat is the guy who designs my web-site, so I have to be careful. But when I go back tonight I will probably have all this hate mail. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

Peter tries to engage these Christians, but finds them disconcertingly dogmatic. He noted:

If you disagree with something, boy they attack! And its like their view is right and you're wrong! Its like . . . I try and be open minded. And when they make a point, I go look it up. Research it myself. If I agree with that interpretation, fine. If I don't, I don't—ya know. But I am open minded enough at least go and look at it. And I have asked them to look at my web-page on pre-trib. I haven't seen any of them do it. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

Peter sees himself as significantly more open to different ideas about biblical prophecy than the individuals he interacts with on the e-mail list. He takes the time to “research” and “look at” the ideas they forward in relation to biblical texts. However, it seems that, for Peter, their ideas in fact have no real chance of impacting his own deeply held beliefs. Peter does not engage in debate or any real negotiation about truth on-line. Instead, he is deeply concerned with helping the many individuals he finds on-line who are “in error.” He describes how his deep love for all people drives him to seek out those who disagree with him in order to refute their ideas:

And the reason I do it is not to attack them. It is because I have a love for them, and I want them to see that there are heading down . . . that they are being deceived by Satan. And they are gonna end

up in the wrong way. They're eternal salvation is at stake! And I think they need to get back on track. And Satan wants to take as many people from Christ as he can. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

Instead of being interested in exploring new or different truth positions through on-line communication, Peter is involved in a personal war against Satan. As a result, he receives quite a bit of what he calls "hate mail." It seems that many people whom he e-mails do not appreciate being the focus of his anti-Satan campaign.

As a result, Peter is often very frustrated by the strength of the oppositional views he finds. However, in addition to "hate mail," he sometimes receives positive feedback. This positive response is enough to keep him motivated to continue to seek out and be involved in on-line exchanges. He described "the most positive letter" he had gotten saying:

I got from that pastor back in Virginia I told you about. Where he used one of my teachings and stuff like that; and a lot of people got led to the Lord. When I get e-mail like that, it makes it worthwhile. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

Peter sometimes catches himself wondering "why bother?" writing and posting his ideas, but God leads him to write by leading people to send him positive response. Peter explains that when he is most down:

Then all of a sudden, I get a positive e-mail from somebody. Who has been blessed by the web-page. And I know that the Lord had something to do with it. That he wants me to keep writing. And he will lead people as it need-be to my web-site. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

With these occasional infusions of positive response, Peter is able to keep up his on-line discourse in two main ways. The first is that he actively maintains his web-site: always adding stories and studies to it. Secondly, and far more problematically, he makes a huge effort to "reply to every e-mail I get." Because he seeks out e-mail lists and web-sites which he disagrees with, much of this e-mail is in fact negative. Still, because of his desire to help those in error, he always responds to people's on-line discourse by pointing out their errors.

When I interviewed him, he was specifically interested in the "cult problem." As he explains on his "cult" web-page, "Cults are everywhere. From the huge and socially acceptable Mormons to more obscure theological heresies. Jesus warns us in the last days false Christ's and false prophets would arise to deceive many" (Peter "Cults"). Linked from this page, Peter has a page on Mormonism specifically. At the top of the page, Peter sounds at first like he will be very even handed. He states that his purpose on the page is to, "take a look at Mormonism's level of commitment to Christ's recorded teachings, and surveys the alternative sources from which Mormonism chooses to obtain many of its unique doctrines" (Peter "Mormonism: Cult or Christian?").

However, it is immediately apparent that Peter feels Mormon writings, and thus doctrines, are not valid. On the page, he first quotes a passage from the Book of Mormon. Then he quotes a passage from the Bible and compares them in a brief passage below the two quotes. He notes which passages are which with the following designations: "Each Mormon quotation is marked: <LDS> Each Bible quotation is marked: THE TRUTH: Items in [brackets] are commentary." Clearly, the "LDS" passages not "THE TRUTH," but the Bible passages are. After some 3,202 words of these alternating quotes and commentary, Peter sums up saying:

Don't rely upon my words, or upon the words of any other men. I believe that the only infallible standard of truth is God's Word, the Holy Bible. TRUST IT! I urge our readers to have compassion and pray for those who are members of the LDS church.

Here Peter's attack on Mormonism is two pronged. First, he is asking Mormons to "rely upon" the "infallible" "Holy Bible" instead of their own texts. In so doing, Peter has faith that they will, somehow, return to belief that the Bible is more truthful than the Book of Mormon or other doctrine. His second prong relies on the actions other non-Mormon Christians. He urges others to "pray" for "members of the LDS church" in hopes that God will act to save Mormons from their error. In both cases, Peter is relying on a heavily experiential form of rhetoric. First, he shows us the "infallible Word of God" is in contradiction to the

Mormon doctrines. Then he appeals for direct action on the part of other Christians to encourage God to help Mormons out of their error.

It is clear that on this web-page, there is no room to debate Peter on this point. When I asked him about it, it seems that this is also the case in his on-line discussions. In response to a series of questions specifically about his e-mail exchanges with Mormons, he described his on-line approach. After locating a Mormon web-site, Peter will e-mail them. He stated:

I point out the errors of their teaching. And ask some specific questions to explain this: "If you are Christian, and you say that you believe in the Bible then why does the Book of Mormon say this?" Or "Why does Joe Smith say this?" Or "Why do you guys believe this, when the Bible says this?" And they don't. And once they get my e-mail I never hear back from them. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

I asked him why he thinks he doesn't generally hear back from the Mormon web-site builders.

I don't attack them. I ask them questions: "I want you to take a look at your theology. Take a look at what the Bible says. And answer my question." And I just want 'em to think. And if I can get them to think, maybe the Holy Spirit or some other Christian can harvest that seed to where they'll get saved. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

Here, we can clearly see that Peter is relying on the hope that Mormons will be pushed by the Holy Spirit "or some other Christian" to move away from their error and "get saved." Not surprisingly, this evangelical e-mailing often gets hostile responses. Peter noted:

I have been getting some e-mail activity . . . hate mail. I call it hate mail because they're calling me a bigot and anti-Christian and all this. And that's not the purpose. My purpose is to point out the differences in the theology! (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

Peter has confidence that the Holy Spirit, once its "seed has been planted," will help the Mormons reject their doctrines. Without, however, his own action, it seems, the Holy Spirit would not have this opportunity. As a Christian,

Peter feels that he must work to save the souls of those in error. As he put it: "I feel I have a *duty* to point out where you're going astray from what the Bible says. And that's what I do" (Peter 19 Aug 1999).

Obviously, Peter has a deep faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to act through the words of the Bible, and this is, of course, a common fundamentalist position. Exploring the issue, I asked him, as I did of most of respondents, by what means he knows he is saved and how one would know if he or she were saved. In response, Peter told me that he knows he is saved because of his direct experience of Grace. Peter, as have all of my respondents, had a spiritual rebirth experience. He described himself before the experience saying:

I was just very very unhappy. I was foul mouthed all the time. I was just not a good. I wasn't a murderer or anything . . . I mean I was just not a nice person. I will put it that way. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

At the time of his conversion, Peter had hit rock bottom. He was "completely broken." He said: "I was contemplating suicide. I was just depressed. Nothing was going right." But then, "after I said that sinner's prayer and got saved. I was on a euphoria for about six weeks where I didn't sleep! I could not sleep! I was on like a high *for six weeks!*" At the climax of this six week experience, Peter's Grace was confirmed during a church service. He explained:

I was in a church service the week after I got saved, and they were singing a praise song. And all of a sudden, I felt this . . . my knees started buckling. I started crying for no reason. Everybody around me knew what was going on, but I had no idea. I was being baptized in the Holy Spirit. And . . . it was just an amazing experience and I cannot explain to somebody who's never gone through it. It's just when God touches your life. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

Peter approaches his amateur on-line evangelization with the assumption that the Holy Spirit will act in his audiences' lives because, in the end, without that action no one can be saved. He cannot explain, or argue about, the

experience of "God touching your life." Instead, he knows it happens because he has personally experienced it.

For Peter, this sort of faith is, by definition, recognizable only in experience. Peter said: "Let me give you an example of Faith. Have you ever seen the wind?" I responded, "No." He asked, "But you know the effects of the wind." He continued:

It's the same thing with my faith in God. I have never seen him personally. I've seen his works. I've seen people's lives change. I've seen people healed from terminal cancer. In my own life, I was . . . I was just one S.O.B. In my younger days, I was like the Apostle Paul [. . .] I was very bigoted in my opinions. (Peter 19 Aug 1999)

There is, in Peter's case, an irony here. From his perspective, he was "bigoted" before his conversion experience. So when people respond to his unsolicited e-mails questioning their faith in Mormonism or post-Tribulationism, he is confused that they call him, as he recounted it, "a bigot." What he perceives as "hate mail" is clearly the response of individuals who feel they are being attacked by a dogmatic and zealous believer with a very closed mind. In fact, he doesn't seem to realize that the e-mails he is sending are themselves certainly being perceived as "hate mail."

One last example from our interview gives us a taste of the tone these e-mails probably take. Apparently a woman posted an interpretation of one of her own dreams on a Christian e-mail list in which she believed that God was leading her to see that the United States would be attacked with nuclear weapons on September 11, 1999. Peter told me that he responded to her saying: "When September 11 comes around, I am gonna be the first one to e-mail ya and call ya a false prophet" (Peter 19 Aug 1999).

Obviously, calling a Christian a "false prophet" would be seen as an insult. Yet, Peter confessed that he could not see why this very e-mail seemed to be, "getting people all bent outta shape" (Peter 19 Aug 1999). Peter's case is one where he is clearly blinded to the effects of his argumentative strategies on his

audience. Certainly one contributing factor to his insensitivity is his complete assurance that the Holy Spirit is acting through him and the Bible to help people. This belief itself rests on his personal experiences with the Holy Spirit as he explained above. While Peter seemed truly compassionate, his radically experiential world view allowed him no room to negotiate about the truths which he holds closest. Thus, his on-line evangelization results, typically, in hostile feedback from his audiences.

Tim and Jack use heavily experiential rhetoric in their on-line communications, but neither of them seemed to regularly engage in any sort of actual on-line debate. While Peter definitely engages in a sort of debate, his own heavily experiential rhetoric seems to be generally rejected by his target audience. Obviously, in Peter's case it is possible for a frequent on-line debater to maintain a radically tragic attitude. However, the result of that attitude seems to be general rejection of his claims by the audience. The next case is one where my respondent also relies heavily on experiential rhetoric. However, that reliance is a deep enough level for her to actually have gathered a fairly large audience. She has done this by presenting her on-line communications in ways that skillfully acknowledge the Internet norms of negotiative debate even though her actual beliefs and rhetoric clearly show evidence of a fundamentally experiential world view.

Case Six: Marilyn's Negotiative Style

Marilyn Agee 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. On September 4, 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 (Agee 4 Sept 1999).

Unlike Tim above who radically reorganized his actual perception of the world to account for his own failed prediction, Marilyn reassessed her interpretation of Hebrew dating to account for her error. When I bought her three books during our interview, she noted the reasons for her incorrect prediction in the front of one of the books saying, "I now think the Rapture will probably be on Pentecost, 2000. In Luke 13: 6-9, Jesus only looks in the first two years. He comes and speaks in the third year" (Agee "Personal Communication . . .").

Although this indicates that Marilyn may be somewhat more negotiative than Tim, she does rely on appeals to authority based on her own divine experience. While this might work well for her publications as we have seen it did for the famous Dispensationalist Hal Lindsey, it should not work as well in her on-line communications. Based on the way my hypothesis played out in Chapter Three, her claims to authority based on personal experience or study should not garner her a large audience on-line. My prediction about this however turns out to wrong; although wrong in a complicated and interesting way. In addition to her success in the print media, Marilyn runs a hugely successful web-site: Bible Prophecy Corner.

On the web-site, the typical appeals Marilyn uses are experiential, but her on-line persona has made serious concessions to the negotiative character of Internet communication. While not negotiative on the personal level of belief and not actually willing to alter her views based on debate, Marilyn's on-line communications are written in a strongly negotiative style. Unfortunately, this negotiative character seems, for Marilyn, to only exist on a very superficial level. However, that "stylistic" negotiative stance seems to be enough to make her web-site very popular among on-line Dispensationalist debaters.

Discussing with me how she claims powerfully authoritative 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. 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.
(Agee 4 Sept 1999)

Based on this divine infusion of understanding, Agee commonly makes rhetorical claims to authority based on her personal experience through study. On her biographical page, she states: "I am a Baptist believer who has been studying the Bible as deep as I can go for over 38 years." This "depth" comes by way of being "led by God" in her studies (Agee "My Testimony") Despite this experiential authority, the bulk of her web-site is bluntly negotiative. The main section, some 13 megs in size, is devoted to what she calls the "Pro and Con Index." This "index" contains over 400 individual pages (Agee "Bible Prophecy Corner").

Each page contains her personal debates with an individual who has e-mailed her with questions or disagreements. She has posted these exchanges for all of us to review and comment on. Still, she believes that her responses to these debaters are divinely inspired. In fact, all her discourse, starting with her first publication, seems to have been inspired by divine direction. Though I quoted it in Chapter One, now Marilyn's statement is beginning to become contextualized in the complexities of her actual life:

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.' (Agee 4 Sept 1999)

And, as it turns out, Marilyn often shares this story with people she is debating, and, when she does this, it serves to divinely authorize her arguments. In so doing, it has caused her to sometimes simply refuse to continue to debate some of her on-line friends. In one such case, when Marilyn is confronted with strong disagreement from the on-line persona known as "Watcher," she simply

rejects all further communications from that entity. However, to understand why this is, I must first explain who and what exactly Watcher is.

Case Seven: Watcher's Failed Negotiations with Marilyn

On October 17, 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 known as "Watcher."

Since 1993, Jane and John have built and maintained one of the most visually appealing and influential End Times web-sites I have found. They have been featured on the television show *Strange Universe*, an A&E documentary, and even had Ted Koppel comment negatively on their work during the aftermath of the H.I.M. religious group's suicides. Their case is particularly interesting for this discussion because, as it turns out, Watcher e-mailed with Marilyn for long time; but, in the end, their relationship soured.

As with all the respondents I discussed above, Jane and John have both had conversion experiences similar to Lambert's and the others which have led to their Christian beliefs. They both consider themselves "born again." However, John and Jane solidly believed in that UFOs phenomenon before they became Christians. John was a fallen away 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 UFO's are. Then there's this idea that there's actually monuments on another planet—and that blows most peoples' minds! (Jane and John 17 Oct 1999)

This work has resulted in a masterful 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 Agee's assertion that the Rapture will occur in two distinct phases.

Apparently, a few years ago Marilyn e-mailed Jane when she found the Watcher site. Soon, Jane, John, and Marilyn were debating End Times topics much as all three had done and still do with other people on the Internet all the time. However, this relationship fizzled over a passage in Second Thessalonians where it seems to state that Christians will live to see the Antichrist in power (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 Tribulation debate, the most common End Times debate topic. One of Marilyn's "Pro and Con Index" web-pages, "Pro and Con 223," she posts over 4,500 word document containing e-mail exchanges she had with Watcher debating this issue. In this manifestation, Agee's rhetorical strategy seems identical to that of Watcher. They both extensively quote biblical passages in support of their arguments. Sometimes, Watcher refers to other Bible interpretations. They debate the relationship between what Marilyn calls "inspired" calendar dating systems and the typical calendar system we use in the secular world. Marilyn ends the page with what appears to be her final position in the debate with Watcher. Discussing specifically how she came to the 1998 date for the beginning of the Tribulation, the same date she would later have to recant, Marilyn explains her dating system:

This is 14 years (7 good and 7 bad) from the signing of the Oslo Accords on Sept. 13, 1993 (1993 + 14 = 2007). Our year 1993 + 7 = 2000. The ratification of the Oslo Accords in Jerusalem three days later on the Jewish Tishri 1, 5753 + 7 = Tishri 1, 5760 (our Sept. 11, 1999). I think the Rapture should take place within these 7 good years. In Egypt, Joseph too up a fifth of the grain in the 7 good years. We are wheat, so it fits us well. Our time is getting short. I am hoping for next Pentecost. (Agee "Pro and Con 223")

Reading those final lines, "I am hoping for next Pentecost," would seem to imply that Agee is very open to altering the date on the basis of negotiation. A superficial examination of her site might support this assumption because of the very negotiative structure implied by the "Pro and Con Index." However, because I had the opportunity to talk the Watcher couple face-to-face, I discovered that this is not the case.

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 its 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 and John 17 Oct 1999)

Jane believes that Marilyn's theory about the "mid-Tribulation" Rapture is a result of Marilyn's intense desire to avoid the Tribulation period. "Its very painful" for Marilyn to imagine that she too, as well as all good Christians, will have to endure the pains of persecution that the Tribulation period will bring.

Still, 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, Marilyn refuses to return Jane or John's e-mails as of the day I interviewed the Watcher couple. Looking back through the "Pro and Con Index," I did not find any clear example of Marilyn actually changing or acknowledging a change of her position based on her on-line communication. 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 a personal authority of experience which I described above. In this way, and not unlike Peter's appeals to debates which he has no ability to actually alter his beliefs about, Marilyn is able to use cues and phrases which imply that she is open to negotiation when, it would seem, she is in fact not.

All this is not to say that Jane and John do not also have their own sense of experiential authority. However, both do reject most claims to direct aural or visual experience of God; including Agee's highlighted passage directing her to

publish. John called it "mildly neurotic;" he is a psychologist. I asked Jane and John what they thought about Gene's experiences with demons which I described in Case Two above. Both Jane and John agreed that such beliefs are dangerously rooted in "superstition" and myth. Such superstitions are a demonic tactic to lead humans away from Christ as they describe on their web pages (Jane and John 17 Oct 1999)

Speaking of Gene's experience of possession 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. (Jane and John 17 Oct 1999)

Jane and John limit valid direct experience of deity to conversion experiences similar to that which they themselves have had. This belief has to do with their interpretation of the word "angel" as Hebrew for messenger. For Jane and John, the individual experience of the divine is limited to an experience of the angelic messenger which they identify with the Holy Spirit. For them, God does not speak directly through humans.

More importantly, John, as a psychologist, discounts Agee's experience as mildly delusional. And as a Christian, he views Gene's experiences as all demonic and dangerous. For Watcher, the only valid experience of deity is the entering of the Holy Spirit into one's consciousness; the born again experience which is neither aural nor visual.

Although this places Jane and John in the experiential frame, their interpretations are not divinely led. They are adept at debating on the Internet, with each other, and with me. They even alter their opinions to suit new facts as their web-site develops. Their understanding of the divine is, as John put it, "dynamic." They are clearly more negotiative than Marilyn, so they are more likely to debate her after she has given up on them.

However, both Marilyn and Watcher are very popular Internet End Times figures. Numerous respondents noted that they have at least seen both Marilyn's and Watcher's large web-sites. Both Marilyn and the Watcher also admitted that they spend a lot of their time engaging in on-line debate about End Times possibilities. Like Peter in Case Five above, Marilyn seeks out and engages an audience on-line. However Marilyn can successfully interact with people on the Internet because she has adjusted her style to the new communicative medium in a way Peter seemed unable to do. However, like Peter, Marilyn maintains a belief that her divine guidance in scriptural study produces fundamentally superior interpretations which points to her fundamentally tragic attitude toward prophetic belief. And, although, Watcher can reject of all divine experience different from their own, they can engage in negotiative debate almost indefinitely thus displaying, at least, a more than average ability to engage the comic.

The clear difference between these two last cases of Watcher and Marilyn is, again, in their exact locations of recalcitrance. Marilyn clearly locates recalcitrance not in debate, but in her personal experiences through study. These studies themselves are, as we have repeatedly heard from many of these respondents, "led" by God. Although it did not seem so at first, Marilyn is even more experiential in her approach to outside influences than Tim was in Case Three. Tim located recalcitrance in his understanding of astronomical phenomenon and other scientific data. Marilyn, unlike Tim, premises her assertion that she had read "everything man had written" and found it unsatisfactory. Rejecting nearly two thousand years of biblical exegesis, Marilyn's authority comes from her own rather idiosyncratic interpretations of biblical prophecy. For Marilyn, it seems that no outside source is relevant to her authority; except, of course, the influence of God. Even when her predictions are wrong, as in the case of predicting the beginning of Tribulation for 1998, she clings unwaveringly to her belief that her understanding of scripture is divinely lead. Thus, she seems to only locate recalcitrance in some sort of personal experience with God.

Watcher, on the other hand, locate recalcitrance for their knowledge of Grace or being saved in a very particular kind of experience. On this point, debate is not really possible. For them, this is a core belief. However, each individual's personal grace is, much as with Jack in Case Four above, not something which they focus on in their on-line discourse. Like Jack, they opt out of any debate on that topic. However, with the many aspects of the End Times which Christians do debate on-line, Watcher is more than happy to continually exchange, engage, and reassess their own beliefs as well as those of others. For them, community recalcitrance is a real and active force allowing their beliefs to change and moderate between any number of on-line conversations. It seems that the strength of their belief in a very particular kind of spiritual rebirth experience has not lead them to locate recalcitrance for all their spiritual beliefs in experience. In fact, the sort of arguments which they most strongly reject are those which in fact rely on claims to personal divine revelation which has implications beyond an individual's personal salvation; just the sorts of authority which Marilyn claims.

Hypothesis Failed . . . Or At Least Revised

I have been arguing, on the most basic level, that everyday Dispensational American discourse is animated and polarized by a recurring tension between truth as arrived at through individual experience and truth as pursued through pluralistic negotiation. In Chapter Three, I found my original hypothesis that the Internet itself encourages negotiative rhetorical techniques was fully supported. In light of this 1999 web-based research however, I must revise that hypothesis.

In my 1994 and '95 research, it seemed that while it would be entirely possible for an individual to access and participate only in discourses where he or she would not find new or challenging ideas to negotiate about, the Internet itself facilitates multilateral communication between widely disparate individuals. Even if some individuals did avoid new ideas and foreign discourses, the appeal

of using Internet technologies in one's spare time is to expand one's discourse audience. At the same time, the Internet technologies used to expand that audience through World-Wide-Web sites allow the audience members to participate in communication with the web-site builder. Because that is possible and easy, people who use the Internet seem very interested in doing it. Because web-pages are openly accessible, the audience is diverse. As a result, the entire on-line Dispensational discourse becomes characterized by a wide diversity of influence sources.

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 in 1994 and '95 seemed to be very well adapted to Internet expression. Through the path-dependent nature of discourse development, individuals engaging in this debate seemed to be encouraged by the media of the Internet to use negotiative rhetorical techniques.

Even after the 1999 research, I still hold this basic hypothesis to be more or less true; but it needs revision. My understanding of it has deepened and been complicated by this most recent data I have collected.

Most of the on-line Dispensationalists I have interacted with do make gestures toward a negotiative rhetoric in their on-line discourse, and this behavior is clearly the result of the social pressure of Internet norms. Those few who do not make such gestures seem, like the H.I.M. group, to be generally ignored by their audiences. At the same time however, the vast majority of Dispensationalist Internet users who do take up negotiative rhetorical strategies also seem to be very capable of maintaining a highly experiential system of belief that rests in a deeply tragic attitude. Although they may adapt their rhetoric at the level of style, this does not seem to result in any fundamental change of values. As with the obvious examples of both Marilyn and Peter, their experientialism is often embedded in a negotiative style. But when we look closely, the tragic rhetoric of experientialism rings clearly in almost all the cases I have examined.

Marilyn presents maybe the clearest example of this use of a negotiative style while, apparently, maintaining a deeply tragic attitude. Although Marilyn is totally certain of her experienced truths, she argues on the Internet in what, at first, appears to be in a highly negotiative style. However, when faced with an equally certain debater, her ability to communicate seems to cease.

Nonetheless, her Internet expressions appear to be negotiative enough that they are quite popular in the on-line Dispensationalist community. Although Peter's negotiative style seems to have far less success on-line, he still manages (even if it is largely hostile) to gain some response by maintaining an approach that, as he put it, "asks questions." Marilyn, it seems, presents a case of someone who has even more skillfully adapted her tragic attitude to a negotiative on-line rhetorical style. In all these cases, a clearly experiential belief system is rooted in specific sorts of revelatory experience.

While Watcher is saddened at the loss of the friend they felt they had in Marilyn, Jane and John 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. About that, there is no doubt. How do they know? All three of them, as well as Gene, Lambert, Tim, Jack, and Peter too, share one thing: they are "born-again," and that refers to a particular spiritual experience which has, as Lambert said, "experientially verifiable" characteristics.²⁸ For all of these End Times debaters, the experience of God's Grace through rebirth seems to outweigh the significance of on-line dogmatism in their judgments of each others character. And, although different research methods might be able to gain some inkling of this, the real power of these experiences on the individual vernacular religious values of the people I have discussed here could hardly begun to be

²⁸ I do not know if Jane and John know this, but Marilyn did say that, although "born again," she has not had a specific single rebirth experience. I assume, though, that Jane and John interpret her claims to rebirth to refer to conversion experiences similar to those they have had and are familiar with in others.

appreciated without the systematic face-to-face ethnographic methods I have developed for this purpose.

Through these methods, we have been able to see how for Watcher and Lambert this experience of Grace seems to be the only sort of authorizing divine experience. But for Tim, Jack, Peter, and Marilyn, it is one of a few. And for Gene and Susan, it is one of many. In this sense, Stephen O'Leary's claim that contemporary Dispensational American rhetoric is rooted in a fundamentally tragic attitude seems to be upheld. However, this apparent fact is not readily evident in all the cases I have examined. In fact, the root tragedy could easily be missed if one did not engage in rigorous face-to-face ethnography.

My methods have revealed what I see as a simple truth. Although Internet audiences demand a certain level of negotiative style which manifests in a kind of comic flavor in the most popular on-line communications, this comedy can be limited to the level of style. Even when the comic appears only at the level of style, Internet communications are often successful. Further, using the Internet does not cause people to engage this style necessarily. In the examples of Gene, Tim, and Jack above, individuals are able to use the Internet, sometimes quite extensively such as with Tim, and not engage in negotiative rhetorical strategies. Even in these examples, though, we find radically different attitudes correlated with this ability to use the Internet in a non-negotiative way. Gene maintains a good natured righteousness about his beliefs. Tim, on the other hand, displays a disturbing ability to harbor deep prejudices. Jack, unlike either Tim or Gene, can use the Internet only in the most practical ways, and yet is also one of the most generally comic and negotiative respondents I have located. In these three examples, we can see the wide diversity of individuals who use the Internet in a way only qualitative research can afford.

In sum, Internet use does seem to encourage negotiative rhetorical strategies. In the cases of both Marilyn and Peter, we find individuals who, to differing degrees of success, want to reach a wide audience. As a result, they use negotiative styles which seem, at first, to imply a comic attitude. In the end, of course, these two individuals are really not very comic. Still, they do succeed

in engaging others in a sort of pseudo-argumentation through the Internet. In this sense, then, a certain level of the comic attitude is necessary for Internet communication. However, that level can be expressed only on a very superficial level and still be successful.

As I will discuss in the concluding section of this dissertation, Stephen O'Leary's claims are a little misleading on the issue of the role of the comic in discourse. What I have come to realize from this research is that the comic is necessary and important part of all discourse. While O'Leary may follow Kenneth Burke in quietly acknowledging this, the fact that my Internet ethnography has thrown into sharp relief is that this comedy can seldom, if ever, be totally peripheral to any discourse. In short, this is because for discourse to occur at all individuals must allow for an audience to respond to their statements. Because the Internet is so keenly focused on the actual acts of communication, if there is no room for an audience to respond there would be very little communication at all; and, as a result, the medium of the Internet would not have very much content. Hence, the multi-lateral nature of the Internet has amplified the comic element in discourse. We can see this most clearly in, for example, in the total rejection of the H.I.M. Internet posts by their intended audiences in comparison to the engaged and interested response to Lambert Dolphin's large and popular web-site.

In The End . . .

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

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. This possibility had been a topic of some concern for American Dispensationalists for a long time. Mixed with the calendar change from 1999 to 2000, on December 31, 1999 there was maybe the greatest single moment of the anticipation for the End Times. 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. In a way, this was the broadest moment of communal recognition of the tragic in human history.

And, in a reciprocal moment of comedy, nothing much happened.

In a way, that is 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 every aspect of our lives will be improved by the Internet, religious expression seems, also, to remain fundamentally the same. Devout religious believers like Marilyn can master the new rhetorical forms of Internet expression and yet maintain the self-assurance of a medieval zealot.

At the same time, we must recognize that something has changed and the effects of that change are already far reaching and the extent to which they will continue to change religious expression and experience are only beginning to be comprehended.

The medieval zealot had no access to Native American or Hindu contemporaries who might hold 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. In the above cases, examples of this hybridization abound; from Watcher's fusion of Protestantism and UFOology, to Tim's attempts to strictly correlate biblical passages and astronomical observations. Of course, such cross-overs are not new. Ethnographic studies have long sought to develop techniques which can

establish the different social forces and influences which have come together to form a given community.

But the introduction of Internet communication into the routines of daily human life have exponentially compounded the possibilities of discursive cross-overs in all sectors. Clifford Geertz described human activities as "suspended in webs of significance" of their own creation (Geertz *Interpretation* . . . 5). In a strange way, the World-Wide-Web has literalized this "web." It has, and is constantly continuing, to expand those connections through a myriad of links following an incomprehensible number of discursive strands. Like the life's work of a hundred million human spiders, the web is always being created, maintained, and recreated. And in that rush of activity, we can frame one person's hybridization of a discourse and see particular patterns in that vernacular web of belief. However, we must also acknowledge that this pattern cannot stand alone. Instead, it is the result of millions of other patterns all meshing and changing in a constant tumult of communication. To look at one person is to see the idiosyncratic identity which has been formed from the raw materials of that great dynamic web of communication.

Each case I have described above is an example my ethnographic framing of an individual identity. But maybe the most obviously hybridized example I have addressed is that of Watcher. Not just the most Internet savvy of the individuals I have discussed in this chapter, they are the most syncretic: pulling together strains of UFOology, 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 and John 17 Oct 1999). And despite their soured relationship with Marilyn, those failed debates were a form of worship; and, in different ways, those debates were expressions of the deep spiritual conviction of and reverence for the Almighty which forms a core element of both community

and identity for all three of them. In the following conclusion, I will describe how these poles of comedy and tragedy correspond to a tension between the social act of communication and individual's core beliefs and values. Out of the soft cradle of that tension, human identities are formed by discourse, are maintained through social exchange, and, until they cease to be, are recreated in the ongoing exchange of ideas.

CONCLUSION: PASSAGES DIVINELY LIT

One of the most outspoken and influential advocates of the idea that the Internet is creating a more "democratic" citizenry is Jon Katz. Representing the extreme of the "technophile" perspective, Katz describes in his 1997 article "Birth of a Digital Nation" how a "post-political revolution" is afoot on the Internet. "Out of sight of the reporters, handlers, spin-masters, and politicians of the presidential campaign, a new political sensibility took shape in 1996. It brought fresh ideas. It brought real debates about real issues." For Katz, a digital nation will be comprised of individuals he calls "netizens" who are more democratic, pluralistic, and, most of all: "they don't merely embrace tolerance as an ideal; they are inherently tolerant" (Katz "Birth . . .").

After causing quite a stir with these statements and gaining research funding from a major financial institution, Katz conducted a survey to attempt to validate his claims. While he felt he verified his general assertions about tolerance on the Internet, he was surprised to discover that his netizens "are actually highly participatory and view our existing political system positively" (Katz "The Netizen . . ."). Originally, based on his personal experience with Internet users, Katz had assumed that the average netizen was someone who shunned the normal channels of the United States' participatory political system.

It should, however, not have come as any surprise that the "netizen" is more politically involved, reads more, and is more aware of current world events,

as Katz's study finds. As we have seen, individuals using the Internet represent a higher than average demographic for both education and yearly gross income. Following Katz, it seems possible to extend the claim that netizens are more tolerant precisely because they are better educated and wealthy. Even further, it might make sense that individuals for whom North American society has made it possible to attain the wealth necessary to use the Internet are not very deeply committed to any kind of radical political change.

Even if one could conduct ethnographic research to strengthen a complicated claim such as this, it would not tell us much about the effects of Internet use. As we must always remember, correlation is not causation. As my research has shown and at variance with the technophile position offered by Katz, the correlation between Internet use and tolerance hardly means that the Internet *causes* its users to be more tolerant.

In fact, the rigorous ethnographic work I have presented in detail throughout this study shows that there are certainly many cases where Internet users are not tolerant at all. Having explored Dispensationalist discourse as comprised of people who we can expect to have relatively less flexible belief systems, we found that, on the Internet, they by and large continue to have rather inflexible beliefs. Tim's anti-Semitism or Gene's beliefs about demons serve as obvious examples of this. In fact, what my research has shown is that the same structures of argument which seem to have always defined discourse still operate in the on-line environment.

There is something different however.

The most obvious instance of that difference is in the total reliance on communication for discourse creation. The Internet has made it possible for discourses to form without any reference to geography. Communication is itself the defining feature as well medium of discourse. The Internet defeats space so that physical location no longer has the power to define the bounds of a particular discourse. Because identity is formed in discourse, suddenly the power of locationally bound identities can be subordinated to shared beliefs. However, the fact of this possibility does not, in the case of Dispensationalism, impact the basic

tragic structure of the discourse. Instead, the age-old element of identity formation remains most powerful: personal experience.

As with all discourse, the same basic structure for identity formation emerges in each case we have examined. In Figure Seven below, you can see how this basic structure plays out. In short, individuals form core values from the personal experiences of physical and social recalcitrance, and these core values have the most definitive power in individual identity formation. For some, like Marilyn Agee, this results in a firm sense of being "Baptist." For others, like Marshall Applewhite, this results in a complicated rejection of one's traditionally formed identity.

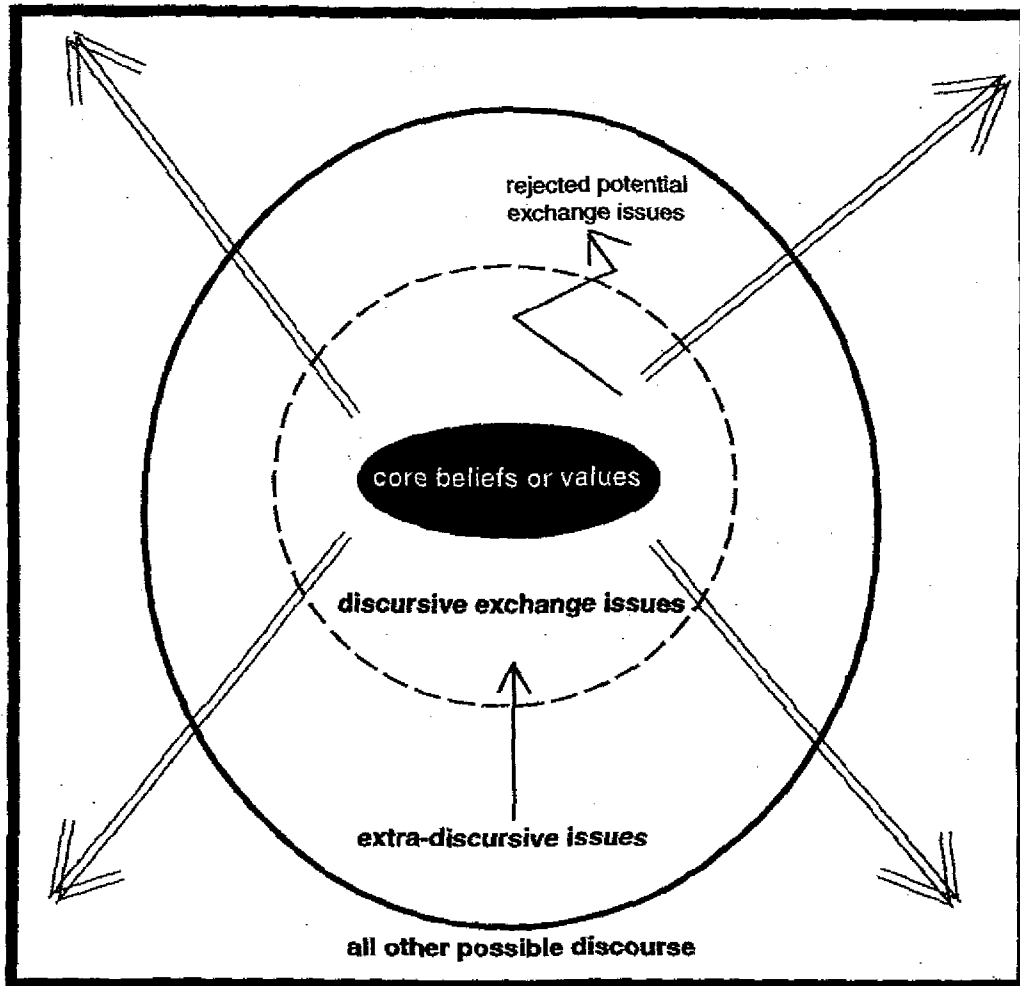


Figure 7: The Structure of Discourse

At the center of every discourse, core values define the identities of individuals who are able to participate in that discourse community. The figure above represents these core values with its dark central oval. Those values are not up for negotiation. In fact, they cannot even be discussed. In Dispensationalism, for example, one cannot usefully attempt to debate whether Christ is or is not God. In the case of the H.I.M. newsgroup posts, the claim that "Do" was God fell obviously outside the bounds of the many discourse

communities the H.I.M. members attempted to interact with including those involved in communication about Christianity.

Beyond that range of core values, there is second range of issues which are exchanged within the discourse. The figure represents this field of actual discursive behavior with the space between the dark core values and the broken circle which surrounds it. I have previously called the observable elements of discourse "exchange-issues," and they define the communicative possibilities of that discourse. As in the case of the "base line" issues I described in Chapter Three, the discussion of these exchange-issues is made possible by the sharing of core values which designate some importance to the issues. Thus, within their discourse community a certain competency with the base-line exchange-issues is expected of all participants. Outside of this sphere of discourse, there are other issues which might seem to be related but which may or may not be considered relevant to the discourse at hand by its community members. The figure represents this field of possible issues in the space between the broken circle of discourse and the solid circle outside of it.

The circle which defines the field of possible discourse is broken because, unlike the core values, it is permeable. When extra-discursive issues cross into a discourse, they are most often rejected as irrelevant. An excellent example of this is presented in Chapter Three where a militia newsgroup participant rejects Do's newsgroup post strictly on the basis of it being not relevant the topic of "militias." In some cases, of course, some community members might see a value in debating the extra-discursive issue. Taking it up, that issue would then be assimilated into the discourse for a time and thus become an exchange-issue. If this new exchange-issue persists in the discourse, it could, potentially, become a primary exchange-issue. If the primary exchange-issue became so generally accepted that it was no longer discussed, that issue would then descend into the

dark circle of the unspoken core values. In so doing, however, the discourse itself would be fundamentally altered.²⁹

An excellent example of the resistance to change generated by the core values or beliefs of a discourse is in the above example of Peter's attempts to engage an audience on the *TribNews Network* e-mail list. Without delving into the theological distinctions, Peter identifies himself as a "pre-Tribulationist." He believes that the Tribulation Period is about to begin. He correctly identifies the *TribNews* web-site and associated e-mail list as "post-Trib" because it defines its discourse through an adherence to the core belief that the Tribulation Period is an historical process that has been occurring for a long time. When Peter attempts to exchange issues that are properly part of a pre-Tribulational discourse, the members of the e-mail list refuse to engage him. In this way, the belief that the Tribulation Period has already begun defines the *TribNews* e-mail list as post-Tribulational (or post-millennial) because it judges pre-Tribulational issues as outside the bounds of discourse; and, hence, refuses to discuss them. Even though both Peter and his audience fail to engage in actual negotiative discourse, they are still actively defining their identities by positioning themselves in relation to each other based on a fundamental difference in core belief.

In my figure, the four lines extending outward from the core values toward the outermost square are the dynamic and active nature of identity formation through discourse. The core issues exert a force which defines the discourse and acts to normalize its potential exchange-issues. This action is not static. Instead, it is a ongoing dynamic process of human interaction. In each communicative exchange event, core issues emerge to define the individual as a participant in that discourse. Then the individuals engage issues and thus display their discursive competence. So doing, they define that discourse's basic issue set. When new ideas enter into the realm of the discourse, they are either

²⁹ It is, of course, possible that a discourse community might radically disagree about a new exchange-issue, primary issue, or potential core value to the point of fracturing the discourse. This is what often happens during sectarian controversies which result in splinter groups. In that case, a new splinter group creates a new discourse for itself.

rejected or accepted as possibly relevant issues. If they are relevant, they become, as least at that time, exchange-issues. If they are not deemed relevant, they are rejected. In either case, the discursive participants actively define their discourse by constantly adjusting and negotiating its external boundary. This boundary, in turn, sustains and insulates those core values at its center.

Not only is the discourse itself a dynamic social event, but so too are the identities which it creates. Issues move into and out of the sphere of relevance as real individuals enact communications based on their idiosyncratic perception of core values and beliefs. Each identity is an individual creation, but it relies on, at least, a conception of a community which defines that identity in the act of discourse. Thus, each expression of an exchange-issue is an identity formation event. Individuals agree or disagree. In so doing, they constantly negotiate the boundaries for their individual identities. Defining these boundaries is always relational. Identity is always based on its relative positions to other identities. Since those positions are always in varying degrees of flux, individual identities must be continually maintained through negotiative discourse. This shows that discourse is always partly comic. And, of course, all this negotiative activity occurs, primarily, at the level of *vernacular* discourse.

Despite this comic dynamism and individuality, identities are also unified through the unspoken and constant shared core values such as the belief that Christ is God. Thus these core values serve as the invisible center from which the individuals can enact issue-exchanges which maintain their individual self-perceptions. In this way, each individual identity is constructed relationally to all the others involved in the discourse as well as others perceived to be outside of that discourse—and there is something of the tragic built into that structure.

Core values are necessarily tragic because they are the definitive starting places of a shared identity. They are, by my definition in fact, *not negotiable*. Except, maybe, in the cases of schizophrenia, spirit possession, or other extreme circumstances, humans must have a basic sense of self in order to begin to organize the world they perceive. For some, this could be as simple as Descartes' "I think." For most, however, it is often deeply intertwined in individual

experience and influences. For almost all the Dispensational Christians I have spoken to, one major starting place for identity is a deep belief that they have been "born again in Christ." About this fact there is no debate. In fact, since it is something only possible to be known through direct experience of the divine, there is no way to begin to debate it. It is the beginning and the end of many of the discursively formed "Christians" I have spoken to.

In fact, the very strength of this kind of identity formation seems to lead to an ability to hold onto beliefs in the face of radical recalcitrance. In my data, extreme examples of this phenomenon abound. Tim or Marilyn's ability to hold on to beliefs about specific dates or a general nearness of the Second Coming of Christ exemplify this tendency. The most obvious example is Do and his follows' ability to maintain a belief that they were multidimensional beings incarnated on earth. The radically experiential world view which they maintained through revelation-based beliefs allowed them to commit ritual suicide. An act that, from my perspective, was sadly ironic. The incredible strength of their identities allowed them to permanently negate those identities in death.

Thus it is clear that the stronger the tragic validation of the core values, the stronger the identities that can be formed from it. In this model, revelatory experiences which support an individual identity are the strongest. With revelatory self-knowledge, the direct experience of divinity acts as the root of identity. Beliefs rooted in experience which is not divinely authorized are the second strongest. These beliefs form out of direct experience with physical recalcitrance and are inherently tragic as well. This second-degree sort of tragedy is what Kenneth Burke described in the case of an empirical experiment which sets up conditions that, in a sense, determine their results before hand. Here, again, Descartes' claim that "I think, therefore I am" comes to mind or even Locke's general sense of a scientific method. My own action-centered behavioral approach rests in this kind of direct experience. In my case, as I outlined in Chapter One, my identity as a researcher of human behavior comes out of my own conviction that individual "Will" exists. In strong distinction to both revelatory and experientially based beliefs, negotiated beliefs are the weakest sort of root

from which to form an identity. Negotiated identities, if they are even really possible, are always consciously tentative and thus potentially changing and radically unsure.

The tragic element rests at the heart of all typical identity formation, and it is clear that such tragedy is inherently attractive. Humans seem compelled to know things, and, probably paramount among that knowledge, is a desire to know who and what they are. In fact, to sustain a typical relationship with reality, individuals must have a reference point from which to order their perceptions and understandings of the world. Further, a radically tragic identity offers the believer the comfort of assured consistency. In the case of a divinely authorized experience of self, this comfort even extends beyond the unknown and into the very real tragedy of mortality. In this way, heavily tragic or even revelatory beliefs provide an attractive source for identity formation.

At the same time, however, identity formation clearly also involves elements of the comic because typical individual identities rely heavily on discursive behaviors which are social and thus, at some level, necessarily negotiative. While the core values or beliefs of a discourse are not questionable, for discourse to occur at all something has to be communicated. Hence, some elements of every discourse must be up for some degree of negotiation. In order to enact identity formation events, individuals must be willing to subordinate, in differing degrees, their own certainty for negotiative discussions. If individuals completely refuse to engage in discourse, they would become totally isolated. While we might imagine cases in which this situation would be possible, in the case of a monk taking a vow of silence for example, it is certainly not the norm in contemporary North American society.

From my data, it seems that there are two fundamentally different ways in which individuals can engage in the discourse necessary to maintain their identity. First, there are cases of individuals with actual negotiative attitudes. One of the few examples of a contemporary Dispensationalist with such an attitude is Lambert Dolphin. Confronted with an undeniable experience of spiritual rebirth, he sought out a community in which that experience would be

accepted. In his case, that turned out to be a generalized Christian community. Although he maintains an experientially based Christian identity, he does not exclude the possibility that other ways of understanding the world might be reasonable and good for other people. Lambert is, of course, not the norm among the individuals I have interviewed.

A truly negotiative attitude toward core values takes far more courage to maintain than an experiential or only stylistically negotiative one. It is less common because it is more difficult. The comic attitude actively expressed in ongoing negotiation about core and definitive values, as much as it has its theoretical appeal, is difficult to sustain. Quite simply, as an individual strives to maintain a comic attitude he or she must also maintain uncertainty. However, the world we live in is one which demands that we act. Often, our acts are, in very real ways, irrevocable. Because of the inherently tragic nature of our experience of time as linear, maintaining a completely comic attitude is impossible in practice. Without hope for any last minute negotiation, at some point our own personal *Comedy of Errors* will finally end. The comic attitude is, at most, an ideal toward which individuals can strive. The more we strive for the comic, the more we must embrace uncertainty—and embracing uncertainty about, in particular, the fundamental realities of ourselves is an ongoing act of courage. It would require we resist the temptations of certainty afforded by closed reconstructions of reality. It would require we accept an always and already ultimate incompleteness in the very face of the irrevocable movement of time and action.

Neither a totally tragic nor a totally comic attitude is possible in daily life as most North Americans live it. Instead, we are always somewhere in-between. Defining these two poles of possible modes of discourse has, however, helped reveal their fundamental presence and tension. And this tension is not one that the creation of any new communicative technology will undo. Maybe this tension can finally be resolved for living humans, but that could only occur through a true revolution of consciousness in the form of an evolutionary leap or final Armageddon—and that possibility remains to be seen.

At this point, we can usefully return to the central metaphor for which I named this study.

There are two sorts of "passages divinely lit." First, there is Marilyn Agee's passage from the Bible. Through the words of the Bible (the very *logos* of the divine) Agee has access to her god. When the passage "Publish and conceal not!" was illuminated, those words suddenly became charged by personal revelation. As a result, Agee began to form an identity as a Christian author. When she entered the on-line environment, she began to maintain that identity by adopting a negotiative discursive style because if she did not, there would be nothing for her to engage in discourse about on the Internet. As I have shown, this is clearly the sort of identity Burke would have termed "tragic" and Agee's expression of it supports Stephen O'Leary's claim that Christian apocalyptic discourse rests in a fundamentally tragic attitude.

However, there is also another sort of passage I have found in a few rare examples during the course of this research. Even if it took those rare examples for me to first recognize it, this comic sense of "passage" also pervades the everyday reality of human discourse. In the case of Agee, the necessity of this comedy is clear in her need to engage in the social exchange of discourse and her willingness to adapt her rhetorical style to that need. Lambert, on the other hand, goes much further toward the comic pole than does Marilyn.

While God may have lit up a Bible passage for Agee, Lambert Dolphin seems to pass through the events of his life always adapting and ready to negotiate. Lambert's passage through time is lit by the divine assurance that he is saved; that he has been "born again." His own self-perception rests in a rebirth experience which he brought to other individuals in an attempt to "experientially verify." Through negotiation, he has come to the reasonable interpretation that he was "born again in Christ." Thus, he has decided that he must be a Christian. The truth of that experience has led him to offer information on an Internet web-site that can function as a source of discussions to which he has no final answers. Instead of relying only on his personal experience of the divine, Lambert relies on the on-going experience of community he has found as

a result of his negotiative experience in exploring the meaning of his spiritual rebirth. In fact, this personal and negotiative interpretation of Christian thought is even more comic than Stephen O'Leary's self-defined "ultimately comic" interpretation of the book of Revelation I discussed at the outset of this study because, unlike O'Leary, Lambert Dolphin acknowledges the multiplicity of interpretations and seeks to openly engage others in the possibilities which his belief system leaves available to both him and his audiences. In this way, Lambert's "divinely lit passage" is through life—not fixed in the set words of any text.

In deference to Lambert's ability to practice comedy, I would like to use these final lines to point out one of the many places in which my research is incomplete. I have focused on individuals with highly developed identities. Even among those individuals, I have focused on one of their most highly developed shared identities: that of being a Christian. These individuals are, of course, not just Christians. In fact, to varying degrees, they may harbor an indefinite multitude of identities. They may identify and interact with fans of a particular sports team, music group, or television show. They may engage in political action or have highly developed hobbies. At their jobs, they may very seldom discuss Christianity. It is entirely possible that with other topics or in other forums they may engage in highly negotiative rhetorical behaviors. Real individuals cannot be limited to a single discourse or reduced to a single identity.

As the possibilities for everyday distance communication have grown, so too have the opportunities for individuals to be involved in multiple and divergent discourses. In each of these discourses, individuals maintain different sorts and different strengths of identities. My research has limited itself to those individuals who express one common and very powerful identity. For them, that identity is no doubt very important. Further research could usefully explore other discursive groups where one might expect to find less solid identity formations or it could focus on individuals as they engage in divergent or unrelated discourses. Through such research, one might examine the ways in which humans are more

and more able to engage in multiple discourses which act to form new and dynamic identity possibilities.

In the end, it may well be that Jon Katz's vision of a tolerant digital nation of netizens is, in fact, possible—future research into more complicated cases of on-line identity formation or maintenance could usefully explore this possibility. At this point, however, my research has not supported his claim. However, the changes we have begun to see wrought by our new modes of electronic communication seem to have just begun. In light of that possibility, I hope that my current study has expanded the possibilities and methods available for researchers to engage on-line social research with rigor, open-mindedness, and, above all, respect for the power of personal communication in the everyday lives of individuals engaged in unique and complicated expressions of their own vernacular rhetorics.

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