Can religion be fundamentalist and vernacular at the same time? As Robert Glenn Howard, a professor of communication and folklore, explicitly argues, it can be and frequently is, in the modern world of technology and social media.

Max Weber’s classic theory of secularization declared that modernizing processes like urbanization and industrialization would be the death of religion. Of particular relevance to today’s world, according to Stef Aupers, Weber believed that technology was uniquely disruptive to religion, since it “robs the world of its mystery because it ‘can, in principle, master all things by calculation’” (2009: 159). Following the same line of thinking, some recent scholars like John Caiazza (2005) have diagnosed a mortal threat to religion from technology, leading to a distinctly twenty-first century malady that he calls “techno-secularism.” But such thinkers apparently cannot see an alternative possibility, a wonderfully modern kind of *techno-spirituality* or even *techno-fundamentalism*.

This sort of techno-fundamentalism, a specifically web-enabled fundamentalism (call it Fundamentalism 2.0 if you are feeling wicked), is what Howard describes. Of course, as discussed elsewhere in *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, religions like Christianity have always been enabled by the technology of the day, whether that means writing or ocean travel or the printing press, radio, and television. Howard accordingly reports on what he calls “vernacular Christian fundamentalism” in the United States as found on any number of websites and blogs.

Of course, in a real way, Christianity has always been vernacular or at least had a vernacular component, as has every other religion. When a “world religion” diffuses to new societies and subcultures, it cannot
help but be vernacularized both by its proselytizers and its adopters. Anthropologists have often talked about this as syncretism or hybridity; the Catholic Church today frequently talks about it overtly as “inculturation”—integrating the local culture into the religion even as the religion is integrated into the local culture. And Christianity especially, more so since the Reformation and the printing of Bibles in local languages (“the vernacular”) has, as Howard notes, put the individual in the position of interpreting the official textual message. Thus, even in very hierarchical and orthodox religious institutions, “popular religion” has always coexisted, which is a particular forte of anthropology.

The democratization of the digital technologies—the fact that virtually anyone can say and disseminate anything, without approval or editing by experts or authorities—is as crucial to vernacular or lived religion as any other aspect of modern society. “Lived religion,” in a world where many people live a (more or less substantial) portion of their lives online, will necessarily have a presence on the internet. Through that medium, religion achieves (or suffers from, depending on your perspective) a “lack of institutional leadership”; instead, such religion “is a social entity made authoritative by everyday believers’ repeated choices to connect” (7). This is not to say that authorities and institutions do not populate the internet too; quite to the contrary, individuals like Joel Osteen and institutions like the Catholic Church are strongly represented online. But interactive media, particularly those that allow the masses to create their own material and participate in their own discussions without the intervention of an official, are able to construct what Howard calls a “virtual ekklesia” with its unique standards and practices.

Empowered by interactive media, “individuals use communication technologies to transcend not just geographic locations but also traditional sources of authority” (13), and not only in regard to religion. Groups of believers (or practitioners of any cultural subject) can organize, institutionalize, and
proselytize their beliefs; further, they can establish their own forms and forums of “social control without any institutions, leadership, or even a shared geographic location” (4). All of this is critical for understanding culture in the twenty-first century and is not unique to Christianity; an increasing number of tech-savvy Muslims are creating their own vernacular Islam.

Howard first discusses Bible prophecy online, which is the main activity or focus of these Christian websites and online groups. Not surprisingly, he finds that 9/11 was a preoccupation of prophecy, especially the distinctive brand of “end-time” prophecy that Christians are wont to engage in. Of course, like every end-time prophecy so far (including Harold Camping’s end-of-the-world prediction for May 2011), those expectations were gone unfulfilled, and yet these movements exhibit remarkable resilience and certainty: part of the adaptability of Christianity was and always has been “an intense sense of certainty not in their specific predictive interpretations of the prophetic narrative but in the overall truth that Christ will return soon” (33). In other words, no matter how many times you are wrong, you are right. This kind of “radical certainty” (36) is characteristic, if not definitive, of fundamentalism, as Howard shows with a brief survey of its history.

He then turns to the evolution of online Christian fundamentalism through its early stages of newsgroups and email lists and the mature “millennial” web around the turn of the century. Long before the internet was a resource, end-time preachers like Jack van Impe (who is still at it today) were using television to make their predictions and offer their biblical interpretations. With the coming of the internet in its primitive form of user groups and basic mailing lists, end-time Christians discovered a new way to share their thoughts, fears, and hopes and were able to build their own “topical communities” (53). Such grass-roots or vernacular activities, in the absence of an official to impose orthodoxy, developed their own standards and practices, for example measures of “end-times competence” (56)
and methods of “ritual deliberation” (58) by which members could discuss and perhaps resolve points of disagreement. By the late twentieth century, many people (not merely Christians) had found clever ways to use the internet and had established ongoing groups or communities, so Howard reports on a number of the online prophecy sites and characters, such as the Watcher Website, Spirit Shower, Symbols Unveiled Web, and perhaps most influentially the Bible Prophecy Corner led by a woman named Marilyn. Some of these sites were small, with a few links and a few followers, while others were extensive and heavily trafficked.

The state of the art today, as any web user knows, is the blog or video blog, and many of these sites are “aggregators” that collect material from other (often many other) sites. The result is a network within the network, a web of webs, creating multi-sited but relatively closed or at least self-referential online communities. Howard describes these highly “participatory media,” the most sophisticated of which are key to “coproducing the virtual ekklesia” (138). One particular site, RaptureAlert.com, “demonstrates how moderated forums and blogs with a specific focus on the End Times emerged as the best online media for the movement to engage in ritual deliberation necessary to enact its virtual ekklesia” (144).

Finally he explores the familiar, sad, and exhausting fact that although the Christian web is “diffuse” and “wildly diverse,” it is also “staunchly intolerant of any who stray from its…definitive beliefs” (147). This is an illustration of a more common and more profound problem with the internet, which has been characterized as its capacity, if not tendency, to fragment into “knowledge ghettoes” and echo chambers where people only interact with their own kind and where “facts” or “reality” are subjective but nevertheless fanatically maintained. Radical certainty is not compatible with rational deliberation, nor is it compatible with toleration, and when that radical certainty is applied to absolute claims like God’s existence or the inevitability of the apocalypse, there is little room for compromise. Howard
rightly points to “the dangers of enclave communication” (156) and how, ironically, a more networked world has actually led to more and stronger enclaves.

References

