Robert Glenn Howard’s Digital Jesus

Jeffrey Barlow
Pacific University

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Robert Glenn Howard's *Digital Jesus*


Review by Jeffrey Barlow

The impact of the Internet upon religion has been an ongoing study for us at the Berglund Center. Here we review an important new book, Robert Glenn Howard's *Digital Jesus*, which tells us a great deal about the Internet, as well as much about one specific form of religion, Protestant Fundamentalism.  

As always in reviewing works about religion, we are aware that the topic itself is often of interest primarily to those who already hold religious values similar to those of the author. After all, religion is one of the two topics verboten in polite company, the other being politics. However, to ignore this book would be to fail to understand a great deal of value, particularly the connection between these two black topics and the Internet itself.

Robert G. Howard is extremely well qualified to discuss these issues. He is Director of Digital Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the author of twenty works on religion or spirituality, with special reference to the Internet and/or apocalyptic cults. He has been studying Fundamentalism—defined below—in electronic environments since well before the development of the World Wide Web. Consequently, he is almost uniquely able to analyze the changes that are made in religious practices and beliefs as electronic communication developed from the early use of Newsgroups through to the present Web 2.0, and all media in between.

Howard’s own religious beliefs will be of interest to some. His objectivity, however, is such that all we can say is that he was raised as a Baptist. The heart of his own spirituality is an Augustinian approach to caritas, sometimes translated as charity or “Brotherly Love”.  

Howard holds this value to be at the heart of Christian belief. Consequently, some of the Fundamentalist communities that he is discussing here would disqualify him as incapable of a full understanding of their communities—or worse, possibly even demonic or satanic in his intentions—because he himself is not a Fundamentalist.

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2 See discussion at Howard, pp 168-170.
Those of such an opinion who refused to read the work would, however, miss an opportunity to better understand their own beliefs and the relationship between them and digital communications. In our view, Howard successfully maintains a perspective which is both objective and compassionate.

Among the many strengths of *Digital Jesus* is a very close understanding of the historical development of modern Christianity. Howard traces the notion of Fundamentalism back to the early twentieth century. At that time, four core beliefs were described as “Fundamental,” initially in England, and later in the United States. These are:

1. A belief in biblical literalism
2. A belief in the experience of spiritual rebirth
3. A belief in the importance of evangelism
4. And a belief in “End Times” interpretations of biblical prophecy

These beliefs, by their nature and the degree to which they deviated from “Main Line” Christianity, that is, the major Protestant denominations, tended to isolate believers from their local communities and were largely confined to small sects often dominated by charismatic individuals.

With the development of digital communications, however, believers were able to reach out to each other in electronic environments. A number of consequences flowed from these new environments.

First, it became possible for “virtual” communities to form. Another of the strengths of Howard’s analysis is a very precise understanding of the term “virtual.” To him, virtual means not merely digital (in the sense of an avatar in an online game) nor visible by its corporeal existence, but rather “manifest by its effects.”

This distinction is of considerable importance for digital Fundamentalist communities. From being small communities centered about a physical church and a charismatic leader, they have become decentralized online communities with no particular leader. They exist only online, and without a hierarchical structure.

Many might think that this change would ultimately destroy a religious community. Howard, however, argues that this community is not unlike the very early Christian communities in which worship consisted of fellowship and a public profession of shared beliefs, an *Ekklesia*. Rather than being fragmented

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3 Howard, p. 8.
5 See discussion at p. 11.
or endangered, Fundamentalists living in communities too small to support churches appropriate to their beliefs can now gather online. It is, Howard argues, precisely their communications regarding their core beliefs that constitutes their worship; they have become a *virtual ekklesia*.

These ekklesia have changed in another important way: they have become *vernacular*—a folk response outside the recognized institutional framework of even the Protestant Fundamentalism in which they began. Each website develops its own special forms of both content and procedure, and taken together they are thoroughly de-centered. 6

Howard traces the development of the virtual ekklesia from early forms beginning with Newsgroups, which he began studying in 1994, through Email Lists or Listservs, onto the World Wide Web, and now, onto Web 2.0. Each of these technologies has had its own impact, and Howard’s analysis of the development of these forms begins with ARPANET in 1979. 7 Scholars of the Internet will find Howard very well grounded in the work of familiar authorities and his substantial index is a litany of great names in Anthropology as well as in Internet studies. 8

The impact of Web 2.0, the participatory web, is critical to the development of vernacular Fundamentalism. In earlier groups, which were usually open to any participant willing to observe minimal rules (no cursing, no flaming, etc.), anyone was welcome. In such open environments, Fundamentalists were often uncomfortable; they wanted to discuss questions that were based in beliefs that were not widely shared and hence often attacked, gently or otherwise.

The earlier forms of the Internet—web pages—were more useful than Newsgroups because Fundamentalists could post content supporting their own particular views in controlled environments. However, these could be participatory in only a minimal sense. Communications were usually of necessity one-to-one via email. While these were affirming to believers, it was Web 2.0 that created the virtual ekklesia. Now, using various forms of BBS (Bulletin Boards) or commenting systems, believers could aggregate their opinions and, by requiring pledges of fidelity to core beliefs, control access. If individuals did

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6 The curious reader may want to pause here and go to such sites as:
http://www.mt.net/~watcher/; http://raptureforums.com/ A Google search on
7 That is, the government network which was the precursor to later more widespread forms of digital online communication. See Howard’s analysis of these changes in chapter 3, “Networking the Apocalypse,” especially at pp 48-9.
8 Howard also teaches in the Department of Communication Arts at Wisconsin.
not conform to both appropriate behaviors and appropriate beliefs, they could be, and often were, removed from the digital community.

Howard has well gone beyond his initial careful longitudinal study of Christian Fundamentalism online. In 1999 he began a series of intensive interviews. He has interviewed all of the important figures among these communities, and his careful even-handed treatment does a great deal to humanize them for the reader, going far to overcome what may be our own prejudices.

Howard understands the major participants not only as individuals, but also as a network. He develops careful distinctions as to types of online discourse, ranging from “authoritarian” (“Believe me because I am channeling God Almighty!”) to a less authoritative and participatory model (This is what I think; what do you think about this?).

While Howard seems to us to be compassionate and objective, this does not mean that he does not think critically. Underlying his analysis is an awareness of some of the harsher realities behind virtual Fundamentalism. Fundamentalism has long been associated, in the view of many scholars and of mainstream churches, with various forms of prejudice and intolerant behavior.

Howard argues that, to the present at least, the ability to aggregate in vernacular Fundamentalist groups has probably strengthened the tendency of these groups to shut themselves off from contrary opinions. As he points out, if there is not some form of enforcing agreement, such groups would quickly collapse into welters of disagreements, and Howard discusses specific examples of just this phenomenon.

Because of what the author refers to as their “radical certainty” (“I know this is true because I have experienced it, not because I can document or demonstrate it...”). Fundamentalists are sometimes prone to attack and denounce those who deviate from their own beliefs. Their beliefs are thus “self-sealing” and tend to isolate them.

Howard believes that such cloistered behavior easily grows harmful to those who deliberately isolate themselves from contrary opinion. In this environment, for example, what outsiders might view as very strange beliefs easily flourish. Howard's fascinating chapter on the 9/11 attacks as a purported harbinger of the apocalypse is very interesting reading. The frequent connections between Fundamentalist beliefs, political conservatism, and fringe conspiracy beliefs are easier to understand after reading Howard's thorough work.

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9 Howard, p 147.
Howard believes, or perhaps better, hopes, that many younger Christians who have been raised with the Internet have not only a commitment to the four core beliefs, but also to the importance of open communication. These, he says, indicate that tolerance is a growing phenomenon. 10

Howard’s *Digital b* is fascinating for a great many reasons, and will greatly advance the careful reader’s understanding of many topics, including the impact of the Internet, the development and nature of online communities, the history of Fundamentalist Christianity, and the nature of current American vernacular communities. We think it well worth reading, and worth drawing to the attention of Christian friends and family members.

10 Howard, pp 167-8.