THE SPIRIT OF NETWORKS:
NEW MEDIA AND THE CHANGING ROLE OF RELIGION
IN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

*The Spirit of Networks* examines the implications of new media for the future of American religious politics. I argue that we are at a critical juncture in both media and religion, similar to the early days of radio broadcasting. The outcome of that earlier juncture involved an increase in media commercialization and the proliferation of conservative evangelical broadcasters—developments which paved the way for the emergence of the Religious Right. Today, technological and generational shifts have the potential to alter the course of American religious politics. Younger people are more wary of political partisanship and religious hypocrisy, and are more likely to use new technologies as tools of political engagement. These shifts have led some journalists and researchers to pronounce the death of the Religious Right and the emergence of a new Religious Left. The research presented here assesses the potential outcome of this critical juncture by examining the impact of new media technologies on public discourse at the intersection of religion and politics.

Through qualitative analysis of newspaper articles, cable news transcripts, and blog commentaries, I demonstrate how new media tend to generate debates about the authenticity and sincerity of public figures. Pundits and bloggers frequently claim to glimpse public figures’ “backstage” identity through video clips, instant messages, and e-mails. In this way, the new media environment generates competing “discourses of authenticity.” Occasionally this dynamic favors independent media sources and grassroots activists. For example the Republican sex scandals, which drove some evangelicals away from the GOP, erupted when liberal bloggers exposed the private messages of conservative congressmen. More often, though, established media industries and political organizations manage to exploit the dynamics of new media to their advantage, leading to what Charles Taylor calls shallow or “flat” debates about authenticity.
The scandal that erupted in the summer of 2010 surrounding the firing of USDA official Shirley Sherrod exemplifies a trend that began during the 2008 election, as video clips of Rev. Jeremiah Wright circulated between cable news and YouTube. Media coverage of Wright, and subsequently of Sarah Palin, demonstrates that traditional media sources often set the terms of debate about religious authenticity. In these debates, religion frequently serves as a proxy for underlying concerns about race. This intersection of religious and racial politics breathes new life into the Religious Right, while pushing “prophetic” social critique to the sidelines.

In uncovering these trends, the current research troubles the argument that new media have inherently “democratizing” effects that can resuscitate the public sphere and render industry regulation obsolete. Instead, my work buttresses arguments for the revitalization of professional journalism, tighter regulation of commercial media industries, and the development of independent media sources. The current research also contributes to ongoing debates in cultural theory about the relationship between religious practice, racial identity, and democratic politics. In conclusion I examine the implications of the current research for developments beyond the American context, and offer suggestions for future research.
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INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER 1
A CRITICAL JUNCTURE IN MEDIA AND RELIGION

In the 2004 election, the Bush administration waged a "values campaign" to rally its evangelical base—with some considerable success. However, many evangelicals had already grown wary of the Bush administration, and of the incumbent leadership within the conservative evangelical community itself. At the same time, the Religious Left shifted into high gear in response to the 2004 election, holding conferences on "spiritual activism" and declaring "an end to the monologue" of the Religious Right. The result has been a major upheaval in terms of leadership, issue framing, and press coverage of religion in the public sphere. Conservative "dissidents" such as Joel Hunter and progressive evangelicals such as Jim Wallis have begun a campaign to re-focus public discourse about religious issues to include social justice concerns such as environmentalism and poverty. The United Church of Christ launched a successful marketing campaign touting its commitment to inclusiveness toward gays and lesbians. More recently, Barack Obama reached out to religious progressives during his presidential campaign, and enjoyed their overwhelming support in the general election. All of these developments, furthermore, have taken place in the midst of a "critical juncture" in media, as incumbent industries struggle to maintain their dominance against the backdrop of an expanding blogosphere and an active media reform movement. Taken together, these developments may present an opportunity for religious progressives to reshape the terms of religious politics in American culture. However, the dynamics of the new media environment pose significant challenges as well, including the continued dominance of traditional media and the tendency of journalists to favor conservative leaders, overlook the diversity of the Religious Left, and focus attention on “hot button” issues.
Trouble on the Right

In recent years, tensions have increased between evangelicals and the Republican Party. Disillusionment with the GOP, and George W. Bush in particular, had been growing among evangelicals since the 2000 election. Bush failed to take up a federal marriage amendment after the election, and though he scored points with his Faith-Based Initiatives, insiders like David Kuo (2006) claimed to see the writing on the wall: the administration was more interested in politics than compassion. Bush’s 2005 Supreme Court nomination of Harriet Miers generated a significant rift among conservatives, with some like James Dobson supporting it while others saw it as evidence that the administration was embarrassed by its association with religious conservatives (Kirkpatrick, 2005).

Tensions among evangelical leaders have also increased. A prominent figure like Pat Robertson enjoys significant mainstream media exposure, but gathers only marginal support among evangelicals compared to conservative talk-show host James Dobson (Lawton, 2007). And while Robertson and Dobson have both been quite partisan, prominent “mega-church” pastors like Joel Hunter and Rick Warren have rejected partisan politics and sought to embrace issues like environmentalism and poverty. These leaders’ shift in focus is consistent with polls indicating that concerns among evangelicals have moved from social issues like gay marriage and abortion to health care and foreign policy (“Evangelicals,” 2007). Meanwhile the Rev. Sam Rodriguez, a key leader among Latino evangelicals, notes the increasing influence of this key demographic: Latino evangelicals are more conservative than whites in some ways, but they do not identify with the Religious Right and do not want to belong to a particular political party (“It’s Not Either/Or,” 2008). Some evangelicals have also become concerned that Christianity has a serious “image problem” among young people, who increasingly see Christianity as
hypocritical and too involved in partisan politics (Barna Group, 2007). This difference holds even among young, white evangelicals, who have begun to question their ties to the GOP (Cox, 2007).

Sociologist Michael Lindsay describes these tensions as an argument between populists and cosmopolitans (McKenzie, 2007). However described, the developments over the last several years have created a sort of leadership vacuum. While conservative incumbents like Tony Perkins criticize the new shifts in focus, others like Mike Huckabee have tended to embrace them (Silk, 2008b). In fact, before Huckabee announced that he wanted to be McCain’s Vice President (“Huckabee Says,” 2008), Mark Silk suggested that he was never running for office at all, but for the leadership of a renewed Religious Right (Silk, 2008a).

There are some indications that the power of the Religious Right has declined significantly. Most tellingly the Christian Coalition, a powerhouse of conservative religious politics, saw its revenues diminish significantly from $26 million in 1996 to $1 million in 2007 (Thomma, 2007). But as Jeff Sharlet (2007) and William Martin (2008) note, the media have too often jumped to proclaim the death of the Religious Right, only to be proven wrong in short order. Geoffrey Layman argues that the decline of the Christian Coalition is misleading because “the organization that now seeks out, identifies and mobilizes evangelical Christians behind Republican candidates is called the Republican National Committee… They are no longer a distinct organization trying to get the Republican Party to do what they want. They are part of the machinery” (Wilkens-Iafolla, 2006, p. 18). John Green (2007) also notes that while the Christian Coalition “suffered from disarray at the national level, many of its state and local affiliates were

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1 The Barna Group’s David Kinnaman (2007) argues that “Christianity has an image problem” among young people today, especially young “outsiders” to the Christian tradition. In Kinnaman’s study, such outsiders reported several key negative perceptions of Christianity, including that it is anti-homosexual (91 percent), judgmental (87 percent) and hypocritical (85 percent).
quite active” in the 2004 election (pp. 143-144). Rather than being in its death throes, the Religious Right is likely to reconfigure itself and continue to play an important role in American political and cultural life. Nevertheless, this period of reconfiguration may present a window of opportunity for religious progressives.

An Emerging Religious Left

Evangelicals had not always formed a reliable base for the Republican Party. In 1988, they were roughly evenly split between the GOP and the Democratic Party (Jones, 2008, p.4). This began to change in the 1990s when the GOP gained Southern whites. By 2004 over half “identified with or leaned Republican” and indeed Bush took 78% of the white evangelical vote in 2004 (Jones, 2008, p.4). John Kerry suffered from failing to close the so-called “God gap.” Controversial exit polls suggested that “moral values” were a key factor in the election. Robert Jones (2008) cites insiders from ABC and CBS in criticizing these polls (p. 6), but other scholars such as Mark Silk and Andrew Walsh (2008) argue that “values voters” were indeed central to the outcome.

Whether the exit polls results were valid or not, the perception that the GOP had captured “values voters” lit a fire under the leaders of a nascent Religious Left. Religious progressives clearly gained new motivation after the 2004 election (Murphy, 2006). Tikkun magazine editor Rabbi Michael Lerner, the Rev. Jim Wallis of Sojourners, and former president Jimmy Carter all published books articulating a more progressive approach to religious politics. Michael Lerner and Cornel West founded the Network for Spiritual Progressives, which gained momentum and gathered significant media attention for its “spiritual activism” conference in 2006. Jones (2008)
argues that “between the magazine, its companion website, and the local NSP local chapters, *Tikkun*/NSP has an impressive reach” (p. 60).

Despite disagreement about the 2004 exit polls, most scholars agree that the 2006 Congressional elections marked a significant turning point for religious politics (Dionne, 2008; Jones, 2008; Silk, 2008, Green, 2007). As E.J. Dionne (2008) explains, Democrats “modestly cut their losses among more religious voters... while at the same time vastly expanding their advantages in the rest of the electorate. Put another way, the Republicans did so badly among less religious voters in 2006 that their continuing, if slightly diminished, advantage among the more religious was not enough to save them” (p. 63). The Democrats’ increased efforts to court religious voters, along with opposition to the Iraq war and a slew of GOP sex scandals, contributed to the election’s outcome (Green, 2007, p. 172; Dionne, 2008, p. 63). Democrats gained support from non-Latino Catholics, Hispanic Christians, Black Protestants, and the Unaffiliated (Green, 2007, p. 174). When activist bloggers exposed the sexual behavior of Congressmen like Mark Foley, some evangelicals questioned such leaders’ sincerity (Baram, 2007) and abandoned Republicans during the Congressional elections (Blumenthal, 2006). The “hot button” issues of 2004 gave way to broader concerns (Wells, 2007; Dionne, 2008). Once again demographics are were a key factor, as younger people grew wary of religious hypocrisy and more concerned about the environment and poverty than “wedge” social issues (Barna Group, 2007). Some younger evangelicals even began to form Democratic groups on college campuses (“Dems Go to School,” 2007).

For these reasons, leaders like Michael Lerner claimed that there was a chance for a progressive religious movement to emerge because of the uniqueness of the “historical moment,” including the fact that there is “a much larger awareness of the dangers of the Religious Right”
Peter Laarman, executive director of Progressive Christians Uniting, agreed that “there’s a huge historical opening here” (Wilkens-Iafolla, 2006, pp.10-11). Demographic research indicates that such statements are not merely wishful thinking. In “The Twelve Tribes of American Politics,” Green and Waldman (2004) claim that “the religious left is just about the same size as the religious right.” While the latter comprises 15 percent of the population, the Religious Left makes up 14 percent. They suggested in their 2004 study that the Religious Left is growing in size and probably moving in a Democratic direction. The 2006 American Values Survey directed by Jones (2008) yielded similar results, and “confirmed that the religious right only modestly outnumbers the religious left” (p. 10).

A key difference, though, is that the Religious Left is much more diverse in terms of religious affiliation. While conservative religious activists are “almost exclusively Christian,” progressives are more mixed: twelve percent identify as interfaith, mixed faith, or Unitarian; six percent identify as Jewish; and eight percent report having no formal affiliation (Green et al., 2009, p. 1). Such diversity may serve as a hindrance to achieving the political cohesion and efficacy of the Religious Right. Nevertheless, some scholars have suggested that in terms of overlapping voting concerns, the religious and secular left together may constitute roughly half the population, thereby forming a political bloc that could rival that of conservative evangelicals (Kellstedt, 2007).

Despite this diversity of affiliation, religious progressives share some common ideological and theological commitments. Generally speaking, theological differences among religious activists reflect traditional political divisions between conservative individualism and liberal emphases on social justice. According to a survey by John Green, Robert Jones, and Daniel Cox (2009), more than three quarters (77%) of progressive religious activists agree that
“social justice is at the heart of all authentic religious values” (Green et al., 2009, p. 27). This view is even more prominent among progressive Christian activists, the “overwhelming majority” of whom (87%) believe that they “have a special obligation to solve social problems because of Christ’s commandments” (Green et al., 2009, p. 25). Not surprisingly, then, “a solid majority (62%) of progressive activists believe that religious people should focus primarily on domestic issues like poverty over foreign policy issues like ending the war in Iraq” (Green et al., 2009, p. 26). Conservative religious activists, by contrast, still prioritize abortion and same-sex marriage while taking an overwhelmingly individualistic approach to social theology. The authors note that progressive activists are only “slightly less ideologically polarized” than conservatives, and conclude that “both groups of activists are strong partisans” (p. 15).

A Moment of Challenge and Opportunity: The Crucial Role of Media

Whether a viable Religious Left can coalesce to challenge the political influence of the Right depends on how these movements adapt to the emerging new media environment—what Yochai Benkler (2006) calls the “networked public sphere.” One of the main reasons that scholars cite for the continued dominance of the Religious Right is its masterful success in establishing a strong and wide-reaching media infrastructure over the last several decades. Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, fundamentalists like Charles Fuller gained enormous success in broadcasting, laying the foundations for media networks that would later provide an infrastructure for the Religious Right (Carpenter, 1997). Today, for example, Focus on the Family founder James Dobson is heard on more radio stations than NPR, and his magazines have more subscribers than the New York Times (2.3 million vs. 1.1 million) (Jones, 2008, p.4). Recent developments, however, have disrupted the stability of so-called “old media” industries,
forming a “critical juncture” in which policy decisions and grassroots media reform efforts could usher in a more progressive political climate (McChesney, 2007).

A number of important social networking and collaborative-production websites launched during the course of the Bush presidency, permanently altering the cultural and political landscape. Wikipedia, which launched in 2001, boasts of “75,000 active contributors working on more than 10,000,000 articles in more than 250 languages” (“Wikipedia:About”). The enormously popular blogs DailyKos and Power Line launched in 2002, represent a wide range of political opinion from liberal to conservative, respectively. The social networking sites MySpace and Facebook launched in 2003 and 2004, offering new avenues of mobilization for political candidates and activists. Launching in 2005, YouTube began as a popular entertainment website but gained serious political importance during the CNN-YouTube presidential debates in 2007, which received some of the highest ratings of any broadcast debate (Gough, 2007). CNN’s David Bohrman touted the collaboration as “the most democratic of all possible structures” for a televised debate (O’Brien, 2007).

Since Joe Trippi’s ground-breaking use of new media in Howard Dean’s 2000 campaign, online sources have played an increasingly central role in American politics (Trippi, 2004). Voters’ reliance on the Internet during the 2008 election was nearly double that of 2004 (“Internet’s Broader Role,” 2008). Like the changes in religious politics noted above, younger voters are at the forefront of this shift. Although still partial to television viewing, people 18 to 29 are more likely to use the Internet (“Internet Now,” 2008), to use social networking websites, to get campaign info from these sites, and to sign up as a “friend” of a political candidate (“Internet’s Broader Role,” 2008).
Beginning with the Dean campaign, new media sources have arguably benefitted Democratic candidates. The Obama campaign was particularly effective in mobilizing new media, targeting voters through text messaging, Facebook groups, virtual communities within the Obama website, and advertisements in X-Box video games (Banwart et al., 2008). While the Clinton campaign tried to squash supporter-created promotional videos, the Obama campaign adopted Howard Dean’s strategy of cooperation (Cheney, 2008). Consequently the campaign benefitted from supporters like “Obama Girl,” whose online video was viewed over 10.5 million times; and musician will.i.am, whose "Yes, We Can" video was viewed almost 11.3 million times (Wheaton, 2008).

To some extent, new media has also advanced the political influence of religious progressives. Green (2007) notes that “advances in communications technology have made targeting of congenial religious voters into less of an art than a science” (p. 172). Although such targeting aids conservatives as well, it could also help to make the fragmentation and diversity of the Religious Left less of an obstacle to political mobilization. Again, the Obama campaign enjoyed some success in its efforts to reach religious voters. Green, Jones, and Cox (2009) report that Obama was “the solid favorite among progressive religious activists. . . Among progressive activists, 58% say Obama was their first choice in the Democratic primary, and 93% supported him in the general election” (p. 2). For their own part, religious progressives also actively mobilized online. While conservatives and progressives reported “similar levels of participation in traditional campaign activities such as making campaign donations or signing petitions,” progressive religious activists “were much more likely to have participated in a range of online campaign activities” (Green et al., 2009, p. 3).
Despite these developments, however, it is clear that “old media” such as newspapers and television still dominate public discourse (Baker, 2007; Pew, 2010). However, such sources are moving away from traditional investigative reporting to reliance on public relations experts and official sources (Pew, 2010). Coverage from these sources, furthermore, typically benefits religious conservatives. A study by the media watchdog group Media Matters (2007) found that “coverage of religion not only over-represents some voices and under-represents others, it does so in a way that is consistently advantageous to conservatives (p. 2). In newspaper and television coverage between November 2004 and December 2006, “conservative religious leaders were quoted, mentioned, or interviewed in news stories 2.8 times as often as were progressive religious leaders” (p. 2). This advantage in coverage is due largely to the fact that, since at least the 1960s, religious conservatives have chosen to strategically emphasize highly polarizing issues—such as abortion and same-sex marriage—in a manner that cultivates public fear and plays into the dynamics of commercial news (Balmer, 2006; Altheide, 2002).

The prospects for a revitalized Religious Left depend, at least in part, on how the tension between old and new media plays out in the near future. On one hand, a movement for media reform has gathered strength in recent years, challenging the dominance of commercial industries and cultivating the democratic potential of new media (McChesney, 2007). On the other hand, incumbent industries have leveraged their existing assets and political clout to transform new media technologies into fine-tuned vehicles for commercial expansion (Baker, 2007). At the same time, professional journalism is in a state of crisis (McChesney, 2007; McChesney and Nichols, 2010). The field did a poor job covering religion throughout most of the twentieth century, and while coverage improved toward the turn of the century (Hoover, 1998), the religion beat has been dwindling for the last ten years or so (Paulson, 2009).
Denominations have been left to drum up coverage themselves—usually in ways that promote a particular ideological or theological perspective rather than performing the journalist’s task of translating across differences. Furthermore, as the newspaper industry declines, cable news outlets eschew investigative reporting in favor of punditry and editorial commentary (McChesney and Nichols, 2010).

These developments have significant implications for religious politics since, as McChesney argues, “the fates of media reform and social justice are intertwined. They rise and fall together” (p. 220). As the case of radio broadcasting demonstrates, the outcome of policy decisions and grassroots activism can set the course of religious politics for decades to come (Schultze, 2003). Writing in Jim Wallis’s Sojourners magazine, Bart Preecs (2007) argues that “new technologies [and] new business models. . . have created the best opportunity in decades for people of faith to shape our communication environment to reflect our values”—namely, “universal health care, ending homelessness, ending war, or saving the planet.” But Preecs warned his fellow progressives that “if we fail to seize this moment, the most powerful communication tools in the history of humankind. . . will continue to be deployed primarily by people whose primary mission is to move merchandise off store shelves.” Indeed the outcome of the struggle for religious broadcasting represents such a scenario (Schultze, 2003). As the following chapters demonstrate, these tensions are already present in the most visible and vocal leaders of the Religious Left. The current moment in American religious discourse is therefore one of immense opportunity, but one of significant challenge as well. It is a critical juncture both for media and for the role of religion in American public life.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

In light of these concerns, my dissertation research addresses the following questions:
• How are recent changes in American religious politics related to the dynamics of the emerging networked public sphere?

• Have new media such as blogs and social networking technologies driven any of the recent changes in the role of religion in American public life?

• To what extent do traditional media sources still exert an influence on these issues?

• When we study how religious discourse unfolds in the networked public sphere, what patterns emerge, and how should we evaluate these patterns in light of our understanding of democratic theory?

• What individuals, groups, or institutions stand to benefit from these developments?

• How should we think about media policy issues in light of the recent developments in religious discourse?

In my preliminary research (Healey, 2008), I began to identify key patterns in the way that discourse concerning the intersection of religion, politics, and science unfolds in the networked public sphere. These patterns were both promising and troubling, challenging the widespread contention—held by media scholars and industry proponents alike—that the emergence of a new, convergent media environment inevitably enhances democratic politics.

My initial hypotheses were as follows:

• New media sources such as blogs and YouTube play an important, demonstrable role in American religious politics. For example, since 2004 they have contributed to an increased hesitance on the part of evangelicals to collude with the Republican Party.

• The dynamics of the networked public sphere—most importantly the interplay between incumbent and new media sources—tends to favor concerns about sincerity and authenticity at the expense of the equally important validity claims of normative rightness and empirical truth. For example, cases where bloggers influence mainstream media coverage typically involve the exposure of hypocrisy rather than the discovery of empirical evidence or the introduction of substantive arguments.

• Public concerns about the sincerity of elites may be justified, but the dynamics of the networked public sphere tends to turn this concern into an opportunity for commercial and political exploitation. A valid concern about sincerity on the part of the public becomes, ironically, an opportunity for strategic action on the part of elites. I call this the “spiral of insincerity.” This problem may not be new, but new media technologies tend to
exacerbate it.

The current research has largely confirmed these initial hypotheses. I have found that, despite the promising potential of new media, the incumbent media industry tends to skew discourse toward a problematic over-emphasis on concerns about sincerity and authenticity. This over-emphasis is important, since it pushes the evaluation of other key validity claims to the wayside—namely, claims of normative rightness (e.g., the separation of church and state) and claims of empirical truth (e.g., the validity of the theory of evolution versus creationism). To some extent, both incumbent and new media sources address all three types of validity claims. But the dynamics of commercial media favor concerns about authenticity and sincerity. Furthermore, they do so in a way that “flattens” public understandings of these values (Taylor, 1991). New media sources such as blogs tend to contribute to this problem even as they challenge incumbent sources. Journalistic issues such as de-contextualization and gate-keeping become all the more complicated.

Methodology: Tracking Discourses of Authenticity

The questions posed here require a qualitative approach, and in such research the problem of validity is best addressed through a combination of methods (Christians, 2003, p. 354). To address both the cultural-historical and institutional context of recent developments, I employ a combination of cultural-historical methods and ethnographic content analysis. My approach constitutes what Douglas Kellner has called a “unified, critical approach” (Armstrong, 2006) in the application of critical theory to electronic media history—that is, an approach that combines aspects of both cultural studies and political economy.
Both cultural studies and political economy fall within the general framework of critical theory. Among the multiple strains of contemporary critical theory (British cultural studies, post-structuralism, feminist theory, etc.), my approach is most indebted to the line of thought that extends from the early Frankfurt School to the recent work of Habermas and other public sphere theorists. As Armstrong (2006) notes, Horkheimer and Adorno’s work on the culture industry combines cultural and institutional analysis. A combination of cultural and political-economic approaches is therefore consistent with this strain of critical theory.

Cultural History

In examining recent perspectives and struggles among various groups—conservative and progressive evangelicals, secular liberals, etc.—I provide a contemporary cultural history of the role of religion in American public life. Drawing from speeches, electronic communications, published books and memoirs, interviews, news coverage, and surveys, this narrative and interpretive aspect of my research is indebted to the so-called “linguistic turn” of postmodernism and cultural studies (Nord, 2003). This aspect of my research includes, for example, the struggle among evangelical leaders and the public’s concern about sincerity among political and religious elites.

I agree with David Nord’s argument (2003) that such cultural history needs to reflect a keen awareness of the institutional and structural context in which particular developments unfold. Consistent with my review of the relevant literature, my research therefore responds to Nord’s “plea to historians to set their reception studies more fully into context, including the contexts of production—of business and technology, government and politics, professional conventions and practices” (Nord, 2003, p. 377). John Armstrong (2006) cites McChesney’s examination of early broadcasting policy (1992) as an example of research that strikes a balance
by combining a political-economic approach with a concern for the cultural. McChesney’s discussion of the activist movement that opposed commercialization, Armstrong claims, deals with the usual domain of cultural studies—the audience. But McChesney performs this examination in the context of a critique of economic and political institutions. My study is similar in that I highlight the struggle among evangelicals with regard to the focus of the evangelical movement, as well as the concerns these dissident leaders have about the role of commercial media in exacerbating specific problems; but I examine these struggles and concerns in their institutional context, by highlighting the relationship between incumbent and new media sources.

Ethnographic Content Analysis

To address such institutional concerns, I supplement cultural-historical methods with ethnographic content analysis (ECA)—an approach developed and articulated by David Altheide (1996). As Altheide himself acknowledges, ECA shares some common concerns with the more general approach of “critical discourse analysis” (CDA) as articulated by Norman Fairclough, Teun A. van Dijk, and others (see for example Wodak, 2002). There are several lines of development in CDA, the most relevant of which is derived from the Frankfurt School and the work of Habermas (van Dijk, 1993, 2001). As van Dijk explains, CDA “focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 353. Italics original). Altheide suggests that his approach “draws on many of these assumptions, but blends interpretive, ethnographic, and ethno-methodological approaches with media logic, particularly studies of news organizational culture, information technology, and communication formats” (Altheide, 1996, p. 69). In other
words, ECA combines a concern for discourse with an understanding of the institutional context in which it unfolds.

Altheide outlines a number of ways in which ECA differs from traditional, quantitative approaches to content analysis. Typical quantitative analyses construct formal procedures for counting and coding data, with a concern for overall reliability as well as inter-coder reliability. Though such methods may be employed to some extent, ECA is generally “not about coding and counting… The goal is to understand the process [of document creation]… and to be able to associate the documents with conceptual and theoretical issues” (Altheide, 1996, pp. 42-43).

ECA is aimed at discovering emergent patterns that might only become clear through “constant comparison and investigation of documents over a period of time” (p. 10). Traditional quantitative approaches may ensure reliability, but they often fail to discover such emergent patterns. Rather than a static process, Altheide offers a “complex and reflexive interaction process” (p. 14) which conceives of document analysis in terms of ethnographic fieldwork. The approach is therefore one of “constant discovery and constant comparison of relevant situations” (p. 16).

While random sampling techniques may be employed to supplement an analysis, Altheide stresses the primary importance of “progressive theoretical sampling,” which calls for a “selection of materials based on emerging understanding of the topic under investigation” (p. 33). “The idea,” Altheide explains, “is to select materials for conceptual or theoretically relevant reasons” (pp. 33-34). In her discussion of critical discourse analysis, Ruth Wodak describes theoretical sampling as follows:

[In CDA,] data collection is not considered to be a specific phase that must be completed before analysis begins: after the first collection exercise it is a matter of carrying out the first analyses, finding indicators for particular concepts, expanding concepts into
categories and, on the basis of these results, collecting further data. (Wodak, 2002, pp. 23-24).

This reflexive process broadens the scope of one’s analysis and allows the researcher to do what Altheide calls “tracking discourse”—that is, “following certain issues, words, themes, and frames over a period of time, across different issues, and across different news media” (p. 70). It also allows the researcher to develop what Herbert Blumer calls “sensitizing concepts.” As Cliff Christians explains, while quantitative research “produces lawlike abstractions,” qualitative work can generate sensitizing concepts that “generate an insightful picture and distinctively convey the meaning of a series of events” (Christians, 2001, p. 117).

In Creating Fear, Altheide employs this approach to demonstrate “how fear has emerged as a framework for developing identities and for engaging in social life” (Altheide, 2002, p. 3). Various interest groups—liberal and conservative alike—mobilize discourses of fear “to define crises and to bump along those claims so that leaders can take political action, against ‘external enemies’ or ‘internal enemies.’” (Altheide, 2002, pp. 3, 11-12). Competing constructions of “the Other” play an important role in such discourses (Altheide, 2002, p. 26). Since fear is entertaining, furthermore, these strategies tend to enjoy significant traction in the context of commercial mass media (Altheide, 2002, 27). In this way, “popular culture and communications formats contribute to the changing face of identity” (Altheide, 2002, 7). As the following discussion will demonstrate, discourses of fear and discourses of authenticity overlap considerably. Indeed, Altheide argues that fear is part of the process whereby “the criteria and frameworks for authenticity, credibility, competence, and acceptability can be widely shared and, indeed, taken for granted” (Altheide, 2002, 7-8).

In contrast to Meyrowitz’s more optimistic analysis, in tracking discourses of authenticity I take from Altheide (2002) two key points. First, I adopt the critical notion that “the process
involving the definition of the situation is a significant act of power” and includes “what we think about and discuss, the language we use in doing so, and the interpretive frameworks we bring to bear on events” (31). Second, I build on his suggestion that “public perceptions of problems and issues. . . incorporate definitions, scenarios, and language from news reports” (33). However this project extends Altheide’s research by demonstrating the emerging interactions between established news sources and new media technologies. While I am studying the effects of new media technologies, I also attend to the perspective of traditional sources—primarily cable news. In order words, my research specifically highlights the way that operatives within established industries view new media sources and mobilize them to bolster particular situational definitions. In addition, in my studies of Jeremiah Wright and Sarah Palin, I extend Altheide’s analysis of “framing” by incorporating more recent work on “white racial framing” (Wingfield and Feagin, 2009).

For each case study I begin by constructing a timeline detailing the major events and discursive developments. This process involves cross-referencing dozens of newspaper articles and broadcast transcripts to verify dates, alleged statements, and sources. The construction of such timelines facilitates the progressive theoretical sampling of materials, as it makes clear which media sources are playing the most significant role in shaping public discourse. I then conduct a tailored Lexis-Nexis search through major broadcast and cable news transcripts—chiefly Fox News, CNN, ABC, CBS, MSNBC, and NPR. I search these documents for key terms and identify exemplary discussions and exchanges. Since ECA is generally “not about coding and counting,” I present the analyses of these cases in a narrative, interpretive format (Altheide, 1996, pp. 42-43). The quotes I have selected in my discussion are representative of a broader pattern that emerged during the course of my research.
Supplemental Interviews and Correspondence

In accordance with the principles of qualitative research described by Christians (2003), I have conducted supplementary interviews and/or correspondence with scholars from a variety of disciplines, including Michael Cheney, Jackie Daniels, Joe Feagin, Lauren Goodlad, Richard John, Lisa Nakamura, Melissa Orlie, Mark Silk, Quentin Schultze, and Diane Winston.

Contribution to the Literature

The study of contemporary developments in American religious discourse is an interdisciplinary project. Religious history—from the earliest days of the republic to the rise of fundamentalism in the twentieth century—provides important context for current issues (Lambert, 2006; Moore, 1994; Marsden, 1980). Political-economic analysis is a constituent element of this broader context since, as many scholars argue, it is impossible to understand American religious history without reference to the emergence of free-market capitalism (Finke, 2005; Hatch, 1989; Moore, 1994; Stout, 1991). There is an abundance of literature critiquing the history and structure of professional journalism—all of which is relevant to a critique of religious discourse, especially as it relates to social policy debates (Bennett, 2003; Chomsky, 2002; Curran, 1997; McChesney, 2004). Fewer studies deal directly with the relationship between journalism and religion, although a few scholars have established themselves as niche experts in that area (Hoover, 1998; Schultze, 2003; Silk, 1998). Interpretive and cultural studies scholarship is likewise relevant, since religious practice itself is largely an interpretive process of meaning construction, and because religious symbolism is pervasive in popular media (Clark, 1998; Hoover, 1998). And of course, social-scientific and political analyses of the recent 2004 election,
though not always highlighting the role of media, are indispensable (Campbell, 2007; Green, 2007; Green, Rozell and Wilcox, 2006; Dionne, 2008).

Taken together, then, there is a wealth of scholarship on the historical, economic, cultural, and institutional dimensions of contemporary religious discourse. The influence of these sources is clear in this introduction and in subsequent chapters. However, no single work specifically addresses the relationship between new media technologies and the ever-shifting role of religion in American public life. With this in mind, the following review highlights gaps that exist in the three most relevant genres of contemporary scholarship.

Media/Religion. A number of scholars have focused specifically on the relationship between media and religion (hereafter I will refer to this field as “media/religion”). Most prominent scholarship in this area tends to approach the subject from a cultural studies or audience reception perspective, focusing on how religious adherents interpret and utilize various types of media content—especially popular culture—in their daily lives and in their religious practices. This tendency is present in work that focuses on television, film, and books (Clark, 2005; Hendershot, 2004; Hoover, 2006; Roof, 1999), as well as more recent strains of research that focus on adherents’ use of the Internet (Campbell, 2005; Brasher, 2004; Hojsgaard, 2005; Lorne and Dawson, 2004).

Stewart Hoover (2006) explicitly argues for this type of approach, claiming that the “dominant paradigm” in media/religion scholarship is skewed too heavily toward media effects research (e.g., “How do media affect religious belief?”). While Hoover does not deny the importance of “the medium” he claims that—especially with the decline of institutionalized religion and the rise of a “quest culture”—researchers must begin by studying how individuals construct meaning through the media that are available to them. Along these lines, Hoover
Roof (1999), and Clark (2005) have each developed unique typologies—constructed through extensive interviews—to describe how different individuals employ media in their own quest for religious identity.

In avoiding the legacy of the media effects paradigm, however, Hoover’s attempt to redefine media/religion research swings the pendulum too far in the other direction—i.e., it over-emphasizes issues of audience reception to the neglect of structural and institutional issues. Recently, Lynn Clark (2007) has critiqued the audience reception approach by suggesting that it appeals to notions of “semiotic democracy” that emphasize the agency of consumers while failing to acknowledge the structural and institutional constraints that limit the range of available content. In fact, even works that specifically address the problems of consumerism and commercialism tend to place the onus on individuals and local communities—for example, by calling for critics to develop more insightful ideological critiques of neoliberalism (Carrette, 2005), for Democrats to develop new rhetorical strategies (Domke, 2004), or for religious communities to form more inclusive and participatory local communications infrastructures (Miller, 2005). While these proposals are laudable, their emphasis on individual and community response tends to naturalize broader institutional processes of commodification, neglecting the possibility that structural reforms might have helped to stem the tide of such processes in the first place.

Clark’s recent edited volume, Religion, Media, and the Marketplace (2007), is an attempt to address such problems, but it suffers from a lack of theoretical and methodological coherence. While her introduction highlights specific political-economic concerns like industry consolidation, for example, the following chapters do not consistently follow through on such themes. Also, while some of the book’s authors touch on the role of religion in civic life—for

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2 Christians (1994, review of Taylor) also offers a relevant critique of audience studies research.
example, by examining coverage of the Kennedy campaign in *Christianity Today* (Alsdurf, 2007)—political discourse is not a consistent theme throughout. Nevertheless, my research follows Clark’s lead in attempting to find a middle ground that integrates both cultural studies and political-economic concerns.

**Political Economy of New Media.** Meanwhile, literature in the political economy of media tends to focus on professional journalism and popular entertainment—for good reasons—but usually does not devote specific, extended analyses to religious practice and discourse. There is noteworthy mention of the involvement of religious groups in the early history of radio broadcasting (McChesney, 1993), the work of religious denominations like the United Church of Christ in litigating on behalf of local communities (Klinenberg, 2007), and the role of new media technologies in religious suppression in countries like China (Goldsmith and Wu, 2006). These discussions tend to be fleeting and anecdotal, however, and the literature will benefit from a more sustained analysis of these issues.

With regard to research on the social impact of new media technologies, there is a wealth of literature that paints an optimistic picture. New media sources such as blogs certainly have demonstrated a significant potential to challenge and influence incumbent media. In light of such evidence, however, some scholars (Cooper, 2006) have suggested that blogs can single-handedly resuscitate the public sphere, while others claim that the Internet itself renders obsolete any concerns about industry consolidation (Compaine, 2000; Owen, 2004; Noam, 2001)³. Some of the more optimistic authors have ties to the media industry. Henry Jenkins (2006), a faculty member at the corporate-funded MIT Media Lab, argues that even as people use new, convergent technologies for apparently non-political purposes, they are nevertheless learning new skills of

³ Baker (2007) provides a summary of these scholars’ defense of the so-called “Internet thesis.”
investigation and collaboration that will eventually translate into a renewed political activism. For this reason he considers himself an optimist, in contrast to scholars like Chomsky and McChesney, whom he accuses of misguided pessimism. Likewise Clay Shirky (2008), a corporate consultant and faculty member at NYU’s Interactive Telecommunications Program, identifies some problems with the implementation of new social technologies, but does not include political-economic or institutional issues in his discussion. In recent years, a spate of popular press books has added to this generally positive assessment, in the form of what *Publisher’s Weekly* has called “the Internet-has-changed-everything book.” Included here are works that tout the Internet’s helpful effects in politics (Boehlert, 2009; Armstrong and Zuniga, 2006; Trippi, 2004), economics (Weinberger, 2007; Tapscott and Williams, 2006), or both (Kline and Burnstein, 2005).

Other authors provide a more critical perspective that incorporates discussion of political-economic issues. These authors do acknowledge that new media technologies hold considerable promise. For example, Cass Sunstein (2006) and Yochai Benkler (2006) have praised “wiki” technology for its collaborative model of knowledge production, suggesting that the “pooling of human creativity” may attenuate some of the social-psychological problems associated with face-to-face deliberation (Benkler, 2006, p.463). Similar to Jenkins’ argument, Benkler has also suggested that the use of new technologies for personal entertainment and creativity can enhance “cultural freedom” by ushering in a new era of “high-production value folk culture” (Benkler, 2006). But these authors also offer important caveats. Sunstein offers clear arguments about the potential detrimental effect of blogs on public discourse (Sunstein, 2006, 2007). Likewise, Benkler argues that regulatory schemes privileging market-based, proprietary models amount to a tax on non-market modes of production, and therefore stifle the emergence of peer-based,

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participatory modes of production (Benkler, 2006). Mark Andrejevic (2004) takes a view opposite that of Jenkins, arguing that “user-producers” provide unpaid labor for the media industry. Also along these lines, C. Edwin Baker (2007) refutes the argument that the Internet eliminates the problem of media concentration.

The title of my dissertation, “The Spirit of Networks,” is a play on Benkler’s title *The Wealth of Networks*, and therefore acknowledges both the debt my work owes and the contribution that it makes to such literature. As Benkler (2006) notes, the emergence of the networked public sphere presents both opportunities and challenges in the years ahead. Benkler cites specific cases where new media have asserted a positive influence on public discourse, and offers a cautiously optimistic picture of the potential “wealth” of networks. Similarly, my research examines numerous cases where new media have influenced public discourse about religion, in ways that are both promising and troubling. My work therefore highlights the implications of the networked public sphere for the role of religion in American public life. In this sense it examines the current—and potential—“spirit” of networks.

**Medium Theory and Media Ecology.** The playful suggestion of a “spirit” of networks also gestures toward medium theory and media ecology, which examine the so-called “biases” of different content formats. Authors taking this approach include McLuhan (1964), Postman (1985), Ong (1982), Carey (1988), Ellul (1964, 1965), and Meyrowitz (1999, 1985). While a general concern for religious issues is present throughout this literature, Clifford Christians’s work—including his discussion of evangelicals’ use of television (1990), his arguments on behalf of “prophetic witness” (1997, 1989), and his analyses of Jaques Ellul (2006, 1995)—is especially helpful in applying a “medium theory” approach to religious issues. Christians borrows Harold Innis’s claim that each medium has its own “bias,” adding that “communications
media do not exist innocently and neutrally alongside one another” but rather “embody decisions to develop one kind of knowledge and not another, to use certain resources and not others…” (“Redemptive” 338-339).

Since I argue that the “bias” or “spirit” of new media is a fixation on issues of authenticity and sincerity—concerns that revolve around issues of identity and disclosure—I frequently rely on Erving Goffman’s “stage” metaphor. Joshua Meyrowitz’s *No Sense of Place* (1985) is the best-known example of media scholarship that employs Goffman’s metaphor, and therefore my work is partly a response to Meyrowitz’s influential work.5 Meyrowitz claims that by allowing social groups to peer into each other’s “back stage” behavior, electronic media “move people informationally to the same ‘place’” (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 145). While others have argued that electronic media tends to foreground dramaturgy and emotion over substantive argument (Couch, 1995; Postman, 1985; Bennett, 2007), however, Meyrowitz draws conclusions that are much more sanguine. He suggests even in his more recent work that “electronic media such as television (which generally integrate experiences for people of different races and both sexes) tend to have an egalitarian influence. Thus, it could be argued that television, in spite of its often repressive content, is a potentially liberating medium” (Meyrowitz, Spring 99, p. 50. Italics original).

In his critiques of media research, Carl Couch devoted special attention to Meyrowitz’s observations. Couch warned against positing information technologies as “the prime movers” of social relationships, arguing that doing so fails to recognize “the complex interactive nature of social phenomena” (Couch, 1996,p. 13). “[T]he more fruitful approach,” he argued, is “to recognize that information technologies and social relationships have bilateral relationships”

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5 *No Sense of Place* has been widely cited in a variety of fields beyond communication and media studies, including political science, psychiatry, philosophy, and social work (Lindlof, 1996).
The effect of a new media source depends on how it is “contextualized in a social structure” and how its development “impacts on the social structure that contextualizes it” (Couch, 1995, 231). As Barnhurst and Nerone (2001) suggest, critical scholars must reject simplistic version of technological determinism “and see technology as only one element in a dialectical process that includes many others: economies, cultural values, political movements, the distribution of social power, and so on” (p. 8). In his favored example, Couch (1995, 1996) notes the different effects of the printing press in Western Europe and China. The Chinese case demonstrates that “although the bilateral technologies favor the creation of symmetric forms of social action, they often have been used to facilitate the creation and maintenance of asymmetric forms of social relationships” (Couch, 1995, p. 235). Context matters.

With such problems in mind, Couch objects to Meyrowitz’s conclusions, arguing that "sustained empirical studies of the intertwinings of the electronic technologies and social relationships will indicate that, instead of creating no sense of place or rendering social relationships of no consequence, the use of the electronic media is eroding some social relationships and creating new ones" (Couch, 1995, 240). In his ten-year retrospective essay on *No Sense of Place*, Thomas Lindlof (1996) likewise argued that “rather than erasing the relevance of location, media are being used to redefine the functions of place.” He concludes that “the book works better as an adaptable resource than as a manifesto announcing the birth of a research program,” adding that “a new version of *No Sense of Place* . . . would need to reconfigure the concept of the back region to include not only the media representation, but the methods and consequences of the corporate or state control of the representation.” My research responds to Lindlof’s call by incorporating insights from cultural studies and political economy
into a revised understanding of the “stage” metaphor. I will return to this issue in the next chapter.

**Organization and Structure of the Dissertation**

Chapter 2 provides a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework that guides the rest of the dissertation. Building on the work of Habermas, with ample revisions from his contemporary followers and critics, this section explains the overarching concepts that drive the case studies that follow—namely: value spheres, validity claims, communicative and strategic action, the colonization of the lifeworld, and the public sphere. In accordance with the reflexive approach of critical discourse analysis and ethnographic content analysis, this section concludes with an explicit normative framework for understanding the role of mass media and religion in American public life.

Part 1 (chapters 3 – 6) provides a broad historical context and a discussion of contemporary developments. The historical context includes discussion of the dynamics between religion and mass media in early American life and government, with reference to relevant philosophers, religious leaders, and politicians (e.g., George Whitefield, Jefferson, Madison, Adam Smith). This early-historical context is indispensable in any discussion of the role of religion in public life. Discussion of contemporary developments includes the social and political impact of new media technologies.

Part 2 (chapters 7 - 9) consists of a series of case studies developed through the process of ethnographic content analysis described above, buttressed by a detailed discussion of the relevant cultural-historical context. The case studies demonstrate the relationship between new
and incumbent media sources in ongoing public debates at the intersection of religion, politics, and science.

In conclusion, Chapter 10 begins by assessing the implications of these case studies for the current critical juncture in American religious politics. I explain how the case studies highlight both the potential promise of new media and the continued dominance of incumbent media sources. I argue that, while demonstrating the potential to overcome problems of previous media regimes, the dynamics between new and incumbent sources have generated a host of new problems. I provide additional analysis of developments beyond the 2008 election, including the emergence of the Tea Party movement and liberal “disillusionment” with the Obama administration. I place these recent developments in a broader, global context, highlighting the connections between American domestic politics and emerging transnational networks of the Religious Right. I conclude by reviewing recent calls for the revitalization of professional journalism, and by suggesting some directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2
MEDIA, RELIGION, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE:
A NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

Overcoming Academic “Tone Deafness” to Religion

Across a range of academic disciplines, scholars have fallen short in their appreciation of religious belief and practice, either by sidelining the issue of religious identity altogether, failing to take religious belief seriously, or treating it with hostility. In some cases, scholars carry on the Marxist legacy of treating religion as an “opiate of the masses” or a mere super-structural reflection of economic power relations. As Ken Wilber (1999) notes in *A Sociable God*, religion “is frequently seen as a relic of pre-scientific thinking, an unfortunate carryover from less sophisticated times” (p. 23). The so-called “new atheism” espoused by authors like Richard Dawkins (2008) and Sam Harris (2005) continues this trend. A more pervasive “liberal ethos” of civil society also tends to sideline religious issues by requiring questions of moral truth to be kept private—a demand for public “neutrality” that amounts to a kind of “repressive tolerance” (Simpson, 2002, p. 139).

In other cases, issues of religious identity are simply overshadowed by other concerns. For example, while Susan Bordo (1995) laments feminists’ over-emphasis on the tripartite of gender, race, and class to the unfortunate exclusion of other categories of difference, even here she fails to mention religious identity (p. 222). But as Martha Nussbaum (2000) notes, when feminists do take religion seriously it is often because of the threat it poses to progressive values (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 175). There is certainly good reason for treating religion with considerable skepticism, considering that it has long been implicated in various forms of social injustice. But a general attitude of hostility to religion is unfortunate, since feminists who adhere to a strictly
anti-religious secular humanism may inadvertently cut off potential opportunities for political solidarity. “By announcing that she wants nothing to do with religion,” Nussbaum argues, “the secular humanist dooms herself to a lonely and less-than-promising struggle, and insults many people who would otherwise be her allies” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 179).

The issue of religious belief is clearly of central importance in contemporary culture, and in some ways the tide has begun to turn in academics’ treatment of religion. Having declared the so-called “secularization thesis” bankrupt, authors have aimed to address the resurgence of religion in contemporary culture (Mahmood, 2004; Connolly, 2005). Wendy Brown (2008) has argued that the typical reading of Marx’s view of religion is misguided, and that a “second Marx” waits to be read in which he offers a political theology of the capitalist state (Healey, 2008). Even Habermas, who is famously secular and has admitted to being “tone deaf in the religious sphere” (Habermas and Ratzinger, 2006, p. 11), has demonstrated an increased sensitivity to religious issues in recent years (Habermas, 2006a, 2006b). He has suggested, for example, that academic engagement with religion is increasingly relevant, and has outlined the normative consequences of “the insight by secular citizens that they live in a post-secular society” (Habermas, 2006b, p. 15). As Richard Wolin (2005) explains, “it falls due to disbelieving secularists… to appreciate the convictions of religiously motivated fellow citizens.”

Some media scholars like Lynn Clark (1998) have even argued that critical scholarship could be sharpened considerably by building bridges between cultural theory and theology. Such a task would recuperate the productive alliance between Max Horkheimer and theologian Paul Tillich at the University of Frankfurt. It was Tillich who advocated for Horkheimer’s appointment as director of the Institute of Social Research, and the two offered joint seminars on philosophy from 1930-31 (Simpson, 2002, p. 27). Contemporary theologians have continued

But to build such bridges does not mean that critical scholars must become religious. In outlining his understanding of Marxist theory, for example, West argues that his approach “neither requires a religious foundation nor entails a religious perspective, yet...is compatible with certain religious outlooks” (West, 1989, p. 233). The point is to develop a theoretical framework that is both critical and sympathetic. This section outlines such a framework by building on Habermas’s key concepts, as well as certain revisions of his theory by contemporary theologians and social theorists.

Subaltern Spheres and Situated Selves: A Revised Habermasian Approach

Many of Habermas’s key concepts are compatible with such a nuanced framework—namely the idea of the public sphere, the colonization of the lifeworld, communicative action, discourse ethics, validity claims, and value spheres. However, given Habermas’s admitted “tone deafness” with regard to religion—as well as race and gender—it is necessary to retain such concepts only to the extent that they survive ongoing critique from contemporary scholars who are better versed in the concerns of contemporary theology (Simpson, 2002) and feminist theory—especially Amanda Anderson (2006), Seyla Benhabib (2006; 2002; 1992; 1986), and

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6 However in “Cross-Cultural Ethics and Truth,” Cliff Christians (2003) argues that “In constructing this alternative [truth as disclosure] to the mainstream view [of truth], I consider a theological framework to be inescapable” (p. 295). Nevertheless we can argue that when, in the same article, Christians argues that in God’s creation “speech is ordered to truth” just as “vegetables are ordered to people as food” (p. 298), and that “truth as disclosure and authenticity is rooted in our creatureliness” (p. 299), this perspective resonates with Habermas’s notion that truthfulness is an inescapable presupposition of any communicative speech act.
Nancy Fraser (1992). Though Martha Nussbaum’s approach (2008; 2001; 1990) is more akin to John Rawls’s, I nevertheless find it likewise compatible with a revised Habermasian project.  

The key critiques these authors level at Habermas’s work have to do with the normative dimensions of his work, his conceptions of public space, and his notions of the self. For example, Benhabib questions Habermas’s distinction between public and private—between public justice and private morality. His distinction between public and private leads him to ignore issues of the politics of identity, leaving him open to accusations that his understanding of the self is disembodied and disembedded. Benhabib therefore defends the notion of a “situated self,” where the general and concrete “other” are understood to exist on a continuum, and where public debates are not limited in scope or topic. In addition, by insisting on matters of public justice and rejecting any discussion of “the good,” Benhabib claims that Habermas opens himself to accusations that he is gender-blind, ignoring the very real moral problems that arise in the private space of the home, including issues of gender, sexuality, love, intimacy, and children. His emphasis on public justice leaves certain groups and topics out of the conversation.

Nancy Fraser (1992) outlines similar concerns about Habermas’s notion of the public sphere in her critique of “actually existing democracy,” and posits the notion of “counter-publics” and “subaltern spheres” in addition to the more unified notion of a “public sphere.” Her highly influential 1992 essay is still cited by contemporary feminists as a clear articulation of

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7 There is no consensus within feminist theory regarding these issues, and the authors I cite here are participants in an ongoing dispute among feminist theorists about the legitimacy of liberal democratic ideals. With regard to the issue of religion in the public sphere, there is no shortage of literature critiquing Enlightenment and contemporary liberal notions of religious toleration. As Lauren Goodlad notes, Saba Mahmood’s Politics of Piety (2005) constitutes an exemplary critique of the “normative presuppositions of secularism” (Goodlad, 2007, p. 142). Meanwhile Wendy Brown remains skeptical of liberalism’s notions of religious “tolerance,” which claim “to be universalizable without being culturally imperialist” (Brown, 2006a; quoted in Goodlad, 2007, p. 142; see also Brown, 2006b). Nevertheless, I find the arguments of Nussbaum, Benhabib, and Anderson more compelling and ultimately more pragmatically useful than those of their post-structuralist critics.
Habermas’s shortcomings (Anderson, 2006; Goodlad, 2007). While Fraser’s main concern is gender, her approach is likewise applicable to concerns about racial and ethnic minorities, as exemplified by Donald Browne’s (2005) examination of minority media.

Habermas has certainly acknowledged the seriousness of these concerns. While his early work neglects minority issues (Browne, 2005), his later work (Habermas, 1993; 1996; 1998) engages such issues more directly. “[T]he real citizens of contemporary liberal societies,” he notes, “are flesh and blood individuals who have grown up in different traditions and forms of life and owe their self-understanding to competing worldviews” (Habermas, 1993, p. 93; quoted in Browne, 2005, p. 219). In this context he asserts that “there must be a common basis on which mutual understanding of alien cultures, belief systems, paradigms and life forms is possible” (Habermas, 1993, p. 95; quoted in Browne, 2005, p. 219).

Despite such remarks, though, scholars such as Donald Browne have felt compelled to modify his approach, arguing that “[t]he concept of the public sphere as set forth by Habermas is too narrow to be readily applicable to ethnic minority media” (Browne, 2005, p. 203). In his wide-ranging study, Browne modifies Habermas’ approach to address ethnic minorities’ use of electronic media in over two dozen nations across the globe. Rather than relying solely on Habermas’ “national and all-inclusive” notion of the public sphere, Browne builds on Nancy Fraser’s (1992) feminist critique to posit the idea of multiple “mini-spheres” that serve “very specific, narrowly drawn communities.” Such a formulation is both necessary and realistic, for two reasons: first, such narrow areas are where “the vast majority of ethnic minority electronic media services operate” (Browne, 2005, p. 186); second, the broad public sphere that Habermas envisions is “becoming more difficult to sustain” because of the rapid growth of media services (broadcast, satellite, internet, cable, etc.) (Browne, 2005, p. 195). The important question is
whether such mini-spheres “exist in a state of balance with the broader public sphere”—that is, whether they promote participation only within their own communities or with the mainstream population as well (Browne, 2005, p. 193). In Browne’s estimation, a proper balance would constitute a complex public sphere where “ethnic minorities and the mainstream culture might acknowledge, understand, and value their similarities and differences” (Browne, 2005, p. 11). We must therefore evaluate mass media as a whole—as well as minority-owned media in particular—in terms of their ability to promote dialogue among these parties.

Such criticisms notwithstanding, certain key elements remain in feminist revisions of Habermas’s approach. Fraser (1992) is clear that some notion of the public sphere is necessary. Anderson, Benhabib, and Nussbaum all maintain a strong defense of the normative content of reason in moral argumentation (see esp. Benhabib, 2002; Nussbaum, 1990), and deny that such notions are antithetical to poststructuralist concerns (see especially Anderson, 2006). These authors also maintain some defense of universals as a necessary element in any viable political project (see esp. Benhabib, 2002; Nussbaum, 2001). Theirs is a historically self-conscious universalism that, like Habermas, avoids the traps of foundationalism. For example, Nussbaum avoids metaphysics in her adoption of Rawls’s notion of “overlapping consensus.” Likewise, Benhabib moves beyond Habermas’s “weak transcendentalism” by positing an “interactive universalism” in which universals themselves are understood as historically situated and therefore worthy of continued debate. The bottom line for these authors is that many postmodern and poststructuralist approaches do not provide a solid normative basis for social critique and engaged political action.

Gary Simpson’s (2002) discussion of theology and critical social theory addresses many of the same concerns raised by feminist authors. Like Benhabib, for example, he questions
Habermas’s rigid division between public and private and he insists that we view public argumentation as an ongoing process (pp. 139-140). But he also accepts Habermas’s idea of the colonization of the lifeworld by system imperatives, and he argues that the “rational criticism” offered by critical theory is a necessary supplement to the Christian tradition of “prophetic criticism.” Citing Paul Tillich, he argues that these two types of criticism “depend upon each other”—the former providing concreteness and the latter, depth (pp. 40-41). Reflecting on the colonizing effects of money and power, he insists that “surely nothing could be more interesting to the prophetic imagination” (p. 136). Habermas’s more recent discussions of religion likewise suggest that prophetic critique plays a productive role in civil society. I will return to this point later in this chapter.

These authors note that while Habermas has tended to neglect or mistreat issues of gender, race, and religion, the core concepts of his work are nevertheless compatible with—if not indispensible to—certain versions of contemporary theology and feminist theory. Keeping in mind the caveats outlined above, the following sections therefore outline some of these core concepts and demonstrate their relevance to contemporary debates about the role of religion in public life.

The Theory of Communicative Action

Habermas’s theory of communicative action contains several of his most influential concepts. In articulating this theory, Habermas has three main goals. First, he aims to outline the theoretical grounds for social critique. Specifically, he defends the normative content of human reason and rationality, as embodied in human communication. Second, he wishes to employ a

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8 Amanda Anderson defends Habermas’ emphasis on reason in *The Way We Argue Now* (2006). This is notable because in this sense she sets herself apart from many other feminists who critique the emphasis on reason.
methodology that incorporates both normative and empirical approaches. More specifically, he aims to incorporate approaches that focus on the social “lifeworld” (namely the hermeneutics and phenomenology of scholars like Gadamer) while also incorporating approaches that focus on social “systems” (namely the sociology of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann). And third, he specifically wishes to offer means of critiquing or diagnosing the pathologies of contemporary culture, especially late capitalism. In all of these goals, he wishes to ground his arguments in something more universal and stable than the mere settled convictions of his own culture. He does this through an examination of language, communication, and developmental psychology. In the context of postmodern theory, these three goals together constitute a bold program indeed, as his chief translator and critic Thomas McCarthy has noted (Habermas, 1991, p. ix-x).

The two volumes of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1985a; 1985b) deal with distinct but related issues. The first volume discusses the notion of social rationalization as discussed by Weber. The second volume outlines Habermas’ distinction between “lifeworld” and “system,” which is intended to address some of the problems with Weber’s understanding of modernity. The end result is an emphasis on communicative rationality, which in Habermas’ formulation has distinct emancipatory potential.

Weber’s notion of social rationalization in modernity is the key to Habermas’ theory of communicative action, so it is worth reviewing briefly. Weber characterized modernity as a process wherein different “values spheres” (chiefly science, morality, and art) became differentiated from one another. “Cultural modernity’s specific dignity is constituted by what Max Weber called the differentiation of value spheres in accord with their own logics,” Habermas (1987) explained in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (p. 112; quoted in Wilber, 2000a:426). “By the end of the eighteenth century,” according to Habermas (1987),
“science, morality, and art were even institutionally differentiated as realms of activity in which questions of truth, of justice, and of taste were autonomously elaborated, that is, each of these spheres of knowing [was pursued] under its own specific aspect of validity” (p. 19; quoted in Wilber 2000a:426). However, Weber claims that the domain of science, and its associated cognitive-instrumental rationality, came to dominate the whole of modern society. The process resulted in increased bureaucratization, with an emphasis on efficiency and system imperatives. Weber conceived of this process as a tragic one, and summarized it in his troubling metaphor of an “iron cage.”

Habermas borrows heavily from Weber in his own understanding of social rationalization. He agrees that modernity is characterized by a process of differentiation between value spheres, and he agrees that instrumental rationality came to dominate. But he insists that the “iron cage” that Weber imagines is not a solid as it first appears:

He [Weber] is convinced that the ‘distillation of the specific peculiarity of every sphere that crops up in the world’ brings out ever harsher incompatibilities and conflicts that are grounded in the inner logics of the value spheres. But this critique refers not to the differentiation of the inner logics of individual value spheres but to some value spheres becoming predominant at the expense of others. (Habermas, 1985a, p. 183. Italics added.)

Unlike Weber, Habermas claims that the dominance of instrumental rationality is a problem specific to the dynamics of late capitalism, not modernity itself. Habermas sees the differentiation of value spheres and the rationalization of society as having an “internal logic” that is universal in import. In itself, this process is not tragic or oppressive but developmental. Furthermore, Weber’s approach (and its critical appropriation by Horkheimer and Adorno) over-emphasized instrumental rationality, failing to recognize that a unique and equally important type of rationality develops within each value sphere. For example in the sphere of morality—

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9 As Wilber notes, the philosophical pinnacle of this differentiation is represented by Kant’s three critiques: objective science (Critique of Pure Reason), morality (Critique of Practical Reason), and aesthetics (Critique of Judgement).
once dominated by religion—a reflexive, communicative rationality develops that is subsequently embodied in modern legal institutions. The sphere of art, similarly, is associated with an expressive rationality embodied in the development of modern notions of artistic and aesthetic critique (Omachonu and Healey, 2009).

Habermas’ reinterpretation of Weber’s theory of social rationalization hinges on the distinction between “lifeworld” and “system.” The social lifeworld consists of those value spheres and rationality types that are not governed (though still dependent upon) system imperatives. Art, law, morality, and religion, for example, constitute the social lifeworld. Meanwhile science, technology, economics, and state bureaucracy constitute the system domain. The central thesis of The Theory of Communicative Action is that as modernity unfolded, system imperatives began to dominate and undermine the rational capacities of the lifeworld. The “steering media” of modern social systems—money and power—began to pressure the social lifeworld to conform to their own logic. Seyla Benhabib (1986) describes this as a paradoxical process, since it was the emergence of lifeworld rationality (namely communicative rationality and self-reflection) that made the development of complex systems possible in the first place (p. 236). State bureaucracies and economic markets became the Frankenstein monsters that turned on their creator. The chief pathology of modernity, therefore, is what Habermas calls the “colonization of the lifeworld by system imperatives.”

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10 This is a problem that Habermas began to articulate in some of his earlier work, such as Legitimation Crisis (1975), in which he claims that as system imperatives become dominant, the state has to intervene in the lifeworld to correct subsequent problems. But the state cannot provide the motivational basis to justify its strategies, because such motivation can only arise from the lifeworld itself. Hence there arises a legitimation crisis in which people begin to demand justification for increased state action.
Religion and the Differentiation of Value Spheres

The problem of “colonization” has important implications for the relationship between religion and other value spheres, such as science or politics. In Situating the Self (1992), Benhabib explains how the differentiation of value spheres has impacted the relationship between religion and science. Traditional religious value systems operated with an apparent unity of cosmology and morality, not because these two domains were entirely integrated but because they had not become differentiated in the first place. Modernity, Benhabib notes, subjects that unity to “radical dismemberment” with the differentiation of value spheres and the “separation of fact and value”—a process that “places additional burdens of justification upon the claims of those that would proceed from their given unity” (Benhabib, 1992, p. 41).

As the value spheres of religion and science become differentiated, each develops its own processes of discursive justification. Neither Habermas nor Benhabib suggest that one type of justification—theological or scientific—is more valuable than the other. On the contrary: each plays an important role. But as each sphere develops according to its own logic, the traditional unity of cosmology and morality cannot be regained except through rhetorical contortions that defy the developmental imperatives of modernity. As Benhabib explains, “[t]he cumulative logic of these ‘sphere specific’ processes of discursive justification cannot be simply subverted” (Benhabib, 1992, p. 41). As discussed in subsequent chapters, the recurrent efforts to defend “creation science” or “intelligent design” are attempts to do just that.

Similar tensions arise between the spheres of religion and politics. From Habermas’s perspective, it is precisely the differentiation of these value spheres that constitutes the “dignity” of modernity. The ideals of democracy, separation of church and state, individual freedom, etc. are only possible if these value spheres are properly differentiated. As discussed in subsequent
chapters, the founding fathers—especially Madison and Jefferson—considered the separation of church and state to be necessary for the protection and flourishing of religious freedom. However, American history is punctuated by religious movements that seek to overturn this differentiation. As discussed later, for example, some contemporary radical Pentecostal movements move beyond mere anti-intellectualism into an outright rejection of deliberative institutions as “demonic” (Wilson, 2008; Healey, 2010a). Leaders of the so-called “spiritual warfare” movement advocate a militant return to the purity that allegedly preceded the European Enlightenment (Wilson, 2008). From the perspective of Habermas’s developmental theory of communication (1979) and more recent approaches based on his work (Wilber, 1998, 2000), such movements are frankly regressive in effect.

Discourse Ethics and the Problem of Strategic Action

While Habermas’ understanding of social rationalization serves as a means of diagnosing the problems of modernity in late capitalism, his theory of discourse ethics offers a utopian vision of the emancipatory potential of communicative rationality (Habermas, 1979). For Habermas, the achievement of balance between system and lifeworld depends on the ability of individuals to develop the universal capacity for rational, self-reflective communicative competence. Only communicative rationality can sustain the processes of social integration, cultural reproduction, and socialization (Benhabib, 1986, p. 236). The rationalization of the lifeworld is therefore not inherently problematic (as both religious conservatives and postmodernists argue) but rather an incomplete process. The ongoing rationalization of the lifeworld requires an increase in argumentative practices that can catalyze the communicative competence of individuals (Benhabib, 1986, p. 242). With this goal in mind, Habermas outlines
his program of discourse ethics, which examines the universal features of human communicative rationality and provides specific procedural tools for enhancing the process of moral argumentation.

In his program of discourse ethics, Habermas argues that moral theory must be understood not in terms of Kant’s solitary ego but “in the form of an analysis of moral argumentation” (Habermas, 1991, p. 57). Though he acknowledges the debt owed by any form of cognitivist ethics to “the basic intuition contained in Kant’s categorical imperative,” Habermas insists that moral reasoning must be understood dialogically—as a capacity that emerges from intersubjective communication rather than from the silent reflections of a solitary individual. (Habermas, 1991, p. 63) This dialogical approach leads Habermas to focus on procedural norms that would allow moral reasoning to unfold according to its own logic. Habermas refuses to prescribe specific ethical formulas. Rather, as Thomas McCarthy explains, discourse ethics “confines itself to the limited task of reconstructing the moral point of view, leaving all concrete moral and ethical judgments to the participants themselves” (Habermas, 1991, p. xi).

The basic principle of discourse ethics is the idea that only those social norms can be valid that meet, or could potentially meet, with the approval of individuals engaged in practical discourse (Habermas, 1991). Habermas argues that certain rules or norms of argumentation are implicit in all such practical discourse, and by reconstructing these implicit rules we can imagine an “ideal speech situation” that serves as a counterfactual ideal against which we can judge the quality of communication in the public sphere. Such rules, which he claims are “not mere conventions” but “inescapable presuppositions” of moral argumentation, include the following: that everyone competent to speak is allowed to participate; that everyone can question any
assertion and introduce any new assertion; and that no one can be prevented from exercising such rights (Habermas, 1991, p. 89).

Importantly for the current discussion, Habermas claims that not all social action is motivated by such normative presuppositions. Here his distinction between communicative action and strategic action is fundamental. While communicative action is oriented toward understanding, and always presupposes such normative rules, strategic action is oriented merely toward success:

Whereas in strategic action the actor seeks to influence the behavior of another by means of the threat of sanctions or the prospect of gratification in order to cause the interaction to continue as the first actor desires, in communicative action one actor seeks rationally to motivate another by relying on the illocutionary binding/bonding effect… of the offer contained in his speech act. (Habermas, 1991, p. 58)

Furthermore, social action is communicative when participants “coordinate their plans of action consensually, with the agreement reached at any point being evaluated in terms of the inter-subjective recognition of validity claims” (Habermas, 1991, p. 58). There are three basic types of validity claims: claims to truth, claims to rightness, and claims to sincerity\(^\text{11}\). These correspond to the objective world, the inter-subjective social world, and the subjective world, respectively.

To put it simply, when people engage in some form of argumentation, with at least the pretense of trying to understand each other\(^\text{12}\), the following questions always arise: “Are you being sincere—i.e., saying what you really mean? Is what you’re saying consistent with some set of values that we can agree on? And, is what you’re saying factually accurate?” Implicit in every communicative speech act is the guarantee that the speaker can and will, if necessary, “make efforts to redeem the claim that the hearer has accepted” (Habermas, 1991, p. 58). While the

\(^{11}\) Technically, Habermas’s three main validity claims all presuppose a fourth claim—that of basic comprehensibility.

\(^{12}\) Habermas (1985a, 1985b) makes a clear distinction between “strategic” and “communicative” action, only the latter of which is geared towards mutual understanding. My analysis blurs this distinction by suggesting that people can engage in both simultaneously.
claims of truth and rightness are redeemable discursively, though, the claim of sincerity is more a matter of correspondence between an individual’s actions and his statements. Additionally, in strategic action the validity claim of sincerity is suspended altogether (Habermas, 1979, p. 41).

The displacement of communicative by mere strategic action—one element of the so-called “colonization of the lifeworld”—thus contributes directly to the increased salience of concerns about sincerity. In his essay “What is Universal Pragmatics,” Habermas explains that in strategic action, the presumption of sincerity (here, “truthfulness”) is suspended:

It seems to me that strategic action (“oriented to the actor’s success”—in general, modes of action that correspond to the utilitarian model of purpose-rational action)… differ[s] from communicative action in that individual validity claims are suspended (in strategic action, truthfulness…) (Habermas, 1979, p. 41).

In this light, public concerns about sincerity (of individuals and organizations alike) are well-founded. They reflect a valid concern about the encroachment of strategic action into the social lifeworld.

Religion and the “Spiral of Insincerity”

In this context, questions about the religious faith of political candidates become more pervasive. Clyde Wilcox explains that since voters do not know what issues will be important in the coming years, they want to know which candidates they can trust, and who will represent their interests. “They need to tell you something authentic about what they care about. Religion is one of the shortcuts we use to determine what people care about” (Wilcox, October 22, 2007). John Green notes that while candidates have always talked about their faith in introducing themselves to the public, their comments need appear genuine because the public reacts negatively to a perception of religious insincerity (Campbell, 2007). This is the problem that plagued Mitt Romney, for example, in his presidential run. Newsweek noted that “Romney's
turnaround on the burning social issues of gay rights, stem-cell research and abortion has raised questions about the candidate's sincerity—a dangerous doubt at a time when voters seem to crave authenticity” (Darman, 2007). To address such concerns, many candidates enroll what Jacques Berlinerblau calls “spiritual mentors”:

Faith is such an interior thing, sequestered under the carapace of a politician’s guile. Who knows if a candidate’s external professions of faith are genuine? That’s where spiritual mentors come in. They are witnesses to the authenticity of their charge’s beliefs. They vouch for the sincerity of a politician’s stated religious convictions. (Berlinerblau, 2007)

Sometimes such mentors serve this function well, but as the controversy around Barack Obama’s pastor Rev. Jeremiah Wright demonstrates, it can also cause significant problems. Evangelicals such as John MacArthur, president of the Master’s College, also raise the concern that candidates may make gestures toward religious faith for merely political purposes:

You have all kinds of people who are not fundamental, biblical Christians now talking like Christians because they see some political ground to be gained by that… I mean, the latest reports on all the candidates now, everybody sounds like a Christian. Everybody sounds very religious. This is unacceptable because now we've allowed any kind of definition to religion, to God, to Christianity.” (King, 2007)

Such concerns have contributed to the increased tensions between the GOP and its evangelical base.

While there are relatively simple and pragmatic reasons for the increased salience of concerns about religious sincerity among the public, therefore, the presence of these concerns also generates incentives for politicians and public officials to appropriate religious rhetoric for merely strategic purposes. The increase in such strategic communications, in turn, only heightens the salience of concerns about religious sincerity. I refer to this vicious cycle as a “spiral of insincerity.” Sociologists have noted similar patterns with regard to the closely-related concept of authenticity. As Charles Lindholm (2008) explains, “commodified and media-saturated
consumption has expanded to fill the void created by deep suspicions about the authenticity of commodified, media-saturated consumption, creating ‘a culture forever wedded to a dialectic between authenticity and imitation’” (p. 58)\(^\text{13}\). Thus the pathologies of modernity include both a “spiral of insincerity” and a parallel “spiral of inauthenticity.”

As Lindolm suggests, the dynamics of commercial media tend to exacerbate the focus on claims of sincerity and authenticity. As noted previously Habermas claims that, unlike truth and rightness claims, sincerity claims cannot be redeemed discursively—only through the consistency of one’s actions. “In the case of claims to truth or rightness,” he explains, “the speaker can redeem his guarantee discursively, that is, by adducing reasons; in the case of claims to truthfulness [i.e, sincerity] he does so through consistent behavior. (Habermas, 1991, p.59) Clearly, this does not mean that sincerity claims cannot or should not serve as the focus of public debate. As Christians and his co-authors explain, “[p]olitical communication should include a place for the personal and emotional concerns of the private sphere” (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, and White, 2009, p. 225). However, the fact that sincerity claims cannot ultimately be redeemed through rational argumentation generates opportunities for extended speculation and unfounded accusations about the character of public figures. In a media environment geared less toward rational debate or reasonable investigation, and more toward sensationalism and imagery, sincerity claims are likely to move to the center of attention (Barber, 2007; Postman, 1985; Gitlin, 2001). Furthermore, as a shortcut for discerning an individual’s authentic concerns, religion is likely to serve as the specific subject matter of such debate.

\(^\text{13}\) Here Lindholm quotes Orvell & Trachtenberg (1989).
Beyond Sincerity and Authenticity

As the discussion above indicates, the notions of sincerity and authenticity are closely related. In fact, in colloquial speech the terms are often used interchangeably. However, the terms have a specific meaning within Habermas’s theory of communicative action. At the same time, they carry broader cultural meanings that are not so tightly delineated, and that often color how Habermas’s ideas are received. This section clarifies the relationship between these different meanings, and the following section and offers a framework for applying these concepts to the public role of religion.

In Habermas’s approach, the distinction between sincerity and authenticity is fairly clear. Sincerity refers specifically to an individual’s self-representation in communicative action. Habermas gives primary attention to sincerity because it is a validity claim that accompanies specific instances of explicit, verbal communication. Importantly, he makes a clear delineation between sincerity and the other two main validity claims—normative rightness and empirical truth. Authenticity, on the other hand, refers more generally to one’s way of life or what he calls the “ethical life” of individuals grounded in the social lifeworld (Habermas, 1993). As Gary Davis explains, “authenticity tends to pertain to living a life; genuineness pertains, for Habermas, to intentional stances in interaction” (Davis, 2007). For this reason, for Habermas authenticity is primarily a concern related to one’s private life, while the issue of sincerity is more likely become a matter of public concern.

Of course, broader cultural understandings of sincerity and authenticity do not fall into such tightly delineated categories. As Lionel Trilling demonstrates in his well-noted collection of essays, Sincerity and Authenticity (1980 [original 1972]), these two notions share a common and very troubled history. The primary issue is that while sincerity is generally associated with
conservative values, authenticity is associated with liberal ones (Anderson, 2006; Taylor, 1991).

In other words, in colloquial speech sincerity and authenticity are understood not as validity claims distinct from claims to normative rightness but as cultural norms themselves. These associations are present within contemporary scholarly discourse as well as in the general culture, with important political consequences.

In contemporary use, sincerity usually means “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (Trilling, 1980, p.4). This definition is consistent with Habermas’s formulation. However, the word retains an older sense of meaning “the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one’s own self,” which carries a suggestion of social conformity. Sincerity was “a salient, perhaps a definitive, characteristic of Western culture for some four hundred years” (Trilling, 1980, p.7), but has been displaced by more recent notions of authenticity, which idealize the creative transgression of social norms (see also Ferrara, 2009). As Charles Lindholm (2008) explains, “the shift is from being as one appears, to discovering what one truly is” (p. 4). Charles Taylor (1991) argues that this tension permeates Western culture broadly, such that many public debates arise between conservative “knockers” and liberal “boosters” of contemporary notions of authenticity.

The same tension is palpable in contemporary social theory. Since Habermas (1991) posits sincerity as a “universal presupposition” of practical discourse, his proceduralist approach has faced criticism from poststructuralists, who tend to espouse socially transgressive notions of authenticity. But as Anderson (2006) notes, Habermas does not understand sincerity as a kind of character virtue, which would confuse it with “older sincerity paradigms” (p. 169). On the contrary, his approach represents “a dialectical overcoming of the sincerity/authenticity

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14 In other words, while Habermas defines sincerity (or truthfulness) strictly in terms of the congruence between an individual’s explicit verbal statements and his subjective feelings, in colloquial terms “sincerity” also refers to a set of social norms that could be redeemed discursively through claims to “normative rightness.”
problematic” by suggesting that both values serve an important social function (p. 187). Sincerity “interrogates society on its own terms” and “allows one to charge a political system or its rulers with forms of hypocrisy, bad faith, or bald political maneuvering” (p. 165). Nevertheless authenticity “operates in proceduralism as the progressive expansion of horizons and enlargement of perspective that defines universalist argument” (p. 171). Taylor (1991) likewise refuses to define authenticity in strict opposition to social norms, arguing that it is compatible with notions of solidarity, community, and relationship. In this sense, authenticity is a valid moral ideal that we can argue about through reason, where such arguments can make a difference (p. 23). Gubrium and Holstein (2009) offer a similarly nuanced position, as does Ferrara (1998) in his discussion of “reflective” authenticity.

**Authenticity and Prophetic Critique**

Such nuanced theorizations of the sincerity/authenticity dialectic are helpful in approaching religion in the public sphere. Habermas (2006b) argues that while religious believers are free to express themselves in doctrinal terms in the public sphere, once they decide to enter the political realm (e.g., to hold political office) they are obliged to “translate” their worldview into secular or non-doctrinal terms. Indeed theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr have held similar views. Summarizing Niebuhr’s view, Christian ethicist Ronald Stone suggests that “[r]eligious language should be inspired by love but translated through the vocabulary of justice into the political realm” (Cipolla, 2007). But this process of “translation” does not represent a loss of authenticity. Rather, it involves a commitment to an ongoing “expansion of horizons” that Anderson (2006) cites as the “authenticating ethos” of moral argumentation (p.

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15 When understood as cultural norms, authenticity and sincerity can become the subject of rational debate, and claims about these norms can be redeemed discursively as claims to normative rightness.
For Habermas (2006c, p. 416) and other scholars (Hoover, 1998), journalists have a similar obligation to catalyze such translation.

Despite this formal “translation” requirement, Habermas has recently argued that religious belief plays an important role in public life. As a rich cultural source distinct from the constitutional state, religious belief can help to fend off the processes of colonization that constitute the pathology of modernity (De Vries, 2006, p. 51). In this sense, Habermas also allows room for the strain of religious engagement that religious scholars call “prophetic”—variously termed “prophetic critique,” “prophetic witness,” or “prophetic imagination” (Patton, 2007; Schultze, 2003; Brueggemann, 2001; Christians, 1989; Simpson, 2002).

In some ways, prophetic critique resonates with contemporary descriptions of authenticity as “creative transgression” of social norms—for example, Trilling’s suggestion that the life of the authentic artist “is intended to disturb us and make us dissatisfied with our habitual life and culture” (Appiah, 1994, pp. 152-153). Indeed in “Characteristics of the Prophet,” Paul Patton (2007) adopts Abraham Joshua Heschel’s description of the prophet as one whose “words are often slashing, even horrid—designed to shock rather than to edify.” In other ways, though, prophetic rhetoric engages the more conservative ideal of sincerity, which “keeps alive the notion of accountability to social forms and practices that. . . have been granted legitimacy through consent, accreted custom, and/or reflective endorsement” (Anderson, 2006, p. 165).

In his speeches, Martin Luther King, Jr. exemplified both strains of critique. As George Shulman (2008) argues, leaders such as King mobilized prophetic rhetoric “to depict accountability, to affirm democratic commitments, and to redefine collective purpose” (p. xiii). Such is the case in his “I Have a Dream” speech and his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” As
Gary Simpson (2002) explains, this type of “immanent critique” “holds the reigning society accountable to its own normative standards and suggests reforms that will bring conformity to its original ideals” (p. 127). On the other hand, King’s “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” (1967a) and “Why I am Opposed to the War in Vietnam” (1967b) are more confrontational and transgressive. As Melissa Harris-Lacewell argues, such powerful rhetoric is precisely what made Lyndon Johnson’s efforts for civil rights legislation possible (Moyers, 2009). In this way, Shulman (2008) claims, “registers of speech we find disturbing or potentially antidemocratic can perform truly democratizing and politicizing work” (p. xv).

At the same time, while secular democratic institutions depend on prophetic critique, they also provide a counter-balance to its potential excesses. As Simpson (2002) argues, prophetic critique has a tendency to become abstract, and often “instrumentalizes... the suffering and oppression of others for the self-preservation of the prophet’s or the prophetic community’s authenticity” (p. 130). Prophetic critique can thus devolve into a “prideful or despairing form” unless held to the more concrete standards of rational criticism (p. 130).

Thus the tensions between democratic liberalism and authentic selfhood are more complex than either left-leaning “boosters” or right-leaning “knockers” of authenticity might claim (e.g., post-structural theorists and religious conservatives, respectively). While democratic proceduralism might tend to reinforce the status quo, the requirement of doctrinal translation nevertheless contains an authenticating ethos in the form of an ongoing expansion of horizons. At the same time, while prophetic rhetoric tends toward a creative transgression of social structures, it often exhibits a demand for sincerity in the sense of an expanded integrity of institutions. While scholars like Habermas and Anderson have clarified the ethics of the
translation process, theologians like Gary Simpson (2002), Charles Mathewes (2007), and William Cavanaugh (2002) have formulated approaches that bring religious communities into the discursive fold. In these ways both religious and secular scholars have begun to formulate a more robust, communicative vision of the role of religion in the public sphere (Elgendy, 2008).

*Electronic Media and the “Flattening” of Authenticity*

Unfortunately, the political economy of mass media tends to mitigate against such a complex dialectic. Religious adherents from conservative and liberal traditions alike have often ceded to the demands of commercial media by downplaying prophetic rhetoric (Schultze, 2003). At the same time, the de-contextualized nature of commercial news allows little room for well-informed argument leading to an expansion of interpretive horizons (Bennett, 2007). Thus while sincerity and authenticity are central to mass-mediated public discourse—often to the exclusion of claims to normative rightness and empirical truth—debates about these issues unfold in a manner that is highly fragmented and de-contextualized. Coverage of these issues tends to be overly-simplistic or “flat” (Taylor, 1991). Those religious and political leaders who appreciate the production tension between prophetic critique and democratic institutions are therefore caught in what Taylor (1991) describes as “a continuing struggle to realize higher and fuller modes of authenticity against the resistance of the flatter and shallower forms” (p. 94; quoted in Christians, review of Taylor, 1994, p. 170).

As one of the most influential pieces of scholarship to deal with issues of authenticity and electronic media, Joshua Meyrowitz’s *No Sense of Place* (1985) serves as an illuminating point of contrast to the current project.\(^\text{16}\) In his appropriation of Erving Goffman, Meyrowitz claims

\(^{16}\) *No Sense of Place* has been widely cited in a variety of fields beyond communication and media studies, including political science, psychiatry, philosophy, and social work (Lindlof, 1996).
that by allowing social groups to peer into each other’s “back stage” behavior, electronic media “move people informationally to the same ‘place’” (p. 145). While others have noted electronic media’s tendency to foreground dramaturgy and emotion over substantive argument (Couch, 1995; Bennett, 2007), Meyrowitz draws conclusions that are much more sanguine. He suggests even in his more recent work that “electronic media such as television (which generally integrate experiences for people of different races and both sexes) tend to have an egalitarian influence. Thus, it could be argued that television, in spite of its often repressive content, is a potentially liberating medium” (Meyrowitz, 1999, p. 50. Italics original).

A number of scholars have issued critiques of Meyrowitz’ work. Carl Couch argues that "instead of creating no sense of place or rendering social relationships of no consequence, the use of the electronic media is eroding some social relationships and creating new ones” (1995, p. 240). In his ten-year retrospective essay on No Sense of Place, Thomas Lindlof (1996) likewise argues that “rather than erasing the relevance of location, media are being used to redefine the functions of place.” Lindlof concludes that “a new version of No Sense of Place. . . would need to reconfigure the concept of the back region to include not only the media representation, but the methods and consequences of the corporate or state control of the representation.” The current project therefore responds to Lindlof’s call by incorporating insights from cultural studies and political economy into a revised understanding of the “stage” metaphor.

Goffman assumed that social actors keep front and back stages separate, and for this reason dramaturgy is preoccupied with issues of reality and illusion (Denzin, 2002, p.107). But Denzin (2002) argues that, in fact, “there are no originals against which illusions are measured”; instead, “there are only performances and stories about performances” (pp.108-109). But as
Paletz and Entman (1981) argue, media coverage of these performances and stories tends to emphasize “the surface appearances, the furious sounds and fiery sights of battle, the well-known or colorful personalities involved—whatever is dramatic. Underlying causes and actual impacts are little noted nor long remembered” (p. 17. Quoted in Bennett, 2007, p. 51). Bennett (2007) adds that, because stories are presented in highly emotional fragments, “people are invited all the more to project their own interpretations onto the world.” Instead of generating deeper insight and understanding, “information is either cast adrift or assimilated into old plot formulas” (pp. 58-59).

Rather than simply blurring the lines between static spaces of identity, then, electronic media generates opportunities for various interest groups to actively construct competing models and interpretations of front- and back stage behavior. Of course, debates about the hidden behaviors or motives of public figures are not without merit. Again, as Habermas (1979) claims, the chief pathology of modernity is the degradation of public life by mere strategic action, which carries no presumption of sincerity (p. 41). Because coverage of such debates is de-contextualized and fragmented, however, it tends to re-enforce existing prejudices rather than creating an opportunity for substantive discussion. Political interest groups have learned to exploit this dynamic, and thus elections are often punctuated by moments when rival campaigns attempt to manufacture public “epiphanies” that alter the course of an election (Denzin, 2009; 2002). The latter chapters of this project will demonstrate that, while this issue is pervasive in the radio and television eras, new media sources like YouTube and web logs have exacerbated these tendencies.
In these ways, electronic media lead to a “flattening” of public discourses of authenticity. Popular debates assume essentialist or realist notions of authenticity rather than more nuanced interpretive understandings (Vannini and Williams, 2009). An important consequence is that the public might become concerned about an issue that does not warrant sustained scrutiny, while ignoring an issue that does—thus thwarting the relevance-filtering and critical gate-keeping functions of journalism (Hove and Jackson, 2008). As discussed in later chapters, the contrast in coverage of Sarah Palin and Jeremiah Wright demonstrates this issue precisely. While electronic media may in some ways disrupt our “sense of place,” therefore, in other ways such technologies provide avenues for reinforcing it, often with results that are more constraining than liberating.

A Statement of Normative Principles

In light of these concerns, we can outline some basic normative principles for our evaluation of religious discourse in the networked public sphere. First, we must ask whether such discourse involves the assertion and redemption of all three types of validity claims—sincerity, normative rightness, and empirical truth. From the perspective of deliberative theory, mass media—especially news sources—have an obligation to navigate the delicate balance between these types of validity claims (Habermas, 2006c). The following chapters—especially those examining contemporary case studies—will demonstrate that discussions of religion in the networked public sphere tend to gravitate toward issues of sincerity and authenticity, at the unfortunate expense of other issues such as the separation of church and state (“normative rightness”), or the relative validity of evolution versus creationism (“empirical truth”). An improvement in practice would entail not only a strengthening of communicative action, but an achievement of some measure of balance or integration—in the sense of a productive tension—between the value spheres of religion, politics, and science.
Secondly, when issues of sincerity and authenticity are addressed, the networked public sphere must allow for the type of nuanced dialectic between these values that Anderson (2006) articulates. On one hand (via the cultural value of sincerity), it must allow for communication that reinforces solidarity, community, and the integrity of existing institutions. This task can be accomplished both through institutional political leadership and certain modes of prophetic critique. On the other hand, it must allow for communication that challenges the established order. This task is typically the domain of the more transgressive modes of prophetic critique.

As Gary Simpson (2002) explains, however, the colonization of the lifeworld by money and power tends to thwart the productive role of prophetic critique in civil society. The chapters that follow demonstrate that commercialization not only tends to sideline prophetic critique, but also makes it difficult for leaders to navigate the line between prophetic critique and mere demagoguery, consumer-oriented marketing, and the pursuit of personal ambition. As they enter the fray, religious and political leaders must continually make such distinctions, and audiences must also exercise discernment in responding to media coverage of these leaders and organizations. The case studies that follow—especially those of Jim Wallis, Jeremiah Wright, and Sarah Palin—all demonstrate these tensions in different ways.

According to Cliff Christians, social researchers (2007) and news media (2004, 2003) each bear a unique responsibility in providing the tools for such moral discernment. It is not only imperative for social research to indicate what authentic social existence involves (1990); such research must itself catalyze the process by which readers can achieve such an existence (2007). “Those who gain their own voice about their moral bearings,” he concludes, “are empowered to move their culture in whatever direction they choose” (2007, p. 443). Critical scholarship can
provide a kind of moral compass for those who seek to exercise prophetic critique in the public sphere (Healey, 2010b).

At the same time, mass media have a responsibility for moving beyond flat, essentialist notions of authenticity. Christians (2004) criticizes mainstream journalism for “crudely tailoring events into a cosmetic cohesion” (p. 46) and for “reducing social issues to the financial and administrative problems defined by politicians (2003, p. 300). Instead, he argues on behalf of “a more sophisticated concept” than traditional notions of professional objectivity—namely, “truth in journalism as authentic disclosure” (Christians, 2004, p. 46). But Christians demands a high degree of “precision in disclosure and authenticity” (p. 46). Drawing from Bonhoeffer, he argues that “telling the truth depends on the quality of discernment so that penultimates do not gain ultimacy” (2004, p. 46). In its ideal form, Christians (2003) argues, “the news media disclose and lay open to enable people to judge authenticity themselves” (p. 300). In this way, news can become “a catalyst for moral agency” (Christians, 2004, p. 52).

The chapters that follow provide a critique of how the commercialization of mass media has thwarted the achievement of these basic normative principles. The next section (Chapters 3 through 6), which provides a history of media and religion in American culture, demonstrates the process of lifeworld colonization as commercial values hindered the potential for productive, prophetic critique in the public sphere. The case studies that follow (Chapters 7 through 9) focus primarily on how, in recent years, this process of colonization takes the form of an over-emphasis on “flat” discourses of sincerity and authenticity. In this environment, debates about religion often serve as a proxy for underlying tensions around race, class, or gender. In this way, debates about religious faith highlight important cultural fault lines but usually fail to measure up to the sophisticated “ethics of authenticity” that scholars like Taylor (1991) and Christians (2004,
2003) demand. While new media such as YouTube and blogs are central to these trends, the
problems that arise are not inherent to new media per se but arise from the complex interactions
between established “old media” regimes and new sources. Rather than offering a simplistic
version of technological determinism, then, the argument presented here suggests that new media
form an integral part of an emerging “environment of power” in which material and political
relationships are constructed and obscured in increasingly complex ways (Barnhurst and Nerone,
2001, p. 9). The achievement of a more robust public discourse depends in part on understanding
how journalists, news pundits, bloggers, politicians, and religious leaders position new media
sources in the ongoing construction of “the public.” As the following cases demonstrate, while
such sources may sometimes serve as tools of empowerment, they also tend to mislead, provide a
false sense of insight and certainty, or simply fail to live up to their potential. Thus they lend
themselves to strategic exploitation by competing interest groups. Such is the environment in
which the current critical juncture in American religious politics continues to unfold.
PART 1
PROPHETS IN THE MARKETPLACE:
MEDIA AND RELIGION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE
CHAPTER 3

THE FOUNDING VISION:
A NEW RELIGIOUS ECONOMY

Torrents of blood have been spilt in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious discord [sic], by proscribing all difference in Religious opinion. Time has at length revealed the true remedy.
– James Madison, *Memorial and Remonstrance*, 1785

In this section, I examine the parallels between European Enlightenment thought and the Founding Fathers’ understanding of the place of religion in the new Republic. Specifically, I argue that Adam Smith’s approach to economics and religion was highly influential to James Madison’s thinking as he argued for disestablishment in Virginia and later in the new federal government. By revisiting Smith’s influence, as well as the Founders’ understanding of press freedom, we gain a new understanding of the relationship between religion and mass media in the early Republic.

The First Amendment’s protections for religious equality and freedom of the press encapsulate a vision of a new religious economy based on competition between multiple sects in the context of a diverse and well-subsidized media system. Understood as such, the First Amendment generates a space in which the prophetic potential of both religious and secular voices can emerge to challenge established power. However, beginning in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, trends toward commercialization and corporate control thwarted this vision. The resulting media environment tends to subvert the prophetic potential of the religious and secular press, while opening the door to collusion between religious organizations and political power. Contemporary misreadings of Smith and the First Amendment only allow such
developments to become further entrenched. This discussion therefore serves the pragmatic goal of buttressing contemporary arguments for prophetic media reform by countering received narratives of religion and media in the early Republic.

**Adam Smith’s Approach to Religious Economy**

The Founding Fathers, and the philosophers who inspired them, were clearly influenced by the religious turmoil and strife that characterized Europe during the period of the Protestant Reformation. The establishment of the Church of England, the persecution of Protestants under the Catholic Restoration, the imposition of the Elizabethan Settlement, the English civil wars, the founding of the Commonwealth, the Restoration of the monarchy, the Glorious Revolution—all of these events raised questions about religious tolerance, liberty of conscience, and the desirability of religious establishments. Key philosophers like John Milton and John Locke lived in the thick of these tumultuous events and addressed them directly in their work. Milton and Locke’s approach to tolerance and liberty of conscience had a tremendous influence on Jefferson and Madison, who sought to avoid similar conflicts they saw arising on their home soil.

While Milton and Locke’s importance is widely acknowledged, Adam Smith’s influence on the Founders is often overlooked (Fleischacker, 2002). While Smith is best known for his economic views, he wrote extensively about religious establishment. Smith devotes considerable energy in *The Wealth of Nations* to addressing the role of religion in society. Not surprisingly, his view on matters of religion reflects his market-oriented economic philosophy. Smith thought that religion was an important component of a healthy, functioning society. But he thought that a free religious market was more efficient than an establishment such as the Roman
Catholic Church, which he considered to be a monopoly. For Smith, religious freedom and economic freedom are inextricably linked (Anderson, 1988). His work provides an important connection between the European and American environments because Smith, a Scotsman and a contemporary of the Founders, looked to America—and specifically Pennsylvania—as living proof that a variety of religious sects could ultimately get along in an open and competitive market.

Smith cited a number of problems that accompany religious establishments. As a kind of monopoly, established churches are prone to corruption. Over time, established churches become political institutions rather than religious ones. They tend to drain money away from the state, without producing results. Despite their relative wealth, established churches fare no better than poor churches at instilling values in the public—and often do worse. Leaders in established churches may be more educated, but they tend to rest easy in their secure position, losing their ability to persuade the public. As a result, established churches are constantly under threat from popular sects, whose members may be uneducated but nevertheless better equipped and motivated to persuade others of the virtue of their position. In fact, voluntary sects are better able to persuade precisely because they do not have the benefit of state sanction and support (Smith, 1904, Bk.V, Ch.1, P.190).

Smith supported disestablishment on the basis that open competition between such voluntary sects would be beneficial both to religion and to society as a whole. Here he disagreed with his long-time friend David Hume. Both Smith and Hume expressed concern for possible fanaticism, but they came to opposite conclusions on the matter. Hume argued that in an unregulated religious market, churches spend their energy on keeping members from fleeing to their competitors. They do this, Hume argued, by ignoring the virtues of “truth, morals, and
decency” and instead promoting a “violent abhorrence of other sects” (Smith, 1904, Bk.V, Ch.1, P.195). Therefore, he concluded, some form of religious regulation is necessary. Smith, on the other hand, argued that competition creates a tendency over time toward a “pure and rational religion” free from “absurdity, imposture, and fanaticism”:

The interested and active zeal of religious teachers can be dangerous and troublesome only where there is either but one sect tolerated in the society, or where the whole of a large society is divided into two or three great sects... But that zeal must be altogether innocent where the society is divided into two or three hundred, or perhaps into as many thousand small sects... The teachers of each little sect, finding themselves almost alone, would be obliged to respect those of almost every other sect, and the concessions which they would mutually find it both convenient and agreeable to make to one another, might in time probably reduce the doctrine of the greater part of them to that pure and rational religion, free from every mixture of absurdity, imposture, or fanaticism, such as wise men have in all ages of the world wished to see established... (Smith, 1904, Bk.V, Ch.1, P.197).

He cited Pennsylvania as an example of how competition leads to moderation of religious views. Though Quakers dominated Pennsylvania, the state government did not promote any particular sect, and therefore a moderate philosophical temper prevailed.

Just as Smith’s views on religion are often overlooked, so his views on economics are often misrepresented. In their efforts to appropriate Smith’s work to justify neoliberal economic policies, contemporary economists tend to overlook Smith’s clear hostility toward monopoly power and the “exclusive privileges” of corporations (Chomsky, 2002; Kreuger, 2001). In fact Smith argued that, through their pursuit of unlimited size and power, corporations could become just as corrupt and oppressive as governments. In addition, contemporary economists have misread Smith’s use of the “invisible hand” metaphor. Smith did not employ the metaphor simply to suggest that the best product will dominate the rest, thus equating private gain with public good. Though the single instance of the metaphor in Wealth of Nations involves the joint benefit of private and public good, Smith’s use of the metaphor in his Theory of Moral
Sentiments makes no such simple equation. “The point of Smith's invisible hand,” as Fleischacker argues, “…was that individuals generally promoted the public good whether or not they intended to do so” (Fleischacker, 2002). Often the public good is served even if—and sometimes because—it thwarts individual self-interest (Fleischacker, 2002). Some scholars have even claimed that Smith’s use of the invisible hand metaphor was meant to be ironic (Rothschild, 2001). While the latter claim is certainly debatable, it is clear that his use of the metaphor has been perverted beyond its original intention.

Smith’s work, then, is not simply a defense of free-market principles, but also a critique of the various problems that arise when large institutions—corporations, religious establishments, or governments—gain too much power. Such accruals of power not only render markets inefficient, but subvert individual liberty as well as the public good. These are points worth bearing in mind since—as we shall see—the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are marked by conspicuous and often troubling connections between American government, religious organizations, and an increasingly commercialized mass media.

The American Context: From Regulation to Competition

The application of economic metaphors to American religious life is common among contemporary historians. Frank Lambert (2006), for example, describes the transition from the early colonies to the Republic as shift from “religious regulation” to “religious competition.” Lambert’s work makes it clear, though, that this application of metaphors is not anachronistic. Rather, such descriptions are true to the actions of the early colonies, the self-understanding of religious leaders in the lead-up to the Revolution, and the Founders’ arguments on behalf of disestablishment.
The 17th century was marked in New England by Puritanism and elsewhere by Anglican and Congregational establishment. Puritans wished to erect a “city on the hill,” and threatened dissenters with expulsion, deportation, or even execution. Early settlers initially established frankly intolerant colonies based on a clear notion of one religious Truth. Meanwhile establishment churches enjoyed the support of state government, often through tax collection. In this context, the early settlers’ notion of liberty (especially on the part of the Puritans) was more concerned with “freedom from error” than freedom of conscience and practice. In this sense the period of the “planting fathers” was one of religious regulation (Lambert, 2006).

As the 18th century unfolded, though, established churches came under increasing scrutiny. George Whitefield is the figurehead of what Lambert calls the period of “religious competition,” in which dissenters railed against the establishment. As Harry Stout explains, at the time of Whitefield’s transatlantic endeavors “Americans and Britons alike were caught up in a ‘consumer revolution’” (Stout, 1991, p. xvii). Importantly, the emerging consumer marketplace existed largely outdoors, where lower overhead costs and wider access to the public presented a serious threat to existing shopkeepers (Breen, 2004, p. 142). But as Stout explains, “only Whitefield thought to… ply a religious trade in the open air of the marketplace” (Stout, 1991, p. xviii). In the eyes of an aspiring preacher, “the public square was naked; there was no sacred vocabulary or ritual to fill its ever-expanding stalls of goods and services” (Stout, 1991, p. xviii). This secular setting was appealing because there were no walls to limit attendance and, more importantly, people who would ordinarily avoid church could be reached more easily in “the profane spaces of the marketplace” (Stout, 1991, p. 68). In Whitefield’s hands, Stout claims, “religion would compete in the marketplace for its own market share” (Stout, 1991, p. 68).
Indeed Whitefield understood his own evangelism in economic terms, describing his itinerancy as “trafficking for the Lord” (Lambert, 2003, p. 128).

*Madison’s Debt to Smith*

The Founders developed their arguments about religious freedom and disestablishment during this period of religious competition. The situation allowed for a powerful alliance between the political elite—most of whom were Deists or Enlightenment rationalists—and leaders of anti-establishment religious sects. Their mutual emphasis on individual conscience allowed George Whitefield and Ben Franklin, for example, to maintain a long and mutually respectful relationship (Moore, 1994, p. 43). Jefferson received harsh criticism for his own unorthodox views, and likewise aligned himself with Baptists and other dissidents in the defense of a general freedom of religious conscience.

Madison’s arguments about religion were particularly influential in the Constitutional debates. He had witnessed suppression of religious dissidents (mainly Baptists) in his home state of Virginia, and sought to protect such minorities. Scholars have noted that Adam Smith had a general influence on Madison’s thinking (Nussbaum, 2008; Lambert, 2006). There is good evidence, however, that Madison specifically adopted Smith’s arguments in two of his most important writings: the *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* and *Federalist* No. 10 (Fleischacker, 2002).

The “Memorial and Remonstrance”

Along with Jefferson, Madison is considered to be a “strict separationist.” His separationist views ripened in the years before the Revolution as he witnessed a series of
imprisonments of Baptist ministers in his home state of Virginia. He was not a Baptist himself—in fact, not much is known of his religious views, as he revealed little. But he felt that the Baptist church was fairly orthodox and thought the persecution of the ministers was unjust. He decided that the situation was a direct result of the establishment of the official church in Virginia—the Church of England, in which he was raised.

While Jefferson and Madison were both involved in the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1776, Madison’s arguments are more widely cited. He made direct appeals to Milton and Locke to defend the idea of religious freedom. He introduced distinctly Lockean language into the Virginia Constitution, stating that "all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience" (Virginia Const. Art. I § 16). Though the established church remained, religious minorities were granted equal rights.

When the Virginia Constitution was written, it left in place taxes to support the Church of England (with exceptions for religious dissenters). The taxes became the subject of ongoing debate. But most of the debate centered not around whether to get rid of taxes altogether but how to gather religious taxes more fairly. A “general assessment” tax was proposed that would allow citizens to choose which church would receive their taxes. Madison and Jefferson opposed such taxes altogether, but there was enormous support for a general assessment tax throughout Virginia and in other states, including among key founding fathers. People generally held a view similar to David Hume, believing that religion was necessary for instilling the kinds of moral virtue necessary for a functioning republic. Supporters argued that religion brought social cohesion, and therefore churches should enjoy tax support.

In response to these arguments, Madison wrote the *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* in 1785, eventually propelling the passage of Jefferson’s *Statute for*
Religious Freedom in 1786. Though Madison likely had not read Wealth of Nations prior to his involvement in the Virginia Constitution, in the Memorial he borrows two key arguments from Smith (Fleischacker, 2002). First, he argues that religious establishment leads to “pride and indolence in the Clergy”:

[We oppose a general assessment because] experience witnesseth that ecclesiastical establishments, instead of maintaining the purity and efficacy of Religion, have had a contrary operation. During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution. (Madison, 1785)

Second, Madison claims that the presence of multiple competing sects would attenuate the problems of religious strife, leading to “moderation and harmony”:

[We oppose a general assessment because] it will destroy that moderation and harmony which the forbearance of our laws to intermeddle with Religion has produced among its several sects. Torrents of blood have been spilt in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious discord [sic], by proscribing all difference in Religious opinion. Time has at length revealed the true remedy. Every relaxation of narrow and rigorous policy, wherever it has been tried, has been found to assuage the disease. (Madison, 1785)

His arguments here follow Smith’s quotation and rebuke of David Hume, noted earlier. The suggestion that competition would lead to moderation makes Smith and Madison’s perspective unique among their peers, suggesting that Smith’s arguments influenced Madison’s thinking on the matter (Fleischacker, 2002).

Federalist No. 10

Even more striking is the similarity to Smith in Madison’s discussion of factionalism in Federalist No. 10. In this famous piece, Madison again outlines an argument that echoes Smith’s claims for religious disestablishment (Fleischacker, 2002). Madison’s concern was that political factions would emerge that could impose their will on others. His argument in Federalist No. 10
is that in a large republic, the sheer number of competing interests would keep any one from gaining dominance:

[T]he greater number of citizens and extent of territory which may be brought within the compass of republican than of democratic government... renders factious combinations less to be dreaded in the former than in the latter. The smaller the society, the fewer probably will be the distinct parties and interests composing it... [and] the more easily will they concert and execute their plans of oppression. Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other. (Madison, 1787)

With specific regard to religion, Madison adds that “[a] religious sect may degenerate into a political faction in a part of the Confederacy; but the variety of sects dispersed over the entire face of it must secure the national councils against any danger from that source” (1787).

Some scholars refute the idea that Federalist No. 10 argues for a balance of power between competing factions. Garry Wills, for example, rejects reading Federalist No. 10 “as if Madison were saying that the more factions there are at play, the more they will check each other, automatically, in a political version of the free market.” He insists that “free markets are meant to make one product prevail by better manufacture or marketing, not to prevent any one from prevailing because of some mutual check” (Wills, 2002. Italics original). But this critique is based on the common misreading of Smith’s “invisible hand” metaphor described earlier. If we understand Federalist No. 10 in Smithian terms, we must do so with a much more nuanced understanding of both Smith and Madison’s positions.

The First Amendment: A New Political and Religious Economy

Such was the context of Madison’s thinking when the Constitutional debates took place. During the early stages, the Founders generally felt that a Bill of Rights was unnecessary. Support arose during the ratification process. Madison strongly favored adding such a bill in
order to clearly articulate and guarantee certain rights. Early on, Madison introduced two amendments on religion (Nussbaum, 2008, pp. 97-98). He initially wrote provisions that restricted individual states, not just the federal government, but he expected this proposal to be contentious. He was right. His provisions went through numerous revisions and counterproposals. The final version—which does not include explicit restrictions for individual states—was worked out by a House-Senate conference committee (Nussbaum, 2008, p. 100). Madison again tried to introduce a provision for the states. It passed in the House, but the Senate rejected it. First Amendment protections of religious liberty were not “incorporated” for individual states until after the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment (Nussbaum, 2008, pp. 131-133).

Of course, while religious liberty is often called the “first freedom,” it is not the only liberty guaranteed by the First Amendment. James Carey argued that its multiple provisions—for religion, speech, press, and assembly—together form a “compact way of describing a political economy” (Carey, 1997; quoted in Schultze, 2003, p. 8). Building on Carey’s comments, Quentin Schultze argues that “the founders built religious conversation into the symbolic fabric of American society. America’s freedom of religion is nothing short of the liberty to gather religiously, to talk religiously, and to publicize religiously” (Schultze, 2003, p. 9). As we shall see, freedom of the press and freedom of religion are tightly intertwined. One cannot understand America’s history of religious pluralism without also attending to the dynamics of mass media.

But just as contemporary scholars often misunderstand Smith’s work and its influence on Madison’s arguments for religious freedom, so too do they misrepresent the Founders’ thinking with regard to freedom of the press (McChesney, 2004). Popular arguments collapse press freedom into a discussion of freedom of speech in order to defend the dominance of media
corporations from government regulation (McChesney, 2004, p. 27). Such arguments fly in the
face of Smith’s warnings about corporate power as well as the Founders’ own policy initiatives.

Madison and Jefferson did not wish to leave the press system to the whims of an emergent
market. Rather, they believed that the federal government had an obligation to enact policies and
subsidies that would ensure citizens’ access to a range of information sources (McChesney,
2004, pp. 29-30). Jefferson’s experience as John Adams’s political rival encapsulates this
complex reading of the First Amendment, and foreshadows the dynamics that would arise
between religion and mass media in the nineteenth century.

The Election of 1800: Religion in the Emerging Mass Media

When the Adams’ administration passed the Alien and Sedition Acts—clearly directed
at Jefferson and other critics of the Federalists—Madison and Jefferson responded by writing the
Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions (1798). In these documents, Jefferson claims that press
freedom and religious liberty are inextricably intertwined. If freedom of speech and press could
be curtailed, Jefferson argued, nothing could stop the curtailment of religious liberty as well.

Indeed during the election of 1800, Alexander Hamilton attempted to subvert the Constitutional
 provision against religious tests for federal office (Lambert, 2006). As the campaign unfolded,
Hamilton attacked Jefferson relentlessly on the grounds that he was religiously unfit to lead the
new nation. He was, in the mind of Hamilton and other Federalists, under the spell of the French
Goddess of Reason. When his efforts at Constitutional subversion failed, Hamilton sought to
burden Jefferson with a voluntary, voter-imposed religious test that would unfold in the so-called
“marketplace of ideas”—that is, in the emerging mass media (Lambert, 2006). Newspapers such
as the Federalist Columbian Centinel, the Washington Federalist, and the radical Aurora General
Advertiser would provide the arena for public debate about Jefferson’s religious qualifications
Jefferson might have preferred to remain silent about his religious beliefs, as Madison had managed to do for most of his life. But Hamilton and the Federalists forced Jefferson to defend his religious beliefs publicly.

Of course, despite Hamilton’s best efforts, Jefferson won the election and pressed on with his vision of religious and press freedoms. When members of the Danbury Baptist association wrote Jefferson to congratulate him on his victory, Jefferson replied by assuring his religious supporters that the First Amendment had created a “wall of separation between Church and State” that reflected the “supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience” (Jefferson, 1802). Contrary to some claims, Jefferson put serious thought into the letter, crafting it as a public statement against continued smear campaigns driven by Federalist newspapers (Hutson, 1998).

But Jefferson went beyond issuing public statements. After taking office, Jefferson maneuvered federal and state printing contracts to subsidize an anti-Federalist press, including the National Intelligencer (McChesney, 2004, p. 28). Such subsidies may seem inappropriate in the context of contemporary standards of professional journalism. But they clearly reflect the commitment that Jefferson, Madison, and others had to the role of the press in a functioning democracy, and to the role of the government in actively fostering the press system as a “fourth estate” (McChesney, 2004, p. 28).

The story of Jefferson’s election and presidency illustrates the complex dynamics that would emerge between religion and mass media in the course of the nineteenth century. These dynamics were brought into play by the religious and press freedoms guaranteed in the First Amendment—a “compact way of describing a political economy,” as Carey claimed. Understood in its broader historical and intellectual context, the First Amendment not only
provides for a democratic press, but also for an active and pluralistic religious conversation—
each overlapping the other, and each providing a check against the dominance of any particular
group or viewpoint. It is precisely in such an environment that the prophetic role of religion—to
challenge the powerful, to call for truth and justice—may be realized. To some extent, the
nineteenth century saw positive developments in this regard. As we shall see, however, further
developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would threaten to thwart this
potential.
CHAPTER 4

RELIGIOUS POLITICS AND THE BIRTH OF MASS MEDIA

The kingdom of God is a kingdom of means…. Preaching of the gospel is a Divine institution—‘printing’ no less so…. They are kindred offices. The PULPIT AND THE PRESS are inseparably connected…. The Press, then, is to be regarded with a sacred veneration and supported with religious care. The press must be supported or the pulpit falls.

– Christian Herald, 1823

A RELIGIOUS NEWSPAPER would have been a phenomenon not many years since… but now the groaning press throws them out in almost every direction.

– From a Methodist journal, 1823

Madison in Hindsight

The nineteenth century confirmed the Founders’ expectations in some ways, while defying them in others. Jefferson thought that the reasoned competition engendered by religious disestablishment would eventually result in a kind of religious consensus. He even suggested that everyone alive during his lifetime would die a Unitarian (Moore, 1994, p. 81). Madison, on the other hand, considered religious factions unavoidable. On this point, he was correct: disestablishment generated increased competition between multiple sects. In fact, the conflict between the Federalists and Jeffersonians may have contributed to the so-called Second Great Awakening in the 1830s and 1840s (Moore, 1994, p.89). This period saw the rise of religious revivals and a splintering of religious denominations. In some cases, religious conflict in the nineteenth century turned violent, as in the aggression directed towards Irish Catholics and Mormons (Moore, 1994, p. 74). However, the level of conflict was relatively low compared to

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17 Hatch, 1989, p. 142.
other nations’ histories. Some scholars attribute this relative moderation to the unique religious economy embodied in the First Amendment—a testament, perhaps, to the foresight of Madison and Smith (Nussbaum, 2008, p. 347).

Contrary to the Founders’ intentions, however, the organizational strategies developed by religious denominations helped lay the groundwork for the formation of political parties (Moore, 1994, p. 72). Both Jefferson and Madison held a particular disdain for such parties (Moore, 1994, p. 81). But religious denominations and political parties co-arose in ways that were mutually reinforcing. The key difference is that while the American system of election by majority channeled political differences into two main parties, the difficulty of coordinating denominations prevented the formation of parallel religious parties (Moore, 1994, p. 86).

More importantly, religious denominations and political parties arose as they did not because the Constitution specifically prescribed them, but rather because they developed their organizational strategies in the context of an emergent free economic market (Moore, 1994, p. 89). While the market was arguably diverse and competitive at the beginning of the nineteenth century, concentrations of wealth and power eventually took shape (McChesney, 2004, p. 59) that would redefine the dynamics between religion, politics, and mass media, setting the stage for important transformations in the early 1900s. The excesses of the Gilded Age would have troubled figures like Smith, Madison, and Jefferson, who opposed monopoly power and stressed the importance of a well-informed citizenry. Furthermore, while attempting to redeem the

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19 Moore faults Madison on two counts. First, he failed to recognize that by proposing to deliberately weaken factions, he might also weaken the incentive for citizens to participate actively in political and civic life. Second, Madison failed to recognize that a diverse array of groups might be able to form strategic alliances based on similar interests. There are good reasons for people to form a national coalition of factions through compromise and pragmatism. This is what happened with the development of national political parties (Moore, 1994, p. 82).

20 Smith was clearly opposed to monopoly control, and argued on behalf of public education to counteract the problems arising from the division of labor. “For a very small expence,” Smith wrote, “the public can facilitate, can encourage, and can even impose upon almost the whole body of the people the necessity of acquiring those most
consumer-oriented culture that began to arise, religious leaders began to accommodate themselves to the logic of the market—often at the expense of the more prophetic elements of their faith.

*An Explosion of Print*

The veritable explosion of mass media in this period is inseparable from the “parallel rise” of churches and political parties (Moore, 1994). The conflict between Federalists and Jeffersonians—and especially the development of the Jeffersonian press—provided a fertile environment for evangelicals, who had been challenging religious authority since the 1740s (Hatch, 1989, pp. 34, 128). The Second Great Awakening was marked by “thundering legions” of self-confident religious believers who aimed to overthrow the tyranny of established religious authority. In contrast to Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and the Anglican Church, which functioned through unity and top-down authority structures, this period saw the rise of more populist-oriented movements: Baptists, Methodists, Mormons, the Christian movement, and black churches (Hatch, 1989). These movements rejected the authority of educated religious leaders who were well versed in theological argument but who had little appreciation for the perspectives of their congregation members. The new religious leaders emphasized popular appeal through what Nathan Hatch calls “the democratic art of persuasion.” Charles Finney, for example, led informal, aggressive, and “frenzied” religious services in which he employed vernacular speech and “hard-sell” tactics (Hatch, 1989, p. 196). It was a new approach to religious practice that, in Finney’s own words, employed “exciting, power preaching” in “the language of common life” (Hatch, 1989, p. 197). Most importantly, Finney advocated an
unabashed use of the press, in the manner of the politicians of his day. In a lecture delivered in New York in 1835, he asked, “What do the politicians do? …They get up meetings, circulate handbills and pamphlets, blaze away in the newspapers…” (Hatch, 1989, pp. 198-199). Indeed the revivals of the 1830s and 1840s exploited new printing techniques to dramatic effect. Arguably, it was this religious fervor that ushered in the age of mass media (Hatch, 1989, p. 126; Silk, 1995, pp. 16-17).

In fact, the number of religious newspapers and journals multiplied exponentially in the first several decades of the nineteenth century. In 1816 the Boston Recorder, a Calvinist general-circulation weekly, broke the long-standing silence of the press on religious matters21. The success of the Recorder was followed by other newspapers espousing the views of Methodists, Presbyterians, and Unitarians (Silk, 1995, p. 16). Religious journals enjoyed a similar rebirth. At the time the Constitution was ratified, there were about fourteen religious journals in the whole country. By 1830, there were more than six hundred, with about four hundred thousand subscribers (Hatch, 1989, p. 142). The “democratization” of both religion and printing was reflected in the increasing popularity of local publishing shops. Before ratification, religious journals issued almost entirely from New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. By the mid-nineteenth century, as John Nerone notes, the city of Cincinnati boasted forty locally published journals (Nerone, 1982, pp. 316-318; cited in Hatch, 1989, p. 144).

In a broad sense, the emerging mass media environment appeared well-suited to the entrepreneurial spirit of evangelicalism. As David Nord explains, “religious evangelicalism and

21 The New England Courant, started in 1721 by the Franklins, was only the fourth newspaper in the colonies and the first that was not published by public officials. It was explicit in its coverage and condemnation of religious authorities. The Franklins caused so much trouble for religious leaders that the Massachusetts legislature investigated them and shut them down. After the controversy of the New England Courant, newspapers largely kept quiet on the subject of religion until the early 19th century (Silk, 1995, pp. 15-16).
religious publishing merged easily because their economic natures are the same” (Nord, 2007, p. 59). Media products such as newspapers have minimal “marginal costs.” The main expenditure for producers is the first copy—once that is produced, the subsequent copies cost very little. This logic comports with the evangelical conviction that the Word of the Gospel is essentially free, and should be given away for free, to all who want or need it. “The common mission of the evangelist and the publisher in the early nineteenth century,” Nord explains, “was to deliver the free word as freely as possible” (Nord, 2007, p. 59). The development of machine papermaking, mass “stereotype” printing, differential pricing, and “colportage” management strategies allowed the American Bible Society and other religious publishers to sell and give away Bibles, thereby distributing the Word to hundreds of thousands of Americans across the nation, including so-called “free riders” who could not afford to pay the market price. Thus, during the same year that Finney delivered his New York lectures, the American Antislavery Society sent more than a million mailings to people around the country, at no charge to the recipients (Hatch, 1989, p. 141).

The Perils of the Market: Demagoguery and Sensationalism

Of course, the dynamics of the new media markets also presented considerable challenges to these religious entrepreneurs—not least of which was the growth of secular daily newspapers. The field of mass publication took a dramatic turn in the 1830’s with the arrival of the penny press, which for the first time made possible cheap, daily publication and distribution of newspapers to people who previously could not afford them. The most important among the new dailies was James Gordon Bennett’s New York Herald, which was innovative in its treatment of religion as news. Bennett notably covered the annual meetings of various religious denominations—something that no secular paper had done before. Other papers largely assumed
Bennett’s approach to religious “news” coverage, although they did not follow his lead in providing personal commentary or criticism (Hoover, 1998, pp. 19-20).

Though religious journals continued to grow, the success of secular dailies pushed general-circulation religious papers out of the market, pressuring religious leaders to accommodate themselves to the logic of the secular press. Religious leaders frowned upon the secular press’s coverage of scandal and its use of advertising, but their attempts to establish religious papers without such material largely failed (Silk, 1995, pp. 17-19). In a manner reminiscent of George Whitefield’s publicity tactics (Stout, 1991), religious leaders began to develop their own means of securing coverage, and often complained if they did not receive it (Silk, 1995, p. 18). The abolitionist Wendell Phillips shaped his public statements into “the nineteenth century equivalent of sound bites” in order to ensure press coverage. Dwight L. Moody and Sam Jones planned their revivals and services to draw press attention, and actively promoted their events in secular newspapers (Silk, 1995, p. 20-22). Charles Finney, Henry Ward Beecher, and other preachers adopted the conventions of popular theater to rouse the attention of audiences. To draw crowds to their emotionally charged performances, they adopted the promotional tools of the marketplace—“handbills, newspapers, and the telegraph” (Moore, 1994, p. 51). In the process of emphasizing emotional theatrics, of course, they also tended to downplay doctrine (Moore, 1994, p. 53) in a way that “gave Princeton theologians every reason to cringe” (Hatch, 1989, p. 196).

In carrying out their democratic agendas, Hatch suggests that religious leaders amplified modern, individualistic convictions that “had the ironic effect of accelerating the break-up of traditional society and the advent of a social order of competition, self-expression, and free enterprise” (Hatch, 1989, p. 14). As a result, their efforts often had unintended political and
social implications—not least of which is the threat of demagoguery and authoritarianism. “Insurgent religious leaders” could inadvertently “produce a society in which grasping entrepreneurs could erect news forms of tyranny in religious, political, and economic institutions” (Hatch, 1989, p. 14). If the popularity of religious belief is reduced to a matter of the “democratic art of persuasion” rather than rigorous intellectual or theological argument, then, ironically, there are few institutional safeguards against a creeping authoritarianism. “Attempting to erase the difference between leaders and followers,” Hatch explains, “Americans opened the door to religious demagogues” (Hatch, 1989, p. 16).

The problem of demagoguery was certainly not unique to the post-Revolutionary period. During his wide-ranging itinerancy in the 1740s, George Whitefield made criticism from church authorities work in his favor by portraying himself as the victim of unwarranted persecution. “In a technique that would reap endless rewards,” Harry Stout explains, “Whitefield portrayed any public criticism as ‘persecution’ from on high, fueling popular antagonism to authority and identifying himself as the beleaguered underdog” (Stout, 1991, p. 47). In reading the newspapers, he looked expectantly for criticism that would arouse interest among the public (Stout, 1991, p. 96). In the process he arguably turned himself into the first American celebrity.

Similarly self-serving tactics are evident among the charismatic leaders who emerged during the so-called Second Great Awakening. Such “democratic firebrands” arose among the Baptists, Methodists, Disciples, and Mormons in the 1840s, usually to challenge trends toward formalization. In his quest to confront established religious authority, for example, Disciples church leader Alexander Campbell also accrued extraordinary personal wealth and “ruled by an iron hand” (Hatch, 1989, pp. 207-208). An important difference between the First and Second

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22 We may understand demagoguery to include popular leadership of a large audience, an emphasis on the spoken word, a reliance on emotional appeals, and a willingness to capitalize on social problems—especially in service of personal gain (Johannesen, 2002, p. 117).
Great Awakenings, though, is the media environment in which such tactics played out. The increasing scale and commercial nature of the mass media in the nineteenth century brought these problems to the forefront. As we shall see, developments in the twentieth century exacerbated them further.

The trend towards consumer-oriented marketing also generated new genres of religious publishing. Parson Weems achieved his success as a bookseller by aggressively marketing moralistic tales that graphically portrayed the consequences of sin—drinking, adultery, murder. Books like *The Drunkard's Looking Glass* (1813) appealed to the reader’s prurient interests while offering a clear moral lesson. Weems’ approach epitomized the “moral sensationalism” that set the nineteenth-century culture industry in motion (Moore, 1994, pp. 21-22). Other books focused on the life of Jesus or his followers, capitalizing on trends toward personalization and “feminization” that developed over the course of the century (Prothero, 2003). Preachers and authors alike began to portray Jesus in simple, personal terms that could cut through the din of doctrinal disputes (Prothero, 2003, p. 55). This trend was reflected first in books like *Julian: Or, Scenes in Judea* (1841) and culminated in *Ben-Hur, A Tale of the Christ* (1880). These books comprised a new form of religious entertainment that sold well and hastened the trend toward commercialization and consumerism (Prothero, 2003).

The problem of sensationalism multiplied significantly toward the end of the century as a thriving partisan press transformed into “big business” driven by profits and marred by corruption. As McChesney explains, out of concern for these issues various groups including “socialists, feminists, abolitionists, trade unionists, and radicals” organized to challenge the continued dominance of the commercial press. Populist and religious journals enjoyed high demand, but over time the dynamics of advertising-driven newspapers forced independent papers
out of the market (McChesney, 2004, p. 59). The tensions generated by these economic patterns would soon erupt into a full-blown crisis for the practice of print journalism at the beginning of the next century. Similar problems would also erupt in the nascent electronic broadcasting industry. Indeed, the apparent “democratization” of media, religion, and politics in the nineteenth century would soon give way to full-blown corporatization and commercialization, with significant consequences for the place of religion in public life.
CHAPTER 5
TWENTIETH CENTURY TRANSITIONS:
RADIO BROADCASTING AND PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

The objection will be raised that we are mixing faith with business, and that they won’t mix. Too long has the world labored under this delusion. They must mix if civilization is to endure.
- *Handbook of Church Advertising*, 1921

Don’t alarm listeners with long lists of what is wrong with the world. Don’t speak dogmatically. Remember it’s normality we’re all striving for.

In the early twentieth century, economic trends toward greater concentrations of wealth and commercialization of media came to a head. The two most important developments in this regard are the birth of radio broadcasting and the establishment of professional journalism. Despite the efforts of grassroots groups—including religious leaders—radio broadcasting quickly assumed a commercial model that forced religious groups to play by industry rules. The news industry legitimated its own commercialism by redefining the practice of journalism. Previous tensions between secular journalism and religion continued, but the dynamics changed considerably.

Simultaneous to—and inseparable from—these developments in mass media, a defining split emerged between liberal and conservative Protestants. The Progressive Era is marked by two religious movements that arguably set the course for twentieth century religious politics: the Social Gospel and fundamentalism. As these different strains of American Protestantism struggled for dominance on the national stage, they made important decisions about whether and

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23 Quoted in Moore, 1994, p. 213.
24 Quoted in Moore, 1994, pp. 234-235.
how to engage with new business techniques and media technologies. As we shall see, sometimes their strategies backfired. Even when apparently successful, their choices were always fraught with tension and compromise.

This section provides a brief history of the major developments in religion and mass media during this period, with an emphasis on how the dynamics of commercial media impact the prophetic potential of religious faith. Before examining broadcasting and journalism in detail, we begin with an overview of the split between modernism and fundamentalism.

*Modernism and the Social Gospel*

Martin Marty begins his three-volume *Modern American Religion* (1997) with the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893. The event brought together leaders from all of the world’s major religious traditions in an effort to find a unifying faith that could stand as a bulwark against the looming threat of “irreligion.” The Parliament exhibited the kind of optimism and faith in progress that had earned liberal Protestants some considerable disdain from their more conservative counterparts. Religion could, or perhaps must, prevail in the coming world order. But conservatives criticized the Parliament for more than its perceived faith in progress. They were threatened by the striking pluralism of the event. If all the world’s religions were to somehow “unify,” then what exactly would become of Christianity?

Indeed trends within Protestant liberalism appeared to challenge or redefine some of the basic elements of Christian faith. Progressive leaders, in their efforts to curb the excesses of capitalist enterprise, eventually came to espouse views that reinforced the trends toward increased commercialization of American culture. As Moore explains, progressive leaders reinterpreted Christianity in terms of “effective social action” based on principles of business
management and advertising. “The modern Jesus was not spending much time on the cross,” Moore suggests, because “He had too much to do” (Moore, 1994, p. 213).

Moore cites the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ as the “most typical expression” of progressive thought (Moore, 1994, p. 210). Leaders of the Social Gospel movement, and specifically the Federal Council, embraced the emerging industries of advertising and marketing. In their effort to Christianize American culture, they sought to employ all of the latest and greatest business techniques. Entrepreneurial Christians published a slew of instructional manuals for churches and church organizations instructing the faithful in how to advertise effectively. One manual suggested, for example, that church posters should always portray the church as filled to capacity, since most Americans are drawn to a crowd (Moore, 1994, p. 215). Through such actions, though, liberals opened the doors to such publications as Bruce Barton’s much-scrutinized The Man Nobody Knows (1925), which went so far as to depict Jesus himself as a shrewd businessman. Instead of Christianizing American commercial culture, Moore suggests, such developments had commercialized Christianity.

Not all modernist leaders were so eager to embrace the trappings of modern life. Walter Rauschenbusch, a central figure in the Social Gospel movement, was among a “prophetic minority” of liberals who sensed that social progress was not at all inevitable (Hutchinson, 1976, pp. 150-151). Rauschenbusch perceived an unfolding social crisis that had to be addressed directly and immediately. For this reason he explicitly rejected revivalist individualism and insisted on the primacy of social salvation. For Rauschenbusch, social salvation precedes individual salvation. The Social Gospel movement therefore focused its efforts on critiquing and seeking to reform social structures and institutions rather than individual souls.
The warnings of the “prophetic minority” within Protestant liberalism were realized in the form of World War I, which undermined the optimism that liberals had espoused. George Gordon remarked that liberals failed to see what was coming because they had been “smoking the opium pipe of evolution” (Hutchinson, 1976, p. 227). But while World War I shook Protestant liberalism to its core, the severity of its subsequent problems were, in part, a measure of its previous success. And it was that success which served as the grounds for a reactionary movement in the form of fundamentalism.

**Fundamentalism and the “Great Reversal”**

For most of the nineteenth century, social and political reform was just as much the domain of conservative as liberal Protestants. Charles Finney explicitly advocated the involvement of the Christian church in efforts to “reform individuals, communities, and government… until every form of iniquity shall be driven from the earth” (Marsden, 1980, p. 86). The latter half of the nineteenth century did see a shift towards private, personal experience. But as Marsden notes, as late as 1897 premillenialist leaders such as Charles Blanchard advocated “progressive political reform” by arguing against “unequal taxation [and] benefits to favored railroads and other corporations” (Marsden, 1980, p. 88). At the turn of the century, James M. Gray—future president of the Moody Bible Institute—advocated breaking up the America Ice Trust because of how its price policies had affected the poor (Marsden, 1980, p. 89).

For decades, in fact, revivalists had largely embraced the political thought of their times. That trend came to an abrupt end in the first few decades of the twentieth century, in a transformation that Marsden calls the “Great Reversal” (Marsden, 1980, pp. 92-93).
The increasing pluralism of the United States, as epitomized by the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions, was one of the factors leading to the development of fundamentalism in the early twentieth century. Whereas the established church in Britain had kept evangelicals in a minority position, disestablishment in the U.S. allowed them to flourish. In fact, to some extent evangelicals came to take their success for granted. When in the late nineteenth century the problem of pluralism became unavoidable, evangelicals felt threatened and reacted accordingly. This helps to explain why, while there was a fundamentalist presence in Britain (in fact, some of the authors of *The Fundamentals* were British), it did not develop into the high-profile movement that emerged in the United States.

While factors such as increased religious pluralism were certainly important, the most significant reason for the emergence of fundamentalism was the relative success of the Social Gospel movement (Marsden, 1980, p. 91). The Social Gospel came to focus on social and political involvement in the world to such an extent that, in the minds of conservatives, it lost all focus on salvation, doctrine, and grace. Fundamentalism was primarily a reaction against the Social Gospel’s apparent neglect of doctrine and scripture in its rush to engage social and political causes. While evangelicals had been involved in social causes for decades, at this point many felt they had to choose between social activism and a return to “fundamentals” (Marsden, 1980, p. 92). Marsden argues that, in making this choice, evangelicals lost the progressive elements of their own history and became fixated on a middle-class way of life that existed before the modernist crisis began. He goes so far as to compare this fixation to a kind of arrested psychological development (Marsden, 1980, p. 93).
The Birth of Religious Broadcasting

The split between liberal and conservative elements of American Protestantism is clearly reflected in the early history of radio broadcasting. Though they had embraced business and marketing in other arenas, mainline and liberal Protestants did not chose to pay for air time on the nascent commercial networks. Instead, they opted to enjoy free air time provided by the networks as part of their public service agreements. Meanwhile, evangelicals—having been forced off the air—developed commercial viable formats to match the success of popular secular programs. Despite the initial dominance of mainstream churches, over time evangelicals “won the battle” for religious broadcasting (Schultze, 2003). But each group also made important choices in their struggle for success, in ways that often compromised the prophetic potential of their messages.

Breakdown of the Law

The early days of radio broadcasting were lively and innovative, almost to the point of being anarchic. In the early 1920s, the only serious form of regulation was the Radio Act of 1912, which was merely intended to coordinate point-to-point communication. That law did not provide any specific criteria for broadcast licensing, and in fact had not even anticipated broadcasting per se (McChesney, 1993, pp. 13,16). It did, however, establish Herbert Hoover as the prime federal regulator through his position as the Secretary of the Department of Commerce. Hoover was almost single-handedly responsible for handing out broadcasting licenses and assigning frequency wavelengths (McChesney, 1993, p. 13). As the decade unfolded, Hoover leveraged his position aggressively on behalf of private enterprise and commercial interests (McChesney, 1993, p. 13).
Due to the lack of broadcasting regulations, the early 1920s amounted to a “vibrant experiment” wherein a diverse array of individuals and organizations scrambled to fill the airwaves with their own unique fare (Hangen, 2002, p. 22). During this period, stations were equally likely to be owned by individuals, churches, newspapers, and department stores (Hangen, 2002, p. 22). Religious broadcasters were far from invisible, and often represented denominational and theological viewpoints that were in the minority. As Quentin Schultze explains, “[f]rom the beginning, local religious broadcasting was dominated by various religious minorities who hoped that radio would amplify their presence and increase their power in the expanding industrial society” (Schultze, 1988, p. 291). The presence of religious broadcasters was so pervasive, in fact, that *Popular Radio* magazine once complained that “[t]he air is filling up with propaganders” (Schultze, 1988, p. 291). Though prominent, religious broadcasters were struggling to find secure footholds in the emerging industry: some accepted free airtime from existing stations, some bought time, and others established their own stations (Hangen, 2002, p. 22).

The major turning point for the industry in general—and religious broadcasting in particular—was the passage of the Radio Act of 1927. Hoover had been dissatisfied with existing regulations, and sought new legislation to break through what he perceived as an “impasse” in the emerging radio industry (McChesney, 1993, p. 17). Congress was stalling, though, so Hoover deliberately provoked what is known as the “breakdown of the law” period by having the existing regulations declared unconstitutional (McChesney, 1993, p. 17). The result was an atmosphere of chaos where the number of broadcasters doubled within six months, each vying for air space by literally broadcasting over each other’s frequencies. As Hoover had expected (and indeed intended), Congress was spurred into action and quickly passed new legislation.
Considering the chaos at the time, the Radio Act of 1927 was ostensibly “designed to minimize signal interference and establish public standards for issuing and renewing licenses.” (Schultze, 1988, p. 292). But the legislative process and the specific provisions of the Act had much more far-reaching effects, essentially propelling the industry down the road of commercialization, with a host of attendant repercussions for religious broadcasting. As McChesney notes, the legislation was drafted mostly in consultation with commercial broadcasters and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), with little or no input from educators, nonprofits, or the public (McChesney, 1993, p. 17). The committee hearings were “dominated by concerns over the short-term business problems of the broadcasters,” while “general debates about policy and the future of broadcasting were not touched” (McChesney, 1993, p. 17). The Federal Radio Commission (FRC), established by the legislation, seemed to regard the profit-orientation of the industry “as a given” (McChesney, 1993, p. 19). The legislation did stipulate that broadcasters had to promote the “public interest, convenience, and necessity”; but this stipulation may have been inserted mainly to ensure that the legislation could be passed as constitutional (McChesney, 1993, p. 18). The intention of the legislation was clearly to bolster commercial interests.

**Mainline Churches Gain the Upper Hand**

The effects for religious broadcasters were immediate. Shortly after passage of the legislation, many non-commercial stations were “squeezed off the air along with dozens of other broadcasters with poor equipment and inadequate funding” (Schultze, 1988, p. 292). Not surprisingly, religious broadcasters were among the first casualties. In some ways, this result was intentional. Federal regulators were particularly disturbed by preachers like Joseph “Judge”
Rutherford and “Fighting” Bob Schuler, whose diatribes included anti-Catholic and anti-government messages, as well specific attacks on public officials and other religions (Schultze, 1988, p. 293; 2003, p. 110). In fact, the FRC classified religious broadcasters as “propaganda stations” in the sense that they “were more interested in spreading their particular viewpoint than in reaching the broadest possible audience with whatever programming was most attractive” (McChesney, 1993, p. 27). At this point the FRC basically ceased issuing licenses to religious groups (Schultze, 1988, p. 293). Its official statement on the matter claimed that “[a]s a general rule particular doctrines, creeds and beliefs must find their way into the market of ideas by the existing public-service stations” (Schultze, 1988, p. 293). Religious broadcasters were forced to share frequencies with other stations, to make due with inferior channels, to buy air time, or to be granted free “sustaining” air time on the emerging major networks. As Hangen explains, the FRC’s standards spawned a vigorous debate among religious groups, who had to decide “whether religious programming should be broadcast as sustaining-time programs or as commercial broadcasts, sold at market value” (Hangen, 2002, p. 27).

With regard to this debate, Hangen notes that the chosen policies of the NBC radio network were a key factor in initiating a long-lasting fissure between mainstream churches and evangelicals. Despite its aversion to controversial preachers, the FRC policies considered religious programming to fulfill its “public interest” requirement, and in fact “license renewal applications required broadcasters to account for religious programming in their schedules” (Hangen, 2002, p. 24). NBC executives decided to include religious programming in their schedules, but with two important provisions. First, the network decided against selling airtime for religious broadcasts. Second, they decided to donate airtime to mainstream representatives of Catholics, Jews, and Protestants (Hangen, 2002, p. 23). Most importantly, for its Protestant
programming NBC chose to work closely with the Federal Council of Churches in Christ in America. That group represented “twenty-five mostly liberal mainline Protestant denominations,” and had an office located conveniently close to the NBC studios (Hangen, 2002, p. 23). The “cozy” relationship of the Federal Council with NBC is exemplary of the different routes taken by mainline and evangelical Protestants in the ensuing years: the former favored using free or “sustaining” air time provided by existing stations, while the latter were virtually forced to purchase commercial air time on the open market. As Hangen explains, “[w]hile liberal Protestants were favored by the emerging national radio networks, conservatives found that their cause was not championed by the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), established by the Radio Acts of 1927 and 1934” (Hangen, 2002, p. 24). Fundamentalists and evangelicals became locked in battle with mainline Protestants, and the mainline churches seemed to have the upper hand.

Even Sister Aimee McPherson, one of the most popular broadcasters of the time, was forced to tone down her rhetoric and placate federal regulators. McPherson was the first American woman to receive a broadcasting license, and her Angelus Temple was the first media station owned an operated by a church (Hangen, 2002, p. 68). Like other broadcasters in the 1920s, Sister Aimee was guilty of “wandering” the airwaves—moving away from one’s assigned wavelength to find “clear air” (Hangen, 2002, p. 68). In 1927, Hoover warned McPherson to stop wandering the airwaves. Her fierce response to Hoover came in the form of a telegram:

Please order your minions of Satan to leave my station alone STOP You cannot expect the Almighty to abide by your wave length nonsense STOP When I offer my prayers to him I must fit into his wave reception STOP Open this station at once. (Hangen, 2002, p. 73)

Quite soon, though, McPherson “learned to be more diplomatic” towards federal regulators (Hangen, 2002, p. 73). Her license came up for renewal in 1928, under the much stricter guidelines of the Radio Act of 1927. In her renewal application, she downplayed the religious
aspects of her broadcasts, emphasizing instead the “entertainment and musical impact” of her shows and claiming to offer shows “presented by the most talented and favorite artists” (Hangen, 2002, p. 73). She stressed the “educational advantages” of her broadcasts before their “religious and moral benefits” (Hangen, 2002, p. 73). Probably due to her immense popularity, her license was never denied (Hangen, 2002, p. 74). In fact, Sister Aimee is one of the brightest examples of how, ironically, the very regulations intended to curb religious controversy and promote mainstream ecumenicalism eventually worked in favor of evangelicals and fundamentalists.

**Evangelicals Win the Battle**

Schultze describes the FRC regulations as “a blessing in disguise for evangelical broadcasters” (Schultze, 1988, p. 295). With their options limited, evangelicals began to favor paid airtime as their primary method of reaching audiences. “As a result,” Schultze explains, “evangelicals learned early how to produce programming that would attract audiences and garner financial support” (Schultze, 1988, p. 295). Sister Aimee McPherson was particularly successful in this regard. McPherson’s programs mimicked commercial radio formats to a degree that rivaled most of her evangelical counterparts (Hangen, 2002, p. 72). At the time that live serial programs like *Superman* and *The Adventures of Sam Spade* were popular on secular radio stations, Sister Aimee was airing weekly drama programs like *The Red Comet* and *The Adventures of Jim Trask—Lone Evangelist* (Hangen, 2002, p. 72). Featuring popular fare like live music and talent shows, “her programming was creative and likely appealed to many radio listeners” (Schultze, 1988, p. 295). McPherson even enlisted former vaudeville performer Thompson Eade to aid in the creation of her programs (Schultze, 1988, p. 295). While McPherson was wooing audiences and securing her sources of revenue, though, mainline
Protestants “became complacent and uncreative about their programming” (Schultze, 1988, p. 299).

Besides their willingness to embrace the format of commercial radio, evangelical broadcasters benefited from broader structural changes in the industry. As the economy grew stronger through the 1930s, stations moved away from providing free “sustaining time” to religious broadcasters. The industry was moving towards a more thoroughly commercial model, and such time was considered valuable (Schultze, 1988, p. 296). Paid religious broadcasting became a significant source of revenue for radio stations, a shift that favored evangelicals. In addition, evangelicals began to organize more effectively. In 1944 the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) was formed to combat the official nonsectarian and ecumenical policies of the major broadcasters (Schultze, 1988, p. 299). They virtually declared war on the Federal Council, accusing it of running an “organized, systematic campaign to monopolize religious broadcasting” (Hangen, 2002, p. 28). The Federal Council, with no model for marketable content, was in an increasingly vulnerable position. The arrival of television dealt yet another severe blow as radio networks, fearful of losing advertising revenue to the new medium, loosened their remaining restrictions on paid religious broadcasts (Schultze, 1988, p. 301). By the late 1940s, Schultze claims that “the real battle for broadcast supremacy had already been won by the evangelicals” (Schultze, 1988, p. 301).

Further developments in the 1950s and 60s helped to put the final nails in the coffin of mainline Protestant broadcasting. Hangen notes that “the winds of federal regulation blew in evangelicals’ general favor throughout this period” (Hangen, 2002, p. 148). The FCC (successor to the FRC) took a hands-off approach to the question of whether religious broadcasting should be commercial or not. Some of the FCC’s own commissioners accused it of having
inappropriately blurred the line between Church and State in its advocacy of particular religious perspectives and its clear disfavor of others. By 1960, the FCC no longer distinguished between sustaining-time and commercial programs in its determination of a station’s “public interest” requirements (Hangen, 2002, pp. 152-153). This meant that radio stations could claim paid religious broadcasting as “public service time.” The change was so significant that Hangen describes it as “a cultural milestone marking the ‘virtual silencing’ of mainline churches in mass media” (Hangen, 2002, p. 153).

Converting to Consumerism

While evangelicals had won the battle for broadcasting, they did so in great part by assuming the values of commercial and consumer culture. For this reason, Schultze considers their success over mainline Protestants a Pyrrhic victory. Their concern for popular appeal and their willingness to secure funding through commercial interests “both isolated the tribe from mainstream media and increasingly converted the tribe to American consumerism” (Schultze, 2003, p. 142). As Everett C. Parker noted in his 1941 study of religious broadcasting, evangelicals were competing not so much with other religious groups as much as with “soaps, cigarettes [and] cosmetics” (Schultze, 2003, p. 142).

We should note, though, that the initial success of mainline churches was also a matter of significant compromise. In agreeing to enjoy free air time from the major networks, mainstream broadcasters also agreed to avoid airing controversial content—a choice that essentially silenced the prophetic potential of their message. As Lawrence Moore notes wryly, “[t]he effort not to antagonize an audience… seemed a strange extrapolation from the life of a crucified Christ” (Moore, 1994, p. 234). But the dictates of commercial radio were clear: as one radio manual
advised, “Don’t alarm listeners with long lists of what is wrong with the world. Don’t speak dogmatically. Remember it’s normality we’re all striving for” (Moore, 1994, pp. 234-235).

The birth of religious broadcasting is therefore marked not only by tensions between liberals and conservatives; it is marked also by tensions between the dynamics of commercial media and the prophetic potential of religious faith, regardless of its political persuasion. While mainline churches and evangelicals struggled against each other to secure dominance in the new medium, each tacitly accepted the commercial model that the nascent industries put into place with the help of the federal government. In this sense, as Robert Fortner (2005) argues, churches missed a crucial opportunity to guide the moral development of the emerging broadcasting industry.

The Advent of Professional Journalism

At the same time that electronic broadcasting became a mainstay of American public life, a major crisis erupted in the practice of journalism. The result was the advent of “professional” journalism, which involved the establishment of the first journalism schools, the separation of editorial and advertising functions, and the articulation of new standards of coverage such as objectivity and neutrality (McChesney, 2004, pp. 64-68). Although journalism would become an important element of both print and broadcast media, newspapers were its primary domain. A key difference is that, unlike broadcasting, the newspaper industry was not subject to the kind of federal regulation that caused such vicious disputes between various religious factions. Nevertheless, print journalism shares with broadcasting a commercial bias, which significantly impacts its coverage of religious issues. Though the dynamics have been changing in recent decades, for most of the twentieth century professional journalism has either held religion at
arm’s length or adopted a “broad truths” perspective in its coverage. The result has been to draw the prophetic elements of religious faith within fairly narrow bounds.

The Crisis of Partisan Journalism

For most of the nineteenth century, newspapers were explicitly partisan, and usually reflected the views of their owners. Importantly, though, the playing field was plentiful and competitive. Readers in major cities enjoyed a choice of multiple sources, each with a unique perspective. If a certain viewpoint was not represented, it was possible to launch a new paper. This combination of multiple sources, partisanship, and competition generated a vibrant democratic atmosphere. This was the case even as newspapers moved towards a more commercial model driven by advertising (McChesney, 2004, p. 58).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however—during the so-called Gilded Age—increased concentrations of wealth and power began to transform the nature of the industry. The industry became marred by bribery and sensationalism. Fewer choices were available, as one or two dailies came to dominate local markets. The early twentieth century saw the rise of “yellow journalism,” in which reporters concocted fictional stories in order to drive sales. Activists, politicians, and the general public grew increasingly skeptical about the political motives of industry owners. Congress became locked in a battle with the American Newspaper Publishers Association, as each struggled to define the future of the industry. Publishers managed to fend off regulation by turning the First Amendment on its head: they argued that the free press and free speech clauses were properly interpreted as preventing any government regulation of commercial industries—in direct contradiction to the prerogatives articulated by Jefferson, Madison, and others. They also claimed that, in any case, the industry could impose its own form of self-regulation by separating editorial and advertising functions, and articulating a code of
conduct for journalists. Thus professional journalism was born as an industry strategy to fend off government regulation and allow the trend toward commercialism to reach fruition (McChesney, 2004, pp. 58-66).

Professional Journalism and Religion Coverage

The bias toward commercialism had significant effects on coverage of religion. The sidelining of serious religion coverage was almost inevitable given the pressures of commercial advertising (Silk, 1995). Professional journalists cited Gordon Bennett’s legacy of controversial religion coverage as an approach to be avoided at all costs\(^{25}\) (Hoover, 1998). An increase in religious and ethnic diversity made newspapers wary of doing any serious coverage or commentary for fear of offending someone (Silk, 1995). In order to avoid controversy—and thus retain both readers and advertisers—mainstream newspapers relegated religion coverage to a specific “religion” section or, more often, to a “church page” that consisted of local coverage of bake sales, sermons, and other low profile events (Hoover, 1998). Over time, even this limited form of coverage became commodified. Where newspapers previously printed church announcements for free, the increase in the sheer number of churches in large cities made this impossible. Churches began to pay for advertisements. In turn, newspapers treated churches with kid gloves for fear of offending an important source of income. By the mid-twentieth century, as one editor suggested in 1940, “religion in the paper was dynamite” (Hoover, 1998, p.21).

To a great extent, these dynamics had the effect of excluding religion from the realm of public discourse. Professional journalists developed an attitude that saw religion—both their own and that of others—as a private matter that did not warrant the same coverage as other issues.

\(^{25}\) Hoover calls this the “myth of origin,” since Bennett provided plenty of non-controversial coverage of religion (Hoover, 1998).
The “church page” continued as a matter of course, but the religion section was considered a “ghetto” of sorts and the reporters who covered it were frowned upon as unprofessional, motivated by personal passions, or simply incapable of doing “real” news. As Stewart Hoover argues, it was as if journalists interpreted the First Amendment to entail not only a separation of church and state but also a separation of church and press (Hoover, 1998).

**Religious Values in Mainstream Journalism**

While for most of the twentieth century professional journalism’s coverage of religion was not robust, accusations that journalism in inherently anti-religious—or simply irreligious—tend to miss the mark. Rather, professional journalism tends to reflect broader values of the surrounding culture, whether its sources are secular or religious. In a broad sense, journalism reflects some commonly held values of the secular “public square”—namely that no religion should be valued above others and that no one religion should be singled out for attack. While these rules of public civility have often caused trouble for journalists (namely when such “neutrality” does not serve the interests of religious critics), they are also apparent among religious groups themselves when they engage in public endeavors (Silk, 1995). More importantly, as Mark Silk argues, professional journalism tends to incorporate mainstream values that are specifically religious in origin. Rather than imposing a secular, anti-religious, or irreligious agenda, journalism reproduces a set of commonly accepted religious topoi—namely: an attention to good works, an emphasis on tolerance and inclusion, an aversion to hypocrisy and false prophesy, an appreciation of supernatural belief, and a concern for the decline of religious institutions.

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26 Hoover cites the work of Marvin Olasky and Terry Mattingly as examples of such critical views (Hoover, 1998, pp. 62-64).
The mainstream press’s attention to good works—for example, social reform projects that help the poor, aid victims of storms or riots, etc.—comports with its basic commercial motives. Social engagement is inherently more newsworthy, and it is easier to cover events that unfold in the local community than those that are contained within the walls of the church. In fact, some newspapers have advised local churches that if they want more coverage, they need to become more actively engaged in the local community by setting up more effective social programs (Silk, 1995).

For similar reasons, professional journalism tends to promote an attitude of religious tolerance. Coverage of the elections of 1928 and 1960, in which Catholic candidates ran for office, are two cases in point. In both cases, opponents of the candidates claimed that a Catholic politician would violate the Constitutional separation of church and state. In 1928, the press defended New York Governor Al Smith, and praised Smith’s pledge to uphold the Constitution. In the case of Kennedy, papers praised Protestant groups who promised not to attack Kennedy’s Catholicism, while denouncing the National Association of Evangelicals and the publication Christianity Today for their criticism. In fact, writers for Christianity Today complained that the mainstream press oversimplified their position and portrayed them as mere bigots (Alsdurf, 2007).

Silk argues that these cases demonstrate how the press is attracted to church/state issues, and attempts to resolve them by insisting on the value of tolerance. Though other issues often have equally serious implications—such as arguments related to the “free exercise” clause—the press tends to emphasize establishment issues because they comport with the dynamics of commercial news: establishment issues have a more obvious public impact, and are therefore deemed more newsworthy. Conflicts involving free exercise, by contrast, are perceived as
centering on the private matters of a few individuals—usually from minority groups with unusual beliefs, such as Native Americans (Silk, 1995). Furthermore, when the press approaches church/state issues, it resolves them by insisting on the value of tolerance: journalists are not opposed to some mixture of religion and politics, as long as no group is trying to impose its dogma on others. The result is coverage of religion that draws protective boundaries around mainstream civic and religious values.

**Broad Truths and Bounded Prophesies**

The religious topoi that permeate journalism are “broad truths” that do not reflect the doctrine of any particular sect. In this sense while religious adherents can criticize the press for failing to support their particular theological views, they cannot as easily accuse the press of being downright anti-religious. Journalism provides much favorable (or at least neutral) coverage of religion, but it is often “invisible” precisely because so many readers agree with its underlying religious perspective. For example, no one complains when the press decries a false prophet, as long as they agree that said prophet deserves to be denounced (Silk, 1995).

While this “broad truths” approach may comport with the logic of commercial news, however, it limits the type of coverage that is possible. The development of the “church page” and the consequent deference toward religion is a reflection of owners’ need to secure revenue by avoiding coverage that may be deemed biased. Likewise, the development of broad and agreeable topoi for framing coverage of religion is a matter of appealing to the broadest possible audience. The result, Silk claims, is that journalism has developed “a disposition that may be called establishmentarian, in the religious sense of the word” (Silk, 1995, p. 142). In other words, journalism aims to avoid sectarianism and promote a general sense of social order. In this sense it serves the “status quo” and avoids coverage that could disrupt the established order. “Such
prophetic functions as [establishments] perform,” he suggests, “are well within the bounds of convention: fostering charity, denouncing scoundrels, casting out madmen. The religion they prefer is domestic and generous and friendly, not revolutionary or hostile to the culture at large” (Silk, 1995, pp. 142-143).

A concern for the prophetic elements of religious faith therefore require a critique of the limitations of professionalism and commercialism in the news industry. McChesney’s call for journalism to become “unprofessional” has a parallel application here (McChesney, 1994). With regard to politics, journalism cannot perform its role as watchdog if it is constrained by the logic of the marketplace (and by an understanding of professionalism that echoes that logic). For the same reasons, professional journalism is limited in its attention to the prophetic elements of religious faith. Proposed solutions to this problem range from the development of explicitly sectarian coverage of news (Olasky, 1988, pp. 20-26. Cited in Hoover, 1998, pp. 62-63.) to the development of a “second language” that would enable journalists to speak about religion in a way that is more informed and engaged (Hoover, 1998, pp. 45-46.).

Coverage of religion has undergone significant change in recent decades. The so-called “restructuring” of American religion in the 1980s and 1990s is one contributing factor. The decline of established religious institutions and the individualization of religious belief give journalists more room to treat religion like other areas of coverage (Hoover, 1998). In addition, international events such as the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, or the terrorist attacks of September 11th in the United States, demand more and deeper coverage of religion. These developments have created an opportunity for revisiting the ways that professional journalism covers religion, and therefore an opportunity for attending more directly to the prophetic potential of religious faith.
CHAPTER 6
PROPHETS AND ADVISORS:
RELIGIOUS POLITICS IN THE LATE-TWENTIETH CENTURY AND BEYOND

If you choose to be a prophet, you don’t have a lot of influence on the political reality, but you’re always free to speak what you perceive to be the truth…. Once they invite you up to the Big House, you have to go by the rules of the Big House.
- Ed Dobson, formerly of Moral Majority\(^{27}\)

The legacies of the Social Gospel and fundamentalist movements lasted well into the latter half of the twentieth century. After the humiliation of the Scopes “Monkey” Trial in 1925, the fundamentalist movement did not disappear but rather re-grouped (Carpenter, 1997). Fundamentalists’ success in radio broadcasting, coupled with new organizational strategies, laid the ground work for a resurgence of conservative evangelicalism in the 1950s. At about the same time, a civil rights movement developed that symbolized the dramatic return of the Social Gospel. Just as they struggled against each other at the beginning of the century, these separate strains of American Protestantism battled once again for the heart and soul of the nation.

In this struggle, the prophetic elements of religious faith faced significant obstacles. In its mid-century embrace of middle-class values, mainline Protestantism began to lose its prophetic edge (Balmer, 2006). Meanwhile, the success of evangelicals led to a collusion with political power in the form of the so-called Religious Right, which forced many to choose between the role of “prophet” and “advisor” (Martin, 1996). Ironically, that same success had the effect of dismantling institutional religion, giving rise to a highly commodified “spiritual marketplace” that tends to fragment the prophetic voice (Roof, 1999; Miller, 2003). More recently, researchers in the emerging field of neuromarketing have sought to exploit the psychological power of

\(^{27}\) Quoted in Martin, 1996, p. 229.
religious experience to undermine the ability of consumers and citizens to think critically about their choices.

Religion in the twentieth century is therefore characterized by two parallel developments. First, religious communities and leaders have sought to expand their power by colluding with the political establishment. Second, political and commercial interests have developed an unprecedented willingness and ability to exploit religious belief for strategic gain. Rather than invigorating democratic politics, these trends tend to consolidate established political and social power. As the following discussion indicates, the ongoing commercialization of mass media is inseparable from these historical trends.

The Fundamentalist Legacy

Fundamentalists’ success in radio broadcasting is prime evidence that the movement did not, in fact, die out with the embarrassment of the Scopes trial in 1925. Indeed fundamentalists suffered a serious defeat during the course of that trial. They won the case, but they lost the public’s respect. Popular accounts declared fundamentalism dead. But in the 1930s and 1940s, fundamentalists like Charles Fuller gained enormous success in broadcasting, laying the foundations for media networks that would later provide an infrastructure for the powerful Religious Right (Carpenter, 1997).

During the 1930s and 1940s, American fundamentalism underwent a process of organizational development that has had a lasting impact on American Protestantism as a whole. Through the formation of para-church organizations arranged in web-like networks, fundamentalists managed to capture popular attention even as mainline denominations suffered serious decline. They utilized commercial radio to their advantage, at times rivaling the
popularity of secular fare; they organized and mobilized young adults through Youth for Christ; and they employed new business management and marketing techniques through Christian Business Men’s Committees. According to Joel Carpenter (1997), fundamentalists were so central to the revitalization of American Protestantism that even more moderate evangelical organizations like the National Association of Evangelicals had fundamentalists to thank for their continued success: “It was principally [fundamentalists’] example and their leadership that propelled a new evangelical coalition and resurgence in postwar America” (Carpenter, 1997, p. 237). Their aim was to maneuver around mainline institutions, putting doctrinal rivalries aside in the hopes of generating yet another evangelical revival. What they needed was another George Whitefield—someone who could lead a new revival. By Carpenter’s account, they got their wish with the arrival of “the prophet” Billy Graham.

A Confidence Shaken

Graham’s arrival on the national scene in the 1950s does mark a certain turning point. He became a mainstream figure, worked himself into the corridors of power in Washington, hobnobbed with a succession of Presidents, founded the widely read evangelical magazine Christianity Today, and continued the fundamentalists’ legacy of successful radio broadcasting. Evangelicals in the 1950s, united against communism under the leadership of Eisenhower and Graham, gained a certain confidence in their ability to influence the direction of the country.

Before the decade ended, however, that confidence would be shaken considerably. Kennedy’s presidential bid threatened to undercut the dominant position of evangelicals. The response that emerged in the pages of Graham’s Christianity Today magazine is telling (Alsdurf, 2007). Evangelicals feared that Catholics might emerge as a majority, with dire consequences for Protestants. They discussed Catholicism and communism in the same breath. They suggested
that Kennedy would take orders from the Vatican, placing his loyalty to the Pope above his loyalty to the Constitution. As they did at the beginning of the republic, evangelicals advocated a strict separation of church and state because they feared for their survival. Kennedy responded in a famous speech in which he defended the value of tolerance and vowed to uphold his Constitutional duties. Graham eventually made some conciliatory gestures toward Kennedy. But not all evangelicals appreciated Graham’s public acceptance of Kennedy, and many worried that their power was uncertain.

Further developments in the 1960s and 1970s did little assuage their fears. The liberalism of the Social Gospel returned in the form of radical reinterpretations or “reincarnations” of Jesus and other Biblical figures (Prothero, 2003). African-Americans regarded the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a “black Moses” whose civil rights marches reenacted the Biblical narrative of Exodus. In the late 1960s, James Cone spearheaded black liberation theology, insisting that Jesus was black (Prothero, 2003, p. 205). Black theology was followed by the feminist theology of Mary Daly. The passage of new immigration laws in 1965 precipitated an expansion of Buddhism, Hinduism, and other non-Western religions, each of which reinterpreted Jesus in the form of an “oriental Christ.” As in the late nineteenth century, evangelicals were disturbed by the increasing pluralism of the American religious landscape.

*Between Prophesy and Demagoguery*

Nevertheless, throughout the latter half of the twentieth century conservative evangelicals found ways to keep their political ambitions alive. Their primary strategy was to focus on social and cultural issues—especially abortion. The story of evangelical involvement in the debate over abortion, however, is more complicated than conservatives often claim. According to Randall
Balmer\textsuperscript{28}, evangelical elites initially chose abortion as a primary issue not because they were unanimously outraged by the \textit{Roe v. Wade} decision (a narrative that he calls the “abortion myth”) but because they thought it would engage the public effectively. Another—and perhaps more significant—motivation behind evangelical political mobilization in the 1970s, Balmer claims, had to do with more controversial issues involving race.

In fact, prominent evangelicals had largely opposed the civil rights movement of the 1960s (Martin, 1995). It was, after all, a reprise of the much-reviled Social Gospel movement earlier in the century. Jerry Falwell, who had emerged as a leading figure along with Graham in the 1950s, is a case in point. Falwell’s statements on the issue of civil rights seldom matched his actions. He made false claims about his willingness to baptize blacks in his church, and tried to conceal his motivations for establishing a school that would serve as a refuge for whites opposing racial integration (Martin, 1995). The turning point for evangelical political mobilization, though, was the federal government’s threat, in 1975, to revoke the tax exempt status of Bob Jones University, which had been enforcing racially discriminatory policies (Balmer, 2006).

Balmer recalls being part of a phone conversation in which prominent evangelical leaders were trying to decide how to rally support for political action. It was clear that the Bob Jones issue would not play well. Balmer recalls someone asking, “What about abortion?” According to Balmer’s account, the focus on abortion was initially a tactical decision rather than a strictly moral one\textsuperscript{29}. Again, Falwell’s case is telling. While \textit{Roe} was decided in 1973, Falwell did not

\textsuperscript{28} As a self-identified evangelical Christian, Randall Balmer has significant credibility as a critic of the Religious Right. He attended a Christian college and was involved in the campaign for George McGovern (then running against Nixon). Balmer speaks as an insider of sorts—not of the Religious Right itself but of the tradition of evangelicalism that the Right claims to represent.

\textsuperscript{29} Neither Balmer nor I deny that abortion is an important moral issue, or that most activists on both sides are sincere in their efforts. The critique articulated here is directed against elites in the Religious Right who have attempted to mobilize the public by disingenuous means.
preach a sermon on the subject of abortion until about four years later. In addition, many evangelicals either agreed with the decision or simply felt that while they disagreed, there was little they could do about it (Martin, 1996). Nevertheless, evangelical leaders claimed that revulsion at the *Roe* decision was the driving force beyond the formation of the Religious Right\(^{30}\) (Balmer, 2006). There is a clear irony here: many leaders of the Religious Right compared abortion to slavery, but in fact the movement began as a defense of racially discriminatory policies at Bob Jones University.

The Religious Right’s strategic use of the abortion issue highlights the tension between prophetic witness and demagoguery. While the abortion issue did rally support for the Religious Right for a long while—especially during the Reagan administration—it eventually began to lose some of its initial traction. The more recent focus on homosexuality and gay marriage serves a similar purpose, and supplements the focus on abortion. As Balmer argues, these issues lend themselves to “selective literalism” and allow in-groups to “externalize the enemy,” providing a convenient scapegoat—gays, abortion supporters, feminists—for a variety of social problems (Balmer, 2006).

Two examples in recent memory stand out. First are the remarks Jerry Falwell made on September 13, 2001, in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11. In an appearance on Pat Robertson’s *700 Club*, Falwell said,

> I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the A.C.L.U., People for the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen.” (Goodstein, 2001)

Robertson responded in agreement. “Well, I totally concur,” Robertson said, “and the problem is we have adopted that agenda at the highest levels of our government.”

\(^{30}\) I accept Balmer’s definition of the Religious Right as a movement begun in the late 1970s, comprised of a loose coalition of individuals and groups seeking to influence American culture and politics.
From the earliest discussions of the abortion issue in the 1970s, to these more recent comments, the tendency toward demagoguery is clearly present: the use of mass media to incite an emotional response, the exploitation of a major social crisis, the apparent hypocrisy in leveraging a social issue for hidden purposes (Johannesen, 2002, p. 117). Evangelical critics like Joel Hunter and Randall Balmer both suggest that these divisive issues are likely to get more media traction because they are more easily framed in black-and-white, “us versus them” terminology. Hunter, pastor of the successful Northland mega-church in Florida, suggests that “creating emergencies and enemies is good for media ratings and fundraising,” although it is “a turnoff to reasonable people who want a solution rather than a shouting match” (Hunter, 2006, p. 7). Media scholars agree, arguing that simple, binary arguments have a greater “potential for mass appeal” in the context of “a sound bite, rhetoric-driven media and politics system” (Domke, 2004). Issues like poverty and environmentalism, on the other hand, require contextualization and sustained coverage—two of the weakest points of commercial journalism (McChesney, 2004; Bennett, 1996).

Prophets and Advisors

In addition to highlighting the issue of demagoguery, the history of the Religious Right demonstrates how collusion with political power can cause religious movements to lose their “prophetic edge” (Balmer, 2006, p. 32). Billy Graham’s experience with his involvement in the Nixon administration foreshadowed the problems that would later arise with the Moral Majority. After the Watergate scandal broke, Graham realized that he had been manipulated for political gain. When he learned about the memos that had been circulating in the Nixon Whitehouse about him, he remarked, “I felt like a sheep being led to the slaughter” (Martin, 1996, p. 147). Having
been burnt once, Graham decided not to endorse a candidate in the next election. “[I am]
opposed to organizing Christians into a political bloc,” he said, noting that “I learned my lesson
the hard way” (Martin, 1996, p. 153). Others did not heed Graham’s advice, however, and many
evangelicals rallied around Carter.

While Carter’s administration was a disappointment to many, involvement with the
Reagan administration proved to be an even more stinging wake-up call for some. Jerry Falwell
formed the Moral Majority in 1979, and the organization quickly mobilized to support Reagan’s
candidacy. Many religious conservatives were wary of engaging in such open political
engagement, but Falwell persisted. Within a year after Reagan’s election, however, members of
the Moral Majority grew disappointed with the administration’s lack of focus on the abortion
issue. Reagan’s selection of Sandra Day O’Connor for the Supreme Court also did not sit well
with many. Cal Thomas, who had been vice president of Moral Majority in 1980, remarked:

Politics is a great seducer…. I think Christian people were sucked into the political
process so that it became primary in their lives, and the moral and spiritual power that
should have been theirs, to [enable them to] speak truth to power, seemed to be put on the
back burner, because Ronald Reagan became the surrogate messiah. (Martin, 1996, p. 225)

Ed Dobson, a long-time associate of Falwell, summed up the dilemma as a choice between the
role of prophet and advisor:

If you choose to be a prophet, you don’t have a lot of influence on the political reality,
but you’re always free to speak what you perceive to be the truth…. Or, you can be an
adviser with a sense of truth… but your objective is simply to influence the process. I
think the Moral Majority moved from a prophetic role into more of an adviser role and
lost some of its ability to speak against the administration…. Once they invite you up to
the Big House, you have to go by the rules of the Big House. (Martin, 1996, p. 229)

Similar tensions have been present in subsequent administrations, including those of both George
H.W. Bush and George W. Bush. In recent years, however, advances in corporate marketing
techniques have further complicated matters, creating a situation where political and economic systems collude in the strategic exploitation of religious belief.

**Branding the God Spot: How Neuro-Marketers Colonize Religious Experience**

The tension between “prophets” and “advisors” exemplifies the process of lifeworld colonization—the insinuation of money and power into everyday life. But while critics like Habermas lament this tendency, early in the twentieth century social psychologists like Gustave Le Bon and Edward Bernays turned the process into a deliberate science, articulating methods by which a reasoned elite could manipulate the irrational mind of the mass public (Ewen, 1996). Le Bon argued that “it is numbers, not values that count,” rejecting the notion that informed, critical thought was the key to democratic flourishing. Speaking to his fellow elites, he insisted that “we must become a cult, write our philosophy of life in flaming headlines, and sell our cause in the market” (Ewen, 1996, p. 144).

Today, marketers have taken Le Bon’s call to new levels, probing not merely into the public’s unconscious mind but specifically into those regions of the brain associated with intense religious experience. Inspired by neuroscientists’ investigations into the so-called “God spot” in the brain (a misnomer, as religious experience involves multiple brain regions), marketing expert Martin Lindstrom (2008) set out to “prove a scientific link between brands and the world’s religions” by comparing subjects’ responses to images of brands and religious icons (p. 121). Using an MRI brain-scanning machine, Lindstrom found that “there was no discernable difference between the way the subjects’ brains reacted to powerful brands and the way they reacted to religious icons and figures” (p. 125). This is why marketers and advertisers “have
begun to borrow even more heavily from the world of religion to entice us to buy their products.” They must not do so overtly, however—only implicitly, lest they harm their brand (p. 127).

Calculated techniques for bypassing conscious reflection are considered cutting-edge among marketers. In 2005, the Advertising Research Foundation reported that by studying brain activation with MRI scanning, marketers can learn how “emotional responses can be created even if we have no awareness of the stimuli that caused them” (Chester, 2007, p. 127).

Marketing guru Clotaire Rapaille (2006) takes a more Jungian approach, offering his Fortune 100 clients techniques for manipulating archetypal “cultural codes” to tap into the “reptilian hot button” in a consumer’s psyche.

Children are key targets in such campaigns precisely because their cognitive development is still in process and therefore open to manipulation. Efforts begin early: according to the Center for a New American Dream, “babies as young as six months of age can form mental images of corporate logos and mascots,” which means “brand loyalties can be established as early as age two” (Barber, 2007, p. 29). But young adolescents are a more desirable target. According to Kathryn Montgomery (2007), “marketing strategies are designed to work on a deep level, tapping adolescents’ basic developmental needs, anxieties, fears, and sense of identity” (p. 217). As Lindstrom’s work illustrates, the techniques directed at all age groups increasingly involve the strategic exploitation of religious belief.

*Political Fundamentalism and the “Echoing Press”*

In some ways, the corporate colonization of religious experience may further the process of secularization. At the same time, though, it amplifies modes of religious politics that resonate with such techniques (Connolly, 2005, p. 873). During the Bush presidency, Karl Rove made
“hot button” social issues such as abortion and gay marriage a key element of conservative political strategy (Connolly, 2005, p. 878). In fact, his maneuvers were the culmination of trends that emerged during the formation of the Religious Right in the 1960s and 70s. According to Randall Balmer (2006), conservative evangelicals learned early on that issues like abortion and homosexuality get more political traction because they allow for an “externalization of the enemy”—a key component in Lindstrom’s (2008) description of “strong brands” (p. 113).

George W. Bush’s administration exemplifies how politics, religion, and media can coalesce in an ethos of “political fundamentalism,” which David Domke describes as “an intertwining of conservative religious faith, politics, and strategic communication” (Domke, 2004, p. 6). In the wake of September 11, 2001, administration officials launched a highly ideological and religiously-infused communications campaign, priming the public to adopt a fundamentalist attitude toward foreign policy efforts. Their strategy consisted of four primary elements: a binary, Good vs. Evil conception of reality; an obsession with time, producing a sense of urgency and a call for imminent action; a belief in a universal gospel—namely that America has “a mission” to spread freedom and democracy around the world; and an intolerance for dissent. As Domke explains, the Bush administration and the Religious Right managed to “convert a self-proclaimed Christian rectitude, via strategic language choices and communication approaches, into righteous political beliefs” (Domke, 2004, p. 6).

The dynamics of the commercial mainstream media were indispensable to the success of their campaign. Deference to official sources, one of the key institutional biases of mainstream news, tends to amplify such strategic communications (Domke, 2004; Herman, 2002; Bennett, 1996). An emphasis on crisis and the use of simplistic “binary” explanatory schemes also fit with the specific content biases of the mainstream news industry. Citing J.H. Garvey’s work on
fundamentalism, Domke notes that such binaries gain traction in the press because of their “potential for mass appeal,” providing as they do a belief system that “travels light and fast” (Domke, 2004, p. 36). As the Bush administration articulated a narrative constructed with the binaries of good/evil and security/peril, the same themes were echoed extensively throughout the mainstream press. Far from playing the role of watchdog or critic, the press largely echoed the political fundamentalism of the Bush administration.

Recently, a number of conservative dissidents have called into question this kind of strategic marketing of conservative values. David Kuo (2006), former Deputy Director of Bush’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, described how Republican leaders used homosexuality as a wedge issue to secure political gain, while letting issues like poverty fall by the wayside (pp. 164-165). Kuo suggested that Republicans were “using Christians for their own political ends,” mobilizing rhetoric to rally their base while failing to implement substantive policy measures (p. 230). Joel Hunter, pastor of the conservative Northland mega-church, argues that these tactics will ultimately fail. While “creating emergencies and enemies is a good idea for media ratings and fundraising,” he argues, “it is a turnoff to reasonable people who want a solution rather than a shouting match” (Hunter, 2006, p. 7). “Reflex reactions to hot button issues,” he argues, will not provide the “long-term and thoughtful guidance that our society needs” (p. 9). Dissidents like Kuo and Hunter face an uphill battle, however; as journalist Jeff Sharlet (2007) notes, evangelicalism tends to favor “clarity” over “complexity.” In calling for systemic approaches to issues like poverty, Kuo “puts him[self] at odds not only with most American evangelicals, but with the history of American evangelicalism, which has long defined itself as an alternative to systemic critiques” (Sharlet, 2007).
Into the New Media Environment

New media offer new avenues for such strategic campaigns, even as they open possibilities for renewed civic engagement. Engaged citizens need to acquire a certain set of communicative skills—active listening, taking turns, public speaking, perspective taking, principled reasoning. “Digital media offer many tools for developing these skills,” argues Montgomery (2007); “but there are opposing tendencies in the new media that may serve to undermine its democratic potential… The move toward increasingly personalized media and one-to-one marketing may encourage self-obsession, instant gratification, and impulsive behaviors” (p. 224). The result is a pervasive “infantalist ethos,” in which marketers seek to cultivate a generation of consumers developmentally young enough to be impulsive and easily manipulated, but old enough to have the cognitive capacities to make and spend money (Barber, 2007). The social responsibilities of adults are cast aside, while “the only type of citizenship that adult society offers to children is that of consumerism” (Giroux, 2000, p. 19). In this environment, a brand can assume the semblance of a cult, offering a clear vision, a sense of belonging, and loyalty—especially in the face of one’s rivals (Lindstrom, 2008, p. 111).

Developments in neuro-marketing and mass media thus extend the process of colonization whereby market forces thwart and displace the possibility of prophetic engagement. Furthermore, political organizations have adopted the techniques of consumer marketing to sell political parties and specific candidates (Connolly, 2005, p. 880). In both cases—consumer product marketing and political campaigns—researchers are developing new techniques that include the exploitation of religious belief. At the same time, the Religious Right has tended to embrace institutions of political power in order to increase its cultural influence. These parallel
developments result in a volatile collusion of strategic politics, scientific marketing, and religious activism.

There is an important irony to the history of the Religious Right. Early religious dissenters and evangelicals advocated the separation of church and state precisely as a means of securing religious freedom. It was Roger Williams, founder of the American Baptist tradition and opponent of the established church in Massachusetts, who provided the inspiration for Jefferson’s metaphor of the “wall of separation” of church and state (Balmer, 2006, pp. 41-42). Likewise Isaac Backus, another Baptist, fought against tax support for the Congregational Church and lobbied for disestablishment at the Constitutional Convention (Balmer, 2006, p. 42). As religious conservatives gained power in the late twentieth century, however, they moved away from this tradition and began to blur the separation of church and state—sometimes rejecting it altogether (Balmer, 2006, p. 51). As the following chapters demonstrate, though, the accumulation of political power through strategic means tends to favor only certain modes of religious engagement.
PART 2
CONTEMPORARY CASE STUDIES
CHAPTER 7
TROUBLE ON THE RIGHT:
CASE STUDIES FROM THE BUSH ERA

In the past, when the mainstream media were the gatekeepers of information, you could scream all you want—‘A conservative senator from Idaho is gay’—and nobody would hear you. But now people can hear anyone, and that's changed how mainstream media makes decisions about what to publish.
- Kelly McBride, The Poynter Institute (Vargas, 2007)

Public controversies at the intersection of religion and politics have affected conservatives and liberals, Republicans and Democrats alike in recent years. As the following case studies demonstrate, very often the debate revolves around the question of whether particular politicians or political parties are sincere in their religious beliefs, or whether in fact the appearance of religious piety merely masks an underlying, and more cynical, political strategy. In the case of the Democratic Party, such concerns arose early on in the 2004 presidential campaign as John Kerry attempted to negotiate the so-called “God gap” that supposedly separates the two parties. While the party attempted to respond to Kerry’s defeat by establishing a “Faith in Action” initiative and enlisting the support of progressive religious leaders like Jim Wallis, questions about the sincerity of these efforts remained. Democratic National Committee chairman Howard Dean appeared to validate such concerns when he identified Job as his favorite book in the New Testament (VandeHei, 2004).

As the following cases demonstrate, though, Republicans have not escaped questions about their own religious sincerity. In some ways, the GOP suffered a deeper blow to its credibility on this front than its Democratic opposition, due to a combination of actions or
perceived failures on the part of the Bush administration and members of the Republican Congress. Republican Congressmen faced a series of sex scandals, while advocates of intelligent design faced a series of legal defeats. At the same time, a revitalized Religious Left began to make inroads in the new media environment, taking advantage of social media technologies to generate revenue and media attention.

While these developments shifted the terrain of American religious politics, they do not warrant premature declarations that the Religious Right is dead (Sharlet, 2007). In fact, even in those cases where religious progressives have made some advances, they have faced trouble of their own. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the period of realignment and uncertainty that marked the Bush administration gave way to a re-entrenchment of the Religious Right in the lead-up to the 2008 election.

POLITICAL TROUBLE

The Terri Schiavo Memo

At the time that Terri Schiavo and her family became the subject of intense domestic and international media coverage in early 2005, she had been in a persistent vegetative state for fifteen years. Since 1998 her husband, Michael Schiavo, had been engaged in a prolonged battle over her fate with her parents, Robert and Mary Schindler. The case received little public scrutiny until 2003, when Schiavo’s parents decided to contact Randall Terry, a prominent pro-life activist, to publicize their case. It received renewed attention in early 2005, when her feeding tube was removed for a third time as the result of ongoing litigation.

On March 18, 2005, the same day that Schiavo’s feeding tube was removed for the third time, ABC News’ Linda Douglass reported on “World News Tonight with Peter Jennings” that
Republicans had circulated a memo suggesting that the case constituted a “great political issue” that could rally the Party’s pro-life base as the 2006 mid-term elections approached. A *New York Times* report later claimed that Democrats had initially released the memo on a now-defunct “decoy” website, *D.C. Inside Scoop* (Nagourney, 2006). Republican leaders denied writing the memo. At the time, Congress was debating the possibility of intervening in the case. By March 21, both houses had passed a bill known as the “Palm Sunday Compromise,” which gave jurisdiction in the case to the federal courts. President Bush took a midnight flight to Washington from his ranch in Texas in order to sign the bill into law.

The same day that Congress passed the bill, John Hinderaker of the conservative Power Line weblog responded to ABC’s allegations in a post entitled “Is This the Biggest Hoax Since the Sixty Minutes Story?” The post’s title clearly referenced Dan Rather’s report about President Bush’s National Guard service, which was based on a set of documents of questionable authenticity. Hinderaker noted that the alleged Schiavo memo was unsigned, and did not appear on official letterhead. He remarked that the memo “does not sound like something written by a conservative; it sounds like a liberal fantasy of how conservatives talk” (Hinderaker, 2005). In the ensuing weeks, accusations of fraud against Linda Douglass and ABC circulated through major news outlets including CNN, NBC News, Fox News and the *Washington Post* (Palser, 2005). An ABC spokesperson later defended Douglass as “an outstanding reporter who was dragged through the mud” (Kurtz, 2005). Accusations of fraud were particularly damaging in the wake of the scandal surrounding Rather’s National Guard report. Fred Barnes, executive editor of the *Weekly Standard*, claimed that ABC’s reporting on the Schiavo memo constituted evidence of "crude liberal bias.” “The offensive part,” Barnes lamented, was that the story “left
the strong impression that Republicans are callous and cynical in their attempt to save Schiavo's life" (Kurtz, 2005).

On April 7, 2005, Representative Martinez acknowledged that the memo in question had, in fact, come from his office (“Senator Says,” 2005). It was written by Brian Darling, the Senator’s legal counsel. One blogger apologized to ABC News for suggesting that their reporting was fraudulent. Hinderaker and Barnes both admitted that their accusations were incorrect, but continued to accuse the media of liberal bias (Kurtz, 2005).

In the end, the actions by Christian conservatives, Congress, and President Bush failed to keep Schiavo alive. The Schindler family’s appeals fared no better in federal courts than they had in the Florida state courts. She died on March 31, 2005 with her husband at her bedside. Nevertheless, the episode demonstrated the relative strength of the Christian Right in its ability to influence events in Washington. Looking back on the episode two years later, columnist Steven Thomma claimed that events of Palm Sunday, 2005 represented “the peak of Christian conservatives’ political power”—a power that had ebbed considerably in the subsequent years as top Republican candidates felt less compelled to cater to social conservatives (Thomma, 2007).

The debate surrounding Brian Darling’s memo gets to the heart of significant tensions developing between Christian conservatives and the GOP at this time. The issue in question was whether the GOP was sincere in its dramatic defense of the Schindler’s wishes, or whether its involvement was part of a more “callous and cynical” public relations strategy. Importantly in terms of the current discussion, these concerns played out through a contentious give-and-take between the mainstream press (both broadcasting and newspapers) and new media sources, including the popular conservative Power Line blog.
Sex, Lies, and E-mails: GOP Sex Scandals

If the Schiavo case represented the “peak” of cooperation between the GOP and conservative Christians while exposing certain developing tensions, the sex scandals that erupted in subsequent months turned latent tensions into a growing rift. Like the Schiavo memo incident, the debates about these scandals revolved around questions of sincerity and authenticity, and involved a close interaction between incumbent and new media sources. There are more cases worthy of discussion than mentioned here—most notably that of Ted Haggard, who resigned as head of the National Association of Evangelicals and from his position as pastor of New Life Church in Colorado after admitting to purchasing methamphetamines and patronizing a gay prostitute (Harris, 2006). But the examples included here are sufficient to highlight the concerns at hand.

The Los Angeles Times described the scandal involving former Republican Rep. Mark Foley as “the biggest Washington sex scandal since Monica S. Lewinsky.”31 The scandal erupted after Lane Hudson, a former Congressional Aide and gay activist, decided to post e-mail messages on his personal blog indicating that Foley had engaged in inappropriate behavior with young male Congressional staffers. Though he had sometimes supported gay rights, Foley had been an outspoken opponent of child pornography, wrote legislation strengthening sex offender laws, and opposed adoption by same-sex couples (Vargas, 2007). Hudson considered Foley a “creep” and a “sexual predator” who symbolized a growing culture of corruption in Washington. “It’s like it’s accepted to come to D.C. and have high ideals and believe in something and then have it go away,” he explained in an interview with the Times. “This whole Washington culture

31 The following discussion about Hudson and Foley is based largely on a Los Angeles Times article published in 2006 (Levey, 2006).
allows that to happen. It’s not only accepted, it’s expected that people become callous and lose their ideals and their focus. And that makes me mad.”

Hudson posted the e-mails on his personal blog in September 2006 out of frustration. He claimed that the e-mails were easy to obtain, since they were already in the hands of various media organizations, Republican leaders, and the FBI. He sent them to the Times in July, but by the fall the paper still had not published an article on the matter. “The blog was my backup,” Hudson explained. “The blogosphere isn’t subject to the same rules as the Washington culture, as the mainstream media.” Shortly after he published the e-mails, the popular website Wonkette linked to his blog, and the next day ABC News ran an article online. The following day, ABC confronted Foley and the Congressman resigned. On his blog, Hudson expressed great excitement at the success of his efforts.

Hudson was not the first, nor the most effective, blogger-activist to deliberately “out” members of Congress out of concern for matters of corruption and hypocrisy. Mike Rogers, another gay blogger, came to be known as the “most feared man on the Hill” for launching similar campaigns as early as 2004. In his own words, Rogers was motivated by what he perceived as "plain, hate-filled hypocrisy." Responding to the GOP-controlled Senate’s scheduled vote against same-sex marriage in June of that year, Rogers first targeted Virginia Congressman Ed Schrock. He blogged about Mark Foley months before Lane Hudson published the Congressman’s e-mails on his blog. He also targeted Senator Larry Craig in October 2006, months before Craig was involved in a sex sting operation in a Minneapolis airport in August of the following year. Craig had drawn Rogers’ ire by voting in favor of a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage. As of fall 2007, Rogers had outed almost three dozen

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32 The following discussion of Mike Rogers is based on a Washington Post article published in 2007 (Vargas, 2007).
Washington insiders on his blog. Like Hudson, Rogers harnessed the power of e-mail and social networking websites to collect damning information about his targets.

The GOP sex scandals were not limited to cases where bloggers “out” gay Congressmen. In an incident that some compared to Craig’s high-profile exposure, Senator David Vitter admitted to patronizing an escort service run by Deborah Jeane Palfrey, also known as the “D.C. Madam.” Palfrey had released her business’ phone records for public viewing and downloading on the Internet, and her attorney had also sent dozens of CD-ROM copies of the list to journalists and activists (Augenstein, 2007). *Hustler* magazine identified Vitter’s number among those listed, and the Senator acknowledged that he had been a customer (Rood, 2007).

The implications of these developments are not lost on scholars who study journalism and mass media. The Poynter Institute’s Kelly McBride notes that “In the past, when the mainstream media were the gatekeepers of information, you could scream all you want—‘A conservative senator from Idaho is gay’—and nobody would hear you. But now people can hear anyone, and that's changed how mainstream media makes decisions about what to publish” (Vargas, 2007). Similar gate-keeping issues apply in the case of the online release of phone records or other information that might expose wrong-doing. In fact, as discussed below, Senator Vitter later faced another scandal when information about questionable budget “earmarks” appeared in an online database compiled by an independent government-watchdog organization.

*Cracks in the Base: Evangelicals and the GOP*

These shifts in the media environment, which have opened the gates to more—and more aggressive—charges of hypocrisy, have had significant effects on the relationship between the GOP and their once-reliable evangelical base. Ellen Moore notes that “in the wake of well-
publicized sex scandals involving prominent Republican politicians, 3 out of 10 self-identified evangelicals voted for Democrats in the 2006 mid-term elections” (Moore, 2008; Blumenthal, 2006). Reflecting on evangelicals’ growing frustration with the GOP, Christian World View Center director Tony Beam asked, "What are we working ourselves to death for and then they're not who they say they are?" While Beam does not share Hudson or Rogers’ support for gay rights, he does share with those bloggers a frustration with the apparent hypocrisy of the Republican leaders they exposed. "If [gay Democratic Congressman] Barney Frank had done those things, we'd say, ‘So what?’ But the hypocrite factor is what makes it worse. We're supposed to be better than that because of the stands we take as a party.” Nevertheless, Beam expressed his continued faith in the GOP and the church, attributing such problems to the moral failings of the individuals in question (Baram, 2007).

Other evangelical leaders have argued that the integrity of the evangelical cause depends on the ability to remain independent from the Republican Party. In 2006 Richard Cizik, vice president in Washington for the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), stated his position on the matter: “The gospel has priority over our politics, and, at times, that means that to be Biblically consistent, you have to be politically inconsistent. And you can't simply become a wholly owned subsidiary of the GOP. You can't do that and be faithful” (Tippett, 2007). Cizik received significant criticism from the evangelical community for his efforts to expand the range of issues addressed by the NAE, including many calls for his resignation. But he is not alone in his views. Jim Wallis, founder and editor of Sojourners magazine, has suggested that the Republican National Committee’s political tactics amount to sheer idolatry—for example, sending postcards to conservative churches claiming that liberals want to ban the Bible, or pressuring churches to provide the RNC with their congregation’s membership lists. In a
rejection of partisan politics, Wallis has been campaigning for an end to “the monologue of the Religious Right” under the banner “God is not a Republican. Or a Democrat” (Wallis, 2005a; 2005b). Local pastors like Brian McLaren have articulated similar views. McLaren claims that there are a “growing number of evangelicals” who “don’t want to have a menu handed to us of a conservative ideology or a liberal ideology, and we just have to sign on and submit our religious commitments to somebody else’s political ideology” (McLaren, 2007). Perhaps ironically, the ability to protect the integrity of one’s religious commitments from partisan politics even served as a centerpiece for Mike Huckabee’s presidential campaign. During his campaign, Huckabee openly criticized evangelical leaders who become “intoxicated by power” and who are merely interested in winning politically (Huckabee, 2008). Many evangelicals, such as Christian publisher Steven Strang, came to regard Huckabee as “one of us” rather than a mere politician cynically adopting the rhetoric of the evangelical community (“Religion and the Presidential Primaries,” 2008).

LEGAL TROUBLE: THE BATTLE AGAINST EVOLUTION

For evangelicals, the relationship between religion and science is just as dynamic, and the history just as long, as that between religion and politics. Liberal Protestants began to embrace science—including Darwinism—well before the Scopes “monkey” trial of 1925. In fact, Darwin’s theory did not generate much shock among Protestant modernists in the nineteenth century. In many ways the rejection of science symbolized by the Scopes case was part of a broader reaction against modernism and the Social Gospel that marked conservative evangelicalism in the early twentieth century (Hutchinson, 1976). The Scopes trial was perceived as a defeat for fundamentalism, thanks in no small part to H.L. Menken’s merciless portrayal of
fundamentalists as “rustic ignoramuses” whose public rejection of science represented a reappearance of “Neanderthal man” (Balmer, 2006, p.114).

After a period of realignment, however, fundamentalism reemerged stronger than ever in the 1960s and 70s (Carpenter, 1999; Martin, 1996). At that time, a broader cultural distrust of science developed as the optimism of the 1964 New York World’s Fair gave way to the violent technical excesses of Vietnam and the Cuyahoga River industrial fire in 1969 (Balmer, 1999, pp. 124-125). As evangelicals began to reassert themselves in public life—especially in public education—they capitalized on this broad distrust of science to argue once again against evolution and on behalf of creationism.

Of course, like most people, evangelicals do not reject science outright. However, their skepticism of science—combined with skepticism of the mass media which report scientific findings—lead many to be selective in their understanding and acceptance of concepts like evolution and global warming (Moore, 2008). Though some outspoken evangelicals like Calvin DeWitt and Richard Cizik embrace the issue of global warming, the consumerist orientation of many evangelical churches does not lend itself to a widespread acceptance of the issue among congregation members (Moore, 2008). And while moderate evangelicals like Randall Balmer reject creationism—and its new reincarnation, Intelligent Design (ID)—as presenting a danger to the integrity of religion as well as science, the debate over evolution and creationism continues to flourish (Balmer, 2006).

As issues that highlight the intersection of mass media, science, and religion, global warming and evolution are both equally deserving of scholarly attention. For the sake of brevity, however, the following examples focus entirely on recent debates about Intelligent Design and evolution. As in the previous section on religion and politics, these examples demonstrate the
increasing significance of new media technologies for public discourse about religious issues. And while they touch on claims of constitutionality and scientific accuracy, the case of the “Wedge document” in particular focuses on claims of sincerity.

Creationism from Scopes to Dover

As recent developments demonstrate, the humiliation suffered by fundamentalists at the Scopes trial did not lay creationism to rest. Recent court cases in Pennsylvania, California, and Kansas represent contemporary counterparts to the 1925 case. H.L. Menken’s parodying reply to creationists at that time even has a contemporary counterpart in the widespread Internet meme of “Flying Spaghetti Monsterism,” which attempts to take arguments for ID to the logical (and deliberately absurd) conclusion that the universe might have been designed by a supernatural being called the Flying Spaghetti Monster (Boxer, 2005). Defenders of creationism take the issue quite seriously, though, arguing that the defeat of evolution is a matter of prime importance for the renewal of American culture itself (Downey, 2006). Opponents are equally convinced of the gravity of the situation, arguing that the integrity of scientific knowledge and the American public education system are at stake.

Of course, critics of evolution have all but abandoned the terms “creationism” and “creation science” in favor of the more religiously neutral-sounding “intelligent design.” Proponents defended “creation science” in legal cases through the 1990s, but the courts repeatedly ruled that the views in question were a religious ideology, not science (Balmer, 2006, pp. 118-119). Proponents typically argue that ID is religiously neutral because it does not necessarily posit a supernatural force as the origin of life; it argues that an intelligent source was likely involved in creation, but does not specify the character of that intelligence. But as Martha
Nussbaum suggests, ID is simply “a more intellectually sophisticated version of creation science” (Nussbaum, 2008, p. 322). As the discussion below demonstrates, there is ample evidence of the religious motivations behind the ID movement.

The strategy of presenting creationism as a legitimate scientific theory, however, is only one among others. After the Supreme Court ruled in 1987 that creationism was a religious ideology, the influential proponent Phillip Johnson decided to flip the argument around: in *Darwin on Trial* (1991), he claimed that the theory of evolution amounts to a form of dogmatic religion (Balmer, 2006, pp. 120-121). Balmer notes a third strategy that might prove to be the most effective yet: as long as proponents of creationism or ID can create enough confusion around the issue, throwing the scientific consensus around evolution into doubt, they have won half the battle (Balmer, 2006, p. 127). This latter strategy is visible in recent arguments that teachers should “teach the controversy”; that evolution is a “theory in crisis”; and that evolution is a theory but “not a fact” (Balmer, 2006; Nussbaum, 2008).

These recent reformulations of creationism are backed by a number of powerful and well-funded think tanks. Some of these include Discovery Institute, Intelligent Design Network, Institute for Creation Research, and Foundation for Thought and Ethics. Their campaigns typically employ a combination of the strategies described above. A primary part of their efforts remains the portrayal of creationism as scientifically legitimate, although no peer-reviewed research has been produced to support either creationism or ID (Balmer, 2006, p. 126). Some of them are more straightforward than others in how they present their work. For example, one proponent of ID from the Foundation for Thought and Ethics (FTE) justified raising funds for the creationist text *Of Pandas and People* by asserting that “[W]e have to inundate [young people] with a rational, defensible, well-argued Judeo-Christian worldview. FTE’s carefully researched
books do just that” (Nussbaum, 2008, p. 322) Other foundations, like the Discovery Institute, have denied publicly that their campaigns on behalf of ID are motivated by religious ideology. The Discovery Institute’s claims to that effect became the subject of intense scrutiny during the trial of *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* (2005), which was the first trial to deal directly with the place of ID in public schools. The Dover, PA school district had passed a policy requiring that students be read a statement calling evolution into question, and that they have access to the creationist book *Of Pandas and People*. The plaintiffs against the school board won the case.

*The Discovery Institute and the “Wedge” Document*

Of particular interest to the current discussion is the role of a document outlining the so-called “Wedge strategy” developed by the Discovery Institute. In 1999, Matt Duss was asked to photocopy a document as part of his routine job duties. Duss was a part-time employee in the mail room of a human resources firm in Seattle, where the Discovery Institute is also located. He noticed that the document was labeled “Top Secret” and “Not for Distribution.” The cover included a rendition of Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*. Out of curiosity, Duss flipped through the document. He kept a copy for himself and shared it with his friend Tim Rhodes, who had an interest in evolution and biology. Shortly after reading it, Rhodes decided to scan the entire document and post it on the web (Downey, 2006).

The document outlines five- and twenty-year goals and objectives, with the aim of defeating scientific materialism and replacing such explanations with “the theistic understanding that nature and human beings are created by God.” The author explains the metaphor of a “wedge” in this way: “If we view the predominant materialistic science as a giant tree, our
strategy is intended to function as a ‘wedge’ that, while relatively small, can split the trunk when applied at its weakest points.” The objectives outlined include academic conferences, teacher training, research funding, op-ed and popular writing, documentaries and other media productions (“The Wedge Document,” 1999).

The publication of the Wedge online made little impact at first, but it eventually played a major role in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*. Barbara Forrest, a professor of history and political science at Southeastern Louisiana University, took the document seriously and made it the subject of an article published in an edited book. That article served as the foundation for a full manuscript, *Creationism’s Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design*, which Forrest wrote with co-author Paul R. Gross (2004). Forrest appeared as a key witness in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, testifying for the plaintiffs against the scientific legitimacy of intelligent design and the Discovery Institute.

The Wedge document, which constitutes a key piece of evidence in Jones’ decision, belies the neutral, even secular, language that Discovery Institute and other ID proponents employ in public. In his 139-page decision, Jones argues that the Wedge document provides “Dramatic evidence of ID’s religious nature and aspirations” (*Kitzmiller v. Dover*, 2005, p. 28). “A careful review of the Wedge document’s goals and language,” he argues, “reveals cultural and religious goals, as opposed to scientific ones” (*Kitzmiller v. Dover*, 2005, p. 29). The document, coupled with statements made by Phillip Johnson and other proponents, testimony by Barbara Forrest and other witnesses for the plaintiffs, as well as evidence about ID’s funding sources, led Jones to conclude that ”[t]he overwhelming evidence at trial established that ID is a religious view, a mere re-labeling of creationism, and not a scientific theory” (*Kitzmiller v. Dover*, 2005, p. 43). He further argues that the “teach the controversy” tactic is “at best disingenuous, and at worst a canard. The goal of the [Intelligent Design Movement] is not to
encourage critical thought, but to foment a revolution which would supplant evolutionary theory with ID” (Kitzmiller v. Dover, 2005, p. 89).

Thus the simple decision to scan and publish a “Top Secret” document online, made by the friend of a mail room clerk, eventually impacted one of the most significant court decisions about evolution since Scopes. Writing for the Seattle Times, columnist Roger Downey calls Kitzmiller v. Dover “a defeat so sweeping—in the form of a judicial decision so detailed and so trenchant—that even the most passionate advocates of faith-based science seem stunned and confused about the future of their cause” (Downey, 2006). As with the various online exposures in the GOP sex scandals, the publication of the Wedge document calls into question the sincerity of those whose public rhetoric seeks to privilege commonly shared social values above mere political strategy.

Senator Vitter’s Creationist Earmarks

Another incident involving Senator David Vitter is worth mentioning in this context, since it links the GOP’s sex scandals with the issue of creationism, while highlighting the role of new media technology in public discourse. As mentioned above, Senator Vitter admitted in the summer of 2007 to patronizing an escort service after his phone number appeared on a set of records released online and via CD-ROM by the so-called “D.C. Madam” and her attorneys. At the time Gene Mills, Director of the Louisiana Family Forum, came to Senator Vitter’s defense via a video clip message posted to the Internet website YouTube. She denied that Vitter’s situation was similar to that of Larry Craig, since unlike the latter Senator, Vitter clearly “repented of the allegations” and “sought forgiveness” (Walsh, 2007). The Family Forum had been an advocate of Senator Vitter, since he was a consistent supporter of conservative social issues.
Shortly after the D.C. Madam scandal, Vitter earmarked $100,000 for the Family Forum in a federal spending bill. The earmark specified that the funds were to be used by the Family Forum “to develop a plan to promote better science education.” However, the organization’s website revealed that it is a Christian activist group whose campaigns included a “battle plan to combat evolution” (Walsh, September 2007). The organization later removed documents from its website outlining its “battle plan,” and articulated a more neutral-sounding public defense. In a maneuver reminiscent of the Discovery Institute’s Wedge strategy, Mills claimed that “We think that in order to teach controversial topics successfully, you have to teach both sides” (Walsh, September 2007). Critics considered the earmark a misappropriation of public funds that would funnel taxpayer money to religious programs. Vitter denied that the program was “intended to mandate and push creationism within the public schools,” but later withdrew the earmark in order “to avoid more hysterics” on the issue (Walsh, October 2007).

The earmark might not have come to public attention had it not been available in an online database created by the non-partisan budget watchdog group Taxpayers for Common Sense (TCS). A project begun in 1995, TCS allows the public to download its database of federal budget information, and offers documentation explaining how users may perform data searches (http://www.taxpayer.net). The goal of providing the online service is to distribute the labor involved in tracking earmarks of the type written by Senator Vitter, thereby making government more transparent and publicly accountable.

**Truth Under Fire**

As discussed in Chapter 2, Benhabib (1992) describes “creation science” as an attempt to overcome the tension arising from the differentiation of value spheres. As scientific and moral spheres develop according to their own logic, the traditional unity of cosmology and morality
cannot be regained except through rhetorical contortions that defy the developmental imperatives of modernity. Creationism embodies such contortions. By suggesting that scripture is a valid source of empirical information about the creation of the universe, creationists subvert the process of value differentiation and relativize the truth claims of modern science (Benhabib, 1992, p. 61). Proponents of “creation science” and “intelligent design” try to “circumvent specific processes of validation and argumentation, the use of rules of evidence and inference which have been developed” within the scientific sphere (Benhabib, 1992, p. 61).

Evidence of such circumvention is apparent in the fact that, despite the many articles and books that proponents have offered in defense of ID, no peer-reviewed articles have been published to support the argument (Balmer, 2006, p. 126). One of the chief witnesses for the defense in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, the ID proponent Michael Behe, admitted as much during his cross-examination (*Kitzmiller Trial Transcript*). While Benhabib’s concern lies primarily with the integrity of science, Balmer also emphasizes the threat that ID poses to religion itself. He argues that ID “subjects religious belief to the canons of Enlightenment rationalism because it concedes, at least by inference, that faith is not sufficient in itself” (Balmer, 2006, p. 134). In this sense a respect for the distinct functions of science and religion is necessary for the integrity of each.

Unfortunately, the dynamics of commercial mass media—especially professional journalism—create a fertile environment for ID proponents to blur these distinctions. The Wedge strategy of “teaching the controversy” or emphasizing “both sides of the issue” plays into the journalistic norm of objectivity. But as political economists point out, journalistic objectivity has a long and troubled history. More often than not, the fear of being labeled as “biased”—either by “flak” organizations, politicians, or advertisers—leads journalists and news organizations to
avoid relevant context, defer to official sources, and focus on a narrow range of issues (McChesney, 2004; Cunningham, 2003; Chomsky and Herman, 2002). The result tends toward confusion and depoliticization rather than knowledge and informed citizenship. As Cunningham suggests, “our pursuit of objectivity can trip us up on the way to ‘truth’” (Cunningham, 2003).

Ironically, the goal of objectivity emerged during the nineteenth century, as science came to replace religion as the source of empirical knowledge. But by the end of the century, problems were evident. “Objective” coverage of lynching did little to accurately portray the suffering of African-Americans, for example. In the early 20th century, the arrival of professional journalism, public relations, and the advertising industry exacerbated these problems. Contemporary coverage of scientific issues such as global warming and evolution thus errs on the side of what Susan Jacoby has termed “dumb objectivity”—that is, a compulsive tendency to present all perspectives on an issue as equally valid, even when common sense dictates otherwise (Inge, 2008). This is precisely the problem that Al Gore alludes to in his documentary An Inconvenient Truth, where he notes that while scientific articles supporting the idea that humans contribute to global warming vastly outnumber those disputing it, the mass media grossly distort this proportion, portraying the issue as a dispute between two opposing—and equally credible—camps (Bender, 2006).

Professional journalism’s tendency to defer to official sources also provides an opening for ideologically-driven “think tanks” to influence coverage of scientific issues. Many of these think tanks are so-called “astroturf” organizations, appearing as grassroots organizations comprised of concerned citizens, when in fact they are created and funded by powerful corporations and sympathetic politicians. Under pressure to cut expenses and keep pace with the news cycle, reporters and journalists have little time or incentive to do in-depth investigations of
scientific issues. Consequently, news sources feature pre-packaged public relations material or interviews with “experts” from such think tanks (Chester, 2007, p. 66).

In the same way that neoliberal organizations mobilize to discredit global warming, the Discovery Institute has employed similar tactics to generate confusion about evolution (Balmer, 2006). Not coincidentally the Discovery Institute, headed by financial commentator George Gilder, has also lobbied aggressively for deregulation of the media industry and the elimination of public interest safeguards. (Chester, 2007, pp. 76-77). The synergy between these efforts is clear: the success of disingenuous public relations campaigns such as the Wedge require a pliable media environment where journalistic standards are lowered or rendered toothless by the pressures of the unfettered market. Such pressures have similar effects across different types of media. Science textbook publishers tend to shy away from the subject of evolution out of concern for negative responses from teachers and parents (Balmer, 2006, p. 116). Similarly, broadcasters tend to present information in ways that do not threaten consumer lifestyles, resulting in industry-friendly coverage of environmental issues (Moore, 2008). Commercial mass media, therefore, do not provide a receptive environment for the discursive redemption of scientific truth claims.

Such is the situation in which environmentally progressive evangelicals—Randall Balmer, Joel Hunter, Jim Wallis, Richard Cizik, Calvin DeWitt—find themselves. These leaders articulate a nuanced understanding of the relation between science and religion that reveals the potential for an ongoing process of social rationalization, despite the continued encroachment of so-called “system imperatives.” Pro-environmental evangelical Richard Cizik claims to have had a “conversion to the science of climate change” at a conference organized by Calvin DeWitt in 2002. His willingness to work with other faith groups, and with scientists who do not share his
faith, is an indication that the value spheres of religion and science may indeed develop in a spirit of symbiosis rather than contentiousness. An important first step, Cizik argues, is that scientists and evangelicals refrain from viewing each other in terms of unhelpful stereotypes (Tippett, 2007). Such concerns for dialogue and cooperation in the examination of scientific issues highlight the need to address the distortions of the commercial media environment in which such conversations unfold.

TROUBLE FROM THE LEFT

Jim Wallis: “A Quote Machine Fashioned Out of Clay”

Just as mainstream media coverage tends to obscure the heterogeneity of evangelicals and emphasize “hot button” issues, coverage of the Religious Left likewise downplays its diversity. As Robert Wilkens-Iaffola (2006) explains, “the mainstream media seem to be waiting for a unified Religious Left to act as a foil for the Religious Right, while overlooking the diverse and diffuse constellation of spiritual and religious groups on the left working to change public policy” (Wilkens-Iafolla p. 6). Liberal critics claim that Jim Wallis of Sojourners has self-consciously anointed himself as figurehead of the Religious Left, playing into the hands of mainstream media while accommodating himself to the culture of Beltway politics. To a significant extent, his publicity efforts have succeeded. While the Media Matters (2007) study showed that conservatives enjoyed more coverage overall, Wallis actually received more mentions in one particular media source—newspapers—than the high-profile conservative Tony
The Nation’s Katha Pollitt (2005) remarked wryly that Wallis was “on a roll” by appearing on Meet the Press and topping the Amazon.com best-seller lists.

But Wallis’s success in garnering media attention came as no consolation for progressives who consider him too centrist. In a post on his Street Prophets blog, UCC pastor Daniel Schultz (2007) lamented that “instead of being depicted as the very sensible, very moderate leader he is, Wallis is portrayed in the press as the leader of the Religious Left. That cuts off the oxygen to anyone on his left.” A post on Jeff Sharlet’s (2005) Revealer website took a more sarcastic tone: “Wallis, who possesses the power to channel the thoughts of several million non-Republican evangelicals, has become a quote machine, a stock figure in any news story about what the press calls the ‘Christian left.’” The post goes on to claim that Wallis is not even human, but an invention of the mainstream media: “In order to maintain the cosmic order necessary for all good media, seven top media organizations gathered in a secret cave, where they fashioned Wallis out of clay.”

Both conservative and liberal critics have taken issue with Wallis’s claims to transcend partisan politics. After the Washington Post ran a front-page article proclaiming that “the Religious Left is back,” a number of leaders specifically rejected the term “Religious Left” for its partisan implications (Jones, 2008, p. 14; Murphy and Cooperman, 2006). Wallis responded by saying, “Don’t go left, don’t go right, go deeper,” (Jones, 2008, p. 14). But The Nation’s Pollitt (2005) argues that “Wallis's evangelicalism is as much a power play as Pat Robertson's. . . And Wallis is as much a power player. By a remarkable act of providence,” she adds, “God's politics turn out to be curiously tailored to the current crisis of the Democratic Party.” Schultz (2007)

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33 The authors of the Media Matters report are quick to add that “the results for Wallis should not overshadow the fact that, overall, conservatives had a much higher profile than progressives” (p. 7)
argued that Wallis caters to “Washington insiders looking for a dash of moral authority, and conservative evangelicals willing to think outside the box on certain issues.”

Conservative critiques of Wallis are no less pervasive. In a content analysis of Wallis’s written work published in *The Journal of Communication and Religion*, Lattin and Underhill (2006) claim that “his message rather than transcend polarized religious/political boundaries falls into a traditional Liberal ideology” (p. 208). Janice Crouse (2007) of the conservative Concerned Women for America (CWA) cites Lattin and Underhill to support her claim that “Wallis has devoted his whole career to trying to force the round peg of leftist ideology into the square hole of biblical orthodoxy.”

Together, these critiques highlight the continued success of mainstream, commercial media in setting the terms of debate. A certain amount of partisan antipathy draws an audience, but even left-versus-right arguments tend to be limited in terms of ideological scope. As Chomsky (1989) suggests, “controversy may rage as long as it adheres to the presuppositions that define the consensus of elites” (p. 48). Wallis is liberal enough to draw productive fire from Religious Right groups such as CWA, but he does so according to the terms of Washington politics and Beltway journalism. Progressives to the left of Wallis may get some traction in the blogosphere, but are largely shut out of traditional outlets. Thus critiques from bloggers like Daniel Schultze and Jeff Sharlet contradict the optimism of scholars who imply that blogs can single-handedly resuscitate the public sphere (Cooper, 2006) or that the Internet renders concerns about industry consolidation obsolete (Compaigne and Gomery, 2000). On the contrary: incumbent media industries are likely to adapt to the emerging networked public sphere, exerting their influence in new ways (Baker, 2007). Religious conservatives are likely to be the primary

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34 For a relevant critique of Beltway journalism, see Kaiser (2009).
beneficiaries of this continued influence. Furthermore, if a nascent Religious Left does manage to garner some mainstream media attention, it is likely to do so on the terms of incumbent industries. While new media sources offer opportunities for religious progressivism, then, the arrival of new technologies does not guarantee a significant change in the political climate.

Ejecting Progressivism: The UCC’s “Stillspeaking” Campaign

The United Church of Christ’s “God is Still Speaking” marketing campaign (also known as “Stillspeaking”) demonstrates how the logic of commercial media continues to shape public discourse about religion, even as new media provide outlets for religious progressivism. The Stillspeaking campaign continues the UCC’s long history of media activism on behalf of minorities—most notably its successful effort in the 1960s to challenge the broadcast license of WLBT-TV in Jackson, Mississippi for its failure to air news about African-Americans.

Beginning in 2004, the UCC produced a series of ads promoting the church’s commitment to inclusiveness. The ads receiving the most attention—“Ejector” and “Bouncer” (also known as “Night Club”)—included specific reference to gays and lesbians. The “Bouncer” ad received a New York Addy Award\(^{35}\), an outstanding advertising award from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, and the Association of National Advertisers 2005 award for multicultural excellence (Ferguson, 2006; Guess, 2005). The UCC also enjoyed an increase in membership, financial support, merchandise sales, and media coverage due both to the ads themselves and the controversy they generated. However the success of the campaign was driven by—and thus reconfirms—the continued dominance of commercial media.

As described by John Nichols (2004) of The Nation, the Bouncer ad featured “muscle-bound bouncers determining who may or may not attend church. After people of color, a

\(^{35}\) For best single national spot.
disabled man and a pair of men who might be gay are turned away, the image dissolves to a statement: ‘Jesus didn’t turn people away. Neither do we.’” The ad ran in six regional TV markets in early 2004 without generating any controversy (Dart, 2004). On December 1, 2004, the ad debuted nationally, running on cable outlets including AMC, Discovery, History, TBS, TNT, ABC Family, BET, Fox, Hallmark, and Travel (Dart, 2004; Cooperman, 2004). However, with the launch of its national campaign the UCC announced that ABC, NBC, and CBS had refused to air the ad on their broadcast networks. Their publicity materials included copies of the rejection notices (Cooperman, 2004).

While ABC initially avoided controversy by citing a blanket policy against religious ads (Chase, 2005a), NBC and CBS offered more pointed reasons. The NBC refusal notice called the ad “too controversial” (Cooperman, 2004). CBS offered the following:

Because this commercial touches on the exclusion of gay couples and other minority groups by other individuals and organizations. . . and the fact the Executive Branch has recently proposed a Constitutional Amendment to define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, this spot is unacceptable for broadcast on the [CBS and UPN] networks. (Cooperman, 2004)

UCC president Rev. John H. Thomas accused the networks of being “nervous about an ascendant conservative movement” after Bush’s successful 2004 campaign (Cooperman, 2004). “Rather than uphold a kind of freedom of the airwaves, they're deciding it's wiser to censor some perspectives than to court reaction from the right,” Thomas suggested. In their defense, NBC and CBS noted that they had approved a different ad (known as the “Steeple” ad) that included a more general reference to inclusiveness but no specific reference to gays and lesbians (Dart, 2004). NBC’s Alan Wurtzel argued that “These folks are giving the impression that NBC is anti-church, anti-religion, anti-gay. It has nothing to do with that” (Cooperman, 2004). Another
network source claimed, “This is yet another example of realizing a windfall of free publicity. It is a growing cottage industry” (Lisotta, 2004).

Despite these accusations, the UCC quickly announced that it would file petitions with the FCC, demanding that two network affiliates in Miami be denied license renewals “for failing to operate in the public interest.” “UCC’s message is being denied access to the airwaves, therefore the licenses should not be renewed,” read an official statement (“UCC Challenges,” 2004). The petition drive was posted on the newly-launched Accessible Airwaves website, which features blog entries by UCC communication director Bob Chase. Chase explained that the launch of the website followed his realization that the blogosphere is “the next great revolution in journalism” (Chase, 2005b). He claims that it was bloggers John Avravosis from AmericaBlog and Chris Bowers from MyDD who had “picked up the [ad] story and gave it legs.” In addition to the FCC petition drive, Chase also announced in March 2005 that “starting today and for the next several weeks, we are running our ad on over 50 of the top blogs. I hope that our message, ‘No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome at the United Church of Christ’ resonates on the blogs and helps get the word out to both the traditional media and the public at large.” The decision was innovative since, according to Henry Copeland (2005) of the BlogsAds web service, the online campaign represented “the first time a church has bought blogads” as well as “the first time I’ve seen a blog post written about a major blogad buy by the buyer.”

Though ABC initially managed to avoid the controversy, in May 2005 it ran into trouble when the network ran an ad from the conservative Focus on the Family (FOF) during the season finale of Supernanny. When UCC accused ABC of having a double standard, spokeswoman Susan Sewell claimed that "The network doesn't take advertising from religious groups. It's a
long-standing policy” (Eckstrom, 2005). Bloggers including John Aravosis, Fredrick Clarkson and Chuck Currie took issue with ABC’s implication that FOF is not a religious group, citing evidence from the *New York Times*, the FOF website and the ad itself (Chase, 2005a). For example, according to the *Times* FOF president Jim Daly had described the ad as “part of an effort to bring its faith-based advice on parenting and relationships to younger families” (Aravosis, 2005). Indeed the ad itself includes the statement, “We'll be there with parenting advice and a faith-based perspective that can make all the difference” (Greene, 2005). Chuck Currie (2005), a UCC minister and blogger, called on his readers to petition the FCC about ABC’s apparent double standard. ABC subsequently told the *New York Times* that while the network does accept ads from religious organizations, it only does so “as long as the commercials do not proselytize” (Salamon, 2005). However, the evangelical *Christian Post* website praised the ad as the “cornerstone” of a broader campaign that drew 10,000 new families to join FOF (Hwang, 2005). “After the spot,” wrote Christin Hwang, “thousands of parents called Focus on the Family and visited the Focus on Your Child Web site looking for resources and encouragement in facing the difficulties of parenthood.” Chase suggested, “It seems that somebody is deciding that one religious expression is O.K. for viewers to see and others are not” (Salamon, 2005). On his own blog, Chase claimed that ABC had repeatedly changed its policies in order to justify its refusal of the UCC ad, and urged his readers to petition the FCC to investigate (Chase, 2005a).

To some extent, both the networks and the UCC are guilty as charged: the networks appear to have refused the UCC’s ads out of concern for potential flak from religious conservatives, while the UCC appears guilty of “milking the controversy for free publicity,” as the networks suggested (Cooperman, 2004). Indeed the UCC ad controversy received coverage
in mainstream sources, Christian magazines, trade publications such as *Television Week*, and gay/lesbian magazines such as *The Advocate* and *Lesbian News*. The mainline Protestant magazine *Christian Century* ran an article titled “UCC Reaps Publicity from Banned Ad,” noting that the controversy generated revenue for the church as people purchased “T-shirts, baseball caps, postcards, coffee mugs, balloons, tote bags and notebook binders” to show their support (Dart, 2004). Upon receiving the Association of National Advertisers’ Multicultural Excellence Award, however, UCC’s Rob Buford denied that crass consumerism and strategic calculation played any role in the campaign: “The church has been given this multicultural excellence award because we didn’t take the brand and make it multicultural, we took multicultural and made it a brand . . . This is the essence of non-conformity with the world” (Guess, 2005). In its reliance on hot button issues, partisan antipathy, and branded lifestyle products, however, the UCC arguably conformed to the dynamics of the very media environment it sought to condemn. Bob Liodice, the president and CEO of the ANA, summarized the UCC’s efforts in less lofty terms: “The business results, membership growth and financial support, were off the charts.” As if to give the lie to Buford’s claims, he quickly added, “Kraft Foods also demonstrated an effective transcultural effort with Kool Aid” (Liodice, 2005). The UCC’s campaigns to petition the FCC also suggest that, even as Bob Chase refers to the blogosphere as “the next great revolution in journalism,” the church regards traditional sources as indispensible to its mission. The petition drives presuppose the continued importance of mainstream commercial media even as Chase praises bloggers for following “in the tradition of this nation’s earliest pamphleteers” (Chase, 2005b).

Later developments continued the same trend. In April 2006, the UCC’s “Ejector” ad debuted on several cable channels. As described by Neal Broverman (2006) of the *Advocate*...
magazine, “First the single mom with a baby is ejected like a rocket out of her pew and out of the church. Then it's the gay couple who go flying. The 30-second TV commercial ends with the tagline, ‘God doesn't reject people. Neither do we.’” However once again ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox rejected the commercial as “an inappropriate ‘advocacy’ ad because of its references to homosexuality, race and ethnicity” (“Networks nix church ad,” 2006). MTV Networks also refused to run the ad on its gay cable network Logo, explaining that it "does not accept advocacy or religious advertising that appears to disparage any organization, denomination or individual" (Lisotta, 2006). In response, the gay cable news network here! announced that it would run the Ejector ad as a free public service. As Christopher Lisotta (2006) of Television Week suggests, the here! network’s decision surely involved a combination of principled commitment to public service and an opportunistic calculation to steal the moral high ground from a key competitor. As in the case of the Bouncer ad, then, the relative success of the Ejector ad was driven in part by the logic of the commercial marketplace.

A Qualified Success

The cases examined above—Jim Wallis’s publicity efforts and the UCC’s marketing campaign—demonstrate that the dynamics of the emerging networked public sphere will play a central role in determining how these scenarios will play out. Both cases indicate that, although new media sources do present some opportunities, established industries still exert a disproportionate influence on the terms and scope of public discourse. While Jim Wallis’s efforts have prompted mainstream sources to consider the Religious Left, his success is partly a measure of his willingness to play by the rules of insider politics and Beltway journalism. The relative diversity of religious progressives is obscured by the narrative that Wallis represents the voice of the Religious Left. The UCC’s Stillspeaking campaign is a similarly qualified success. The
power of mainstream networks to refuse the Bouncer and Ejector ads put UCC in the position of having to turn lemons into lemonade. Bob Chase accomplished this task masterfully, by transforming the networks’ rejection into a rallying cry for an online campaign supported by progressive bloggers. However, the strategy runs the risk of having the UCC rely on the continued conservatism of the networks to maintain its David-versus-Goliath narrative. Furthermore, while the underlying theme of the UCC ads—the inclusion of gays and lesbians—is certainly important, it is the contentious nature of the issue that ensures mainstream coverage. A campaign focused on poverty or the environmental may not enjoy such traction.

CONCLUSION

As the discussion above indicates, the dynamics of commercial mass media do not provide an ideal environment for the discursive redemption of truth claims (e.g., scientific evidence) or rightness claims (e.g., social justice issues). On the other hand, it should be clear that contemporary mass media—including incumbent media sources, professional journalism, and new media such as blogs—tend to favor discussions or investigations into claims of sincerity on the part of Congresspersons, presidential candidates, activists, religious leaders, and organizations. In the case of the sex scandals in the GOP, as well as the leaking of the Discovery Institute’s “Wedge” document online, new media have altered the dynamics of how sincerity claims are raised and addressed in the public sphere.

If sincerity is a valid concern, as Habermas’ “colonization” thesis suggests, we may see the cases outlined above (the Schiavo memo, the GOP sex scandals, and the leaking of the Wedge document) as positive developments. In these cases, the public has mobilized new technologies to expose instances where mere strategic action has displaced communicative action oriented toward understanding. Such exposures have had effects on the relation between
the value spheres of politics, religion, and science that might also be viewed as positive. Progressive evangelicals argue that the integrity of these spheres depends on their proper differentiation. A new evangelical leadership has emerged that urges a cautious relation to partisan politics, and a renewed cooperation with the scientific community.

While such developments are positive in some ways, there are good reasons to remain cautious and critical of the emerging networked public sphere. Campaigns that expose insincerity and strategic action cannot be made to bear the burden of the general failure to redeem claims of empirical truth and normative rightness in public discourse. For example, while the exposure of the Discovery Institute’s “Wedge” document revealed the religious motives of such organizations and hindered their ability to subvert the standards of scientific discourse, it did nothing to address the institutional problems that made it possible to challenge such standards in the first place. An ideal media environment would ensure that each type of validity claim is taken seriously in its own right and attended to accordingly. The dynamics of the new media environment—a give-and-take between incumbent media and alternative sources such as blogs—may lead to a spiral or vicious circle in which sincerity concerns come to dominate over concerns about truth and rightness.

The blogosphere does indeed challenge the authority of incumbent media sources (Cooper, 2006; Sunstein, 2006 and 2007). But the arrival of the blogosphere does not, by any reasonable measure, mean that Habermas’ “ideal speech situation” has arrived, as more optimistic scholars such as Stephen Cooper have implied (2006). The blogosphere is marred by problems of group polarization, information cocoons, and echo chambers in ways that are simply not possible in traditional media. Additionally, traditional media sources tend to dominate online, and blogs often serve more as a reactionary force than an independent or alternative media in
their own right (Baker, 2007; McChesney and Nichols, 2010). Pundits and bloggers who claim to expose instances of strategic action, calling into question the sincerity of politicians and organizations, often do so knowing that the mainstream media provides a receptive environment for their efforts. Ironically, the increased concern for sincerity claims and the newly available methods for calling such claims into question raise the possibility that “sincerity campaigns” may become a common political tactic, allowing the encroachment of strategic action into the social lifeworld to continue in new and more paradoxical ways.

The following case studies—involving media coverage of Jeremiah Wright and Sarah Palin—exemplify the increasing prevalence of strategic campaigns based on simplistic or “flat” notions of sincerity and authenticity. In the case of the “pastor problems” of Barack Obama, such campaigns dominated news coverage and nearly determined the outcome of the election.
CHAPTER 8
THE PASTOR IN THE BASEMENT:
AUTHENTICITY AND RACE IN MEDIA COVERAGE OF JEREMIAH WRIGHT

I thought the most devastating thing [Jeremiah Wright] said today at the National Press Club was that he actually prayed with the family in the basement just before the announcement [of Obama’s candidacy]…. [T]here's something almost bizarre about saying, “I can't have you up here with Dick Durbin, but let's get together in the basement and pray in secret.”
– Newt Gingrich (Hannity, 2008c)

The Significance of the Obama/Wright Controversy

Throughout the course of the 2008 presidential campaign, “pastor problems” emerged for a number of candidates. These problems, which involved the candidates’ association with controversial religious figures, were often driven by the circulation of videos through websites and cable news programs. While Republican candidates including John McCain and Sarah Palin dealt with such problems to some degree, the controversy over Barack Obama’s relationship with Jeremiah Wright had the most significant impact on the election. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the Wright controversy was “one of the big stories of the primary season” (“How the News Media” 2008:6). Though the issue was later displaced by rumors that Obama is Muslim (a narrative no less driven by new media sources), “looking at the entire primary season and general election period together. . . the Wright controversy was the single largest press narrative in the campaign, religious or otherwise” (“How the News Media” 2008:6).

More importantly, it was the single issue that could have determined the outcome of the election. McCain’s supporters and campaign insiders claimed that it could have tipped the
election, if only McCain had pressed it more aggressively (Ross, 2008b). But the issue was only ostensibly about religion: the Wright controversy played into the fears of white voters by allowing debates about religion to serve as a proxy for underlying concerns about race (Paulson 2008; Zacharias and Arthurs 2008). After Fox News purchased videos of Wright’s sermons from his church in March 2008, within one week over 900 video uploads of his former pastor—or commentary on Wright’s sermons—appeared online (Vargas 2008). Conservative commentators argued that the videos revealed the true face behind Obama’s mask of post-racial unity. Wright was the secret that Obama kept hidden back stage or, as Newt Gingrich would suggest, literally tucked away in the basement (Hannity 2008c). Supporters argued that Wright’s comments were taken out of context, and that criticisms of Wright belittled the contributions of the black prophetic tradition. Ultimately, Obama won the election despite the fact that the Wright controversy dominated news coverage throughout the campaign. Nevertheless, the controversy highlights how competing constructions of authenticity have begun to dominate public discourse in the emerging new media environment.

Obama and Wright: A Complex Relationship

The tensions that emerged between Rev. Jeremiah Wright and Barack Obama reflect the different understandings of religious authenticity described in Chapter 2. Wright represents the black prophetic tradition articulated by James Cone (1999) and others, which is geared towards a more explicitly situated critique of mainstream, white culture in the form of a “theology of black liberation” (p. 43). As Appiah (1994) suggests, Black Power represents a more “essentialist” understanding of authenticity at the level of collective identity. Obama (2006) clearly defends the role of religion in public life, arguing that “secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square” (para. 47). In stark contrast
to Wright, however, Obama argues that “democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason” (para. 57)\(^\text{36}\). Such argumentation, he claims, can help to “bridge the gaps that exist and overcome the prejudices each of us bring to this debate” (para. 67). In this sense Obama’s position resonates with the Habermasian claim that an ongoing “expansion of one’s horizons” provides an “authenticating ethos” of moral argumentation.

Obama’s supporters and critics have both tended to interpret these differences according to the pervasive, “flat” understandings of authenticity that Taylor (1991) critiques. Left-leaning critics remain skeptical about Obama’s rhetoric of unity and pluralism. Judith Butler (2008), for example, has warned progressives not to indulge in “uncritical exuberance” about Obama’s success, noting that “there have always been good reasons not to embrace ‘national unity’ as an ideal” (para. 1). Indeed Butler suggests that such rhetoric “surely [serves] an ideological function” (para. 3) and suggests that if Obama fails to support a truly “critical politics” (para. 4), then “at some point the messiah will be scorned as a false prophet” (para. 8). For such reasons, some Obama supporters believe his association with Wright worked in his favor, since it served to dampen skepticism about his authenticity as a black man. By contrast, conservative critics have suggested that Obama’s rhetoric of unity and pluralism would be worthy of praise—if only it were sincere. Such critics cite his association with Wright as proof that his rhetoric is disingenuous, while his “true” racial identity should rightfully raise concerns about his fitness for office.

The insights from Habermas, Anderson, and Taylor outlined in Chapter 2 suggest a more nuanced understanding of the Obama/Wright relationship. Against liberal critics, these insights suggest that Obama’s authenticity was never located strictly in his willingness to openly associate himself with Wright’s version of black liberation theology. Obama’s rhetoric of unity, and his suggestion that religious adherents must “translate” doctrinal positions into secular terms, are both consistent with Anderson’s argument that democratic proceduralism contains its own authenticating ethos. Indeed as Waskul (2009) argues, there is some normative value in the controlled impression management that critics might label as “inauthenticity.”

On the other hand, Obama’s brand of democratic liberalism is not complete in and of itself. Melissa Harris-Lacewell suggests that Obama is in a position parallel to that of Lyndon Johnson, who depended on the prophetic rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr. to provide the cultural context in which his legislative endeavors could succeed (Moyers 2009: para. 47). In fact as David Frank (2009) points out, in his speech on race Obama deliberately “sounds the prophetic voice of Africentric theology that merges the Jewish and Christian faith traditions with African American experience” (p. 167). But as Gournelos (2010) notes, in the same speech Obama vascillates between prophetic rhetoric and the rhetoric of national unity—sometimes within the same sentence. In other words, while Obama has positioned himself within the institutions of democratic liberalism, he clearly recognizes the productive tension between liberal universalism and prophetic critique. In this sense, it is not only plausible that Obama could maintain his commitment to national unity while attending Wright’s sermons (a possibility that his critics have denied); in fact, such attendance may have served as a foundation for this commitment. Such is the complex dialectic of authenticity and sincerity—of prophetic critique and institutional translation—that ultimately serves democracy well (Healey 2010).
Unfortunately, as discussed in Chapter 2, the political economy of mass media tends to mitigate against such a complex dialectic. “Flat” (Taylor 1991:94) or “essentialist” (Ferrara 2009:23) understandings of authenticity prevail over complex, interpretive ones. Religious and political leaders such as Obama, who appreciate the production tension between prophetic critique and democratic institutions, are therefore caught in what Taylor (1991) describes as “a continuing struggle to realize higher and fuller modes of authenticity against the resistance of the flatter and shallower forms” (p. 94; quoted in Christians, review of Taylor, 1994, p. 170).

One consequence of this “flattening” of authenticity is an increased ability for interest groups to mobilize fear among audiences and voters. As the Wright controversy demonstrates, discourses of fear and discourses of authenticity overlap considerably. Indeed, Altheide (2002) argues that fear is part of the process whereby “the criteria and frameworks for authenticity, credibility, competence, and acceptability can be widely shared and, indeed, taken for granted” (pp. 7-8). In Creating Fear (2002), Altheide demonstrates “how fear has emerged as a framework for developing identities and for engaging in social life” (p. 3). Competing interest groups mobilize discourses of fear “to define crises and to bump along those claims so that leaders can take political action, against ‘external enemies’ or ‘internal enemies’” (pp. 3, 11-12). Competing constructions of “the Other” play an important role in such discourses (p. 26). Since fear is entertaining, furthermore, these strategies tend to enjoy significant traction in the context of commercial mass media (p. 27). As the following case study demonstrates, the affordances of new media such as YouTube provided an opportunity for cable news sources like Fox News to generate this type of flat, fear-generating discourse about Obama’s authentic identity in a way that is bereft of any substantive historical context.
THE “WRIGHT” STRATEGY:
HOW CONSERVATIVE PUNDITS MOBILIZED YOUTUBE

First Attempts: Framing the Trinity Church Website

As the son of a white American woman and a Kenyan father, the issue of Obama’s “blackness” surfaced long before he announced his candidacy in the Presidential election\(^\text{37}\). Obama (2006) notes in *The Audacity of Hope* that during the Illinois Senate race in 2004, his Republican opponent Alan Keyes claimed that “because I was not the descendent of slaves I was not really African American” (p. 210). Black authors such as Debra Dickerson (2007) argued that “Obama isn't black” because “‘black,’ in our political and social reality, means those descended from West African slaves” (para. 10). Likewise Stanley Crouch (2006) wrote that “when black Americans refer to Obama as ‘one of us,’ I do not know what they are talking about” (para. 7). Ron Walters (2007), who advised both of Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaigns, argued that “it is legitimate that Black Americans raise questions about ‘Blackness’ as an objective issue, because it is the core concept that defines the basic cultural identity of Black people” (p. 12).

But while some black leaders criticized Obama for *lacking* authenticity as a black American, conservative pundits and bloggers highlighted his association with Wright, whose black authenticity they resolutely affirmed. In what Zacharias and Arthurs (2008) described as the “blackening of Obama” (p. 425), conservatives questioned the sincerity of the candidate’s pluralist rhetoric and tapped into the fears of white voters. As Eddie S. Glaude and others have

\(^{37}\) For more on issues of blackness and authenticity, see Vannini and Williams (2009). Vannini and Williams note that many ethnographic accounts of subcultures “have shown that concerns with authenticity lie at the roots of group membership, group collective identity and values, personal and social identity formation and maintenance, and status” (p. 5). In his chapter in Vannini and Williams’ volume, Michael Schwalbe argues that “the lives of many men in subordinated groups are characterized by similar struggles to live authentically, without masks worn to please more powerful others” (p. 9). Schwalbe complicates the inter-subjective negotiation of authenticity by suggesting that the process involves “managing impressions of self on the basis of available scripts” (Vannini and Williams, p. 9). This discussion appears to resonate with Appiah’s (1994) discussion.
suggested, while the debates ostensibly centered around religion, the debates about Wright “served as a proxy for the claim about Obama's otherness... he really is black, and therefore is a candidate only for “them”” (Paulson 2008:para. 4; see also Zacharias and Arthurs 2008).

The earliest significant instance of this strategy involved the framing of online sources as a window into Obama’s backstage identity. In February 2007, columnist Erik Rush published an essay highlighting the “Black Value System” outlined on the website of the Trinity United Church of Christ. He then appeared on Fox News’ Hannity and Colmes and reiterated some of his main points:

I would go beyond saying that they're Afrocentric. They're African centric. They refer to themselves as an African people. And that somewhat concerns me from the viewpoint of do they consider themselves Americans? Do they consider themselves Christians? Are they worshipping Christ? Are they worshipping African, things black? I mean what is it? (Hannity 2007a)

Co-host Alan Colmes criticized Rush, noting that “you're basing this on a web site that you've read, never having actually been at the actual church or ever having asked Barack Obama something about his faith, something which he's talked about quite extensively” (Hannity, 2007a). But Rush insisted that “their web site is representative of them. That's why it's out there. Their pastor puts writings on it which are representative of them. That's why it's out there” (Hannity, 2007a)

After Hannity’s interview with Erik Rush, Wright appeared on Hannity & Colmes and repeatedly attempted to contextualize his sermons by citing the distinguished scholars of black liberation theology who influenced him. “How many of [James] Cone's books have you read? … How many books of Dwight Hopkins?” he asked host Sean Hannity (Hannity 2007b). But in his interview with Wright an in subsequent programs, Hannity insisted that Trinity’s explicit
emphasis on the black community is “racist.” “[W]hat they have at this church on their Web site is, you know, commitment to the black community, commitment to the black family, adherence to the black work ethic, pledge that you'll acquire skills for the black community, strengthening black institution. I mean, it goes on and on” (Hannity, 2007c). In this way, Both Rush and Hannity attempted to frame the Trinity website as a window into Obama’s backstage religious and racial identity. But while the issue gained some traction among conservative blogs, the Trinity church website did not serve as a major reference point for the controversy.

**Controversy Ignites: Fox News Discovers YouTube**

The issue of Obama’s church—and especially his relationship with Wright—only gained serious momentum in the mainstream media in March 2008, after Fox News purchased DVDs that included Wright’s more incendiary sermons (Campbell 2008). The videos included his claim after 9/11 that America’s “chickens are coming home to roost,” and his “God damn America” remarks from 2003. In addition to airing the clips on their cable programs, Fox included links to the Trinity website and YouTube from the Fox News website (Goldblatt 2008). ABC news followed Fox News’s lead, purchasing videos and airing reports about Wright’s more controversial sermons (Ross and El-Buri 2008a). Within one week of this initial coverage, over 900 video uploads of his former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright—or commentary on Wright’s sermons—appeared online (Vargas 2008). During the height of the controversy, one of these sermons was the most viewed video among Google Video, MySpace, and YouTube (Vargas 2008).

On one hand, the popularity of these clips appears to validate Meyrowitz’s claims about electronic media’s ability to blur sub-cultural boundaries. As Dan Manatt of PoliticsTV noted,
"A lot of white Americans have never been to a black church. They don't know what's said. They don't know what it's like. So seeing Wright on cable, on YouTube, comes as a shock" (Vargas 2008:para. 11). Though Trinity church had been using the web to reach its congregants for years, Manatt asked, “But who watches those services? Members of the church… Up until now, Wright was just preaching to the choir, quite literally” (Vargas 2008:para. 13). Much of the videos’ popularity, therefore, had to do with a curiosity about previously “backstage” sub-cultural behavior.

However, rather than having an “egalitarian influence” by leveling the public’s “sense of place,” critics exploited this lack of context to frame the clips as troubling glimpses into the backstage identity of a viable African-American candidate. In a discussion of the videos on Fox Special Report with Brit Hume, for example, Charles Krauthammer argued that Obama “has presented himself, and has in his words and actions, been a post-racial candidate. And here he is with this raving bigot and his pastor, as we now see” (Baier 2008). Appearing in Hannity & Colmes, Karl Rove argued that “It's also a question of credibility for us now to suggest that he's only recently become aware of these controversial statements. [It] really strains credibility” (Hannity 2008a). In this way Obama’s critics mobilized the Wright videos to question his sincerity. As journalism professor Don Campbell (2008) noted, “The most incendiary clips quickly landed on YouTube, and the rest is history” (para. 12).

A Call for Context

As noted above, from the earliest days of the controversy Wright attempted to defend himself by providing some historical context for his sermons. At the height of the controversy, Obama did the same. In his speech on race in late March 2008, Obama (2008) described how “the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up”
influenced his former pastor’s worldview (para. 32). Noting the important role of new media in the controversy, he remarked that “if all that I knew of Reverend Wright were the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television and YouTube… there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way [that many have]” (para. 17). Even Republican Mike Huckabee agreed that Wright’s sermons had been taken out of context, and suggested that whites “have to cut some slack” to blacks who voice anger over racial discrimination (Tapper, 2008a; quoted in Wingfield and Feagin, 2009, p. 140). Others defended Wright by invoking the important historical role of prophetic critique. Religious historian Martin Marty (2008), who had served as Wright’s mentor, wrote that Wright’s “prophetic” sermons “have been mercilessly chipped into for wearying television clips” (para. 8). “[I]t is not the context of particular sermons that the public needs, [so much as] that of Trinity church, and, above all, its pastor” (para. 2). Marty defended Wright as “trying to live up to his namesake, the seventh-century B.C. prophet” (para. 8).

Of course, the lack of such historical context is precisely what made Wright so attractive to Obama’s opponents as a potential wedge issue. Rather than creating an opportunity for substantive discussion about the black church, the widely-circulated clips of Wright’s sermons called into question the sincerity of Obama’s rhetoric of unity and pluralism, as well as the authenticity of his African-American and Christian identity. As America Magazine writer Michael Sean Winters later explained in an interview on National Public Radio, “A pastor is not called just to preach to their congregation, but to evangelize and to reach out to people beyond the walls of the church and bring more people in. So, obviously YouTube has changed the nature of that and the ability to take things out of context” (Martin, M. 2008). In response, NPR host Michel Martin noted the effect of this de-contextualization on the role of the church as “a place
where prophetic truth and the challenge to the larger society can be openly expressed.” Martin suggested that pastors like Wright may rightly “worry that [their] ability to speak the truth as [they] see it might be compromised in an era when whatever [they] say [could] ricochet around the world in a matter of minutes” (Martin, M. 2008). De-contextualization creates an opportunity for powerful interest groups to define the meaning of such widely-circulated clips by leveraging the continued dominance of traditional media sources—especially cable news.

**Between Prophesy and Demagoguery**

Indeed critics continued to question Obama’s sincerity, and pointed to YouTube as a potential window into the candidate’s true identity. In a discussion with Sean Hannity, conservative pollster Frank Luntz said, “What is in his heart we cannot tell… But now he's acknowledged that he has [been at Trinity during Wright’s sermons]… But here, Sean, if YouTube were ever to get footage, video of him there when this happens, then he's in trouble” (Hannity 2008b). As it happens, such video did not emerge. However, at this point in the campaign, Wright began to capitalize on the media attention he was receiving. Following in the footsteps of numerous preachers from the First and Second Great Awakenings, as well as leaders of the Religious Right in the 1960s, Wright began to walk a fine line between prophesy and demagoguery. As the promise of media attention nudged him toward the latter, Obama’s ability to maintain a productive public relationship with Wright dwindled.

Having been mischaracterized and demonized by Obama’s opponents, Wright planned what journalist Richard Wolffe (2009) described as a “comeback tour, a media blitz including TV interviews and a speech at the National Press Club in Washington in April” (181). The campaign team became concerned, and Obama decided to meet with Wright in Chicago. According to Wolffe, Obama warned Wright that the pastor “wasn’t heading for vindication; he
was heading for vilification.” “Look, you’re a pastor, you have your own role to play,” Obama said in Wolffe’s account. “But I can tell you how politics in the cable and blog age works. Here’s what you need to anticipate: that it’s going to be a media circus” (182).

On April 25, Wright appeared on Bill Moyers Journal and articulated the long history of prophetic critique, from Jewish oppression under the Egyptians to “the prophetic theology of the African-American church,” including the civil rights activism of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Moyers 2008:para. 76). Wright’s performance on Bill Moyers’s show was generally well-received. In fact, shortly afterwards Alan Colmes noted that “Martin Luther King… called America the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today… If they had the Internet at the time they created a Martin Luther King Day, somebody would have gone back and found that stuff, and I [wonder] that there'd be a Martin Luther King Day” (Hannity 2008c). United Church of Christ president John H. Thomas (2008) remarked that, “following Rev. Wright's insightful interview with Bill Moyers. . . many in the UCC hopefully anticipated that the prophetic voice of the church would be more clearly understood by the public and affirmed” (para. 5). However Rev. Thomas quickly added that “unfortunately, following widespread critique of his handling of questions and answers at the National Press Club, that deep hope has turned now to unsettling despair for many” (para 5).

Unlike his measured approach in the Moyers interview, Wright’s performance at the National Press Club was combative and accusatory, and served as a major turning point in the Obama campaign. According to Wolffe, “It was indeed a circus, and Wright was the clown trying to tame the lions. He lectured his National Press Club audience on the history of the black church, hammed up his answers for the cameras, and harangued the moderator who relayed the audience’s first question about America’s chickens coming home to roost on 9/11” (182).
Addressing a national audience, Wright decried the lack of context in coverage and defended his faith community. “This is not an attack on Jeremiah Wright,” the pastor argued. “This is an attack on the black church” (Tapper, 2008b, para. 1). As ABC’s White House correspondent Jake Tapper (2008b) explains, he also accused Obama of putting politics above all else, “implying Obama's condemnation of some of his sermons was not sincere” (para. 4). “Politicians say what they say and do what they do because of electability,” Wright said. “He had to distance himself because he's a politician...Whether he gets elected or not, I'm still going to have to be answerable to God” (Tapper, 2008b, para. 5).

Yet responses to Wright’s appearance—from across the political spectrum as well as from Obama himself—almost uniformly portrayed Wright as motivated by self-interest. ABC’s Jake Tapper (2008b) framed his appearance as part of a “publicity blitz” and suggested that his alleged need to defend the black church was not “sincere” but rather “self-serving” (para. 2). Appearing on Hannity & Colmes (2008d), pastor Eugene Rivers argued that Wright was “a complex, tragic figure” who had been “driven by ego, and an insatiable need to get your 15 minutes of Hollywood.” Rivers suggested that “Jeremiah abused a relationship which... had a certain amount of strategic utility for him.” After watching a video of Wright’s speech at the National Press Club, Obama appeared to agree. According to Wolffe (2009), “He was shocked and angry. Obama felt he had been selfless in Philadelphia [in his speech on race], respecting his pastor, the church, and the community. Now he believed that Wright only cared about himself” (183). Obama called a news conference and made the following remarks:

I am outraged by the comments that were made, and saddened over the spectacle that we saw yesterday... the person I saw yesterday was not the person that I met twenty years ago. His comments were not only divisive and destructive, but I believe they end up giving comfort to those who prey on hate and I believe that they do not portray accurately the perspective of the black church. (Wolffe, 2009, p. 183)
Wright’s case exemplifies Gary Simpson’s (2002) argument that prophetic critique has a tendency to become “prideful or despairing,” and often “instrumentalizes . . . the suffering and oppression of others for the self-preservation of the prophet’s or the prophetic community’s authenticity” (p. 130). Thus the de-contextualized media frenzy pushed Wright over the line from prophetic critique to mere demagoguery. At the same time, Obama began to lose either the willingness or ability to negotiate the tension between prophetic critique and liberal universalism—a task he had accomplished with qualified success in his speech on race (Frank 2009; Wingfield and Feagin, 2009, pp. 139-140). Critics note that even in this speech Obama sometimes “resorted to a soft version of white-racial framing” (Wingfield and Feagin, 2009, p. 153), and did so increasingly in his subsequent speeches (Gournelos, 2010). Rather than sustaining a potentially productive relationship, then, Obama’s opponents had succeeded in turning Wright and Obama against each other. As each accused the other of lacking sincerity and engaging in strategic action, the “higher and fuller modes of authenticity” described by Taylor (1991) were lost, and public debates were further flattened (p. 94).

Refusing Context: Conservatives’ Disavowal of Racial Framing

This degeneration of the discourse around the Obama-Wright relationship—including Wright’s demagoguery and Obama’s willingness to play into a “soft white racial frame”—made it possible for critics to disavow the centrality of race in the controversy. As the circulation of the Wright videos became a major issue for the Obama campaign, some of the candidate’s most prominent critics denied that the issue had anything to do with race or the history of the black church. Of course the strategy of disavowal had been present all along. Filling in for Alan Colmes the day before Obama’s speech on race, Hannity & Colmes co-host Kirsten Powers
asked guest Karl Rove, “[I]s it possible that maybe we don't understand this because Barack Obama is, after all, black[?]” Rove interrupted and responded flatly, “No” (Hannity 2008a). After his appearance at the National Press Club, however, critics began to downplay issues of Wright’s blackness by portraying him instead as a radical leftist. Appearing on Hannity & Colmes after Wright’s National Press Club speech, Newt Gingrich claimed that “Wright is actually not so much representative of the black church as he is representative of the hard left. He's much closer to— to Noam Chomsky. He's much closer to Bill Ayers” (Hannity 2008c). Appearing on the same show, former Clinton adviser Dick Morris agreed, arguing that “when you read all of Wright's stuff you really get the point that he is anti-American, he is against the United States of America. He hates us…”.

For these guests, as well as host Sean Hannity, the central issue was the sincerity of Obama’s public comments about Wright, as well as his pluralist rhetoric. Their comments suggest that he was hiding his authentic identity as a radical-leftist follower of Wright. For Gingrich, Wright’s most revealing comment was that, although Obama had rescinded his invitation for Wright to speak at his candidacy announcement (Kantor and Healy 2007), he nevertheless prayed with Wright beforehand in a lower level of the building where the event was held. Gingrich framed the incident’s front stage/back stage symbolism as a clear window into Obama’s true identity:

I thought the most devastating thing [Wright] said today at the National Press Club was that he actually prayed with the family in the basement just before the announcement [of Obama’s candidacy]. And the reason I thought it was devastating is that it's clear that Senator Obama can't decide what the relationship is. Is this somebody he's proud of and he wants next to him or is this somebody who he can cut loose from? But there's something almost bizarre about saying, “I can't have you up here with Dick Durbin, but let's get together in the basement and pray in secret.”
Host Sean Hannity summed up the accusation simply: “Yes,” he noted in agreement with Morris, “I think there's two Barack Obama [sic]” (Hannity 2008c). Greta Van Susteren (2008) raised the “basement” issue on her show as well, suggesting that the revelation made Obama look “like he was trying to hide him and that he knew something was up.”

Such critics had no such ambivalence with regard to Wright’s sincerity and authenticity, however. Gingrich described Wright as “the authentic deep anti-American left. And look,” he added, “I say this with great respect. I believe that Jeremiah Wright believes what he says. The fact [is] that it's nuts.” In response Hannity added, “I agree with your assessment. I really believe that Reverend Wright sincerely believes this. [T]his is about honesty and this is about judgment. I don't have any doubt… that Barack Obama knew very well where [Wright] was coming from, which means for a year he's been dishonest with the American people about what he really believes” (Hannity 2008c).

The widespread circulation of Wright videos on cable news, YouTube, and blogs eventually allowed these claims about Obama’s sincerity to gain traction. While the issue of Obama’s dis-invitation of Wright provoked some discussion in March of 2007 (Kantor and Healy 2007), the immediate presence of allegedly “backstage” footage provided a more tangible news hook that opponents used to define their relationship. Furthermore, the lack of historical context in such discussions allowed opponents to disavow the issue of race even as they implicitly invoked it to rouse the concerns of viewers. While Gingrich and Morris claimed that the issue was about leftist politics and not race, two days later Hannity (2008e) reported that “52 percent of people polled characterized Reverend Wright's message as anti-American, and 47 percent of those polled by FOX News says Reverend Wright's message is anti-white.” Appearing
on *Hannity & Colmes*, author Mark Steyn commented that “this is a specific branch of Afro-centric liberation theology that is highly political in content, and to his credit Jeremiah Wright is not backing off anything he said. He's who he is, he's who he's been for 20 years” (Hannity 2008e). As Wingfield and Feagin (2009) explain, the Wright controversy “appealed to the central images and commonsense assumptions about black men in the four-centuries-old white racial frame” (p. 155). In Wright’s case, critics appealed to the stereotype of black as threatening and dangerous (Wingfield and Feagin, 2009, p. 106), and in Obama’s case to the stereotype of blacks as dishonest (p. 15). Since these racial stereotypes are always in the background of a mass-mediated public discourse steeped in a white racial frame, critics were able to invoke them implicitly while denying that the controversy had to do with issues of race. Indeed the white racial frame is defined by the denial of systemic racism and the suggestion that any explicit acknowledgement of discrimination is simply a distraction from the “colorblind” society that was allegedly achieved through the civil rights movement (Wingfield and Feagin, 2009, p. 24). The de-contextualized circulation of Wright’s sermons—through cable news, YouTube, and blogs—thus fed into pre-existing racial stereotypes, making it more and more difficult for Obama to sustain his relationship with his former pastor. In late May, 2008, Obama and his family resigned from the Trinity United church.

**CONCLUSION**

*The Failure of the “Wright” Strategy*

On January 20, 2009, Obama was sworn into the office of the Presidency. For all the efforts of his critics, neither the Wright controversy—nor the persistent rumors that he is actually Muslim—succeeded in thwarting an innovative and ultimately successful campaign. The clips that gained the most traction online featured the most incendiary excerpts from Wright’s
sermons, leading some to ask why the Obama campaign had not pushed Wright’s more “conservative” or “mainstream” sermons in response. “For a campaign as good as Obama's has been,” said Cynthia Tucker of the *Atlantic Journal-Constitution*, “what is curious is why he hasn't worked harder to make some of those sermons available, get some of those sermons that are much more conventional, up on YouTube as well” (Stephanopoulos 2008). Once online, however, it became difficult for talk-show hosts and pundits to control the framing of even of the most controversial clips. Internet scholar David Weinberger has suggested that that “this is proof of the Internet surfacing the fractures in our culture… YouTube is a context-free environment. You see a few minutes of videos out of context. But because many are watching each other's videos and responding to each other, it's also a place that provides a way to re-contextualize what's been taken out of context. It's a place to have a dialogue” (Vargas 2008:para. 10).

The Obama campaign did, in fact, mobilize new media sources to great effect. While the campaign did not push more “mainstream” clips of Wright’s sermons, it did post an online video in which candidate Obama defended his relationship with Wright. One day before his major speech on race, Obama explained that “the sermons I heard him preach always related to our obligation to love god and one another” (Hannity 2008a). More importantly, Obama’s 37-minute speech on race itself appeared on YouTube, and quickly emerged as a most-watched video. Cynthia Tucker noted that the speech was “stunningly successful on YouTube, which is a bit curious because it was a long speech” (Stephanopoulos 2008). Indeed, in the heat of the Wright controversy the speech received over 5.1 million views, “marking YouTube’s emergence as a vehicle for substantive discourse, not just silly clips,” according to the *New York Times*’s Sarah Wheaton (2008). In fact, *Newsweek*’s Jonathan Alter (2008) reported that Obama’s speech on race “was constructed so that you simply couldn't understand it in 10 seconds” (para. 3). “In
other words,” the Obama campaign “intentionally avoided any of the snappy lines that they know reporters and TV producers are trained to recognize as useful for representing the entire story” (para. 3). For Alter, the online popularity of Obama’s speech on race represents “the Obama campaign’s savvy understanding of [the Internet]” and suggests that “the era of sound bites and fat cats may be coming to a close” (para. 1).

Indeed the Obama campaign’s new media strategy was many-faceted. The campaign targeted voters through text messaging, Facebook groups, virtual communities within the Obama website, and advertisements in X-Box video games (Banwart et al. 2008). While the Clinton campaign tried to squash supporter-created promotional videos, the Obama campaign adopted Howard Dean’s strategy of cooperation (Cheney 2008). Consequently the campaign benefitted from supporters like “Obama Girl,” whose online video was viewed over 10.5 million times; and musician will.i.am, whose "Yes, We Can" video was viewed almost 11.3 million times (Wheaton 2008).

Commentators frequently cited the unique role of YouTube in the campaign’s success. “It seems like whatever Barack Obama does works on YouTube,” suggested George Stephanopoulos (2008) shortly after Obama’s speech on race. “He was a made for YouTube phenomenon,” claimed ABC News’s David Wright in June 2008 (Moran 2008). Indeed shortly after the election Mark McKinnon, former Chief Media Advisor to John McCain, acknowledged the Obama campaign’s wise use of Internet-based advertising. “[T]he Obama campaign had 15 million hours of watched video on YouTube,” McKinnon noted, “which if you translated that into broadcast television, would have been about $46 million worth of advertising” (Conan
McCain’s supporters were left to wonder whether the Wright controversy could have tipped the election, if only their candidate had pressed it more aggressively (Ross 2008b).

**Continuing Dominance of Traditional Media Sources**

During the campaign, new media sources occasionally forced the hand of traditional sources—as when liberal bloggers succeeded in shutting down debates that were to be hosted by Fox News (Boehlert 2009). And new media clearly played a major role in Obama’s eventual victory (Vargas 2008; Wheaton 2008; Banwart et al. 2008). Far from overthrowing the era of big media, however, the 2008 campaign demonstrates that new media often serve to reinforce the dominance of traditional sources and corporate-style marketing.

As Eric Boehlert (2009) notes, Obama’s careful engagement with new media generated a “political disconnect” between the campaign and the so-called “netroots” (xviii). The campaign “focused more on the revolutionary fund-raising and Facebook-style social-networking possibilities the Internet held, and less on the scrappy liberal politics the blogosphere embraced” (xviii). Indeed Naomi Klein (2010) has criticized the Obama campaign for forsaking progressive politics in favor of shallow—though highly successful—efforts at branding and corporate-style marketing. In fact, even cases such as the wildly popular “Obama Girl” viral videos—in which supporters generated unsolicited grassroots attention—often reflected the same bias toward entertainment that media critics have long ascribed to television (Cheney 2008). In this sense even the most innovative political campaigns exhibit a somewhat conservative approach to new media. As noted in *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians, Glasser, McQuail, Nordenstreng, White, 2009), “Established political parties and authorities are not strongly
motivated to explore the truly new potential of the new media, except where it serves their own organizational purposes. There has been a tendency to use new media in old ways” (p. 230).

Furthermore, while new sources allow audiences to deconstruct mainstream narratives, traditional sources still manage to set the agenda for debate (McChesney and Nichols 2010). Although in one sense commercial news programs are becoming mere repositories for YouTube videos, as commentator Andy Borowitz suggests (Lopate 2009), the Wright controversy demonstrates that the same news sources are often responsible for supplying such “found” video in the first place. By exerting influence over situational definitions and issue framing, such sources determine “what will be discussed, how it will be discussed, and, above all, how it will not be discussed” (Altheide 2002:33-34). So while commentators like Jonathan Alter (2008) are correct in acknowledging the impact of new media sources on public discourse, it is far too optimistic to claim that “the era of sound bites and fat cats may be coming to a close” (para. 1). Rather, it is more accurate to say that a new era is just beginning—and the “fat cats” are learning to master the unique affordances of the emerging environment. For such reasons Barnhurst and Nerone (2001) suggest a distinction between “the public” and “the people,” the former of which is always merely a representation of the latter (p. 7). There may indeed come a time when Alter’s idealistic scenario comes to pass. “In the meantime,” though, “news form intervenes, affecting the public in spite of the fact that individual people might not be moved my news messages or may use them in oppositional ways” (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001, pp. 7-8).

Importantly, the lack of context in the dramatic, character-driven coverage of cable news thwarts the role of journalism in providing critical gate-keeping and relevance filtering (Hove and Jackson 2008). Two problems arise. First, interest groups can tap into voters’ fears by
constructing disturbing narratives about candidates’ “back stage” identity. Second, interest
groups can construct a narrative of normalcy, thus failing to alert voters to areas of potential
concern. In both cases, voters’ concern for honesty and authenticity becomes, ironically, an
opportunity for strategic political exploitation.

Coverage of Obama and Palin demonstrates how new media sources tend to exacerbate
these problems. Wright served as an “icon of fear” (Altheide 2002:17) among white voters
precisely because they had little context for understanding the black prophetic tradition or
Obama’s complex place within it. Opponents selected and mobilized key video clips, playing
into a pre-existing white racial frame even as they denied that the controversy had anything to do
with race (Wingfield and Feagin, 2009). In this way, Obama suffered from a lack of context. By
contrast, supporters succeeded in framing Palin’s faith as mainstream, simple, and authentic
because, within the same white racial frame, Palin appeared as a figure of “archetypal whiteness”
(Daniels, 2008; Healey, 2010). In addition, voters were largely unaware of the complex tensions
within Pentecostalism and evangelicalism, despite critics’ attempts to instigate a discussion by
circulating videos from Palin’s former church. In this way, Palin benefitted from a lack of
context. Together, these trends tend to re-enforce white racial frames, allowing religion to serve
as an un-examined proxy for race in public debates (Wingfield and Feagin, 2009; Paulson, 2008;
Zacharias and Arthurs, 2008).

The Success of the “Wright” Strategy

While the Wright controversy did not succeed in derailing the Obama campaign
completely, it did succeed in driving a wedge between Obama and his former pastor. The
outcome of the controversy—Obama’s resignation from Trinity United church—is symptomatic
of a broader failure to maintain a productive tension between democratic liberalism and prophetic critique. Commercial media environments reflect a pervasive white racial frame that suggests that systemic racism is either non-existent or a problem of the past. In this environment, prophetic critique that issues forth from black communities has little chance of gaining traction or, when it does, tends to be covered in a de-contextualized manner that exacerbates existing racial stereotypes. This dynamic creates a temptation on the part of prophetic leaders to enter the media environment strategically—a tactic which often pushes prophetic critique over the line into mere demagoguery. At the same time, those political leaders who are sympathetic to prophetic critique, and who value its ongoing contribution to democratic ideals, are likewise tempted to retreat from an explicit engagement with systematic racism to a strategic reliance on white racial framing in their appeals to voters. All of these factors were clearly on display throughout the Wright controversy. Rather than overthrowing the era of big media—or even leveling the playing field—new media have frequently served as new avenues in which traditional media sources and established political interests can exert their influence in new ways. In the emerging media environment, discourses of authenticity thus serve as primary vehicles for a continued religious and political conservatism.
CHAPTER 9
EVERYONE HERE CALLS HER SARAH:
AUTHENTICITY AND RACE IN MEDIA COVERAGE OF SARAH PALIN

“[T]here's one word that people use to describe her, both positive and negative. Authentic. They believe that they see what she is and she is what people see.” - Frank Luntz (O’Reilly, 2008d)

“I don’t belong to any church.” – Sarah Palin (Silk, 2008e)

During the same month that Obama resigned from Trinity United church, “a group of up to 300 young men killed 11 people who were accused of being witches and wizards in western Kenya, in some cases slitting their throats or clubbing them to death before burning their bodies,” according to the Associated Press (2008b, para. 17). The AP reported this incident in September 2008, when questions emerged about Sarah Palin’s association with Thomas Muthee, a pastor from Kenya who is “revered among evangelicals” subscribing to the “spiritual warfare” movement (AP, 2008b:para. 13). Critics cited video of a church service from 2005, in which Muthee prayed that Palin receive protection from "every form of witchcraft" (AP, 2008a:para. 5). Another video showed Palin thanking Muthee for blessing her successful bid for governor (AP, 2008b). Like the excerpts of Wright’s sermons, these videos circulated between YouTube, blogs, and cable news outlets. In contrast to the media firestorm over Wright, however, religious scholars (Silk, 2009; Butler, 2009; Berkowitz, 2009)—as well as data reported compiled by the Pew Research Center (“How the Media,” 2008)—have suggested that news media failed to cover Palin’s religious beliefs as closely as was warranted (Healey, 2010a), and that her relationship
with Muthee and the spiritual warfare movement is a particularly important point of failure in coverage (Berkowitz, 2009).

Media coverage of Palin’s faith thus serves as a revealing counterpoint to the Wright controversy, demonstrating how different interest groups mobilize video clips of religious sermons to generate contrasting discourses of authenticity—with varying degrees of success. While a lack of context allowed the Wright controversy to gain significant traction, in Palin’s case it allowed supporters to dismiss potential “pastor problems” in favor of a narrative of normalcy (Healey, 2010a). As in the Wright controversy, debates about Palin’s faith are inseparable from issues of authenticity and race. Unlike Wright, however, Palin benefitted from the white racial frame that permeates virtually every aspect of political discourse in the U.S. Furthermore, while Palin’s Republican ticket failed to win the election, the campaign launched a career that promises to have an important impact on American religious politics. In fact, just as the outcome of the Wright controversy symbolizes the demise of prophetic critique, Palin’s rise to national political stardom symbolizes an increase in what William Connolly (2005) calls the “resonance” between economic neoliberalism and religious apocalypticism. Coverage of Palin’s faith—including the role of new media—therefore provides an important indication about the possible outcome of the current critical juncture in media and religious politics. The construction of Palin’s religious identity as mainstream, authentic, and non-political represents the success not only of Palin’s personal ambitions but also the nexus of conservative religious and political institutions that selected her to serve as an energizing icon for the Republican Party and its white evangelical base (“Romney’s Image,” 2009).
The Importance of Being Sarah

When John McCain announced his choice of Sarah Palin as the Vice Presidential candidate on August 29, 2008, scholars and journalists rushed to identify Palin’s religious faith. Throughout the campaign, a key question had been whether the McCain campaign would choose a VP candidate who would appeal to the Republican Party’s white evangelical base (see e.g. Goldsmith, 2008; Sullivan, 2008a). The question was clearly an important one for evangelicals themselves. The day after McCain’s announcement Christianity Today—self-described as “a magazine of evangelical conviction”—ran an article by Sarah Bailey (2008b) with the headline, “Is Palin an evangelical?” The Washington Post had described Palin as evangelical (Goldstein, 2008), but Bailey questioned their definition of the term (para. 4). Religion scholar Alan Wolfe (2008a) also described her as an evangelical, although “not a Southern evangelical.” Wolfe suggested that Palin’s brand of “libertarian” evangelicalism would not appeal to many in the Republican Party base. But as Bailey (2008a, 2008b) notes, none other than Richard Land—president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission—had already endorsed Palin “because she's a person of strong faith” (Goldsmith, 2008). Citing similar statements from the Christian Coalition and the Family Research Council, Bailey (2008a) added, “so far, it seems like bells and whistles from the conservative evangelical community” (para. 1). Nevertheless, she added that “[a]lthough it's clear that some evangelicals are excited about her, I wonder whether she calls herself an evangelical” (para. 12).

Indeed Palin had been—and continues to be—unwilling to define her religious identity explicitly (Silk, 2009b). The following exchange, from an interview with Time magazine’s Jay Newton-Small just two weeks before McCain’s VP announcement—is representative:
What's your religion?
Christian.
Any particular...?
No. Bible-believing Christian.
What church do you attend?
A non-denominational Bible church. I was baptized Catholic as a newborn and then my family started going to non-denominational churches throughout our life. (Newton-Small, 2008)

Of course, as religion scholar Mark Silk and journalist Amy Sullivan point out, the phrase “Bible-believing Christian” is a common signifier for evangelical identity (Silk, 2008e; Sullivan, 2008a). But while Palin acknowledges her indebtedness to evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, she does not identify explicitly with either. In her autobiography, Going Rogue: An American Life (2009), Palin notes that her mother attended “an evangelical church in Anchorage,” and that through her experience at a youth Bible camp Palin had found the same “depth of spirituality” that her mother had been seeking (p. 22). But while she accuses the media of unfairly portraying her as a “book-burning evangelical extremist” (p. 237), she does not refer to herself as evangelical.

Palin has also distanced herself from the specific churches she has attended. Though Palin spent most of her life attending the Wasilla Assembly of God church—which Mark Silk (2008e) describes as “part of the largest historically white Pentecostal denomination in America”—during the campaign a spokeswoman claimed that Palin is “not a Pentecostal,” and emphasized instead that she was baptized as a Roman Catholic as a newborn (Sullivan, 2008b). In Going Rogue, she downplays her attendance at the Wasilla Assembly of God church by explaining that “[t]here weren’t many churches in our small town” (p. 22). In 2002, when she first ran for lieutenant governor of Alaska, Palin stopped attending Wasilla Assembly of God regularly and began attending Wasilla Bible Church (Sullivan, 2008a; AP, 2008a). But while

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38 Sullivan (2008b) claims that “there is no record that her family attended Catholic services before joining the Pentecostal church where she became saved at age 11.”
she acknowledged in her August 14, 2008 interview with *Time* (Newton-Small, 2008) that she attended “a non-denominational church”—most likely a reference to Wasilla Bible Church (Silk, 2008e)—by late September she began to claim that she was not a member of any church. In late September 2008, Katie Couric (2008) reported that “the governor told us though she's not a member of any church, she visits a couple of them regularly when she's home.” And in an interview with Hugh Hewitt, Palin claimed “I don’t belong to any church” (Silk, 2008e).

As the following section demonstrates, Palin has been consistently vague about her religious background largely in anticipation of, and in response to, questions about practices within Pentecostalism or controversial statements that she or her former pastors have made. Silk (2009b) claims that Palin’s “occultation” of her faith dated back to her first run for state office, at which time she stopped attending the Wasilla Assembly of God church. As a Pew Forum report (“How the Media,” 2008) notes, in September of 2008 CNN (Kaye, 2008) and the Associated Press both suggested that “the McCain campaign has been playing down the governor’s Pentecostal roots.” The *New York Times’s* Laurie Goodstein (2008) also reported that religious leaders in Alaska “had been told by the McCain-Palin campaign not to talk to members of the news media.” Nevertheless, Palin accused the media of “mocking” her religious beliefs (Silk, 2008e), and pundits like Bill O’Reilly claimed that personal attacks on Palin outnumbered attacks on Obama by “10 to 1” (O’Reilly, 2008e). However the Pew Forum reported a “relative lack of attention to Palin's religious biography within the mainstream media” (para. 15), claiming that the media did not “dwell on religion” (para. 2) in its coverage of Palin. In other words, while the McCain-Palin campaign did face its own “pastor problems,” coverage of Palin’s religious background paled in comparison to the Wright controversy, which became the single largest press narrative in the campaign (“How the News Media,” 2008, p. 6).
The relative lack of media attention to Palin’s beliefs, as well as her own efforts to downplay her religious biography, allowed the Republican Party to appeal to its base of white evangelicals without becoming entangled in the type of controversy that plagued the Obama campaign. As Silk (2008h) explains, “Palin's identity as an evangelical and a strong social conservative was well known [by voters during the election], as was her strong appeal to the evangelical/social conservative base of the Republican Party.” Silk argues that, like Mike Huckabee, Palin is a “movement evangelical.” “But movement evangelicals like Huckabee and Palin don't need to advertise who they are to the movement,” Silk (2009a) explains, although “[t]hey do feel the need to veil it from everybody else.” While early analyses questioned whether evangelicals were “really sold on Palin” (Sullivan, 2008a) and suggested that her nomination speech “will not win over all evangelicals” (Wolfe, 2008b), she soon became immensely popular among Republicans and white evangelicals in particular. Tim Minnery, vice president of Focus on the Family, claimed that Palin “is from the heart of Evangelicalism, a Bible church. There are just millions of Evangelicals who know how to place her because of that church connection” (Sullivan, 2008b). Indeed in October 2008, Palin enjoyed an 85% favorability rate among white evangelical Republicans (“Romney’s Image,” 2009). By the summer of 2009, seventy percent of Republicans viewed her favorably, although the number reporting “strongly favorable” opinions had dropped since the campaign season ended (Cohen, 2009). But her favorability among white evangelical Republicans remained steady at 84% (“Romney’s Image,” 2009). By the fall of 2009, the group Public Religion Research reported that “[a]mong conservative political leaders, Sarah Palin stands apart as being most popular and well known”—edging out Mike Huckabee and John McCain in a poll of conservative activists (Green et al., 2009, p. 21).
However early skeptics like Amy Sullivan (2008a) and Alan Wolfe (2008a, 2008b) were correct to point out that Palin appeals to a particular strain of American evangelicalism. Sociologist Michael Lindsay has described the struggle for evangelical leadership as one between “populists” and “cosmopolitans” (McKenzie, 2007). The former represent what Ed Stoddard (2008) calls the “old” face of the Religious Right—emphasizing wedge issues like abortion and gay marriage—while the latter are more likely to voice concern about environmentalism or poverty. This struggle for leadership is accompanied by well-documented demographic shifts indicating that younger evangelicals hold positions on social and economic issues that diverge from the traditional emphases of Religious Right (Barna Group, 2007). In her positions on abortion, gay marriage, and environmental issues, Palin clearly aligns herself with the “old” evangelical leadership, leading younger evangelicals like Cameron Strang, publisher of the Christian magazine Relevant, to complain that Palin “hasn't addressed issues of concern to younger Christian voters” (Miller, 2008, para. 4).

For these reasons Palin’s rise to prominence within the Republican Party—especially in contrast to Mike Huckabee’s failure to secure the Presidential or Vice-Presidential nomination—represents what Newsweek’s Lisa Miller (2008) described as “a religious right revival.” Huckabee, who openly expressed his desire to become McCain’s Vice-Presidential nominee (AP, 2008d), aligned himself more closely with the “new” evangelical movement. In fact, Silk (2008a; 2008b) suggests that Huckabee was never running for office at all, but for the leadership of a renewed Religious Right—one characterized, however, by a distinct change in focus from the leadership of traditional conservatives like Tony Perkins or James Dobson. But while the wedge-issue politics of the old-guard Religious Right tends to resonate with commercial media (see e.g., Domke, 2004), the moderate and rhetorically-nuanced evangelicalism of the “new”
leadership does not—as new evangelical leaders themselves have acknowledged (Hunter, 2006). This dynamic contributed to Huckabee’s failure to secure the nomination. “He was, or seemed to be, a reluctant culture warrior,” Silk (2008i) explains. “In a word, he seemed far too independent for a party always in search of the front man, be it Reagan or Quayle or George W. Bush.” However, “[u]nder the largely spurious guise of reformer,” Silk explains, “Palin fit the role perfectly.”

The strategic alliance between the Republican Party and conservative evangelicalism is fraught with tensions. Indeed John Bitney, who worked for Palin during her campaign and term as governor, told Vanity Fair that “[s]he did not get started with the blessing of the Republican Party. She started with a dedicated corps of sort of right-wing true believers who killed themselves for her, and got her going” (Purdum, 2009, para. 52). The Republican Party embraced her when she began to moderate her message. But Palin has maintained ties to strains of American evangelicalism that have caused concern among more moderate evangelical and Pentecostal Christians (Goodstein, 2008; Wilson, 2008). Although many of those involved in the choice of Palin as McCain’s running mate were elite Washington insiders such as William Kristol (Mayer, 2008), grassroots religious activists also played a key role. Adam Brickley, then a recent college graduate, started a website in February 2007 favoring Palin’s nomination. His website became popular enough to gain attention from influential conservative bloggers like InstaPundit. Brickley is an evangelical who practices “Messianic Judaism”—a strand of Pentecostalism with connections to the spiritual warfare movement (Wilson, 2008). But he is also “the product of an effort by wealthy conservative organizations in Washington to train activists,” having attended seminars at the Leadership Institute, Young America’s Foundation, and the Heritage Foundation (Mayer, 2008).
While tensions persist, the Palin nomination nevertheless represents a renewal of what William Connolly (2005) calls the “resonance” between conservative evangelicalism and free-market Republicanism (Healey, 2010a). The emerging new media environment contributes to this resonance, even as it occasionally challenges established political and media institutions. As Connolly (2005) argues, mass media contribute to an “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” in which “cowboy capitalism” fuses with “the most militant section of American Christianity” (p. 870). “The Christ of Revelation” gains priority over “the Jesus of Luke” as “the existential bellicosity of those infused with economic greed reverberates with the transcendental resentment of those visualizing the righteous violence of Christ” (pp. 874-876. Italics original). In both cases, though, pundits and political leaders are able to market the more controversial aspects of economic and religious ideology as mainstream ideas. As demonstrated in the following section, the dominant narrative of Palin’s religious background portrays her faith as mainstream, simple, authentic, and non-political, despite her ties to controversial pastors and religious movements.

The mainstream construction of Palin’s evangelical identity thus normalizes a particular strand of evangelical thought while joining it to particular political institutions and ideologies. These dominant narratives directly contradict the efforts of younger evangelicals and new evangelical leaders to change the movement’s focus toward environmentalism, poverty, and a more civil political discourse. For these reasons evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike have a stake in the outcome of the current critical juncture in media and religious politics. The following section demonstrates how the dynamics of the new media environment—especially the continued dominance of traditional media sources like cable news—allowed Palin’s “pastor problems” to remain largely below the public’s radar screen, while the Wright controversy nearly determined the outcome of the election.
CASE STUDY

Saradise Lost: Liberal Blogs and the Fake Pregnancy Controversy

Immediately following McCain’s choice of running mate, bloggers and mainstream journalists rushed to report any and all information about Palin. As she was largely unknown outside of Alaska, it is unsurprising that her nomination would arouse such interest. Adding to the intrigue, however, was the widespread concern—among conservatives and liberals alike—that the McCain campaign had failed to vet the candidate properly. *The New Yorker* reported in October 2008 that “[b]y the time he announced [Palin] as his choice,” McCain “had spent less than three hours in her company” (Mayer, 2008, para. 34). A number of influential conservatives—including William Kristol, Fred Barnes and Michael Gerson—had been pushing for Palin’s nomination after meeting with her in June 2008 (Mayer, 2008, para. 14). But other conservatives like Peggy Noonan and David Brooks voiced a clear concern (Mayer, 2008, para. 37).

According to Eric Boehlert (2009), however, it was not mainstream media but liberal Alaskan bloggers who were the first to say that Palin had not been vetted properly (pp. 224-225). “While major media organizations scrambled to even *get* reporters to Alaska to start their background reporting on the star governor,” Boehlert notes, “the bloggers were teeing up all kinds of meaty morsels from the minute the Palin news first broke” (p. 225. Italics original). According to *Vanity Fair*’s Todd Purdum (2009), “[a]fter she was picked, the [McCain] campaign belatedly sent a dozen lawyers and researchers, led by a veteran Bush aide, Taylor Griffin, to Alaska, in a desperate race against the national reporters descending on the state” (para. 11). The race to define Palin had begun.

But while Boehlert (2009) claims that liberal bloggers vetted Sarah Palin better than the GOP (p. xi), he laments the fact that the liberal blogosphere soon became mired in conspiracy
theories about Palin. In a chapter called “Saradise Lost,” Boehert explains how the grassroots structure of the liberal blogosphere backfired by promoting an erroneous claim that Palin had faked her own pregnancy in order to cover up her daughter’s pregnancy. While prominent liberal bloggers like Markos Moulitsas did not themselves promote the story, websites such as Moulitsas’s Daily Kos employed an open structure that allowed users to promote the story, eventually pushing it to the top of the discussion board. The presence of a largely unknown nominee generated what Cass Sunstein (2007) calls a “cybercascade”—a rapidly spreading falsehood that was echoed in celebrity gossip magazines like National Enquirer, US Weekly, and OK! Magazine (Kurtz, 2008a).

As the pregnancy issue rose to the top of the blogosphere, questions about Palin’s policy background and religious beliefs fell by the wayside. The Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) reported that “[f]or the week of Sept. 1-7, Palin was a significant or dominant factor in 60% of the campaign stories” (“The Palin Phenomenon,” 2008). Palin received more coverage than McCain and in fact, “Palin enjoyed more coverage as a VP candidate during the GOP convention than Obama did a week earlier when he became the first person of color to accept the nomination for president of a major party.” But this coverage was mostly about Palin’s family and personal life rather than her religious background or political qualifications, according to the PEJ report. At the same time, PEJ reported that “[a]nother closely related storyline surfaced during the week, one that goes to the heart of Palin coverage. The contention of the McCain campaign—and many Republicans—that the media were engaging in an unfair feeding frenzy against her accounted for 1% of the campaign coverage.”

Indeed when Palin gave her acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention on September 3, 2008, Palin singled out the media for criticism, saying, “[H]ere's a little news flash
for all those reporters and commentators: I'm not going to Washington to seek their good opinion” (“Transcript of Palin’s Speech to Convention,” para. 2). Palin portrayed herself as an outsider challenging the status quo, and condemned the media as elitist. Several days later, Howard Kurtz argued that “[t]he media's tattered reputation has not fared as well [as Palin’s], not after the frenzy over Palin's mothering skills, her baby and her pregnant teenage daughter. The uproar handed John McCain’s team an opening to declare war on the press, his aides fuming over what they see as blatantly biased treatment of their newly anointed hockey mom and her family” (para. 3).

Kurtz and others defended the efforts of “serious journalists” to “answer fundamental questions about Palin’s record in Alaska,” adding, “That, by the way, is our job” (para. 4). In their report for this coverage period, PEJ suggested that “not all aspects of her personal life can be reasonably considered off-limits to journalists trying to fill in the gaps about a candidate largely unknown now seeking the second-highest office in the land” (“The Palin Phenomenon,” 2008) The Politico’s Roger Simon argued that, “To hear from the pols at the Republican National Convention this week, our job is to endorse and support the decisions of the pols” (quoted in “The Palin Phenomenon,” 2008). Despite these attempts to defend and distinguish “serious journalism” from mere gossip, however, it is clear that the initial period of coverage for Palin allowed the campaign to frame the candidate as an authentic outsider facing unwarranted scrutiny from the Washington elite, the mainstream media, and especially liberal bloggers. Palin supporters such as New York Post and Fox News analyst Kirsten Powers would continue to remind voters that “[a]lmost every story we have seen about her has started as an Internet rumor” (Scott et al., 2008).
Boehlert (2009) argues that the attention toward Palin’s pregnancy—generated initially through liberal blogs—demonstrates “the inherent risks for any decentralized, bottom-up community like the netroots” (p. 242). As in the Wright controversy, the public became concerned about an issue that did not warrant sustained scrutiny, thwarting the relevance-filtering and critical gate-keeping functions of journalism (Hove and Jackson, 2008). But while Obama’s “pastor problems” signaled a false alarm, in this case it was Palin’s religious background that failed to garner the media scrutiny they deserved. But this initial controversy put reporters and journalists on the defensive, making substantive questions about Palin’s religious background more difficult to broach.

*The “Task from God” and “Pipeline” Videos: Questions of Context and Bias*

The *Wall Street Journal* offered the first serious journalistic critique of Palin’s religious background in an article published on September 4, 2008 (Sataline, 2008). In the article, Suzanne Sataline focuses on statements from Palin’s former pastors at the Pentecostal Wasilla Assembly of God church. These statements indicate a belief in what religious scholars call “capital-P” prophecy (Woods and Patton, 2010) and religious apocalypticism (Crowley, 2006)—the idea that the Bible foretells world events and that we are approaching “end times.” For example, Sataline notes that the Rev. Ed Kalnins, pastor of Wasilla Assembly of God, “says he has told church members that God put President George W. Bush in office” (para. 2). “God has placed this man in authority,” Kalnins told Sataline, suggesting that “criticisms [of Bush] come from hell” (para. 15). Sataline reports that Kalnins believes “America is locked in a ‘holy war’ with terrorists” (para. 2)—what Kalnins called “a war of gods” (para. 14). Even within this early coverage, however, the McCain campaign refused to acknowledge such statements as an
important context for Palin’s political campaign. When asked about Kalnin’s defense of divine prophecy, campaign spokeswoman Maria Comella said, "I am not going to get into that. I think talking about where she worships today and how she characterizes herself speaks for itself about where she is today on this issue" (para 4).

Despite the campaign’s disavowal, this environment of Biblical prophecy and religious apocalyptism provides an important context for understanding statements that Palin herself made at Wasilla Assembly of God. In June 2008, Palin spoke to a group of young missionaries at the church. In a video of the event—which was available on the church’s website but subsequently removed—Palin asked the audience to “Pray for our military men and women who are striving to do what is right also for this country,” and to pray "that our national leaders are sending them out on a task that is from God. That's what we have to make sure we're praying for: that there is a plan and that plan is God's plan" (para. 7). Palin also asked the audience to pray for a natural-gas pipeline that had been proposed in Alaska. “I think God’s will has to be done in unifying people and companies to get the gas line built. So, pray for that,” Palin asked her audience (“Palin’s Church,” 2008, Sept. 2). Citing Christian ethicist David Gushee, Sataline raises concerns about Palin’s statements, noting that Gushee “is troubled that a public official might presume that government action could be God's intent” (para. 8), and suggesting that questions about such beliefs are worthy of public scrutiny (para. 9).

Though initial coverage of Palin focused primarily on her personal life and not her religious background, the circulation of these video clips from Palin’s former church eventually generated a sustained discussion of the candidate’s faith throughout the following months. The first videos first appeared online in an article posted by the Huffington Post on September 2, 2008 (“Palin’s Church,” 2008; Levine, 2008). As Sataline would do in her Wall Street Journal
article, the *Huffington Post* article suggests that Palin’s comments in the “task from God” and “pipeline” videos can only be understood in the context of statements from pastor Ed Kalnin’s sermons such as the following:

> What you see in Iraq, basically, is a manifestation of what's going on in this unseen world called the spirit world. ... We need to think like Jesus thinks. We are in a time and a season of war, and we need to think like that. We need to develop that instinct. We need to develop as believers the instinct that we are at war, and that war is contending for your faith. ... Jesus called us to die. (“Palin’s Church,” 2008)

While the *Huffington Post* originally posted a link to the video on the Wasilla Assembly of God church website, that video was subsequently removed from the church website. However, the videos quickly appeared on YouTube and began to circulate between cable news and other blogs.

On September 8, 2008, MSNBC’s Keith Olbermann (2008b) ran the “pipeline” video on his *Countdown* show. In anticipation of the debut episode of *The Rachel Maddow Show*, which was to air later that night, Maddow appeared as Olbermann’s guest. Referring to Palin as “Elmer Gantry” and “Amy Simple McHockey Mom,” Olbermann asked Maddow, “Should we be terrified?” Maddow responded by suggesting that, while “there’s no religious test for office,” Americans are “not that psyched about extremism.” There may be reason for concern, Maddow suggested, “if you believe that God is directing troop movements in Fallujah.” Later that night, Maddow (2008) ran the “task from God” and “pipeline” clips on the debut episode of her new show. “[T]he more we learn about Sarah Palin’s statements on religion and politics,” Maddow commented, “the more urgently I feel that the governor should be asked if she believes in the separation of church and state.”

The next morning, *ABC News* featured the video on *Good Morning America*. In a segment titled “Sarah Palin Uncensored: Tapes from the Past,” Diane Sawyer (2008a) introduced the “task from God” video by suggesting that “in this 21st century world of YouTube and
Internet sites, it's hard not to leave a video trail even if you're an aspiring candidate in Alaska.”

After airing the short clip, ABC’s Jeremy Hubbard briefly added that “Palin's former pastor, Tim McGraw, says Palin believes God is sovereign and in control.”

Enough momentum had gathered around these circulating videos that, later that day, the McCain campaign decided to issue a statement specifically addressing Palin’s prayer that U.S. troops were “out on a task that is from God” (“McCain/Palin Campaign,” 2008). Campaign spokesman Michael Goldfarb suggested that "This is an incredibly humble statement, a statement that this campaign stands by 100%, and a sentiment that any religious American will share—the hope that our country's actions are indeed righteous." Fox News picked up the campaign’s suggestion that Palin’s prayer was nothing out of the ordinary, and began to frame Palin’s faith—and her former churches—as normal and non-political.

That evening, Fox News correspondent Dan Springer lamented that “the left-wing bloggers and some of the mainstream press are out here trying to show that Sarah Palin's belief are out of the mainstream,” suggesting that her critics are “looking for any ‘got you’ moment that would, you know, possibly create a ‘Reverend Wright’ moment for Sarah Palin” (Nauert, 2008). Regarding the videos from the June 8, 2008 church service, Springer notes that “those remarks are now all over YouTube.” Springer’s guest, Washington Examiner columnist Mary Katherine Ham, followed the McCain campaign’s narrative of normalcy:

I think the far-left blogs and folks, sometimes, in the media, when they go after these things, it largely betrays the fact that they just don't understand sort of normal evangelical Christians. The fact that she gave a speech to her old church in which she asked for people to pray that we were doing the will of God in Iraq was not a statement of a messianic mission, it was just a Christian asking for folks to pray for the well-being of her son and other troops.
Later that evening, during Fox’s *Special Report with Brit Hume*, Hume (2008b) argues that “some people are attacking Sarah Palin over her Christian faith,” and suggests that Palin’s comments were taken out of context. “[A] couple of our cable competitors have been looking into her and saying some pretty sharp things,” Hume explains (2008a). But while Hume acknowledges that Palin attended a Pentecostal church, he emphasizes that “she has for the past six or seven years been going to another church,” which Hume describes as “a garden variety bible church, evangelical Christian bible church.” Hume’s guest Fred Barnes, executive editor of the *Weekly Standard*, continued the narrative of normalcy. “Sarah Palin, as best I can tell, is an evangelical, pretty much in the mainstream of American Christianity,” Barnes suggested.

Referring to the “task from God” and “pipeline” video clips, Barnes suggests that the controversy stemmed from the anti-religious bias of Palin’s critics. “[T]his seems to irritate at least a lot of atheists—she prays a lot. She prays for things. You know, she prays for good things to happen in Alaska,” Barnes explained. Appearing on the same show, Charles Krauthammer also suggested that while Jeremiah Wright’s controversial comments were political, Palin’s were not. “Reverend Wright stands up and says that the white government of the United States invented AIDS as a way to kill the black race. That's not the theology. That's not religion. That's raw politics, and it's inciting race hatred,” Krauthammer argued.

Shortly thereafter, Bill O’Reilly and Greta Van Susteren picked up Hume’s suggestion that critics were taking Palin’s comments out of context (O’Reilly, 2008b). They suggest that while Fox News is providing the context for Palin’s beliefs, her critics are engaging in a smear campaign. Reporting from Wasilla, Alaska, Van Susteren suggested that she was “digging into” questions about Palin’s churches in order to provide a proper context for her faith:

> [O]ne of the problems you have is that you, unfortunately, people come in and grab little snippets and they'll run with it. You got to sort of step back and look at the whole picture
so you can have, you know, a good eye and recognize that there is a freedom of religion. Just make sure we get the facts straight.

In response, O’Reilly suggests that other media sources are not simply taking her comments out of context but attacking and smearing her religion. “[W]e're not routing for anybody here at ‘The Factor’ in this election,” O’Reilly claims, “but we certainly aren't going to allow any Americans' faith and family to be smeared.” In anticipation of an investigative piece scheduled to run on CNN later that evening, O’Reilly frames any critical examination of Palin’s faith background as a potential attack. “Now, CNN is going to get into her religion tonight,” O’Reilly tells his viewers, reassuring his audience that “We're going to watch that very closely. We don't want anybody's religion in this country attacked. I hope they don't do it.”

Indeed, CNN’s edition of *Anderson Cooper 360 Degrees* raised more explicit concerns about the circulating video clips and other controversial statements from Palin’s former pastors (Cooper, A., 2008). After airing the “pipeline” clip, Cooper notes that the video is “big on YouTube right now,” and suggests that “It's got a lot of people wondering about Palin's church and the role of religion in her political decision-making.” CNN correspondent Randi Kaye suggests that her explicit prayer for the pipeline contradicts statements from Palin spokeswoman Meghan Stapleton that the candidate does not “bring [religion] to her office.” After running the “task from God” clip, Kaye also suggests that “recordings like these have many wondering if her beliefs could impact policy decisions,” adding that “[h]er former pastor says he has no doubt she'll turn to her faith in office.” Again citing the role of new media in the debate, Anderson Cooper asks Kaye, “What's been the McCain campaign response to all the YouTube videos coming out on Sarah Palin's church?” “It hasn't been very happy about it, Anderson,” Kaye responds. “They released a statement late today, certainly trying to clarify those comments about the Iraq war, saying that… She is not asserting that it is God's plan.”
But Kaye suggested that Palin is “playing down her Pentecostal roots,” citing additional statements from her former pastors indicating a belief that people who voted for John Kerry would not attain salvation and that, in Kaye’s words, “Alaska is destined to serve as a shelter for Christians at the End Times.” Kaye also cites a speech given on August 17, 2008, at the Wasilla Bible Church. “[J]ust days before Palin was asked to run as vice president,” Kaye notes, “the founder of Jews for Jesus, David Brickner, told worshipers terrorist attacks on Israel were God's judgment of Jews who haven't embraced Christianity.” For Cooper and Kaye, then, the statements from Palin’s former pastors and guest speakers provide a necessary context for understanding the political implications of the “task from God” and “pipeline” videos.

Over the next several days, *ABC News* also featured several pieces raising critical questions about Palin’s religious background. A segment on *Good Morning America*, for example, addressed the question of whether Palin tried to ban books in Wasilla (Sawyer, 2008b). In a segment of *World News Sunday*, Dan Harris (2008) highlights Palin’s Pentecostal background, suggesting that “[l]ike Evangelicals, Pentecostals believe the Bible is the literal word of God and that the end times are near. But Pentecostals also believe that the Holy Spirit can give you gifts, like speaking in tongues, prophesy and divine healing.” Most importantly, however, ABC featured an interview with Palin during *World News with Charles Gibson*. It was Palin’s first interview since accepting the Vice Presidential nomination. During the interview, Gibson (2008) ran the “task from God” video clip and then asked Palin about her comments. The following is an excerpt from the interview, which aired on September 11, 2008:

GIBSON: (Off-camera) Are we fighting a holy war?

PALIN: The reference there is a repeat of Abraham Lincoln's words, when he said, first he suggested, never presume to know what god's will is, and I would never presume to know god's will or to speak god's words, but what Abraham Lincoln had said, and that's a repeat in my comments, was, let us not pray that god is on our side, in a war, or any other
time. But let us pray that we are on god's side. That's what that comment was all about, Charlie. Today is the day that I send my first born, my son, my teenage son, oversees with his Stryker Brigade. 4,000 other wonderful American men and women to fight for our country, for democracy, for our freedoms.

GIBSON: (Off-camera) But you went on and said there is a plan, and it is god's plan.

PALIN: I believe that there is a plan for this world, and that plan for this world, is for good. I believe that there is great hope, and great potential for every country, to be able to live and be protected with inalienable rights, that I believe are god-given, Charlie. And those are the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That in my worldview is a grand - the grand plan.

GIBSON: (Off-camera) But then, are you sending your son on a task that is from god?

PALIN: I don't know if the task is from god, Charlie. What I know is that my son has made a decision. I am so proud of his independent and strong decision he has made.

Critics took issue with Palin’s suggestion that she was merely paraphrasing Lincoln. Amy Sullivan (2008b) suggested that the Lincoln reference was another instance in which Palin downplayed her religious background. “Palin argued that she had been paraphrasing an Abraham Lincoln quote,” Sullivan wrote. “In fact, she had used fairly standard Evangelical language in expressing a desire that human actions conform with God's will. In trying to separate herself from that tradition, Palin's explanation struck both secular critics and many Evangelicals as scripted by political strategists.” But while Sullivan suggested that Palin’s language was “fairly standard” within the context of evangelicalism, Mark Silk (2008c) argued that it had disturbing political implications:

[I]t is one thing to believe, as Lincoln said, that the will of God always prevails, and that a victory could represent God's judgment. It is something else to believe that God sets certain tasks for countries to do—which they presumably succeed in doing or fail to do. What the prayer suggests is that Palin sees the job of government, at least in a matter as consequential as going to war, as carrying out God's tasks.

After Gibson’s interview ran, however, Bill O’Reilly (2008c) again defended Palin’s comments and portrayed Gibson as exhibiting an anti-religious bias. “[T]he media's obsessed with Palin's religious beliefs as they are with Bush reliance on God,” O’Reilly suggests. “The
secular media generally dismisses any faith based people, which of course puts them at odds with the folks, who overwhelmingly admire spirituality of their leaders.” In response to Gibson’s question “Are we fighting a holy war?” O’Reilly explains, “if I were answering Gibson's question. . . I would have said don't you agree, Charlie, don't you agree that a benevolent deity would want just people to confront suicide bombers, confront terrorists who murder innocent men, women, and children?” Newt Gingrich took a similar approach, suggesting that Gibson’s interview was “a sad commentary on the growing anti-religious hostility of the elite media” (Kurtz, 2008b).

During this early period of coverage—roughly from McCain’s announcement of his VP choice to Charles Gibson’s interview with Palin—several competing themes emerge. First, sources such as Wall Street Journal, ABC News, CNN, Huffington Post, and others made explicit or implicit claims that Palin’s religious background provides important context for understanding not only the comments she has made but also for the way that her faith might impact her policy decisions. These sources point to evidence that Palin’s background—most importantly her attendance at the Pentecostal Wasilla Assembly of God church—revolves around “capital-P” prophecy such as a belief in “end times” and a belief that specific political leaders and policies are chosen by God. Palin’s supporters—namely pundits or commentators such as Sean Hannity, Bill O’Reilly, Fred Barnes, Charles Krauthammer, and Newt Gingrich—employ several different strategies to counter these claims. Supporters claim that the “task from God” and “pipeline” videos were taken out of context; that critical reports about Palin’s faith are attacks on her religion per se—not on her political beliefs of ideology; that mainstream media have a secular, anti-religious bias; that Palin’s beliefs are mainstream and non-political; and that Palin is not Pentecostal but subscribes to a generic, non-denominational faith. At the same time,
supporters also portray Palin herself as authentic, down-to-earth, and forthcoming about her views. Both critical and supportive sources acknowledge the important role of new media—especially YouTube and blogs—in generating discussion about Palin’s faith.

*Palin’s “Pastor in the Basement”: The Thomas Muthee Videos*

A second wave of interest in “found” video developed after MSNBC’s Keith Olbermann aired another clip from Palin’s June 2008 appearance at Wasilla Assembly of God church, in which the candidate credits her successful gubernatorial campaign to Thomas Muthee, Bishop of the Word of Faith church in Kiambu, Kenya (“Sarah’s Blessed Quest,” 2008). Muthee had come under scrutiny in 1999 in a *Christian Science Monitor* article by Jane Lampman (1999b), who reported Muthee’s involvement in “spiritual warfare”—a global evangelical movement aimed at locating and driving demons out of communities and governments. Muthee had targeted a woman named “Mama Jane,” accused her of practicing witchcraft, and allegedly drove her out of Kiambu. The episode is representative of the practice of “spiritual mapping” in which pastors claim to identify specific locations as “spiritual strongholds” for “territorial spirits” or demons (Lampman, 1999b, para. 8; see also Holvast, 2008a, 2008b). Lampman reported that “[t]he more aggressive, potentially confrontational aspects of these practices raise concerns within and beyond the evangelical community” (1999b, para. 9) and notes that “the practices flourish most among Pentecostals” (1999b, para. 26). The *Huffington Post* mentioned Muthee indirectly in its September 2, 2008 article, which featured the “task from God” video (“Palin’s Church,” 2008). Without naming Muthee specifically, the *Huffington Post* article reported that Ed Kalnins, Palin’s former pastor, “has asserted that Palin's election as governor was the result of a ‘prophetic call’ by another pastor at the church who prayed for her victory.” Regarding Muthee, Kalnins said, “[He made] a prophetic declaration and then unfolds the kingdom of God, you
know.” In the video featured by Keith Olbermann (2008c) on September 19, 2008, Palin makes the following remarks to the audience:

We forgot to talk about Pastor Muthee. As I was mayor and Pastor Muthee was here and he was praying over me. You know how he speaks, and he’s so bold. He’s praying, lord make a way, lord make a way. And I’m thinking, this guy is really bold. He doesn’t even know what I’m going to do. He doesn’t know what my plans are. And he’s praying not, oh, lord, if it be your will, may she become governor, whatever. No, he just prayed for it. He said, lord make a way and let her do this next step. And that’s exactly what happened. Again, very, very powerful coming from this church. So that was awesome about Pastor Muthee.

Palin’s suggestion that Muthee’s prayer was directly related to her gubernatorial victory added to the contextual evidence for Palin’s belief in “capital-P” prophecy, and shed doubt on her claim that her own “task from God” and “pipeline” prayers had been mischaracterized. Indeed, as Mark Silk (2008f) would later note, Palin’s repeated references to “prayer warriors”—for example in conversation with James Dobson (Goodstein, 2008) and in her book, Going Rogue (2009, p. 411)—is directly linked to the spiritual warfare movement within Pentecostalism. As Jane Lampman (1999a) reported ten years earlier, members of the spiritual warfare movement believe that, in the words of one such leader, “[s]everal passages in Scriptures make it very clear that God governs the world through the prayers of His people, that prayer releases His power and grace or directs His work”39 (para. 8).

Keith Olbermann picked up these themes in mid-September 2008, citing Lampman’s previous work in Christian Science Monitor and reporting from the Times of London to raise further questions about how Palin’s faith would affect her political leadership. Describing Muthee’s involvement in spiritual warfare as “terrifying,” Olbermann notes that Muthee delivered ten sermons at Palin’s church during the period that she was preparing her

39 Alvin Vander Griend, director of Houses of Prayer Everywhere.
gubernatorial campaign. “Sarah Palin has a preacher problem,” Olbermann (2008c) announced, suggesting that Muthee “makes Jeremiah Wright look like Father Flanagan of Boys Town.”

Indeed the symbolic parallels to the Wright controversy are ironic. Newt Gingrich had framed Wright as the secret face of Obama’s true racial identity, citing the fact that they had prayed together “in the basement” of the building where Obama gave his announcement speech (Hannity, 2008c). Meanwhile Muthee’s anti-witchcraft ministry is dubbed as “The Prayer Cave” after its location in the basement of a local grocery store in Kiambu (Lampman 1999b, para. 5). In both cases critics cite a candidate’s “pastor in the basement” as evidence that they are hiding their true religious identity, and in each case new media drives the debate as “found” video circulates between cable news, YouTube, and blogs.

The Muthee controversy gathered momentum on September 24, 2008 when journalist Max Blumenthal (2008) posted an additional YouTube video clip on his blog. Originally available on the Wasilla Assembly of God church website, this May 2005 video features Muthee preaching to the congregation and praying on stage with Palin. On the liberal blog Daily Kos, David Waldman (2008) linked to Blumenthal’s original post, re-posting the video with additional commentary under the headline “Preacher Problem!” That evening, Olbermann (2008d) aired the video on Countdown. In the video clip, Muthee is seen on stage with Palin, who at that point is considering a run for governor. Muthee places his hand on her and prays as follows:

We are asking you as the body of Christ in this valley, make a way for Sarah even in the political arena. Make a way my God. Bring finances her way, even for the campaign in the name of Jesus. Above all, give her the personnel. Give her men and women and that will buck her up in the name of Jesus. In the name of Jesus, in the name of Jesus, every form of witchcraft is what we rebuke in the name of Jesus. Father make a way now, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

This is the prayer for which Palin would thank Muthee in June 2008, after she had been elected governor. In a conversation with Chicago Tribune columnist Clarence Page, Olbermann cites
OLBERMANN: I know this is not the headline of the day, but there’s literally no space in that videotape between the governor and the pastor and he’s still talking about witches. What does that videotape do for or to her?

PAGE: Well, it certainly gives us a different view of Sarah Palin than the hockey mom that we’ve known in the past. It’s a—maybe—this may be a campaign advantage. She could bring a witch hunter to Washington with her, and maybe chase out some demons from Capitol Hill. But it’s something that it’s quite remarkable to me that this hasn’t gotten more attention, even with the financial meltdown and other news that’s going on.

OLBERMANN: If you had a story with videotape of a pastor from Kenya who got his start in witch hunting, laying his hands on a candidate and the candidate’s last name was, just to pick one out at random, Obama, what would be happening right now?

PAGE: Well, I could imagine your buddy Rush Limbaugh would be talking a lot about it, not to mention a lot of other people. You know, Keith, I’ve covered Senator Obama for years here, and also Pastor Wright. Reverend Wright has been a major figure in Chicago religious circles, the kind of church that politicians stop by. Only after Senator Obama ran for national office do we see, what, 30 seconds of video from Reverend Wright all over the news, giving us the impression of a fire brand and the image of Obama as some kind of black nationalist or something. We don’t see any of that with Sarah Palin. It’s really quite remarkable to me.

OLBERMANN: That’s my point here. This is stuff that makes you say, you know, that Jeremiah Wright, he seems pretty mainstream by comparison to people who are going out on anti-witch crusades. Is this, do you suppose, registering, impacting Governor Palin’s candidacy?

PAGE: Right now, I think the nation is in a strange denial with regard to Governor Palin. She’s introduced to the public 60 days before the election and people are trying to absorb this and that about her. But, you know, this is the kind of thing that I think worries some folks in Republican circles, wondering what more are we going to see. You know, Pastor Muthee, witch hunting—I’ve been to Kenya. I’ve covered a number of countries in Africa. This kind of think has a terrible reputation. A lot of innocent women have been killed, mutilated on these witch hunts. The more you look into this, the more unseemly it looks.

OLBERMANN: We moved on from this in Salem, Massachusetts 320 years ago. There was a reason for that.

Olbermann and Page both cite the “witchcraft” video clip as evidence that Palin has not been forthright about her religious background. They frame the video as a window into Palin’s true religious identity, and suggest that the dominant portrayal of Palin as a “hockey mom” is
misleading. They further suggest that Muthee’s involvement in spiritual warfare has political implications that should give voters pause, and contrast the relatively meager coverage of these issues to the flurry of attention paid to Jeremiah Wright. Importantly, though, while they stress the gravity of this religious context, both Olbermann and Page engage in light-hearted sarcasm about Muthee’s reference to witchcraft. This broader cultural attitude toward witchcraft—as a humorous historical relic—contributed to the efforts of Palin’s supporters to dismiss Muthee’s prayer as irrelevant and non-political.

Print Coverage of Palin and Muthee

Though the Wall Street Journal had provided critical coverage of Palin’s religious background shortly after her nomination, serious newspaper coverage of Palin’s relation to the spiritual warfare movement only emerged after the Muthee videos began to circulate widely between cable news, YouTube, and blogs. It was at this point in late September 2008 that the Associated Press (2008b) ran an article reporting that violence against accused witches, including children, is rampant in present-day Africa. The AP article is representative of much coverage during this period in its use of the video—and Muthee’s mention of “witchcraft”—as the central news hook. After describing the video that “made the rounds yesterday on the internet,” the AP article provides a brief sketch of Pentecostalism, spiritual warfare, and Muthee’s prominence in the movement. The article ends by reporting that “[p]eople accused of being witches have been targeted in parts of present-day Africa. In Congo, children have been thrown out of their homes and in Rwanda alleged witches have been beaten by mobs.” A similar article in London’s Guardian newspaper reports that “a video has emerged showing Sarah Palin playing a central role in a church service in Alaska in which witchcraft is denounced” (MacAskill, 2008). The Guardian article describes the video, noting that it is “available on
YouTube,” and suggests that it “raises new questions about how much [McCain’s] team investigated her background before naming her as John McCain's running mate.” Similar references to the video appeared in *The Los Angeles Times* (Times Wire Reports, 2008) and *Newsday* (AP, 2008a) in late September 2008.

Print coverage of this type continued throughout October 2008. Early that month, *Time* published an article by Amy Sullivan (2008b) titled “Does Sarah Palin Have a Pentecostal Problem?” Sullivan cites the Muthee video (re-posted on the *Time* website) as evidence that Palin and the McCain campaign had reason to downplay or obscure Palin’s religious background. In fact, while Palin herself had suggested that the McCain campaign ought to look into the Wright controversy more closely, Sullivan suggests that McCain wanted to avoid the Wright issue altogether because he feared questions about Palin’s own pastors. Citing the history of theological tensions between evangelicals and Pentecostals, Sullivan suggests that “[t]he Evangelicals’ swoon for Palin might fade if it turns out that she continues to hold fast to Pentecostal practices and beliefs.” Sullivan then provides a “primer” on Pentecostalism, suggesting that the tradition’s “heavy emphasis on the Holy Spirit appeals to converts from cultures that believe in spirit worlds, particularly cultures in Africa, and it encourages those who think there is an ongoing spiritual war between good and evil.”

In her *Time* article, however, Sullivan does not mention Muthee by name, and provides only broad descriptions of Pentecostalism. Other papers, such as London’s *Daily Telegraph*, were directly critical of Muthee. In mid-October the latter newspaper reported that Muthee’s claim to have driven “Mama Jane” from Kiambu was false, and that the woman, pastor Jane Njenga, still lived down the road from Muthee’s church (Wadhams, 2008). The *Daily Telegraph*’s Nick Wadhams (2008) also insinuated that Muthee had stretched the facts as part of
a campaign to broaden his successful ministry. “It is clearly boom times for Mr Muthee's church,” Wadhams reported, adding that a “5,000-seat complex is under construction and a 12,000 seat auditorium is planned. Apparently some local religious leaders shared this criticism. “Rival pastors in Kiambu now denounce Mr. Muthee for his treatment of Mama Jane,” Wadhams reported. “Pastor Gideon Maina said: ‘As a man of God, you don't make your name by stepping on other people's names.’”

The most prominent and widely-cited print article to cover Palin’s relationship with Muthee and Pentecostalism is Laurie Goodstein’s (2008) *New York Times* article, “Palin's Faith is Linked to Form of Pentecostalism Known as Spiritual Warfare.” Again, the article cites the important role of online video in spurring discussion: “Ms. Palin's faith has come under scrutiny after two videos taken in her former church surfaced on YouTube and became immediate sensations,” Goodstein reports. Goodstein notes that in the video, Palin “is also seen nodding as her former pastor from Wasilla prays over her and declares that Alaska is ‘one of the refuge states in the Last Days,’ a piece of prophecy popular in some prayer networks that predicts that as the ‘end times’ approach, people will flock to Alaska for its abundant open space and natural resources.” Goodstein suggests that Palin’s connections to spiritual warfare are more than tenuous. Palin had appointed Patrick Donelson, described as “a pastor and fishing guide who helped found a spiritual warfare ministry,” to “the only seat reserved for members of the clergy on the state’s Suicide Prevention Council.” Adding to the evidence for Palin’s ongoing disavowal of her background, Goodstein reports that “[r]eligious leaders in Alaska, including Mr. Donelson, declined interviews, with several saying they had been told by the McCain-Palin campaign not to talk to members of the news media.” In contrast to the narrative of normalcy espoused by her supporters, Goodstein claims that “the [spiritual warfare] movement's fixation
on demons, its aggressiveness and its leaders’ claims to exalted spiritual authority have troubled even some Pentecostal Christians.”

*When Context Becomes “Mockery”*

Print coverage of the spiritual warfare movement thus emerged belatedly, after the video clips from Palin’s former Pentecostal church began to circulate between cable news, YouTube, and blogs. Though this print coverage provided a broader context and additional evidence for understanding Palin’s relation to the spiritual warfare movement and Pentecostalism, the dominant narrative among supporters continued to frame this coverage as an attack on Palin’s religion rather than its political implications. Like Olbermann and Sullivan, Palin’s supporters drew analogies to coverage of Jeremiah Wright. Supporters, however, claimed that while coverage of Wright was justified on the grounds that his comments were political—not religious—Palin’s beliefs were non-political and therefore critics were clearly motivated by a secular-elitist antipathy to religion *per se*.

After the “task from God” video began to circulate in early September, Charles Krauthammer had framed Wright’s comments about AIDS as political rather than religious. “That's not religion. That's raw politics, and it's inciting race hatred,” Krauthammer argued, suggesting that criticism of Palin was, by contrast, specifically aimed at her faith (Hume, 2008a). This theme of de-politicization continued after the Muthee controversy developed. In part, the Muthee relationship failed to garner much serious debate because, in contrast to the print coverage discussed above, cable news failed to report the broader context of the spiritual warfare movement and its specifically political aspirations. As Wilson (2008) notes, for example, the movement advocates a seven-point strategy for exerting influence over societies and
governments. Holvast (2008a, 2008b) also demonstrates that the movement is an expression of Americanism and the concept of Manifest Destiny.

As noted earlier with regard to Keith Olbermann’s coverage, however, even Palin’s critics often treated the subject of “witchcraft” as a joke. An exchange from CNN’s Reliable Sources—featuring show host Howard Kurtz, New Republic senior editor Michelle Cottle, and CNN political commentator Amy Holmes—is representative (Kurtz, 2008c). After airing the Muthee “witchcraft” video clip the discussion unfolds:

KURTZ: Now, I had not realized that witchcraft was an issue in this presidential campaign, but look, on a semi-serious note, given the endless looping of Jeremiah Wright and his rants, MSNBC has played this a few times, it hasn't got much attention. Is this fair to question Palin's interaction with one of her preachers?

COTTLE: Well, it may be fair, but it's very dangerous for Democrats. Democrats have kind of a reputation for being anti-religious, which is not fair, but they have to be extremely careful.

KURTZ: But what about journalists? Should this be played on every political talk show, or is it unfairly exploiting someone's religion?

HOLMES: Well, what was different about Jeremiah Wright was that there was a political component. He said "God damn America."

There was rebuking witchcraft. I mean, where's the news in that? That's a much more religious story about her church and the types of religious messages that they're talking about. This wasn't about politics and where do you stand on the issue of America's culpability in the world.

KURTZ: Is it potentially offensive to witches?

HOLMES: Maybe...

COTTLE: Well, they're going to lose that vote, I think. They'll lose the Wiccan vote.

HOLMES: They'll take you around.

By contrast, in early October 2008—just after Obama widened his lead in the race—Palin raised questions about “the candidate's judgment and who he would choose to associate himself with in the past.” Fox News co-host Mort Kondracke suggested that Palin was referring to Jeremiah Wright, whom Kondracke described as “an anti-white racist, anti-American racist whose church Obama attended for 20 years” (Barnes, 2008). Again, while commentators portrayed Wright as a
political figure, they tended to frame Palin’s relationship with Muthee as strictly religious, with no political implications—that is, when these sources mentioned Muthee at all. Importantly, Fox News transcripts return no search results for “Muthee” during this period of relatively high coverage.\(^\text{40}\)

According to this narrative, if there is no political reason to critique Palin’s relationship with Muthee, it follows that critics must be attacking Palin’s religion *per se*. Indeed Palin makes numerous comments along these lines throughout October 2008 and afterward. In an interview with Hugh Hewitt in late September 2008, Palin makes the following comments:

Hugh Hewitt: Do you think the mainstream media and the left understands your religious faith, Governor Palin?

Sarah Palin: I think that there’s a lot of mocking of my personal faith, and my personal faith is very, very simple. I don’t belong to any church. I do have a strong belief in God, and I believe that I’m a heck of a lot better off putting my life in God’s hands, and saying hey, you know, guide me. What else do we have but guidance that we would seek from a Creator? That’s about as simple as it gets with my faith, and I think that there is a lot of mocking of that. And you know, so bet it, though I do have respect for those who have differing views than I do on faith, on religion. I’m not going to mock them, and I would hope that they would kind of I guess give me the same courtesy through this of not mocking a person’s faith, but maybe perhaps even trying to understand a little bit of it. (Silk, 2008e)

Later that month, Palin made similar claims in an interview with David Brody (2008) of the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN):

Brody: There have been some shots taken at you…regarding your Christian faith…The Pentecostal stuff, the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Do you want to clear up exactly what you believe in and so that the record can be set straight a little bit? Because there have been some editorials and others taking shots at you regarding --

Palin: Yeah, and I think the saddest part of that is that faith, not just my faith, faith and God in general has been mocked through this campaign, and that breaks my heart and that is unfair for others who share a faith in God and chose to worship our Lord in whatever private manner that they deem fit and my faith has always been pretty personal.

\(^{40}\) In fact, a search for “Sarah Palin AND (pastor OR religion OR faith)” in Fox News transcripts (Lexis-Nexis) returns zero results between September 23 – 29, 2008.
I haven't really worn it on my sleeve. I haven't been out there preaching it. I've always been of the mind that you caalk [sic] the walk. You just don't have to be talking the talk about your beliefs, so just wanting maybe my life to be able to reflect my faith. So it's always been pretty personal and that was kind of a surprise in the last couple of months that people would misconstrue and spin anything that has to do with my faith or anybody else's and turn it into something to be mocked. That's very sad. I don't think that there's anything that I can do about it, so you know, I won't, I won't whine or complain about it, but nobody is going to convince me that my foundation of faith is not good for me and for my family no matter the mocking, no matter what anybody says about it, I'm going to keep plugging away at this and I'm going to keep seeking God's guidance and His wisdom and His favor and His grace, for me, for my family, for this campaign, for our nation. Again no matter what anybody else says about it it's between me and God, and I am so thankful that that he has strengthened me with this understanding and this belief that I can count on Him. I can reach out to Him asking for that strength, asking for the blessings that He so freely gives and I don't know how anybody would want to do this if they didn't have real strong faith in God that He's got it all under control.

In response to Palin’s claims, Mark Silk (2008e) argues that “[s]imple avowals of trust in God do not elicit mockery in American culture, beyond the small world of Christopher Hitchens and company.” Silk suggests that, rather than being criticized simply for "putting my life in God's hands," Palin came under scrutiny for “specific beliefs and practices that Palin is now disavowing, such as... making a place for teaching creationism in the public schools.” In other words, like much of the print coverage discussed above, Silk suggests that there are indeed political implications for Palin’s religious background. Furthermore, Silk suggests that Palin has engaged in a deliberate attempt to obscure, downplay, and disavow those aspects of her religious background that have political implications.

_Hockey Moms and Joe Six-Packs: Authenticity, Religion, and Whiteness_

In contrast to what Newt Gingrich called “the growing anti-religious hostility of the elite media” (Kurtz, 2008b), from the beginning of the campaign supporters portrayed Palin as an authentic voice of the public. Palin’s self-identification as a “hockey mom” was inseparable from the representation of her faith as mainstream and benign. As Mark Silk (2008h) would
later note, Palin began to “divide the country into real and unreal America,” and “as she
presented it, the real America is the America of (among other things) religion.” In an interview
on Hannity & Colmes (2008f), Palin biographer Kaylene Johnson recapitulated the theme of
authenticity as presented in her book, Sarah: How a Hockey Mom Turned Alaska's Political
Establishment Upside Down (2008):

Well, the thing that I found really interesting and pretty amazing for someone of—that's
in politics and that is in the public eye so much is that there—there's no difference
between her public persona and who she is on a day-to-day basis, and when I had the
opportunity to talk to her, I really felt like I was talking to someone like you would talk to
someone across your kitchen table. (Hannity and Colmes, 2008f)

When Alan Colmes asked Johnson about the statements from Rev. Kalnins reported in the Wall
Street Journal (Sataline, 2008) several days before, Johnson replied that she had not heard about
them, adding that she had spoken to a different pastor who “talked more about her family and
how their faith was nurtured in the church over the years.” Johnson acknowledged that questions
about a politician’s background are important, but suggested that “it crosses the line is when it
goes into personal family issues”—a reference to the pregnancy stories that had dominated initial
coverage of Palin.

The dual narrative of Palin’s authenticity and benign religious faith continued throughout
the campaign and beyond. Several days after the November election, Franklin Graham spoke to
Fox News’s Greta Van Susteren (2008f) and noted the admiration that his father, Billy Graham,
held for Palin: “And, really, what he [Billy Graham] likes about Governor Palin—first of all,
she's real. What you see is what you get with her. And she is a woman of faith. And she's not
afraid to let that come out. And so my father has seen that and he respects her for her honesty.”

The construction of Palin’s authenticity revolved not only around her religious faith but
also her race. As race scholar Jackie Daniels (2008) notes, Palin “represents archetypal
whiteness” and invokes race implicitly in her references to “hockey moms” and “Joe six-packs” (para. 1). The latter expression “carries with it a particular—rather than a generic—referent,” Daniels claims. “The referent is to a white, working-class man” (para. 4). Indeed, immediately after Kaylene Johnson defended Palin’s authenticity in her appearance on Hannity and Colmes, pollster Scott Rasmussen told the show’s hosts that the mid-western states “are going to see an awful lot of Sarah Palin because she has a cultural appeal to those white working class voters that are so important in those states and that Barack Obama struggled with in the primaries” (Hannity and Colmes, 2008g).

Yet just as the campaign had managed to disavow issues of Palin’s religious background, her supporters also disavowed the importance of race in Palin’s populist appeals. The same day that Scott Rasmussen noted Palin’s appeal to white voters, Bill O’Reilly (2008a) criticized Chicago Sun Times columnist Mary Mitchell for suggesting that Palin deliberately invoked race when the latter claimed that "[w]e grow good people in our small towns with honesty, sincerity, and dignity.” O’Reilly dismissed the issue by suggesting that, for Mitchell, “everything is racial.” The following day O’Reilly spoke to Greta Van Susteren, who was reporting from Wasilla, Alaska. In her report Van Susteren made some of the strongest claims for Palin’s authenticity:

Well, first of all, Bill, the thing that's so surprising is I haven't heard one person call her governor except those of us who are imported from someplace else. Everyone here calls her Sarah. And everyone seems to know her. It's all on a first-name basis.

And everyone is up here in the state trying to dig up some new information about her. Some are trying to find some bad information. "National Enquirer" has five people here in the state, five on the ground. I ran into them in a hotel last night. I don't think they've been able to dig up anything. We're not up here trying to dig up the dirt. We trying to just get up here and dig up the facts.

And the facts that we've learned so far is that the people in Alaska, at least the ones we've met, love their governor. Of course, they love her as Sarah. But—so the extraordinary thing is we can't find -- we can't find one person who has anything but great praise.
Ten days later conservative pollster Frank Luntz echoed Van Susteren’s remarks, suggesting that “there’s one word that people use to describe her, both positive and negative. Authentic. They believe that they see what she is and she is what people see” (O’Reilly, 2008d) Luntz also suggested that while Palin was becoming “more explanatory” in her public comments, Obama remained “rhetorical.” “Rhetorical is what you do at a national convention,” Luntz explained, suggesting that “that’s not what the public is looking for. And in fact, Obama can only get so far with rhetoric. Now they want substance.”

The repeated claims that Palin is an ordinary, normal American with nothing to hide stand in stark contrast to the narrative that plagued Obama during the Wright controversy— namely that he is disingenuous, elitist, and politically radical. While Luntz’s distinction between “substance” and “rhetoric” appears to be a mild criticism, then, it perpetuates a highly racialized narrative that portrays Obama as dishonest about his racial identity—especially his relationship with Wright. Indeed Palin supporters suggested that while Palin has nothing to hide, Obama’s background is cause for concern. Appearing with Kondracke on The Beltway Boys, Fred Barnes (2008) claimed that

[T]he media’s obsessed with Sarah Palin, trying to trash her in every possible opportunity. They certainly cover her a lot. I think we know a lot more about Sarah Palin, her biography, her college days, than we do about Barack Obama because the media does not want to go back and cover Barack Obama, particularly his college days. We know nothing. We can’t get his college thesis, which would be interesting.

Though at this point Obama had already left Trinity United church and had condemned Wright’s more controversial statements, Palin supporters continued to link Obama to Wright, whom they portrayed as racist (Barnes, 2008; Hume, 2008c). As Palin began to invoke race implicitly in her appeals to white voters, the campaign again projected racial intolerance onto the Obama
campaign. Conservatives like Rush Limbaugh portrayed any attempt to raise the issue of Palin’s whiteness as a racist ploy, and elsewhere accused the Obama campaign of communicating in a way that deliberately “incites racism” (Van Susteren, 2008c). Conservative pundits like Charles Krauthammer accused Wright of being a “raving racist,” and suggested that the media had avoided the issue out of fear of being labeled racist (e.g. Hume, 2008c).

These accusations of racism against Obama and Wright place the concerns of white voters at the forefront of attention. When pundits such as Limbaugh, O’Reilly, or Krauthammer decry racism, the primary concern is not the racial oppression of blacks or other minorities, but rather an alleged prejudice or discrimination against whites. In portraying Palin as an authentic representative of mainstream religious and political values, supporters posit Palin as an icon of white entitlement. In this way, the narrative of authenticity surrounding Palin serves as a flip-side to the Wright controversy. Each narrative appeals to what Wingfield and Feagin (2009) refer to as a “four-centuries-old white racial frame” (p. 155)—a set of background assumptions that label blacks as threatening, dangerous, and dishonest (p. 15, p. 106) while portraying whites as non-threatening, honest, and trustworthy.

Palin’s own “readiness on the stump to divide the country into real and unreal America,” as Silk (2008h) describes it, plays into this white racial frame. Reporting from a fundraiser in North Carolina in mid-October 2008, the Washington Post’s Juliet Eilperin (2008) noted that “Palin also made a point of mentioning that she loved to visit the ‘pro-America’ areas of the country, of which North Carolina is one.” “No word on which states she views as unpatriotic,” Eilperin added. Eilperin provided this extended quote to Huffington Post:

We believe that the best of America is not all in Washington, D.C. . . . We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hard working very
patriotic, um, very, um, pro-America areas of this great nation. (Stein, 2008)

Palin continued to appeal to themes of patriotism in her subsequent public comments. Appearing on Hannity & Colmes later that month, host Sean Hannity (2008h) asked, “Nine weeks ago, did you think you’d be in this position?” Palin replied:

Never anticipated it, no. But at the same time, Sean, it kind of feels comfortable, not so much a crowd out there cheering, but again, Americans desiring representation of who they are and what they believe in and what is important to them. And that's what John McCain and I represent. And I think that's what you feel when you're in these rallies, and awesome, amazing, patriotic people showing up to these rallies.

In an interview with Greta Van Susteren (2008d) later that night, Rush Limbaugh continued this populist narrative, portraying Obama and the Democratic Party as elitists. In addition to what Limbaugh characterized as “unfair” treatment of Palin, the radio host claimed that “[t]he Democrat Party tried to destroy an average citizen, this Joe the plumber guy”—a reference to Joe Wurzelbacher, a figure whom McCain and Palin invoked in debates and public speeches (Eilperin, 2008). Accusing the Democratic Party of trying to uncover unflattering information about Wurzelbacher, Limbaugh suggested that, by contrast, “Governor Palin has a genuine, rich American life that she has lived, and she has hundreds of people to vouch for it. She doesn't have anything in her past that's hidden.” Van Susteren—whose husband, John Coale, provided Palin with legal advice in the establishment of a political-action committee (Purdum, 2009)—continued this theme a few days before the election, airing extensive interviews with Palin, her husband and two daughters that bolstered Palin’s image of populist authenticity (Van Susteren, 2008e). These interviews represented the culmination of an “authenticity campaign” that Van Susteren had waged from the earliest days of Palin’s candidacy, when the Fox News host aired interviews with Palin’s former pastors and with Palin’s older sister. Through these interviews,
Van Susteren (2008b) personalized both the candidate and her husband, whom Van Susteren referred to as the “first dude.”

Van Susteren’s choice of Rush Limbaugh as a guest represents the importance of race in the construction of Palin’s authenticity. Limbaugh’s comments in his interview with Van Susteren are inseparable from his previous accusations of racism against the Obama campaign. In the context of the highly racialized campaign against Obama and Reverend Wright, figures such as Joe the Plumber invoke the same racial codes as Palin’s repeated references to “Joe Six-Pack” (Daniels, 2008). Palin’s concern for “Americans desiring representation” is in this sense a call for the representation of white interests in the face of shifting demographics and the possible election of the first African-American president, as New York Times columnist Frank Rich (2010) would later suggest.

Of course, just as Palin downplayed her religious background while appealing to her evangelical base, the candidate continued to make implicit appeals to white voters while avoiding explicit engagement with racial issues. Nevertheless the importance of Palin’s whiteness continued throughout the campaign and afterwards. For example, the Weekly Standard reported in late November 2009 that Palin supported racial profiling (Continetti, 2009). “I say, profile away,” Palin said, suggesting that “political correctness. . . could be our downfall.” While such remarks drew fire from sources such as Racialicious, a liberal blog focusing on issues of race and pop culture (Peterson, 2009), the same appeals undoubtedly contributed to Palin’s steady approval ratings among whites. A Pew Poll from June 2009 reported that Palin’s popularity among white evangelical Republicans was 85% in October 2008 and remained steady at 84% by June 2009 (“Romney’s Image,” 2009).
Indeed while Palin’s whiteness played an important role in her popularity during the campaign, its importance became clearer after the election, as Palin assumed a leadership role in the Tea Party movement. When Palin delivered the keynote speech at the inaugural National Tea Party Convention in early February 2010, the former governor criticized Obama as a “charismatic guy with a teleprompter” and told the crowd that “America is ready for another revolution!” (Zernike, 2010). Following her speech, conservative supporters portrayed Palin as a “real American” in contrast to Obama, whom critics portrayed as representative of “academic elitism” and “international socialists” aimed at “propping up the lagging third world” (Shiver, 2010).

Though ostensibly aimed at fighting taxation and the expansion of government, the Tea Party movement represents a white backlash against Obama’s election. In April 2010, a New York Times/CBS News poll found that Tea Party activists “tend to be white, male, and married,” are “loyal Republicans,” and “are significantly more likely than all adults to say that too much has been made of the problems of black people” (“Polling the Tea Party,” 2010). These attitudes—along with continued claims that Obama is Muslim, that he was born in Kenya, that he is a socialist, or that he is overly-sympathetic to third world—contribute to a racialized campaign to define Obama’s inherent “otherness” (Paulson 2008:para. 4; see also Zacharias and Arthurs, 2008). As Palin assumes a leadership role within the Tea Party movement, she serves as an icon not only for conservative religious values but also for the concerns of white voters who feel increasingly threatened by shifting demographics, harboring “fears of disenfranchisement,” as New York Times columnist Frank Rich (2010) suggests.
CONCLUSION

Several factors explain Palin’s nomination and subsequent rise to popularity. Despite her own relationships with controversial pastors, Palin was willing to invoke Jeremiah Wright in her criticism of Obama. As journalist Ray Suarez claimed in October 2008, the Republican Party largely left it to Palin to “pile on the doubt” about Obama’s religion (“Barack Obama,” 2008). This willingness stands in marked contrast to other contenders who might also have appealed to the Republican Party’s evangelical base. Mike Huckabee, for example, was one of the few public figures among conservative evangelicals and the Republican Party to speak out in defense of Jeremiah Wright, citing the pastor’s personal experience with racial discrimination. “I think you have to cut some slack,” Huckabee told MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough regarding Wright’s controversial sermons (Tapper, 2008a; quoted in Wingfield and Feagin, 2009, pp. 140).

In addition, despite the campaign’s narrative of authenticity, critics suggest that Palin is driven by calculated personal ambition. Vanity Fair’s Todd Purdum (2009) issued the following critique:

In dozens of conversations during a recent visit to Alaska, it was easy to learn that there has always been a counter-narrative about Palin, and indeed it has become the dominant one. It is the story of a political novice with an intuitive feel for the temper of her times, a woman who saw her opportunities and coolly seized them. (para. 19)

Purdum also suggested that if it had vetted Palin properly, the McCain campaign could have discovered that for Palin, “no political principle or personal relationship is more sacred than her own ambition” (para. 24). Reflecting on Palin’s decision to resign from her position as governor, Slate’s Dahlia Lithwick offered a similar counter-narrative, suggesting that “Palin's only actual message is the importance of loving and understanding Palin” (para. 7). “Palin's political skill

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41 Huckabee is not beyond criticism with regard to racial issues. For example, Medhurst (2009) faults Huckabee for pandering to “white southern identity” by raising the Confederate flag issue in a speech in South Carolina in January 2008 (p. 231).
lies in selling a persona but not a message,” Lithwick suggests, adding that “in the end, this may explain why she quit” (para. 2).

This counter-narrative resonates with what Vannini and Williams (2009) describe as “a large body of literature that has surveyed the (im)possibility of achieving authenticity within the context of capitalist production and consumption” (p. 10). Such literature often claims that “authenticity is a hook employed either to sell products and services. . . or a hegemonic discourse through which various ideologies are articulated” (p. 10). Though a range of scholars argue that “higher and fuller modes of authenticity” are possible, the evidence presented here indicates that in the Palin campaign, the former, “flatter” modes of authenticity prevailed. Indeed while Palin complained of being mocked either for her religion or for her unwillingness to conform to the values of the Washington elite, much of the satire she faced aimed directly at the fissures in a heavy-handed campaign that transformed Palin’s idiosyncratic style into a strategic marketing tool (Healey, 2010). In another instance of the “spiral of insincerity” described in Chapter 2, Palin’s down-home “wink” became yet another campaign tactic, lending itself to the type of parody seen on Saturday Night Live. Nevertheless Palin’s supporters have continued to defend her as a “real American,” usually in contrast to Obama. While the counter-narrative of Palin’s personal ambition resonates with her critics, supporters dismiss it as further evidence of the bias of the “leftist-activist media brigade” (Shiver, 2010).

As noted earlier, the liberal blogosphere lent credence to such allegations of media bias by allowing conspiracy theories about Palin to gain traction in the early days of her candidacy. Nevertheless, the Pew Center noted that while the media focused on Palin’s personal life in September 2008, it did not “dwell on religion” (“How the Media,” 2008). Reflecting on media coverage of Palin after the election had ended, Mark Silk (2008g) argues that “nothing happened
afterward to require altering‖ the Pew report’s assessment. Journalists who managed to uncover “disturbing” information about Palin’s religious background failed to press the issue, Silk suggests, in order to avoid accusations of imposing a “religious test” on a political candidate. Indeed as Hoover (1998) and Silk (1995) demonstrate in their historical research, commercial media has tended to avoid controversial coverage of religion. As Hoover (1998) argues, journalists have tended to interpret the First Amendment to entail not only a separation church and state but also a separation of church and press (Hoover, 1998).

Bruce Wilson, co-founder with journalist Frederick Clarkson of the website Talk To Action, cites similar problems in his efforts to provide background information about Sarah Palin and the spiritual warfare movement. Wilson and researcher Rachel Tabachnick were among the first to cite Palin’s ties to Thomas Muthee and Alaska evangelist Mary Glazier, both of whom are active in the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) movement. Citing research from historian Philip Jenkins (2002; see also 2007), Wilson suggests that “much of the journalism on religion and politics to come out over the last decade has missed massive, global changes in Christianity that carry profound political implications”—including the NAR and spiritual warfare (Berkowitz, 2009). Without this broader context, Wilson suggests, the most important research on Palin’s religious background may have “sounded outlandish” to journalists and audiences alike. Since the names of these various movements and leaders are unfamiliar, “there weren’t any cognitive reference points” that would allow important information to gain traction in public debates. As noted above, the quick and sarcastic dismissal of Muthee’s reference to witchcraft—even by Palin’s critics—is a case in point. Wilson also suggests that “[d]espite gaining broad distribution on the Internet, I think that our work didn’t spread deeply into the mainstream media because we didn’t have access to big enough distribution channels. While we were posting on
some alternative news services, such as Alternet and Buzzflash, The Daily Kos and The Huffington Post, many of the biggest liberal political blogs didn’t pick up our stories” (Berkowitz, 2009).

While Palin’s supporters claimed that de-contextualization caused undue concern over the candidate’s religious background, the evidence provided here suggests precisely the opposite—that by failing to provide the broader context of Palin’s religious associations, media coverage generally failed to raise important concerns, allowing supporters to frame her faith as benign, mainstream, and non-political. The result is a normalization of beliefs and practices that, as Goodstein (2008) notes, “have troubled even some Pentecostal Christians” (para. 7). In fact, Wilson claims that it was not mainstream media but “classic fundamentalists” who showed the most interest in the research conducted by Talk To Action:

[Perhaps the most enthusiastic response we got [to our research] was from classic fundamentalists—Pre-millennial Apocalyptic Dispensationalists, to be specific. Those folks were reposting our stories, in their entirety, on their Web sites, and they praised our work for accurately describing the NAR and its theology. They’ve been aware of the movement for years, and most of the good oppositional research on it, up until now, has been done by fundamentalists—religious traditionalists in essence, who consider the New Apostolic Reformation to be a dangerous and possibly satanic heresy. (Berkowitz, 2009)

In fact, Wilson argues that questions about Palin’s ties to the NAR and spiritual warfare caused a rift that “seemed to go straight to the heart of the hard right.” After one of Wilson’s reports was reposted on the conservative Free Republic website, a debate emerged between those who supported the NAR and those who opposed it (Berkowitz, 2009).

Across the political spectrum, then, there is a growing recognition that Palin’s relative success—her continued popularity and increased media presence—has important implications for the future of religious politics. As the current critical juncture in media unfolds in tandem
with a struggle for leadership within American evangelicalism, Palin serves as a bellwether. Her iconic image represents a confluence of religious and racial tensions that have emerged over the course of the last decade, as generational differences have caused a crisis of values within and among competing interest groups (Barna Group, 2007). While some journalists have sounded the death knell for the Religious Right (Sharlet, 2007), Palin’s story suggests that the emerging new media environment serves to strengthen what Connolly (2005) called an “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine,” favoring more reactionary religious and economic ideologies while pushing progressive voices to the side.

The construction of Palin’s religious identity as mainstream, authentic, and non-political represents the success not only of Palin’s personal ambitions but also the nexus of conservative religious and political institutions that selected her to serve as an energizing icon for the Republican Party and its white evangelical base. In contrast to media coverage of Jeremiah Wright, Palin’s rise to stardom demonstrates that while small-\( p \) prophetic critique struggles to gain a foothold in the new media environment, leaders subscribing to a mixture of capital-\( P \) prophecy, religious apocalypticism, American exceptionalism, and free-market fundamentalism can achieve rapid success. Since resigning from her position as governor, Palin has launched a lucrative media career: she received six-figure fees for speaking at the National Tea Party Convention (Zernike, 2010), the Wine and Spirits Wholesalers of America (“Sarah Palin’s Wine Soapbox”), and the Bowling Proprietors’ Association of America, among other groups (Sherman, 2010); debuted a new Real American Stories series on Fox News (the first episode of which replaced Greta Van Susteren’s program) (Gold, 2010); and secured a new documentary series, Sarah Palin’s Alaska, which is slated to appear on Discovery Communications’ cable channel TLC (De Moraes, 2010). Meanwhile, though Wright travels and speaks to
congregations around the country, it is the video clips from his most controversial sermons that continue to generate media attention. In March 2010, for example, Kentucky Secretary of State Trey Grayson released an ad attacking his Republican primary opponent Rand Paul for invoking 9/11. As CBS News reports, Grayson’s ad “shows Rand Paul saying, ‘there is blow back from our foreign policy,’ and then shows Wright saying, ‘America's chickens are coming home to roost’” (Condon, 2010). While Wright’s prophetic voice appears in mainstream discourse as a caricature, invoked by politicians to discredit their opponents, Palin has become—as New York Magazine’s Gabriel Sherman (2010) wryly observes—“a singular national industry.”
CONCLUSION
The case studies presented in Part 2 provide insight into the potential outcome of the current critical juncture in media and religious politics. Cases such as the GOP sex scandals, the Terri Schiavo memo, and the Discovery Institute’s leaked documents suggest that new media technologies’ bias toward issues of sincerity and authenticity may, in some cases, serve to drive a wedge between conservative evangelicals and the Republican Party establishment. At the same time, cases such as the United Church of Christ’s Stillspeaking campaign and the Obama campaign’s religious outreach through new media suggest that the emerging new media environment may be conducive to the efforts of religious progressives.

However, as discussed in Part 2, the latter two cases indicate that religious progressives face problems similar to those described by religious conservatives—namely the ongoing compromise and appropriation of grassroots efforts by concerns for money and power, and the tendency for prophetic critique to devolve into mere demagoguery. Moreover, the cases of “pastor problems” described in Chapters 8 and 9 indicate that, rather than driving a wedge between religious conservatives and the Republican Party, new media technologies may serve as a vehicle for a renewed flourishing of the Religious Right—a resurgence in which religious and racial identity coalesce to form a potent political force. As described in this chapter, these tendencies crystallized more fully in the months after the 2008 election with the rise of the Tea Party and the emergence of various narratives of “disillusionment” with the Obama administration. The global rise of the Religious Right, catalyzed by complex trans-national
communications networks, further indicates that the future of religious politics both at home and abroad will likely exhibit a distinctly conservative, U.S.-centered tenor.

Moreover, the trends in American and international religious politics are not simply politically conservative: in many cases they include a regressive tendency toward xenophobia and nativism. Critical media scholarship must therefore assess the emerging networked public sphere in terms of its ability to enhance and encourage complex forms of moral reasoning and civic deliberation. This task requires a robust philosophy of technology that can understand and respond effectively to recent political, cultural, and economic developments. For example, advances in scientific marketing techniques require new theoretical tools that can reposition developmental psychology in service of democratic—rather than corporate or commercial—values. To this end, the following discussion posits a “pluralistically enlightened universalism” that incorporates religious belief and spiritual practice in a developmental model of civic life. This broad philosophy of technology serves as a normative backdrop for more specific, political-economic and policy solutions.

“Flat” Authenticity and the Collapse of Value Spheres

The case studies examined in previous chapters represent the continuation of long-standing tensions in the relationship between media and religion. Trends toward media commercialization and the professionalization of journalism tend to displace small-\(p\) prophetic critique, thwarting the potential for religious communities and political leaders to work in productive tension with one another. In Habermas’ (1987) view, the differentiation of value spheres—e.g. science, politics, and religion—constitutes the “dignity” of modernity (p. 112; quoted in Wilber 2000a:426), as the demise of monolithic politico-religious authority allowed for
the development of civil society. However, the process of lifeworld colonization—the insinuation of money and power into everyday interactions—prevents these value spheres from co-existing in productive tension with one another. As Ken Wilber (1998) suggests, rather than forming an integrated, well-balanced whole, these value spheres tend either to collapse into one another (a regressive tendency) or to become dissociated from one another (a pathological tendency). In the first case, religious and political institutions may collude in ways that Enlightenment thinkers such as Madison, Jefferson, and Adam Smith aimed to avoid in their arguments against religious establishment. In the second case, intense animosity may develop between communities that claim to represent different value spheres—as evidenced, for example, in the aggressive scientism of the “new atheism,” on one hand, or the efforts of religious conservatives to stigmatize evolutionary and environmental studies as anti-religious, on the other. The ability of journalists to negotiate the tensions between these value spheres—to foster an atmosphere of civility, nuance, and context in public debates—is compromised by a host of pressures including the expanding influence of public relations industries, the manipulation of “objectivity” standards, an increased reliance on political and corporate officials, and widespread cuts in resources that support investigative reporting (McChesney and Nichols, 2010; Cunningham, 2003).

The unique affordances of new media—e.g. the ability to capture and distribute video, audio, and other primary source material quickly on a mass scale—tend to exacerbate these problems, even as they open some opportunities for grassroots political activists to challenge established corporate and political institutions. Voters are anxious about the future, and want to know whom they can trust. As Wilcox (2007) explains, candidates “need to tell you something authentic about what they care about,” and very often “[r]eligion is one of the shortcuts we use to
determine what people care about.” New media provide an avenue for these concerns as video clips of religious sermons—ostensibly the domain of congregants—circulate between cable news programs and Internet websites. Unfortunately, debates driven by such materials reflect what Taylor (1991) calls “flat” notions of authenticity—that is, simplistic notions that a candidate either “is” or “is not” authentic (Vannini and Williams, 2009:2). In the 2008 elections, according to the Pew Forum, “the press honed in on the words and actions of religious figures associated with [the candidates].” However, “what the press did not do, generally, was take those words to the next level, looking deeper into the candidates’ beliefs to examine how they influence their positions on issues and impact their policy decisions” (“How the News Media” 2008:5). In other words, the YouTube-driven debates about candidates’ “pastor problems” fell far short of Taylor’s (1991) demand for substantive argument and a robust “ethics of authenticity.”

The lack of context in such dramatic, character-driven coverage thwarts the role of journalism in providing critical gate-keeping and relevance filtering (Hove and Jackson, 2008). Two problems arise. First, interest groups can tap into voters’ fears by constructing disturbing narratives about candidates’ “back stage” identity. Second, interest groups can construct a narrative of normalcy, thus failing to alert voters to areas of potential concern. In both cases, voters’ concern for honesty and authenticity becomes, ironically, an opportunity for strategic political exploitation. I refer to this process as a “spiral of insincerity” or “spiral of inauthenticity.” As Rose and Wood’s (2005) research on reality television suggests, audiences are often complicit in the success of these campaigns, since they tend to prefer a “contrived authenticity” or “hyperauthenticity” that is self-conscious of external manipulations (pp. 294-295).
Coverage of Obama and Palin exemplifies these two problems. Wright served as an “icon of fear” (Altheide 2002:17) among white voters precisely because they had little context for understanding the black prophetic tradition or Obama’s complex place within it. Opponents selected and mobilized key video clips, playing into a pre-existing white racial frame even as they denied that the controversy had anything to do with race (Wingfield and Feagin, 2009). In this way, Obama suffered from a lack of context. By contrast, supporters succeeded in framing Palin’s faith as mainstream, simple, and authentic because, within the same racial frame, Palin appeared as a figure of “archetypal whiteness” (Daniels 2008; Healey 2010a). In addition, voters were largely unaware of the complex tensions within Pentecostalism and evangelicalism, despite critics’ attempts to instigate a discussion by circulating videos from Palin’s former church. Furthermore, such critics often failed to present the broader political implications of Palin’s religious associations, focusing instead on the sensationalist aspects of Pentecostalism or making light of the subject of witchcraft. In this way, Palin benefitted from a lack of context. Against the egalitarian predictions posited by Meyrowitz (1999, 1985), then, the continued dominance of traditional sources in the new media environment tends to generate “asymmetric forms of social relationships” (Couch 1995:235). Coverage of “pastor problems” in the 2008 election indicates that American religious politics may become more—not less—driven by partisan strategy and racial prejudice as competing interest groups adapt to the unique affordances of the networked public sphere. In the process, the ever-elusive goal of robust civic deliberation—the “soul of democracy”—continues to retreat (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001, p. 7).

A New Resonance: Neuro-marketing and Religious Apocalyptism

The contrast between Wright and Palin exemplifies an emergent tension between different understandings of the “prophetic” role of religion—what religious scholars have
characterized as capital-\(P\) and small-\(p\) prophecy (Healey 2010a). Woods and Patton (2010) explain that capital-\(P\) prophets include biblical figures who “heard a direct, supernatural word from God” (p. 25). Small-\(p\) prophets, however, are individuals “who passionately and courageously interpret their life and times from the perspective of faith” but “do not necessarily presume a direct, supernatural word from God” (p. 25). They are not primarily fore-tellers but truth-tellers with a penchant for scathing social critique and “resistance thinking” (p. 25).

Since the 2000 election—and 9/11 especially—political discourse reflects the tension between these competing interpretations (Healey, 2010a, p. 158). President Bush, who openly discussed his faith during the 2000 campaign, figures prominently in these debates. Bush claimed that God wanted him to be President (Goldborough, 2004), that he was called by God to lead the nation after September 11 (Duffy, 2002), that he sought advice from God before starting the Iraq war (Goldborough, 2004), and that the Iraq war was a mission from God (Kurtz, 2008b). Religious and secular critics alike were quick to address Bush’s prophetic claims. Shortly after the start of the Iraq war, Jim Wallis (2003) described the God of the biblical prophets as “the God who required social justice and challenged the status quo of the wealthy and powerful” and claimed that, instead of following their lead, Bush had veered from a benign “self-help Methodism” into a dangerous “theology of empire.” Religious scholar Martin Marty faulted Bush for “confusing genuine faith with national ideology” (Wallis, 2003). Cornel West (2004) argued that there is a “crisis of Christian identity” in America as “Constantinian” Christians like Bush struggle to legitimate existing structures of authority while “prophetic” Christians carry on the work of social justice epitomized by Martin Luther King, Jr. and other figures in African-American culture.
The 2008 election crystallized these competing discourses. Obama faced criticism for his association with Rev. Jeremiah Wright, former pastor of Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ, an Afro-centric congregation shaped by Wright’s interpretation of black liberation theology. Though named after a prophet with divine gifts, Wright has sought to carry on the small-\(p\) prophetic tradition of social critique and resistance thinking (Shulman, 2009). Meanwhile Sarah Palin fended off limited scrutiny of her involvement with Pentecostalism, a tradition that emphasizes spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues, diving healing, and the prophetic fore-telling of events (D. Harris, 2008; Wacker, 2001). As discussed in Chapter 9, Palin’s prayer that American troops may be on “a task that is from God,” along with her association with pastors such as Thomas Muthee and Ed Kalnins, suggest that Palin’s rise to national prominence extends the Republican Party’s association with capital-\(P\) prophecy and religious apocalyptism.

The tension between capital-\(P\) and small-\(p\) prophetic discourses has important political implications (Healey, 2010a, pp. 158-159). As George Shulman (2008) suggests, “[c]laims to divine authority and absolute moral truth” tend to “engender self-righteousness and violence, which close spaces for political contest” (p. xii). In political discourse, capital-\(P\) prophetic rhetoric tends to consolidate rather than challenge established power. Thus when conservative evangelical leaders recruited thousands of “patriot pastors” to rally support for the GOP (Eisenberg, 2005), critics compared these pastors to biblical prophets like Amaziah and Hananiah, who were “professional prophets, bureaucratic soothsayers who claimed to speak in God’s name yet told the leaders what they wanted to hear” (Woods and Patton, 2010, p. 62; McMickle, 2006, p. 66). On the other hand, as Shulman (2008) explains, the prophetic rhetoric arising from religious critics of slavery and white supremacy is “an extraordinarily resonant form
of political speech.” By spotlighting domination and calling for collective action, such religiously-motivated critics “animate a democratic politics by avowedly prophetic speech” (p. xiii. Italics original). The tension between these discourses reflects a struggle between those who would consolidate established power and those who seek to expand democratic ideals by demanding greater integrity from the social institutions that claim to represent them.

This struggle unfolds in a mass media environment driven by neoliberal economic ideals (Healey, 2010a, p. 159). Journalism and popular entertainment converge as media industries forego public service in favor of corporate interests. An ethos of consumerism prevails (Barber, 2007). In this context, as William Connolly (2005) argues, mass media contribute to an “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” in which “cowboy capitalism” fuses with “the most militant section of American Christianity” (p. 870). “The Christ of Revelation” gains priority over “the Jesus of Luke” as “the existential bellicosity of those infused with economic greed reverberates with the transcendental resentment of those visualizing the righteous violence of Christ” (pp. 874-876. Italics original). Thus the voices of Left Behind author Tim LaHaye, Fox News pundit Bill O’Reilly, George W. Bush, and Sarah Palin resonate across popular and political discourse while those espousing the Social Gospel are accused of radicalism and anti-Americanism. In early March 2010, for example, Glenn Beck advised his listeners to leave their churches if their pastors spoke about “social justice.” “I beg you, look for the words ‘social justice’ or ‘economic justice’ on your church Web site,” Beck told his audience. “If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words [for Communism and Nazism].” (Goodstein, 2010, para. 5). Jim Wallis responded by suggesting that “what [Beck] has said attacks the very heart of our Christian faith” (Goodstein, 2010, para. 3).
As described in Chapter 6 (“Prophets and Advisors”), developments in neuro-marketing and mass media extend the process of colonization whereby market forces thwart and displace the possibility of small-p prophetic engagement (see also Healey, 2010a). Political organizations have adopted the techniques of consumer marketing to sell political parties and specific candidates (Connolly, 2005). In both cases—consumer product marketing and political campaigns—researchers are developing new techniques that involve the strategic exploitation of religious belief. Inspired by neuroscientists’ investigations into the so-called “God spot” in the brain, marketing expert Martin Lindstrom (2008) set out to “prove a scientific link between brands and the world’s religions” by comparing subjects’ responses to images of brands and religious icons (p. 121).42 Marketing guru Clotaire Rapaille (2006) takes a more Jungian approach, offering his Fortune 100 clients techniques for manipulating archetypal “cultural codes” to tap into the “reptilian hot button” in a consumer’s psyche. At the same time, the Religious Right has tended to embrace institutions of political power in order to increase its cultural influence. These parallel developments result in a volatile collusion of strategic politics, scientific marketing, and religious nationalism.

Sarah Palin’s nomination and continued popularity does not bode well for the efforts of conservative dissidents like David Kuo and Joel Hunter, who have spoken out against this type of strategic exploitation of religious belief (Healey, 2010a, p. 162). In a scathing critique in Newsweek magazine, religious skeptic Sam Harris (2008) offered the following assessment of Palin’s Republican convention speech: “Here, finally, was a performer who—being maternal, wounded, righteous and sexy—could stride past the frontal cortex of every American and plant a

42 Lindstrom constructs a narrow definition of “religion” by examining practices and beliefs that are “successful” across different traditions. His analysis rests on a notion of religious economy that evaluates “success” in terms of market values rather than theological substance or social benefit. For a critique of this kind of approach see Martin Marty’s (1993) review of Finke and Stark’s (1993) The Churcining of America (Healey, 2010a, p. 18).
three-inch heel directly on that limbic circuit that ceaselessly intones ‘God and country.’” “If anyone could make Christian theocracy smell like apple pie,” Harris suggested, “Sarah Palin could.” Though crude and over-stated, Harris’s critique crystallizes the strategic value of Palin’s nomination. As Connolly (2005) notes, the “flip flop” campaign against John Kerry had demonstrated the Republican Party’s mastery of neuro-marketing techniques by which an idea “enters thought-imbued feelings of viewers before being subjected to critical scrutiny” (p. 880).

As described in Chapter 9, the campaign strategies employed on Palin’s behalf invoked “cultural codes” of race, class, nation, and gender in similarly under-stated ways. Though her nomination was ostensibly an effort to appeal to women, her campaign was clearly targeted to white, working class men. Media scholar Jesse Daniels (2008) suggests that through her repeated appeals to “hockey moms” and “Joe Six-pack,” Palin presented herself as “archetype of whiteness.” It was this archetypal whiteness that allowed Palin and her supporters to construct a narrative of normalcy and authenticity, deflecting questions about the political implications of her religious faith.

As scholars and journalists note (Sullivan 2008b; Silk, 2009, “Palin’s Religious Ties”), Palin was especially careful to disavow her association with Pentecostalism. In its emphasis on divine prophesy and spiritual gifts, however, Pentecostalism—especially in its more radical forms—lends itself to a renewed resonance with contemporary neuro-marketing techniques that favor psychological persuasion over civic deliberation (Healey, 2010a, pp. 163-164). By extension, emerging strands of radical Pentecostalism tend to resonate with the neo-liberal ideology articulated by political organizations such as the Leadership Institute, Young America’s Foundation, and the Heritage Foundation (Mayer, 2008; see discussion in Chapter 9). As discussed in Chapter 9, one of Palin’s early influential supporters, Adam Brickley, attended
seminars at these organizations while subscribing to “Messianic Judaism”—a strand of Pentecostalism with connections to the spiritual warfare movement (Wilson, 2008a).

The Pentecostal practice of speaking in tongues—or glossolalia—is an emblematic point of resonance. Social scientists have argued that glossolalia is a form of physiological dissociation in which “the higher speech control center in the cerebral cortex of the brain is cut off from the lower motor control center in the medulla.” Some argue that the process “represents regression to infantile speech” (Wacker, 2001, p. 52). There is some evidence that practitioners can learn how to control this process and cultivate it within the bounds of sub-cultural norms (Wacker, 2001, p. 56). In this sense, glossolalia and neuro-marketing are both distinct techniques for consciously and deliberately manipulating physiological processes in order to bypass certain cognitive functions of the brain in favor of more direct, emotional responses. The political consequences of such practices, however, depend on the context in which they are employed.

Glossolalia emerges from the conviction that, as Palin’s former pastor Tim McGraw suggests, “Christianity can become awful intellectualized and cerebral.” Pentecostalism, he explains, “also involves physical demonstration, emotional connection with God” (D. Harris, 2008). Within the context of a psychologically integrated system of belief and practice, glossolalia and other such practices can invoke such an emotional connection without necessarily being regressive in effect (Wilber, 2000b, p. 554). As Bruce Wilson notes, “hundreds of millions worldwide think glossolalia is a valid form of religious expression” and in some cases the practice constitutes an important element in left-wing movements that aim to challenge “elite power structures” (Wilson, 2008b). Indeed I have argued elsewhere that John Coltrane’s free jazz experiments of the 1960s involved a form of glossolalia, and that these experiments
contributed to the civil rights movement by forming a relatively integrated practice that combined black liberation theology with improvisational music performance. Thus the fact that Pentecostalism foregrounds these types of practices does not constitute an indictment of Pentecostalism per se. However, in foregrounding such practices Pentecostalism runs the risk of appropriation by neo-liberal projects that may have contradictory political aims.

Wilson suggests that that the religious movements with which Palin has associated herself exemplify the latter scenario. “What we can observe in Sarah Palin's churches,” Wilson (2008b) suggests, “is a form of Christianity in which the experiential aspect of religious experience has been dramatically amplified but from which theological content has been largely drained away.” “When religion becomes mainly experiential, when theological content is stripped away,” Wilson continues, “it can serve as a powerful and dangerous vehicle for political ideology.” In this way radical Pentecostal movements convert a latent anti-intellectualism into an outright rejection of rationalism and democratic proceduralism. Leaders of the spiritual warfare movement advocate a militant return to the purity that allegedly preceded the European Enlightenment (Wilson, 2008a). As Wilson suggests, “Third Wave and NAR [New Apostolic Reformation] theology is militantly anti-pluralistic and anti-democratic, the quintessence of Christian religious supremacy” (Berkowitz, 2009). From the perspective of Habermas’s developmental theory of communication (1979) and more recent approaches based on his work (Wilber, 2000a, 2000b, 1998), such movements demonstrate regressive tendencies both at an individual level (by favoring emotionalism in the absence of a rigorous theological context) and a social level (by aiming to return to a historical period in which the value spheres of religion and politics were un-differentiated).
In its rejection of deliberative institutions as “demonic,” radical Pentecostalism resonates with neoliberal ideologies that reject deliberative safeguards as impediments to an unfettered market while advocating neuro-marketing techniques designed to undermine critical reflection. As Connolly (2005) notes, this relationship is not causal in any strict sense, but an instance of “causation as resonance” as “affinities of identity” infuse economic interests with religious intensity, while converting certain articles of faith into “vindictive campaigns against the economic interests of those outside the faith” and imbuing others with a “drive to vengeance” (pp. 870-871). Connolly notes that while “the major constituencies in this machine do not always share the same religious and economic doctrines,” nevertheless “evangelical and corporate sensibilities resonate together, drawing each other into a larger movement that dampens the importance of doctrinal differences between them” (p. 871. Italics original). Thus while some conservatives such as Peggy Noonan and David Brooks emphatically condemned Palin’s nomination, others embraced her wholeheartedly (Mayer, 2008). While certain points of resonance were beneficial to the continued project of “political fundamentalism” initiated under the Bush administration (Domke, 2004), however, they were not palatable to a broad audience: hence the campaign’s disavowal of racism and religious extremism and its narrative of normalcy and authenticity—strategies that amounted to an ironic “un-marketing” campaign waged fiercely on Palin’s behalf.

**Regressive Tendencies: Racism and Nativism in the Tea Party Backlash**

As noted in Chapter 9, while Jeremiah Wright continues to serve as an “icon of fear” among conservative white voters, Sarah Palin managed to use her vice-presidential campaign as a spring-board to launch a relatively successful career as a political pundit and media star. While
Palin’s “archetypal whiteness” played an important role in her popularity during the campaign, its importance became clearer after the election, as Palin assumed a leadership role in the Tea Party movement. Though ostensibly aimed at fighting taxation and the expansion of government, research indicates that the Tea Party movement represents a white backlash against Obama’s election. According to Christopher Parker of the University of Washington, “The tea party is not just about politics and size of government. The data suggests it may also be about race” (O’Donnell, 2010, para. 3). Parker conducted a survey indicating that among whites who approved of the Tea Party movement, “35 percent said they believe blacks to be hardworking, 45 percent said they believe them intelligent and 41 percent said they believe them trustworthy” (O’Donnell, 2010, para. 8). A *New York Times/CBS* News poll yielded similar results (“Polling the Tea Party,” 2010). At the same time, the Tea Party has gained support from prominent conservative evangelicals like James Dobson, who produced an ad in support of Rand Paul in which Dobson praises the candidate in part because Paul “identifies with the Tea Party movement” (Silk, 2010). Commenting on Dobson’s endorsement, Mark Silk (2010) suggests that “Tea Party manifestos are all about taxes and big government, but at bottom the movement is an expression of the same kind of anti-coastal culture war politics that has driven the religious right since the 1970s.”

As Palin assumes a leadership role within the Tea Party movement, she serves as an icon not only for conservative religious values but also for the concerns of white voters who feel increasingly threatened by shifting demographics, harboring “fears of disenfranchisement,” as *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich (2010) suggests. Indeed Tea Party leaders have a record of making racially controversial remarks. Speaking at the National Tea Party Convention in February 2010, Republican Congressman Tom Tancredo claimed that Obama had been elected
because “we do not have a civics literacy test before people can vote in this country. . . This is our country. Let’s take it back” (Milloy, 2010). As noted in Chapter 9, Palin has made similarly controversial remarks. In addition to her comments in support of racial profiling (Continetti, 2009), she expressed approval of Arizona’s controversial immigration law after its passage in April 2010. “[W]e’re all Arizonans now,” Palin suggested (Cooper, 2010). Such views are consistent with research conducted by Holvast (2008a, 2008b) suggesting that the evangelical movements with which Palin associates herself are largely an expression of American exceptionalism and the racially-charged concept of Manifest Destiny. In these ways the Tea Party crystallizes the “affinities of identity” that Connolly (2005) describes between religious and economic conservatives (pp. 870-871).

Furthermore, the racial prejudice that serves as a motivating force for the movement has indeed been manifested in “vindictive campaigns against the economic interests of those outside the faith” while imbuing the movement’s members with a “drive to vengeance” (Connolly, 2005, pp. 870-871). These tendencies began to manifest more clearly after the passage of a health-reform bill in March 2010, as Democratic lawmakers reported incidents of death threats, harassment, and vandalism (Rucker, 2010). Critics singled out Palin and other Tea Party leaders for instigating such incidents (Hulse, 2010). Though supporters dismissed such criticism as political opportunism, such incidents unfold against the backdrop of a broader increase in the formation and activity of hate groups, as reported in 2010 by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Potok, 2010).

In these ways the Tea Party movement exemplifies how the “capitalist-evangelical resonance machine” described by Connolly (2005) exerts developmentally regressive pressures
on contemporary culture (Healey, 2010, p. 165). The movement’s tendency toward xenophobia and nativism stand in stark contrast to the values that many scholars describe as characteristic of advanced stages of moral development—including cosmopolitanism, universal justice, and the achievement of a global civil society (Benhabib, 2009). Early in his career, Habermas (1979) drew from Lawrence Kohlberg’s developmental model of pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional moral consciousness, applying such concepts in a much broader historical and social scale. Benhabib (1992) likewise draws from developmental models in her vision of a “post-conventional Sittlichkeit” or ethical community that integrates “universalist morality and context-sensitive moral judgment” (pp. 8-11). As Susan Bracci (2002) explains, post-conventional civic participation “entails a moral obligation to think from others’ perspectives, and a political obligation to create the institutions and practices whereby other voices can be heard” (pp. 135-136). More recent work in the field of “wisdom studies” has incorporated evidence from neuro-psychology in suggesting that “wisdom” involves the capacity for compassion and altruism (Hall, 2010a)—both of which are elements of the higher stages of these types of developmental models (cf. Krebs and Van Hesteren, 1992).

Stephen S. Hall, an expert in the field of wisdom studies, suggests that the Tea Party fails to exemplify these developmental values. “I don’t see a lot of compassion in Tea Party politics,” Hall remarked in a conversation with radio host Leonard Lopate. “But I think that’s a really essential part of wisdom. And it’s a difficult part, because it involves some degree of self-sacrifice in a way for the benefit of the larger group,” he continued (Lopate, 2010). This lack of compassion may stem in part from the deliberate tactics of political consultants and marketers who have steered the Tea Party toward popular success. A recent article in Playboy magazine,
published anonymously by an author claiming to be a consultant for the Tea Party, clearly resonates with the discussion of neuro-marketing in Chapter 6:

The exciting news for me is that the [Tea Party] organization still needs someone who can deliver a message to the masses using traditional means. Even the most forward-looking political professionals know blogging and text messaging will get you only so far. That’s where I come in. I’m part of the team prepping to deliver the Tea Party message via traditional means.

A good piece of mail gets its message across in 10 seconds. Television gives you 30 seconds, maybe. We’re playing to the reptilian brain rather than the logic centers, so we look for key words and images to leverage the intense rage and anxiety of white working-class conservatives. In other words, I talk to the same part of your brain that causes road rage. Ross Perot’s big mistake was his failure to connect his pie charts with the primordial brain. Two years after Perot’s first White House run the GOP figured this out, and thus was born the "angry white man" and with him a 54-seat swing in the House of Representatives. (Anonymous, 2010. Italics added.)

The anger that such marketers are tapping into derives from what I would call a crisis of authenticity. As J.M. Bernstein (2010) suggests, the anger among Tea Party activists represents a nihilistic response to the failure of American economic and political institutions to secure the grounds for individual autonomy. As Bernstein explains, such autonomy is only possible—or is even “manufactured”—within a broad institutional context. “The events precipitating the Tea Party movement”—especially the economic crisis—“demonstrated the depths of the absolute dependence of us all on government action” (Italics original). “Tea Party anger is, at bottom, metaphysical, not political,” Bernstein claims. “[W]hat has been undone by the economic crisis is the belief that each individual is metaphysically self-sufficient, that one’s very standing and being as a rational agent owes nothing to other individuals or institutions” (italics original).

This situation is precisely what Taylor (1991) describes as the debasement of the value of authenticity—that is, the failure to recognize that being ‘true to oneself’ is only possible within the context of community and social institutions. “In the end,” Taylor argues, “authenticity can’t,
shouldn’t, go all the way with self-determining freedom” (p. 68). Rather, “we ought to be trying to persuade people that self-fulfillment, so far from excluding unconditional relationships and moral demands beyond the self, actually requires these in some form” (p. 73). The Tea Party’s rejection of government intervention, its claims of creeping socialism, and its dogmatic emphasis on individual freedom derive from a debased notion of authenticity, and are representative of a culture that is “living an ideal that is not fully comprehended, and which properly understood would challenge many of its practices” (Taylor, 1991, p. 56). In the Tea Party, such tensions have generated the “rage and anger” that Bernstein describes. “[I]t is the sound of jilted lovers furious that the other — the anonymous blob called simply ‘government’—has suddenly let them down, suddenly made clear that they are dependent and limited beings, suddenly revealed them as vulnerable.”

In choosing deliberately to “leave aside the election of a—‘foreign-born’—African-American to the presidency,” however, Bernstein fails to acknowledge the centrality of racial politics in the movement he describes. “The other” is not simply an “anonymous blob” called government. As Frank Rich (2010) correctly notes, the anger of the Tea Party is directed toward a highly racialized Other. While it may be enough, as Bernstein suggests, that anonymous institutions have “let them down,” activists are all the more infuriated that such institutions are headed by racial, ethnic, or sexual out-groups, or by those sympathetic to the plight of such minorities. Thus while Bernstein is correct that in terms of its political consequences “[t]he great and inspiring metaphysical fantasy of independence and freedom is simply a fantasy of destruction,” this fantasy often specifically involves the destruction of a racialized Other.

As described above, marketers and campaign strategists have succeeded in turning this crisis of authenticity into a political opportunity by encouraging a developmentally regressive
response on the part of constituents. As Wilber (2000b) suggests, in terms of moral development social movements are complex but tend to have “an average center of gravity” (p. 187. Italics in original). From the perspective of developmental theory, the latent xenophobia and nativism of the Tea Party movement represents a regressive reaction to economic crises and demographic changes symbolized by the election of the first African-American president. As described in Parts 1 and 2, the expansion of neuro-marketing techniques, along with the rise of “political fundamentalism” and an “echoing press” (Domke, 2004), have served to catalyze the emergence of this movement and exacerbate its more regressive tendencies. Thus the “spiral of inauthenticity” continues.

**Liberal “Disillusionment” and the Failure of Prophetic Critique**

In contrast to the Tea Party’s regressive character, Hall (2010b) suggests that, especially in his response to the health care debates, Obama has demonstrated some of the key characteristics of wisdom. Hall suggests that, as recounted by various news sources, Obama’s response to the ongoing debate involves some of the key “neural pillars of wisdom”—including emotional regulation and resilience, the ability to deal with uncertainty, the willingness to re-frame problems in search of alternative solutions, and the humility required to listen to critics. In a broader context, Obama’s approach to foreign policy resonates more closely with Benhabib and Habermas’s notions of post-conventional morality, which involve an increasingly cosmopolitan outlook (cf. Benhabib, 2009). It is precisely this globally-oriented approach that brought praise from the Nobel commission. As Howard Fineman (2009) noted in October 2009 after Obama received the Nobel Prize, “from the time he announced his candidacy, his appeal—and his sense of himself—has been global” (para 2). At the same time, it is also this
cosmopolitan approach that has prompted derision from detractors who favor Sarah Palin’s brand of American exceptionalism (cf. Shiver, 2010).

Media coverage of the health care debates, however, was characterized by various narratives of disillusionment with Obama’s leadership. But these narratives of disillusionment—offered by conservatives and liberals alike—arise in great part from the failure to bring prophetic social critique into a productive tension with democratic liberalism. As George Shulman (2008) suggests, the methods of democratic liberalism “need to be animated—and also unsettled—by prophetic practices that unrelentingly expose the hierarchies held in place, not undone, by the liberal ordinary” (p. xvi). In his willingness to expose himself to criticism, Obama positions himself as a leader who appreciates the potentially productive tension between prophetic critique and democratic liberalism. But as Taylor (1991) suggests, such leaders are caught in “a continuing struggle to realize higher and fuller modes of authenticity against the resistance of the flatter and shallower forms” (p. 94; quoted in Christians, review of Taylor, 1994, p. 170). Conservative “knockers” of Jeremiah Wright’s transgressive authenticity struck a blow to the productive tension between prophetic critique and democratic liberalism by forcing Obama to sever ties with his former pastor. At the same time, though, liberal “boosters” of transgressive authenticity incorrectly assigned the prophetic role to Obama himself. As Melissa Harris-Lacewell notes, many of Obama’s supporters incorrectly assumed that he would play a role parallel to Martin Luther King, Jr. (Moyers 2009: para. 47). Indeed, in a speech in June 2010, Arianna Huffington reflected on this misunderstanding: “It seems like yesterday, doesn't it? Barack Obama was going to take office, he was going to change the world and we would just go home and hit the couch,” she told an audience at the America’s Future Now conference (Seabrook, 2010). But as Harris-Lacewell notes, Obama is in a role parallel to Lyndon
Johnson—that is, he is in a position of institutional leadership that requires prophetic critique in order to function properly. After a campaign driven by themes of “hope,” supporters’ failure to recognize their own prophetic role contributed to a sense of disillusionment.43

To some extent, of course, conservatives pushed the narrative that Obama’s supporters are becoming disillusioned. A Pew Center report issued in late 2009 suggested that although Obama’s numbers were slipping, they were not slipping as much as his critics claimed (Pew Research Center, 2009). In fact, the Pew report suggested that “there is little evidence that liberal Democrats are becoming disillusioned with Obama” and that his support was especially strong among African-Americans and young people (Pew, 2009). Nevertheless, the president of the Young Conservatives Coalition claimed that “youth are beginning to … question their faith in Obama… after [a] campaign that promised them ‘hope’ and ‘change.’” And when Sarah Palin spoke at the Tea Party convention, she asked liberals mockingly, “How’s that hope-y, change-y thing working out for you?” (AP, 2010)

However, liberal critics themselves have erred on the side of blaming Obama personally—especially on the issue of health care reform. According to Greg Marx (2009), this is a “rapidly coalescing media narrative—both in the mainstream press and from liberal-leaning outlets” (para. 7). Under the headline “No We Can’t,” Rachel Maddow (2009) blamed the health care situation on “a collapse of political ambition” among Democrats and Obama in particular. Obama said we “must” have a public option, Maddow claimed, but “he has changed his mind.” Jon Stewart (2009) called out Obama for wavering on the public option, saying, “Mr. President, I can’t tell if you’re a Jedi, ten steps ahead of everything, or if this whole health care thing is kickin’ your ass just a little bit. Why is this so hard? Why can’t you guys just stay on message?” Arianna Huffington (2009) accused Obama of being “timid.” Michael Moore suggested that

43 Paul Loeb makes a similar argument in his recent commentaries (see for example Loeb 2010).
Obama is creating a new generation of cynics because he rallied young people during the campaign and then let them down (Lehrer, 2010).

But other progressive commentators have questioned the tendency to blame Obama. One columnist complained that “Too frequently people talk as though Obama [and the Democrats]… just aren’t trying hard enough,” suggesting that such critical subscribe to “the Green Lantern theory of domestic politics.” Kevin Drum reminded readers that Bush “had the same problem”: “[conservatives] wanted a revolution, but instead they got No Child Left Behind. Washington… is a tough place to get anything done.” In fact, evangelicals like David Kuo (2006) grew disillusioned when Bush failed to put in place a serious faith-based initiative program. And despite Jon Stewart’s criticisms, Greg Marx (2009) adds that “the Bush administration, for all its famed message discipline, didn’t force that much through the legislative branch” (para. 6. Italics original). So when Howard Fineman asks “How did a gifted… young Democrat — who won the White House by a large margin… manage NOT to enact… health care reform, a goal his party has been seeking since Truman?” Greg Marx (2009) asks instead, “Why did so many people think this young Democratic president would succeed where every other one since World War II had failed?” (para. 9. Capitalization original).

The answer involves a combination of misguided expectations and misplaced responsibility. Progressives have failed to recognize that while politicians invoke prophetic rhetoric during their campaigns, once they are elected they must hand off the “baton” to supporters. The responsibility for prophetic critique lies at the grassroots level. Without a prophetic movement to push them, elected leaders become snared by the inertia of political bureaucracy. As NPR’s Daniel Shorr (2010) argued, “It's become commonplace to blame
politicians…. [But] It may be that what is really needed is a new electorate.” As Robert Jensen (2009) argues:

When traditional political and/or theological leadership fails, it’s tempting to want to turn to a prophet. But that too would be a mistake. This is a moment that cries out not for a prophet but for prophets. It is time to recognize that we all must strive to be prophets now. It is time for each of us to take responsibility for speaking in the prophetic voice. (pp. 142-143. Italics original.)

In fact Andrew Kohut (2009), President of the Pew Research Center, has indicated surprise about “the extent to which liberals appear to be dozing as the country has shifted on both economic and social issues.” The public at large is shifting in a conservative direction, and this is due in part to “a lack of passion among Democrats—and liberals in particular.” “[L]iberals seem asleep on issues like health care,” Kohut says. “[T]he Democratic Party will need a lot of help from liberals in 2010. “Obama's challenge” he says, involves “lighting a fire under lethargic liberals.” There have been a number of commentaries along these lines. In response to Arianna Huffington, Aaron Belkin (2009) wrote that “Obama is timid because progressives are timid.” They need to be “more direct, honest and aggressive about what they believe.” Michael Karpman (2010) wrote, “You would think… progressives… would be marching in the streets…. But our streets are empty. The only voices heard are the paranoid rants and slurs of Tea Party activists.”

In fact there is more aggression and grassroots activism to be found among Tea Party activists, some of whom have been quite direct in their racially-charged passion against Obama and his administration. Joe Feagin (2009) suggests that “progressives and antiracists must inject radical elixir in the Obama White House.” But Feagin suggests that “a strong radical public” must be clear about the centrality of race in these issues. What is needed is “a broad neo-Abolitionist coalition of blacks, browns and antiracist whites.” In fact, as Mark Silk (2009, “The
Great Equalizer” notes, Frederick Douglass claimed that even Abraham Lincoln seemed “Tardy, cold… and indifferent” when viewed from “the genuine abolition ground,” but considering the general mood of the country, he was “radical.” A progressive-minded president needs a radical public to push him. Cornel West sent a video message directly to Obama saying as much (“Cornel West’s note to Obama,” 2010). “Like Abraham Lincoln who needed the abolitionist movement, like FDR who needed the labor movement, you need a progressive movement to push you.” West speaks directly to Obama, reminding him that he needs to show “courage” and “back bone.” But in addressing the President, West also acknowledges that “you cannot do it alone.” Obama can only keep alive the prophetic legacy of King and rabbi Abraham Heschel if there is a prophetic movement pushing him, West suggests.

If there is some substance to the various claims of disillusionment, then, such disillusionment stems in part from the failure to maintain a productive tension between the institutions of democratic liberalism and a prophetic, grass-roots social critique. As described in Part 2, this failure began during the presidential campaign as conservative critiques of Jeremiah Wright drove a wedge between Obama and his former pastor, while media coverage of Sarah Palin normalized and de-politicized her religious associations. The problem was exacerbated as progressive supporters mistakenly assigned the prophetic role to Obama himself, rather than engaging in sustained, grass-roots prophetic critique. While Obama may have demonstrated an openness to criticism in his handling of the health care debate, exemplifying the type of “wisdom” that Hall (2010b) describes, such measured wisdom cannot fulfill its democratic potential if there is no room for prophetic critique in mass-mediated public discourse. At the same time, without the counter-balance of such critique, liberal universalism—such as Obama’s rhetoric of pluralism and unity—tends to collapse into a white racial frame (see Wingfield and
Feagin, 2009; Gournelos, 2010). In this light Obama’s presidency thus far is both a highly qualified success and a missed opportunity. While the new media environment may have contributed to his election, the emergence of the Tea Party movement and prominent leaders such as Sarah Palin suggest a much more conservative trend in public discourse.

Beyond the American Context

These domestic trends—characterized by an intersection of religious conservatism, racial politics, and mass media—are reflected in global developments beyond the American border. Much like George Whitefield in the eighteenth century, contemporary American evangelicals have established transnational communications networks that span the globe. James Dobson’s radio programs enjoy airplay on Zimbabwe’s ZBC, while Pat Robertson’s 700 Club can be seen in South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and elsewhere throughout Africa. South African television also carries programs from U.S. televangelists like Robert Schuller, James Kennedy, and Kenneth Copeland (Bouwer, 1996, p. 166). At the same time, representatives of the American Religious Right have increased their presence at the United Nations and have formed alliances with other conservative religious organizations across the globe. As evidenced by coverage of Jeremiah Wright and Sarah Palin on the domestic front, in their political activities these groups have often appropriated the rhetoric of progressive gender and racial politics to advance a distinctly conservative agenda on a global scale.

The Religious Right’s positions on issues of gender and sexuality are a case where the domestic political and media environment has shaped the movement’s global agenda. At the U.N.’s 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing, feminist and progressive groups managed
to shape the agenda, advancing women’s rights considerably. But the conference lit a fire under conservative evangelicals, and five years later evangelicals dominated the agenda, pushing progressive women’s issues like violence and poverty out of the picture, in favor of abortion and homosexuality (Butler, 2006, pp. 15, 53). It is now a matter of no surprise that conservative evangelicals would focus on such issues. As discussed in Chapter 6, however, the Religious Right’s focus on abortion and homosexuality was a strategic decision that arose from a specific political situation in the late 1970s—namely the 1975 decision of the IRS to revoke the tax-exempt status of the evangelical Bob Jones University, which at the time forbade interracial dating among its students. Balmer (2006) claims that the movement settled on abortion as a more palatable and politically viable issue than interracial dating. Ironically, though, evangelicals began to speak about their opposition to abortion in racial terms, claiming the mantle of “new abolitionists” fighting against a new form of slavery. As reported in early 2010 by the New York Times, this strategy has persisted well into the twenty-first century (Dewan, 2010). Many of the leaders who adopted this rhetoric had opposed the civil rights movement. But the maneuver allowed evangelicals to cloak the more questionable origins of the movement in a noble disguise, while also building solidarity among followers by identifying an external enemy (namely, abortion supporters). By the time President Clinton took office, though, the fight against abortion seemed all but lost. The movement turned to homosexuality as a new rallying point, since it also allowed evangelicals to “externalize the enemy” and play into cultural anxieties about changing gender roles in the wake of the women’s movement in the 1960s (Balmer, 2006, p. 26).

Religious Right groups that have become involved in the U.N. (hereafter RR UN), have employed similar rhetorical strategies that appropriate civil rights language in service of conservative values. RR UN groups are primarily concerned about what they perceive as the
dominance of liberal and/or feminist agendas in international policy decisions, including almost every issue that falls under the umbrella of “women’s rights.” Both conservative evangelicals and Catholics have taken the position that “women’s rights” are not the same as “human rights,” but rather are an altogether different—and highly suspect—agenda (Butler, 2006). In differentiating themselves from feminist groups at the Beijing conferences in 2000 and 2005, RR UN groups appropriated the language of progressive racial politics in much the same manner that they did in the 1970s. Evangelicals accused feminists of perpetrating a “new global racism” against poor women by allegedly imposing policies of population control that amounted to “ethnic cleansing.” “Using the language of racism, inequality, and the needs of the poor,” Doris Buss explains, this movement “has laid claim to a progressive stance that it says is more authentic, more compassionate, and more sensitive than that of feminists” (Buss, 2003, p. 77). RR UN groups portray environmental efforts in the same way—namely as methods of “population control” that destroy the “natural family” of indigenous cultures. Concerned Women for America, for example, has attacked the U.N.’s environmental efforts, portraying “sustainable development” as a code word for population control measures that would sacrifice “the babies of third world mothers” (Buss and Herman, 2003, p. 73). More recently, conservative activists have adopted a new strategy of linking environmentalism and evolution in their campaigns (Kaufman, 2010).

In its efforts at the U.N. and in its broader international agenda, the Religious Right has begun to form significant alliances with conservative religious organizations across the globe. Philip Jenkins suggests that its primary allies are in the Global south—namely Africa and South America. “Finding Southern allies is doubly valuable for traditionalists,” Jenkins explains, “since conservative positions stand a much better chance of gaining a hearing in the mainstream media
when they are presented by African or Asian religious leaders rather than the familiar roster of White conservatives” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 202). Southern cultures also share considerable ideological ground with American evangelicals. They are more patriarchal than Europe or North America, have highly conservative views on issues of morality and sexuality, and often share a dislike of the institutional separation of church and state (Jenkins, 2002).

Some scholars suggest that the American Religious Right is securing a global network of influence through such alliances. In their case studies of Guatemala, South Korea, Africa, and the Philippines, Steve Brouwer and his fellow researchers (1996) suggest that the growth of a “new global fundamentalism” is concomitant with the expansion of U.S.-based global capitalism and American military interests. Though the global spread of Christian fundamentalism is not “imperialistic in the old colonial sense,” they claim, the emerging international sites of Christian fundamentalism amount to an “aggressive international sales force” whose religious product is “clearly stamped ‘Made in the U.S.A.’” (Brouwer, 1996, p. 11). The expanding media presence of American leaders like James Dobson and Pat Robertson in the global south indicates that a transnational telecommunications infrastructure may strengthen religious conservatism on a global scale, just as such infrastructures did in the United States (Carpenter, 1997).

The rise of the spiritual warfare movement—notably covered by the Christian Science Monitor’s Jane Lampmann (1999a; 1999b) in the late 1990s—extends the efforts of these more mainstream religious conservatives, and continues the movement’s Americanist tendencies (Holvast, 2008a; 2008b). As a more recent iteration of the spiritual warfare movement, the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) “is bent on radically reinventing Christianity, and is fast becoming the vanguard of the global Religious Right,” according to Bruce Wilson (Berkowitz,
2009). As reported by Wilson (2008a) and the Associated Press (2008c), the success of these movements depends in part on the international distribution of promotional books and videos. At least one such video made its way to Sarah Palin, whose former pastor Ed Kalnins worked closely with Thomas Muthee to distribute the latter’s videos in Africa (AP, 2008c).

There are a number of factors that may cause trouble for the global aspirations of the American Religious Right. First, while there are many areas of ideological overlap, there are also areas where the Religious Right will find little or no support. Southern Christians, for example, are much less likely to support the Zionist cause in Israel (Kay, 2004, p. 355). Second, the agenda of RR UN groups often comes into conflict with the domestic groups. Involvement in Third World poverty, for example, runs against the “isolationist, pro-capitalist positions of segments of the domestic Christian Right” (Ansell, 2004, p. 259). More importantly, in a post-September 11, 2001 atmosphere, RR UN alliances with conservative Islamic states are often troubling to domestic constituencies. Third, the expansion of Christianity in the global South may eventually reverse the direction of influence. William Kay suggests that if current trends continue, “No longer will the north be telling the south how Christianity should be constructed or practiced. Rather the south will be telling the north that true Christianity is to be seen in exuberant worship, conservative morality and in the traditions of communitarianism—even tribalism—that mark African society as a whole” (Kay, 2004, p. 354). African forms of Christianity may accept polygamy, ancestor worship, or acknowledgement of a “spirit world”—practices that are anathema to most Western Protestants. Some of these tensions are already present in evangelicals’ varied responses to Sarah Palin’s relationship with Thomas Muthee and the spiritual warfare movement.

Despite such tensions, the United States nevertheless remains a key player in the
development of global Christianity, and especially in the formation of what Brouwer calls the “new global fundamentalism.” Even if the primacy of the United States declines, as Jenkins expects, the overall direction of global religious practice is decidedly conservative—promoting traditional views of the family and sexuality while resisting policies like “women’s rights” and “sustainable development” that are perceived as threatening.

This global trend toward religious conservatism calls for a more tentative assessment of the future than some scholars have issued. Over the last several decades, there has certainly been an increase in the number of NGOs concerned with progressive causes like human rights, women’s rights, environmental sustainability, and economic justice. There is, therefore, some basis for optimism since, as Akira Iriye (2002) suggests, such organizations “may be said to be creating an alternative world”—a “global civil society” based on the values of “international order, cooperation, and independence” (pp. 5-7). But such optimism may be warranted only if analyses exclude those NGOs that are actively seeking to redefine the meaning of “global civil society” in starkly conservative terms. In *Global Community*, for example, Iriye defines NGOs in a way that explicitly excludes religious organizations. When he does mention them to support his overall argument, he focuses on those religious organizations affiliated with the Catholic Church, mainline Protestantism and the Social Gospel, or that subscribe to a more ecumenical philosophy, such as the YWCA, the Church World Service, or the World Council of Churches.

As Butler, Buss, Brouwer’s analyses suggest, however, there are an increasing number of religious organizations—including religious NGOs—that actively oppose mainline Protestantism, ecumenism, and often the Catholic Church itself. Butler suggests, in fact, that Religious Right NGOs have managed to “challenge our very definition of global civil society,”
undermining the global women’s movement and making it difficult for NGOs to “speak in a
unified voice” at U.N. conferences (Butler, 2006, p. 56). Brouwer suggests, furthermore, that
missionary organizations in Africa and elsewhere are having “an effect on the Christian
landscape just as substantial as that of the NGOs on the sociopolitical terrain” (Brouwer, 1996, p.
153). They are not, however in the business of building schools or clinics; rather, they are

The influence of Religious Right NGOs is likely to increase since, as most religious
historians suggest, mainline Protestantism has been on the decline throughout the twentieth
century. The decline of mainline Protestantism is related to developments such as the emergence
of a competitive religious economy, which selects for the most persuasive, organizationally
innovative, and mass media-oriented sects. Throughout American history, conservative
evangelicalism has fared much better in these areas. Global trends reflect these domestic
patterns. Butler suggests that progressive groups who adhere to the Social Gospel are “slowly
fading into the background” while Religious Right NGOs continue to grow. The influence of the
World YWCA and YMCA, as well as the World Council of Churches, is rapidly diminishing.
“This often-overlooked trend,” Butler claims, “will have a major impact on global civil society
just as its influence is heightened” (Butler, 2006, p. 45). Meanwhile, conservative Islam exhibits
its own “missionary element” (Kay, 2004, p. 353) that in some ways mirrors the efforts of
Christian conservatives.

Considering these developments, William Kay and Philip Jenkins suggest that “where, at
the moment, there is religious competition, by 2050 there may well be geopolitical power
struggles or bloody wars” (Kay, 2004, p. 353). The prospects for a progressively-minded
“alternative world” are therefore tenuous at best. As Weber and Habermas suggest, modernity brought certain potential disasters along with its dignities. The tension between the progressive and regressive elements of global civil society is only heightened in a postmodern context of unbounded neoliberal economics and instantaneous transnational communications. As in the domestic context, the global situation in the new millennium may warrant a cautious and guarded optimism, but a sober realism as well. As Carl Couch (1996) argues, we must not follow the lead of “a few naïve souls [who] optimistically prophetize that information technologies are ushering in a harmonious global village” (pp. 249-250). Indeed, Couch notes that while electronic media may be “moving us toward a global village,” villagers “have never been particularly harmonious.” If the 2008 U.S. presidential election is any indication, the intersection of religion, nationality, and race may become more complex and fraught with tension in an increasingly global new media environment. At the same time, global trends reflect a similar displacement of small-\(p\) prophetic critique by various strains of religious apocalypticism and fundamentalism.

*Journalism in the Networked Public Sphere: A Call for Renewal*

In a report titled *Religion on the International News Agenda*, Mark Silk (2000) notes that religion “has become increasingly associated with conflict around the globe. From Kosovo to Khartoum, from Jerusalem to Jakarta, the struggle for power and pelf both within and between countries can often now be cast in religious terms” (p. 1). But, echoing Habermas, he adds that religion has often played an important and politically constructive role in an increasingly secularized world. “Since the end of the cold war, ethnic and national identity have, at times for the better, taken on a pronounced religious character” (2000, p.1). Silk suggests that the interaction of national, ethnic, and religious identities can sometimes yield positive political
outcomes. However the outcome of such struggles depends on the quality of the deliberative processes in which they unfold—including the strength and integrity of political and media institutions. More specifically, as Silk suggests, the outcome of these struggles depends on how they are understood and reported by news professionals. American journalists, in particular, need to have “a better grasp of the religious dimension of important international news stories” (p. 2).

Indeed, as noted in Chapter 1, professional journalism in the U.S. has long had a poor performance record with regard to coverage religion (Hoover, 1998). The ongoing “collapse” or “death” of journalism reported by various scholars (Jensen, 2010; McChesney and Nichols, 2010) includes a precipitous decline in the religion beat (Paulson, 2009). As the newspaper industry declines, cable news outlets eschew investigative reporting in favor of punditry and editorial commentary (McChesney and Nichols, 2010). As Jensen (2010) notes, “of the journalism remaining, a growing percentage is of less value to the project of enhancing democracy.” Such an environment hinders the potentially productive role of religious belief, practice, and critique in democratic life, while amplifying the more regressive or anti-democratic modes of religious engagement.

Scholars suggest that the revitalization of journalism requires sweeping changes in the economics, culture, and ethical standards of news production. “We doubt that meaningful change will come from improved performance in the standard occupational routines,” Barnhurst and Nerone conclude in their analysis of new forms (p. 302). Robert Jensen (2010) likewise argues that “[i]f journalists had only to struggle to return to some previous state in which they did a better job, that would be hard enough. But journalists can’t be satisfied with striving toward standards from the past. A new journalism is needed.” McChesney and Nichols (2010) likewise call for “a new journalism” that can “overcome the great limitations of professional
journalism”—including its class biases and its deference to political and economic elites (p. 81). Cliff Christians (2010) argues that contemporary journalism, “with its global reach and technological complexity,” must abandon Enlightenment individualism and stilted notions of objectivity to envision “a media ethics of the future” (p. 144; see also Christians 2004).

At the very least, such new approaches are important elements in the reinvigoration of American civic life. More broadly, though, such a revitalized news environment is an important element in the struggle against the ethos of “technological fundamentalism” that has placed the global community on the precipice of environmental collapse (Jensen, 2010). For this reason Jensen argues that the collapse of journalism requires what he calls a “journalism of collapse” that will “reject technological fundamentalism and aid people in the struggle to redefine the good life.” By telling the stories of citizens who are imagining new understandings of the good life, such work constitutes what Jensen (2010) calls “journalism in the prophetic voice” (see also Jensen, 2009).

In fact, the calls for reform and revitalization outlined by McChesney (2010), Jensen (2010, 2009), Christians (2010, 2004), Barnhurst and Nerone (2001) and others are consistent with the argument—reiterated throughout the current work—that a robust democratic discourse requires a productive tension between grassroots-level, prophetic critique and responsive political and media institutions. On one hand, such an approach would incorporate a Habermasian emphasis on institutional and policy reform through direct engagement with legislative processes. On the other hand, echoing Jacques Ellul, it would acknowledge the limits of institutional reform, advocating grassroots action by independent groups that do not operate under the “tutelage” of the state (Omachonu and Healey, 2009, p. 101). As Jensen (2009) suggests—and as I have argued elsewhere (Healey, 2010)—an ideal environment would make
room for both religious and secular voices, encouraging bridge-building between secular and religious communities. At the same time, such an environment would encourage participation by racial and ethnic minorities by enabling a complex network of subaltern or “mini-spheres” that interact with, and make demands upon, the broader “public sphere” (Healey and Omachonu, 2009). In this way, while individual sources may be politically partisan or religiously sectarian, the media environment as a whole may become more responsive, interactive, and “multivocal” (Barnhurst and Nerone, 2001, pp. 304-305).

McChesney and Nichols (2010) use the metaphor of jazz performance to suggest how the tensions between grassroots and institutional voices can yield democratically productive results:

Citizen journalists, bloggers, pro-am journalists and innovators we cannot even imagine would contribute along with paid professional journalists. The former would be the improviser who would push the implicit logic and beauty of the music to its limits. The latter, the paid journalists, would be the melody and the rhythm section. Without them the improvisers are just making noise—perhaps brilliant noise, but noise all the same. Together the players begin to feed off each other and produce genius.

The authors extend this analogy to include “the relationship between entertainers and artists and journalists” (note no. 81, p. 290). Here I would further extend the analogy to include religious leaders, preachers, and pastors from a diverse array of communities, many of whom act as what Habermas (2006, “Political”) calls “moral entrepreneurs” who “generate public attention for supposedly neglected issues” (p. 416). McChesney and Nichols’s caveat with regard to artists and entertainers applies to religious leaders as well: for such leaders to make “powerful statements on current events” in a way that contributes to civic life more broadly, “they need to have a viable journalism to draw from and to play off of” (McChesney and Nichols, 2010, note No. 81, p. 290).

At the same time, as Silk (2000) and Hoover (1998) suggest, journalism must demonstrate an ability to understand, contextualize, and critically report on the activities and
arguments that originate from within religious communities. As McChesney and Nichols (2010) suggest, “there needs to be expertise… in vital areas of specialty and paid journalists accountable for those beats” (p. 81). In fact, Hoover (1998) suggests that journalistic coverage of religion may require a “second language” that would enable reporters to speak about religion in a way that is informed, engaged and professional (Hoover, 1998, pp. 45-46.).

Such a revitalization of journalism—and indeed the media environment as a whole—is necessary to ensure that racial and religious politics unfold in a progressive manner that meets a minimum standard for productive deliberation. As McChesney and Nichols (2010) note, the success of the abolitionist movement depended in great part on the type of policies that are anathema to the contemporary lawmakers and corporate media lobbyists (pp. 124-127). The inability of the current media environment to foster a robust, deliberative racial and religious politics is demonstrated not only by media coverage of American candidates’ “pastor problems,” but also by the success that conservative evangelicals have enjoyed in appropriating civil rights rhetoric in their domestic and international campaigns against environmentalism and women’s equality. An effective response must include concrete strategies of institutional and policy reform, as well as a renewed approach to critical media theory.

In terms of structural solutions, the overarching goal is to organize political and media institutions to maximize what Nussbaum (2000) calls “human developmental capabilities” while allowing for variation across individuals and groups. As Benhabib (1992) explains, “enlarged thought, which morally obligates us to think from the standpoint of everyone else, politically requires the creation of institutions and practices whereby the voice and the perspective of others, often unknown to us, can become expressed in their own right” (p. 140). We can evaluate media institutions, in particular, in terms of their ability to allow for, cultivate, and respond to
prophetic voices from a diverse range of communities. Specific solutions include an increase in ownership and employment diversity, the curtailment of rampant commercialism, the promotion of independent media sources, and a model of professional journalism that encourages more substantive coverage of religious issues (Omachonu and Healey, 2009; Hoover, 1998). Such solutions are important since, as Nancy Fraser (1992) notes, “political economy enforces structurally what culture accomplishes informally” (p. 120).

Building Bridges: “The Prophetic” as an Organizing Concept

However the problem of colonization—or what Ellul calls la technique—extends to technological civilization as a whole, not only to media technologies specifically. For this reason communication scholarship requires a broad philosophy of technology (Christians, 2010, pp. 151-152). As Christians (2010) explains, “[i]nstead of minor adjustments in the engineering model, we need to reconceive technology itself. A fundamentally different approach to technology is needed. Prophetic witness does not simply harangue but presents an alternative” (p. 152).

For Christians (2010), the development of “a different kind of universal, one that honors the splendid variety of human life while articulating cross-cultural norms” is an essential part of a prophetic critique of mass media and technological civilization as a whole (p. 143). The articulation of such universals must “empower us to action” but not in an individualistic manner. In fact, a new understanding of universals must move beyond the Enlightenment emphasis on individual autonomy and instead anchor “community values and professional ethics” (143). This approach to universals runs counter to what Christians calls “the scientific version of universals,” which undermines pluralism while catalyzing cultural imperialism (143).
Indeed, the appropriation of psychiatry and social psychology by corporate interests lends new legitimacy and urgency to arguments for what Benhabib (2002) calls “pluralistically enlightened universalism” (Healey, 2010, p. 165). Neoliberal institutions and corporate entities, well-funded and staffed by trained psychologists and social scientists, have methodically constructed their own universalist models of the human, employing them in a deliberate, systematic exploitation of consumers and citizens—with children as their key targets (Barber, 2007; Giroux, 2000; Montgomery, 2007). In this context, Nussbaum’s (2000) argument for the pragmatic necessity of universalism is all the more salient.

Drawing from Nussbaum’s capabilities model and Benhabib’s emphasis on the post-conventional ethical community, I have argued (Healey, 2010) that prophetic critique, while always culturally situated, nevertheless draws upon a complex set of universal human capabilities. Whether religious or secular in origin, prophetic critique requires developmentally complex modes of critical reflection, imagination, sympathy, and communication that are anathema to neoliberal political-economic projects.

It is no coincidence that, as marketers have developed techniques of regressive psychological manipulation aimed at converting religious experience into brand loyalty, religious philosophers have outlined developmental models of moral consciousness that explicitly incorporate a religious or spiritual dimension. Lawrence Kohlberg suggested—but did not himself articulate—stages of spiritual development beyond his six levels of morality (Wilber, 2000b, p. 185). Others have taken up the project where Kohlberg left off. James Fowler (1981), for example, conceived of faith as an imaginative capability—a mode of knowing that both Piaget and Kohlberg actively avoided (p.99). He offered his own structural-developmental model that elaborated these capacities into six “stages of faith,” the most advanced of which is a...
“universalizing faith” that manages to avoid exclusivism while embracing the particular within an individual’s own tradition (p.209). More recently Ken Wilber (1998), a key figure in transpersonal psychology and a leading proponent of “integral theory,” has articulated a more radically inclusive framework based on a comparative analysis of developmental schemes from both secular disciplines and religious traditions (p.63). Rabbi Michael Lerner (2000), co-founder with Cornel West of the Network of Spiritual Progressives, cites Wilber’s developmental model in his own critique of contemporary religious politics. I suggest that when religious progressives such as Lerner or Jim Wallis (2005) call for a “prophetic” approach to contemporary issues, they are referring to modes of social and political engagement that emerge from the advanced “stages of faith” outlined by such developmental models.

A growing number of scholars have begun to integrate literature in moral philosophy with scientific research in moral psychology and neuroethics (Wilkins and Coleman, 2005; Plaisance and Skewes, 2003), arguing that philosophical approaches to ethics may be incomplete or misguided if they fail to integrate recent empirical work (Appiah, 2008). While such models involve the scientific study of human psychology, they do not reproduce the scientism that Christians (2010) faults in modernist formulations of universals. When undertaken from the perspective of critical scholarship, such approaches can turn modernist scientism on its head by insisting that the methods of scientific inquiry, while demanding their own kind of integrity, must never become ends in themselves.44 Science, as one sphere of value among others, must be integrated into a broader, more holistic project—what Christians (2010) calls a “humanities model”—that aims to catalyze human flourishing rather than merely greasing the wheels of technological efficiency (p. 152).

44 For an excellent discussion of recent attempts to reconcile the tensions between religion and science—including the parallel projects of the New Naturalism and the New Natural Theology—see Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s Natural Reflections: Human Cognition at the Nexus of Science and Religion (2010).
This perspective recapitulates Habermas’s (1979) suggestion that a primary task of critical scholarship is the diagnosis of developmental social pathologies. In the context of media scholarship, such developmental models help move beyond the presumption of technological “neutrality” by diagnosing the specific implications of new media environments for human consciousness (Christians, 2010, pp. 152-153). Of course, individuals and groups cannot be neatly mapped onto any model with discrete stages. As Wilber (2000b) explains, “no self is ever simply ‘at’ a stage. And further, there are all sorts of regressions, spirals, temporary leaps forward, peak experiences, and so on.” Despite such variations, though, individuals and cultures alike have “an average center of gravity” (p.187. Italics original). Likewise, I suggest that media environments tend to have an average developmental center of gravity. As the current discussion demonstrates, the “capitalist-evangelical resonance machine” (Connolly, 2005) exerts developmentally regressive pressures on contemporary culture, deliberately lowering this center of gravity in order to extract revenue from an infantilized consumer base (Barber, 2007). In the hands of consumer and political marketing experts, new media technologies have served to exacerbate this problem. The result is not only the loss of prophetic social critique, but a collapse of integrity in all of the spheres of value that are implicated—not just religion but politics and science as well.

The current “critical juncture” in media and religious politics presents an opportunity for critical scholars to intervene on behalf of a renewed religious politics that encourages the critique of—not acquiescence to—entrenched power. The network of scholars studying the intersection of media, religion, and politics has grown in recent years. The possibility of forging a more progressive religious politics depends, at least in part, on the alliances these scholars build with each other and the adeptness with which they respond to the current critical juncture in American
media and religion. Following Habermas’s (2006b) suggestion that non-religious citizens carry an equal burden in translating between religious and secular arguments, I suggest that secular scholars must build bridges with their religious counterparts in the critique of contemporary religious politics and mass media. This goal requires that scholars avoid the trappings of the so-called “new atheism,” and instead articulate conceptual links with contemporary theology and popular religious discourse (Healey, 2010, p. 166; see also Jensen, 2009).

In this intervention, the “prophetic” can serve as an organizing concept that bridges secular and religious activism, representing those universal human capabilities that neo-liberal projects seek to undermine (Healey, 2010, p. 166; see also Woods and Patton, 2010). The developmental “capabilities” approach outlined above is one avenue for further theoretical development. Without prescribing a particular doctrine or worldview, this approach acknowledges the unique ways that religious engagement can generate meaning for individuals and communities. Prophetic social critique that arises from religious sources draws from some of the same cognitive capabilities as secular critique, but may also draw from some capabilities that are unique to religious practice. An acknowledgement of such possibilities from secular scholars is an important element of what Habermas (2006b) calls the “ethics of democratic citizenship” (cf. Boettcher, 2009).
Critical Scholarship and the Future of Religious Politics

Racial and religious issues will inevitably play a role in domestic and international politics in the years to come. Whether such issues unfold in a progressive manner that encourages an enhanced, pluralistic cosmopolitanism—or in a regressive manner that exacerbates ongoing trends toward xenophobia, nativism, and violence—depends in part on the quality of mass-mediated public discourse. As Benkler (2006) notes, the current moment is one of immense opportunity, but one of serious challenges as well. Scholars have noted the potential of new media technologies to enhance democratic ideals, but such cases should not encourage misguided or naïve optimism. The values at stake are too precious to be left to the whims of the commercial market or the false hope of a technical fix.

As Carl Couch (1996) argued, the constraints imposed by new technologies “are often subtle and insignificant during the early stages of development.” It is imperative to study the dynamics of new technologies as they emerge, since “it is after a technology has become taken for granted that its format has the greatest consequences for human action and thought” (p. 250). More importantly, Couch argues that the effect of new media depends on how it is “contextualized in a social structure” and how its development “impacts on the social structure that contextualizes it” (Couch 1995:231). The research presented here provides insight into the contours of the emerging new media environment, and highlights the specific dangers that this new environment presents for the future of religious politics. The case studies from the Bush era, the 2008 election, and beyond demonstrate that the social impacts of new media technologies can only be understood in the context of an ongoing struggle between newer sources and existing media institutions. The outcome of this struggle is yet to be determined, but will have significant consequences for public understandings of the role of religion in public life. The evidence
presented here indicates that time is of the essence for critical scholars concerned about the future of American religious politics, and the role of new media in its development.

Despite the timeliness of these issues, however, such scholarly interventions require an attitude of realism. In his discussion of prophetic pragmatism, West (1989) recognizes that “utopian energies” must be channeled into various “reformist strategies that oppose the status quo of our day.” But these strategies “are never to become ends-in-themselves”; rather, they are a means through which to channel moral outrage against the evil of human suffering (p. 229). The revitalization of the media environment—whether through policy reform, independent media activism, or other avenues—is but one aspect of a broader struggle toward the recovery not only of democratic political values, but of universal human values more broadly. As Barnhurst and Nerone (2001) suggest, “[t]he forms of news do not constitute the Archimedean point from which to move the world”—although they do “have deep and far-reaching meanings and consequences” (p. 302). An ideal form—in which the disjuncture between what news actually accomplishes and what it claims to accomplish is overcome—is elusive. What remains may simply be a choice between more or less politically “benign” forms of news (p. 301). As Cornel West (1989) suggests, “all human struggles—including successful ones—against specific forms of evil produce new, though possibly lesser, forms of evil” (p. 229; quoted in Omachonu and Healey, 2009, p. 106). Motivated by a concern for justice and human flourishing, critical scholarship proceeds nevertheless, with passion and an attitude of “tragicomic hope” (West, 2004, pp. 16-19).
APPENDIX A:
JEREMIAH WRIGHT TIMELINE

1987 – Wright appears as an authoritative spokesperson on the black church in the PBS 
*Frontline* episode “Keeing the Faith” (Jones, 1987).


(Obama, 1995).

Sept. 16, 2001 – Wright makes “chickens are coming home to roost” comment during sermon. 
Sermon (with video link) reported by ABC News on March 13, 2008 (Ross and El-Buri, 2008).

2003 – Wright makes “God damn America” comments during sermon. Sermon and video 
reported by ABC News on March 13, 2008 (Ross and El-Buri, 2008).


June 28, 2006 – Obama delivers speech on faith. “Call To Renewal” keynote address (Obama, 
2006b).

January 2007 – Obama asks Wright to do invocation at upcoming February 10 announcement 
(Kantor and Healy, 2007).

Feb. 9, 2007 – According to Wright, Obama calls Wright the night before the Feb. 10 
announcement and rescinds his invitation to give the invocation (Kantor and Healy, 2007).


Renew America website.

calls Trinity church "quite cultish, quite separatist." Discusses Trinity’s Black Value 
System.


March 6, 2007 – *New York Times* publishes article, “Disinvitation By Obama is Criticized” 
(Kantor and Healy, 2007)

January 13, 2008 – Final sermon by Wright at Trinity (Goldblatt, 2008).

February 2008 – Wright retires from Trinity.

March 12, 2008 – Fox News purchases video from Trinity United church, reports on Wright’s controversial comments (Vargas, 2008).

March 13, 2008 – ABC News airs reports about old sermons and videos of Wright (Ross and El-Buri, 2008).

March 14, 2008 – Obama campaign announces that Wright is resigning from African American Religious Leadership Committee (part of Obama’s campaign).

March 14, 2008 – Obama denounces remarks by Wright in an interview on MSNBC’s Countdown with Keith Olbermann (Olbermann, March 15, 2008).


April 25, 2008 – Wright appears on PBS’s Bill Moyers Journal.

April 28, 2008 – Wright gives speech to the National Press Club (Tapper, 2008b).

May 31, 2008 – Obama and family resign from Trinity.

APPENDIX B:
SARAH PALIN TIMELINE

September 1999 – Christian Science Monitor publishes two articles on Thomas Muthee and spiritual warfare (Lampman, 1999a; 1999b).


May 2005 – Palin is blessed by Bishop Thomas Muthee during a Wasilla Assembly of God Church service (AP, 2008a).


2006 – Palin elected as Governor of Alaska.

June 2008 – Palin gives speech for the graduation ceremony of the Master's Commission class at Wasilla Assembly of God Church (“Palin’s Churches and the Third Wave,” 2008). This speech is the source of the “task from God” and “pipeline” videos discussed in Chapter 9.


August 30, 2008 – Christianity Today publishes article, “Is Palin an evangelical?” (Bailey, 2008b)

September 1 - 7, 2008 – Project for Excellence in Journalism reports that “For the week of Sept. 1-7, Palin was a significant or dominant factor in 60% of the campaign stories” (“The Palin Phenomenon,” 2008)

September 3, 2008 – Palin delivers a 40-minute acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention (Bauder, 2008).

September 4, 2008 – Wall Street Journal raises pastor problems in article, “Palin’s Faith is Seen in Church Upbringing” (Sataline, 2008).

September 8, 2008 – Fox News Hannity & Colmes (2008f) interviews Palin’s biographer, who defends Palin’s authenticity. Colmes tries to bring up Palin’s pastor problems as reported by the Wall Street Journal.

September 9, 2008 – ABC News Good Morning America airs video of Palin praying for Iraq soldiers from June 8, 2008 (Sawyer, 2008a).
September 9, 2008 – CNN airs segment questioning Palin’s religious beliefs and their influence on her political views (Cooper, 2008).

September 9, 2008 – Fox News Special Report with Brit Hume airs two segments defending Palin’s religious beliefs, and criticizing media coverage of her faith (Hume, 2008a; 2008b). Fox News’s America’s Election Headquarters airs a similar segment (Nauert, 2008).

September 9, 2008 – McCain campaign releases a statement defending Palin’s comments during the August 17, 2008 church service (“McCain/Palin Campaign,” 2008).

September 10, 2008 – ABC News airs segment on Good Morning America investigating whether Palin tried to ban books in Wasilla (Sawyer, 2008b).

September 11, 2008 – ABC News airs segment of first interview with Palin on World News with Charles Gibson (Gibson, 2008). The main interview segment, including the “task from God” section, is aired later that day, during Nightline (Bashir, 2008a).


September 12, 2008 – Bill O’Reilly defends Palin’s religion comments in her interview with Charlie Gibson (O’Reilly, 2008, “Analyzing Palin Interview”).


September 22, 2008 – Pew releases report saying that in coverage of Palin, “the media get personal, but don't dwell on religion.” Describes “the relative lack of attention to Palin's religious biography within the mainstream media” (“How the Media,” 2008).

September 24, 2008 – Max Blumenthal (2008) posts Muthee video on his website, indicating that it was available on the Wasilla Assembly of God church website. Mark Silk (2008, “The Faith of Palin”) indicates that Blumenthal posted first, and Olbermann picked it up afterwards. Silk also indicates that Daily Kos picked it up too.


September 26, 2008 – In an article on Muthee “Witchcraft” video, AP (2008b) reports that violence against accused witches, including children, is rampant in present-day Africa.
September 23 - 29, 2008 – A Lexis-Nexis search for “Sarah Palin AND (pastor OR religion OR faith)” in Fox News transcripts returns zero results during this period.

October 9, 2008 – *Time* publishes article, “Does Sarah Palin Have a Pentecostal Problem?” (Sullivan, 2008b) Suggests that McCain wanted to avoid the Wright issue because he feared questions about Palin’s own pastor problems.

October 25, 2008 – *New York Times* publishes article about Palin’s beliefs. Reports on Palin’s connection to the “spiritual warfare” movement (Goodstein, 2008).


February 6, 2010 – Palin receives a six-figure fee for speaking at the National Tea Party Convention (Zernike, 2010).

March 2010 – Palin debuts a new *Real American Stories* series on Fox News (the first episode of which replaced Greta Van Susteren’s program) (Gold, 2010).

March 2010 – Palin secures a new documentary series, *Sarah Palin’s Alaska*, slated to appear on Discovery Communications’ cable channel TLC (De Moraes, 2010).
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