Fictions of Belief

Reading Evangelical Novels in A Secular Age

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For Beth

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But no one believes anything unless he has first thought that it is believable.
— Augustine

INTRODUCTION

This is a cultural history of American evangelicalism. It looks at the variety of ways evangelicals imagined belief in the United States at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first.

Centered on bestselling evangelical novels published in the 1970s, '80s, '90s, and 2000s, *Fictions of Belief* examines evangelicals' social imaginary. It shows how they understood themselves and their world, the ways in which they imagined things usually go and imagined things should go. It's the study of a cultural imaginary, a *mentalité* or, to use a word evangelicals of this period would themselves use, worldview, but especially the implicit and unarticulated aspects of a worldview, the terms and conditions hidden underneath clear propositional affirmations. It seeks to explain evangelicals by examining where and how descriptive "is"-statements are merged, in their thinking, with normative, proscriptive "ought"-statements. The study asks the question, how did evangelicals imagine belief?

According to the best available demographic data, a little more than one quarter of Americans today are evangelical. This works out to about 81 million people.[1] They do not all identify with the term, however, nor do they belong to a single organization, recognize the same leadership, or subscribe to a common confession of faith. They don't even all associate with each other. Historian Mark Noll once said that actually existing evangelicalism is just "shifting movements, temporary

[1] Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research, May 12, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf; U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for Selected Age Groups by Sex for the United States: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2015," U.S. Census Bureau, June 2016, http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk.

alliances, and the lengthened shadows of individuals."[2] That makes it a difficult religious movement to define.

The most well known and commonly used historical definition comes from David Bebbington. Bebbington defines evangelicals by belief. He writes that evangelicals can be defined by their conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism.[3] That is to say, they believe that individuals need to personally experience conversion, that that conversion should have real-world, day-to-day impact on how they live, that the Bible is the ultimate authority in life, and that Jesus's death on the cross has redemptive power. This definition is generally accepted and widely used in histories of American evangelicalism.

This is a good, workable definition. One problem with it, however, is that it can make "evangelicalism" seem much more unitary that it actually is. It can make it seem like evangelicalism is one thing, and everyone who is an evangelical agrees on that thing (or those four things), when actually there are all sorts of conversations and disagreements and differences of opinion. The abstraction is too neat. The reality, where "biblicism," for example, could mean seventh-day Christians who keep kosher, oneness pentecostals who reject the Trinity, seeker-sensitive, purpose-driven megachurches, annual Bible quiz competitions, annual prophecy conferences, expositional, verse-by-verse radio preaching, and hipsters having hymn-sings in local bars, is messy.

"We must allow room," historian Molly Worthen writes, "for diversity and internal contradiction, for those who love the label and those who hate it. We must recognize that American evangelicalism owes more to its fractures and clashes, its anxieties and doubts, than to any political pronouncement or point of doctrine."[4]

One way to do this, Worthen suggests, is to turn to the evangelical imagination, "a sphere of discourse and dreaming framed by abiding questions about how humans know themselves, their world, and their God."[5] Before one asks, with Bebbington, what evangelicals believe, it might be good to ask what it means to them to believe, how belief is understood as a cultural activity, how belief itself has been imagined. *Fictions of Belief* takes up this task.

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[2] Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 6. More recently, he has made an even stronger nominalist argument. As he put it in 2014, "There is no such thing as evangelicalism and David Bebbington has provided the best possible definition for it" (John Fea, "Defining Evangelicalism at the Conferences of Faith and History, Part Two," The Way of Improvement Leads Home, Oct. 3, 2014, http://www.philipvickersfithian.com/2014/10/defining-evangelicalism-at-conference_3.html).

[3] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-19.

[4] Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 264.

[5] Worthen 264-265.

There is, not coincidentally, an industry devoted to producing works of evangelical imagination. A specifically evangelical print culture emerged in the twentieth century, as will be recounted in the next chapter. It served as the part of the material basis for the "shifting movements, temporary alliances, and the lengthened shadows of individuals" that Noll describes. It sustained conversations that were marked by conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism, and debated what those meant, and determined the extent of acceptable disagreement. It also produced thousands and thousands of novels that invited people to imagine what it would be like to know themselves and trust God and experience belief.

Fictions of Belief looks at five bestselling novels produced over four decades at the turn of the millennium as a way of looking at who evangelicals were in the diversity of their dreaming.

Doing History with Novels

This study focuses on fiction, but treats novels as historical documents. The fiction is read very closely, treated as a site of social imagination.[6] At the same time, its material conditions and contexts, how it is produced, distributed, sold, and consumed, are also never far out of sight. Bestselling evangelical novels are considered alongside historical moments and movements that exhibit the same or similar conceptions of belief. In each chapter, a fictional work is put in a broader cultural context, so a romance novel is analyzed alongside a sex-and-marriage manual from the same time period or apocalyptic fiction is considered in connection with popular apologetics. The fiction and the history, it is argued, offer two windows on the same theme.

In this way, *Fictions of Belief* seeks to make good on what German Americanist Winifred Fluck called the "key promise of American studies," breaking down disciplinary barriers, so that "literary studies could go beyond a narrowly defined formalism and discuss literature again in its historical and cultural significance, while historians, on the other hand, would profit from the new interdisciplinary approach in their attempts to use literary texts as important sources."[7]

Few histories of American evangelicalism have given any serious consideration to fiction. A much-lauded work such as Worthen's *Apostles of Reason*, for example, makes only a passing reference to one evangelical novel, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's *Left Behind*. Worthen links that narrative about the end of human history to the religious right's political concerns, and moves on. She doesn't deal with the fact the book is fiction, nor does she pause to consider the many other novels that evangelicals read by the hundreds of thousands, even though more than a few of them

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[6] See Winfried Fluck, *Das kulturelle Imaginäre: Eine Funktionsgeschichte des amerikanischen Romans 1790–1900* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997).

[7] Winfried Fluck, *Romance with America?* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter Gmbh Heidelberg, 2009), 15.

explicitly address what she identifies as a central question of contemporary evangelicalism, "how to resolve the tension between the demands of personal belief and the constraints of a secularized public square."[8] Matthew Avery Sutton, focusing on evangelical's apocalyptic imagination, gives only slightly more space to *Left Behind* in his recent work, *American Apocalypse*. Sutton characterizes the fiction as a simple popularization of End Times theology, and gives a cursory account of the geopolitical setting of the novel.[9] He does not consider the fiction in any detail, looking at, for example, how the narratives work or the arcs of the characters. Sutton also doesn't examine the longer tradition of evangelical apocalyptic novels, which goes back at least 100 years.[10] In *The Age of Evangelicalism*, Steven P. Miller, goes a little further. He mentions the "ongoing commoditization of born-again Christianity" at the end of the twentieth century, and points to evangelical bookstores. The only novel sold by those bookstores that finds its way into Miller's narrative, though, is, again, *Left Behind*. Again, it receives only a brief mention.[11]

These are, without question, excellent works of scholarship. They represent the best of contemporary historical work on American evangelicalism. And yet they don't take evangelical fiction into account when they offer their accounts of evangelical history.

There are several arguments they should.

First of all, there is a lot of evangelical fiction being produced. One industry expert estimates evangelical novel sales currently amount to between $75 and $85 million, annually.[12] In an average month, without any really big hits, the top ten evangelical fiction titles can sell more than 113,800 copies.[13] Bestsellers, such as the ones examined in this study, can sell 500,000 copies in a year, like some of Beverly Lewis's "bonnet" romances, or as many as one million copies per month, like *The Shack*. This is a significant cultural activity that evangelicals are engaged in. The sheer volume suggests it matters.

Compare this to the cultural activity of politics. Evangelicals are frequently understood and in fact defined by their political engagement. Miller, Sutton, and Worthen, for example, all exten-

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[8] Worthen 4.

[9] Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014), 363-365.

[10] See Crawford Gribben, *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[11] Steven P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 102-103, 132-133.

[12] Lynn Garrett, "The Business of Christian Fiction," Publishers Weekly, May 20, 2016, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/70450-the-business-of-christian-fiction.html.

[13] Nielsen Company, "Nielsen BookScan Report Oct. 2015," http://www.christianretailing.com/index.php/best-sellers/nielsen-bookscan. According to Nielsen, the BookScan captures 85 percent of the market, so these sales numbers may be low.

sively detail evangelicals' political activism. Several studies show, however, that only slightly more than 60 percent of American evangelicals make it to the polls (and about 12 percent vote for Democratic candidates).[14] Not everyone votes and not everyone who votes does so as part of the religious right. Nevertheless, understanding the rise of the religious right and continuing power of the religious right is clearly important to understanding evangelicals.

Evangelicals read evangelical fiction at roughly the same rate in which they vote for Republican candidates. A survey by the Baptist Lifeways Research found nearly 80 percent of evangelicals reported regularly reading Christian books besides the Bible.[15] Some expressed a preference for non-fiction, but 51 percent said they liked both fiction and non-fiction or preferred fiction.[16] Market research further shows that many of those who read evangelical fiction read a lot of it. Fifty percent of these fiction readers read more than ten evangelical novels per year.[17] When evaluated by the percentage of people involved and the amount of time involved, fiction reading is at least comparable to evangelical political engagement.

Another way to look at political involvement is to look at the massive amounts of money flowing into politics, particularly in the age of political action committees that can raise and spend unlimited funds.

In the 2016 election, the largest super PACs connected with evangelicals were those supporting the presidential aspirations of Texas Senator Ted Cruz.[18] One was the Keep the Promise PAC, run by evangelical leader David Barton.[19] Barton is a popular revisionist historian who argues

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[14] Phillip Bump, "Ted Cruz Undersells Evangelical Turnout. But He Has a Good Reason," Washington Post, March 23, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/03/23/ted-cruz-undersells-evangelical-turnout-but-he-has-a-good-reason/; W. Gardner Selby, "Ted Cruz Says Today, Roughly Half of Born-Again Christians Aren't Voting," Politifact Texas, March 30, 2015, http://www.politifact.com/texas/statements/2015/mar/30/ted-cruz/ted-cruz-says-today-roughly-half-born-again-christ/; Pew Research Center, "How the Faithful Voted: 2012 Preliminary Analysis," pewforum.org, Nov. 7, 2012, http://www.pewforum.org/2012/11/07/how-the-faithful-voted-2012-preliminary-exit-poll-analysis/.

[15] Lifeways Research, "American Use of Christian Media," Lifeways Research, Feb. 2015, http://lifewayresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/American-Use-of-Christian-Media-Online-Survey-Release.pdf.

[16] Barna Group, "The State of Books and Reading in a Digital World," barna.org, https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/735-the-state-of-books-and-reading-in-a-digital-world#.V4P9rFcZDzI.

[17] Jet Marketing, "Christian Fiction Readers: Worth Pursing, Worth Keeping," cbaonline.org, http://cbaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/06/Christian-Fiction-Survey-Report-Final.pdf.

[18] See Libby Watson, "The SuperPACs Behind Ted Cruz's Fundraising Juggernaut," Sunlight Foundation, Feb. 23, 2016, https://sunlightfoundation.com/blog/2016/02/23/the-super-pacs-behind-ted-cruzs-fundraising-juggernaut/.

[19] Zachary Milder, "PAC Built by Ted Cruz Mega-Donors Gets Evangelical Leader," bloomberg.com, Sept. 9, 2015, http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2015-09-09/pac-built-by-ted-cruz-mega-donors-gets-evangelical-leader.

that the United States was founded as a Christian nation.[20] The largest single donor to his PAC was Bob McNair, a Texas businessman and owner of the Houston football franchise, the Texans. McNair is a member of an evangelical Presbyterian church, and deeply religious.[21] Another top donor, Lee Roy Mitchell, founder of the Cinemark chain of movie theaters, is associated with an evangelical Presbyterian church in Dallas, Texas.[22] Other donors to the PAC were not evangelicals, but the evangelical influence on the political money was more than apparent.

Keep the Promise III, another super PAC that supported Ted Cruz, was also almost entirely financed by the religious right. The money mostly came from Dan and Farris Wilks, Texas billionaires who made their money in fracking. The Wilks's run a small Texas church called the Assembly of Yahweh. It is associated with the seventh-day, Sacred Name movement, and teaches that Christians should continue the Jewish religious rites mandated by the Torah, including keeping the Sabbath, the Passover, and the festivals of Leviticus 23.[23] This puts them well outside evangelical orthodoxy, but the Wilks's are, nonetheless, part of the broad religious right, and they also fund a lot of evangelical groups, such as Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, and David Barton's organization, WallBuilders.[24]

The two super PACs together spent about $1.79 million per month in 2016, before Cruz suspended his campaign.[25] This is notable political involvement. At the same time, however, the top evangelical fiction grossed about $1.55 million in one month.[26]

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[20] See Thomas Kidd, "The David Barton Controversy," World Magazine, Aug. 7, 2012, https://world.wng.org/2012/08/the_david_barton_controversy.

[21] John McClain, "Texans Owner Healthy After 10-Month Cancer," Houston Chronicle, August 7, 2014, http://www.houstonchronicle.com/sports/texans/article/Texans-owner-McNair-gets-clean-bill-of-health-5673266.php.

[22] Bill Glass, *Blitzed By Blessings: A Journey to Strengthening your Inner Core* (Charleston, SC: Advantage, 2010), 70.

[23] Theodore Schleifer, "Billionaire Brothers Give Cruz SuperPAC $15 Million," CNN.com, July 27, 2015, http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/25/politics/ted-cruz-wilks-brothers/.

[24] Peter Montgomery, "Meet the Billionaire Brothers You Never Heard of Who Fund the Religious Right," American Prospect, June 13, 2014, http://prospect.org/article/meet-billionaire-brothers-you-never-heard-who-fund-religious-right.

[25] Keep the Promise PAC, "Report of Receipts and Disbursements," Filing FEC-1078258, May 20, 2016, http://docquery.fec.gov/cgi-bin/forms/C00575415/1078258/; Keep the Promise III, "Report of Receipts and Disbursements," Filing FEC-1077904, June 16, 2016, http://docquery.fec.gov/cgi-bin/forms/C00575423/1077904/.

[26] The Nielsen Company, "Nielsen BookScan Report February 2016," Feb. 2016, http://www.christianretailing.com/index.php/best-sellers/nielsen-bookscan.

Similarly, in the first quarter of 2016, the evangelical lobbying group Faith Family Freedom Fund, which is associated with the Family Research Council, spent about $60,000 on political ads.[27] This is not nothing. Yet, in one month that same quarter, evangelicals spent more than $95,800 on the evangelical Western romance *A Daddy For Her Triplets*, by Deb Kastner, a moderate seller by a mid-list author.

The National Right to Life Victory Fund—the nation's oldest anti-abortion lobbying group, which brings together evangelicals and Catholics—spent more than $112,000 in the first quarter of 2016.[28] In February 2016, for comparison, Wanda E. Brunstetter's latest evangelical romance novel grossed $154,600.[29]

Evangelicals clearly care about politics and are involved in politics; historians are right to write about this. By multiple measures, though, fiction is a similarly significant activity. There's a lot of it, and it's clearly a part of evangelical culture and part of how evangelicals engage the world.

This is one reason historians of American evangelicalism should consider evangelical fiction. Another is that fiction is a special kind of source, providing special kinds of insights.

Interpreting fiction's historical significance can be challenging. It can be difficult for historians to figure out how representative a given work of fiction is. Does *A Daddy For Her Triplets* say something about evangelicals generally? If *Left Behind* is historical evidence, and what is it evidence of? It's worth noting, however, that this problem is not unique to novels. Representativeness is a problem, too, with political speech. Does Robert Jeffress speak for all evangelicals? Does Max Lucado? If Andy Stanley's apolitical stance represents something, what does it represent?[30] As Fluck has pointed out, one of the challenges of cultural history is always to figure out how the part

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[27] Open Secrets, "Faith Family Freedom Fund," Open Secrets, June 15, 2016, https://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/lookup2.php?cycle=2016&strID=C00489625.

[28] National Right to Life Victory Fund, "Report of Receipts and Disbursements," Filing FEC-C00509893, April 15, 2016, http://docquery.fec.gov/pdf/963/201604159012460963/201604159012460963.pdf#nav-panes=0.

[29] Nielsen BookScan Report, Feb. 2016.

[30] Robert Jeffress, a Southern Baptist pastor, supports Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Explaining his support, Jeffress said, "I want the meanest, toughest, son-of-a-you-know-what I can find in that role, and I think that's where many evangelicals are" (Robert P. Jones, "The Evangelicals and the Great Trump Hope," New York Times, July 11, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/11/opinion/campaign-stops/the-evangelicals-and-the-great-trump-hope.html?_r=0). Max Lucado, a non-denominational megachurch pastor who generally avoids politics, spoke out against Trump (Richard Clark, "Why Max Lucado Broke His Political Silence for Trump," Christianity Today, Feb. 6, 2016, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/february-web-only/why-max-lucado-broke-his-political-silence-for-trump.html). Andy Stanley, a non-denominational megachurch pastor, preached against over-involvement in politics, saying government doesn't "matter as much as men and women who understand this word: Faith" (Greg Bluestein and Jim Galloway, "Andy Stanley on Election-Year Vitriol: 'You're Scaring the Children,'" AJC.com, Jan. 25, 2016, http://politics.blog.ajc.com/2016/01/25/andy-stanley-on-election-vitriol-youre-scaring-the-children/).

relates to the whole. "As a methodological problem," Fluck writes, "the question of representativeness cannot be evaded."[31] The work of interpretation is always necessary.

Fictional texts are especially problematic, though, because of their fictionality. Novels connect to the world by addressing readers, and the way they address readers requires careful interpretation. Evangelical novels are different from instructional texts or proselytizing tracts, even though they can both proselytize and teach. At their most fundamental, however, novels tell stories. And specifically stories that are not factually true (while they promise, also, to be true in other, higher ways). Fiction address readers with neither information nor injunction nor argument, but rather an invitation to imagine. Fiction asks readers to pretend something is true, while of course also always being aware that they're only pretending.

James Wood, the New Yorker's book critic, describes fiction as a game of not-quite belief. "In fiction," he writes, "one is always free to choose not to believe, and this very freedom, this shadow of doubt, is what helps to constitute fiction's reality. Furthermore, even when one is believing fiction, one is 'not quite' believing, one is believing 'as if.'"[32]

This is the second reason evangelical novels can be useful in understanding evangelical history. Because of the complicated way that fiction works, the study of fiction can reveal a social imaginary. Novels, if studied carefully, show something of implicit assumptions and unarticulated background understanding.

German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser, part of the reader-response school, is helpful here, explaining how this works. Iser points out that the "as-if" function is critical to fiction. It is key to fictionality. "If we are to attempt a description of what is fictive in fiction," Iser writes, "there is little point in clinging to the old distinction between fiction and reality as a frame of reference. The literary text is a mixture of reality and fictions, and as such it brings about an interaction between the given and the imagined."[33] Fiction, that is to say, involves representation via non-identity. An object in the text refers not to an object in the world, but to an object that could exist in a world. This means even realistic, mimetic fiction, when it is successful, creates imaginary objects in the minds of readers, which are marked as different from actually existing objects. Fiction discloses the way in which its reality is not real, and asks readers to accept it as real, regardless. If readers can suspend disbelief, they are engaged by this imaginative interplay between identity and non-identity, the real and the as-if.

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[31] Fluck 40.

[32] James Wood, "Introduction: The Freedom of Not Quite," in *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Picador, 1999), xv-xxii, here xxi.

[33] Wolfgang Iser, *The Fiction and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1.

"The 'as-if' triggers acts of ideation in the recipient," Iser writes. "Triggering an imaginative reaction to the world represented in the text proves to be the function of the 'as-if' construction, which comes to fruition through the attitudes the reader is induced to adopt to the world exemplified by the text."[34]

A text's invocation of a fictional object—a cow, a house, a human psychology, or even an intervening act of God—asks readers to think of a fictional world in which it could exist. This happens subtly, normally, though some texts are more explicit in their world building. The most overt example of this request to imagine a world might be in the movie trailers narrated by the late Don LaFontaine, who is famous for the phrase, "In a world …." "We have to very rapidly establish the world we are transporting [viewers] to," LaFontaine explained. "That's very easily done by saying, 'In a world where … violence rules.' 'In a world where … men are slaves and women are the conquerors.' You very rapidly set the scene."[35] Other, less noticeable strategies serve the same end. The background is implied by the text, perhaps through a well-placed detail. A dog, barking somewhere in the distance, tells readers that there is a world and it is out there and it is a certain kind of world that can be imagined in a particular way.[36] Readers are invited to imagine the dog, to accept the barking as if it's real, and to agree to pretend the world exists.

Fluck says that readers, in this way, "restructure reality" in their reading. This is important because it can "open up the possibility to articulate something that is otherwise inaccessible and unrepresentable to us."[37] The imagined reality, called forth by the imaginative play of identity and non-identity, the given and the pretend, relies on readers' feelings and associations. It draws on their working assumptions about life, and how humans are and how they should be, and the morality of the order of the universe. It thus—when studied—can provide representative evidence of readers' generally vague and unarticulated background understanding of the world, their social imaginary.

Fiction has an "articulation-effect," in Fluck's terminology. A novel, especially a novel that people like, that works for people, as fiction, shows something about how those people understand themselves and the world, their *mentalité*. "Through these open structures within the linguistic patterning of the text," Iser writes, "the imaginary can manifest its presence."[38]

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[34] Iser 16.

[35] Dennis Hevesi, "Don LaFontaine, Voice of Trailers and TV Spots, Is Dead at 68," New York Times, Sept. 2, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/03/arts/television/03lafontaine.html?_r=0.

[36] See Rosecrans Baldwin, "'Somewhere a Dog Barked,'" Slate, June 17, 2010, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2010/06/somewhere_a_dog_barked.html.

[37] Fluck 114.

[38] Iser 21.

Of course, not all novels work for everyone. Not everyone responds to every novel in the same way. This is important to keep in mind when considering how popular fiction fits into a larger cultural context. Interpretations ought not move too quickly from reports of numbers of readers to conclusions about how they all agree with theological statements. Readers are not controlled by the novels they read.

Fictions of Belief rejects the idea promoted by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, and many following the Frankfurt School, that popular culture manipulates the masses into passive acceptance of ideology. Horkheimer and Adorno argue mass culture imprints its social imaginary on consumers. When people consume mass-produced culture, such as, say, a popular film, "it is the triumph of invested capital," Horkheimer and Adorno write. "To impress the omnipotence of capital on the hearts of expropriated job candidates as the power of their true master is the purpose of all films, regardless of the plot selected by by the production directors."[39] The mass-produced art tells people who they are and what they desire. Capitalism is imposed on their dreams. It forces itself on their structures of thought, their understanding of their own agency, and their sense of how things go and ought to go. With the broadcast of a soap opera, the production of pop music, and the publication of a paperback novel, "the power of industrial society is imprinted on people once and for all."[40] An updated version of this argument might say that popular narratives are complicit with neoliberalism and construct consumers' subjectivities in such a way that the neoliberal order seems natural and necessary.[41]

It is not uncommon for evangelical fiction to be seen as imposing an ideology on readers. Media studies scholar Heather Hendershot noted this in 2004. Scholars and cultural observers have been more interested evangelical politics than evangelical media, she said, and "if such researchers consider evangelical media at all, they view it as propaganda—overtly political, painfully unsubtle, and inherently dangerous."[42] Such conclusions are not supported by careful readings of the texts. They're also not supported by studies of actual readers, and the ways in which they engage with

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[39] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* , ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 98.

[40] Horkheimer and Adorno 100.

[41] See, for example, Michele Beyers and Valerie Johnson, eds., *The CSI Effect: Television, Crime, and Governance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); Laurie Ouellette, "'Take Responsibility for Yourself': *Judge Judy* and the Neoliberal Citizen," in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* , ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellettee (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 223-242; and David P. Pierson, "Breaking Neoliberal? Contemporary Neoliberal Discourses and Politics in AMC's *Breaking Bad*," in *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series*, ed. David P. Peirson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 15-32.

[42] Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 3.

fiction. Readers have more freedom and they are more creative than theories of mass-culture's ideological manipulation give them credit for.

There have been several important historical studies of working-class consumption of popular fiction that show this. In the industrial American cities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, working men read adventure stories and working women read romances. But they did not behave like Horkheimer and Adorno would have predicted. Even these unsophisticated readers had complicated responses to the fiction they consumed. They were not so easily controlled, as American studies scholar Michael Denning demonstrates in *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*. "These popular stories, which are products of the culture industry," he writes, "are best seen as a contested terrain, a field of cultural conflict where signs with wide appeal and resonance take on contradictory disguises and are spoken in contrary accents."[43] Looking at the ways in which working-class women consumed, historian Nan Enstad makes a similar argument. Consumption, even the consumption of the products of the culture industry, can have a variety of meanings. Its meanings can be contested. "Working women's relationship to consumerism," Enstad writes, "was shaped in part by the effects of production already inhering in the goods they bought. This is not to say that working women simply imbibed ideological messages conveyed by these commodities; on the contrary, they wound the products into their own social context and imbued them with their own meanings."[44] Readers engage fiction in their own ways.

A novel can be compared to a theatrical stage, with sets and characters, costumes and scripts. Different readings are like different performances, enacting the same story, but with widely, even wildly variant meanings. Context matters. A school boy's performance of *Hamlet* is importantly different than an aging Shakespearean actor's, even if the words, costumes, and sets are all the same. Likewise, a popular cop show such as *CSI* is seen differently on a prison TV than it is on a TV in white suburbia. The differences, however, don't undercut the fictional work's historical representativeness, when context is taken into consideration, they rather reveal a fuller and more nuanced articulation of the social imaginary. Everyone is playing the game of as-if, and imaginatively engaging with the fiction (and the fictive quality of fiction) to some degree, revealing not just what they believe and say they believe, but what they understand to be believable.

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall offers a way to think about the variety of readers. "Audience reception and 'use' cannot be understood in simple behavioural terms," Hall writes, because readers

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[43] Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987), 3.

[44] Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press), 19.

are not like Pavlov's dogs, just responding reflexively to given stimuli.[45] Readers have choices. Broadly speaking, there are three ways readers can respond to the message of a text, Hall says, three positions they can take with regards to a text's ideology. First, they can accept it. Second, they can reject it. Third, they can accept some of it and reject part of it, too. Hall calls these the dominant reading, the oppositional reading and the negotiated reading.

In the dominant position, readers take the text "full and straight." These readers accept the message of the text as the authors intended. They behave more or less like Horkheimer and Adorno and the people who see evangelical media as propaganda say they will (though the power of the texts to control even these readers can still be challenged).

Oppositional readers, on the other hand, don't share the assumptions of the text. They reject its ideology and interpret the text in a completely or, as Hall says, "globally" contrary way.[46] One version of this sort of reading can be seen in popular, "psychological" interpretations of the text, where the reader identifies all the author's secret pathologies and suppressed desires. This reading position is also often expressed as simple antagonism and dislike. But it can be more complicated than that too. Just because people dislike the text, for instance, doesn't mean they don't read it. There are people who get a great deal of pleasure out of what can be called "hate reading." This is an understudied reader response, but real nonetheless. Dislike-as-enjoyment can be found in TV viewers who enjoy watching shows they actively dislike.[47] It's also visible in the celebration of B movies. It is an essential element of the American alt comedy tradition, notably associated with the characters of Andy Kaufman and standup of Steve Martin and continued by comedians such as Tig Nataro, where something is funny because it's not funny and the people "get it" when they realizes there's nothing to get.

In each of these cases, notably, the idea of the dominant reading plays a critical role in the oppositional reading. People think about how they're supposed to respond to the text and imagine that others, "believers," do respond that way. They enjoy the text because they're distinguishing themselves with their oppositional reading. Their dislike of the text is an aesthetic evaluation, but

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[45] Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed., Simon During (New York: Routledge, 1993), 90-103, here 93.

[46] Hall 103.

[47] New Yorker TV critic Emily Nussbaum popularized "hate watching" in a negative review of the NBC show "Smash" in 2012 (Emily Nussbaum, "Hate-watching 'Smash," April 27, 2012, New Yorker, http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/hate-watching-smash). It does not seem to be a new phenomenon, though. Ien Ang, in her study of the broad Dutch audience for the soap opera "Dallas," noted that some viewers took a decidedly ironic attitude towards the show (Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1989), 99, 101).

additionally works to separate them from the audience of people who agree with the ideology of the text and consume it "full and straight."

Most readers, however, do not accept the dominant reading. Nor do they read oppositionally. Fiction readers, for the most part, seem to fall into a broad middle category. This sort of reading is negotiated reading, according to Hall. These readers "accord the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to 'local conditions.'"[48] They accept some aspects of the books' message and ignore others, as it suits them. The suspend disbelief, but perhaps only partially, and only sometimes.

To understand evangelical novels in their cultural context, and to understand how they reveal the implicit terms and conditions of a worldview, it is important to consider negotiating and oppositional readers, as well as those who just love and embrace everything about the respective novels. Actual readers have to be kept in mind.

Fictions of Belief relies heavily on a number of excellent studies of evangelical readers. Amy Johnson Frykholm's powerful work showed how readers—even readers who completely subscribe to the theology of a novel—use novels in complicated and diverse ways. In *Rapture Culture*, Frykholm shows how evangelicals read *Left Behind* as a way to connect to family and friends, to articulate and navigate religious differences, and to explore ideas and anxieties. She also makes a very convincing argument that readers retain a strong sense of the novel's fictionality. "Over and over again in interviews," Frykholm writes, "I ask the question, 'Are these books accurate? Is this the way the world is going to end?' Over and over again, I receive the same answer, 'Yes, but they are just somebody's interpretation. They are only fiction.'"[49]

Lynn S. Neal similarly offers a careful and nuanced study of evangelical romance readers. *Romancing God* is a slightly broader work than *Rapture Culture*, in that Neal writes about readers of a genre rather than just one particular novel. Neal shows how fiction reading itself can be devotional, for evangelical women. Many of the readers she interviewed were devoted to the genre. "They imagine," Neal writes, "evangelical romance reading as a devotional practice *through* which to articulate a woman's faith and a woman's ministry. The genre becomes an instrument for the performance and composition of evangelical women's everyday religious lives."[50]

Informed by these studies of readers and by an awareness of the diversity of readers, *Fictions of Belief* thinks about fictional texts as creative spaces, where readers are invited to pretend

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[48] Hall 102.

[49] Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Reading* Left Behind *in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 133.

[50] Lynn S. Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 106.

and imagine. Popular novels can thus be usefully put in historical context and treated as historical documents. They have to be interpreted and contextualized, but they can, when carefully studied, represent how people felt and thought and what they assumed, at a given historical moment. Fiction has an articulation effect, where vague understandings of how the world works and expectations about how it should are made clear.

The cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it this way: "Any art form," he wrote, "renders everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived."[51]

Imagining Belief

When these novels are carefully examined, and their contexts considered, the everyday experience imagined again and again is the experience of belief. These bestselling evangelical novels are about belief, and invite readers to imagine belief in the condition of secularity.

To think about "the condition of secularity," this study relies heavily on the work of the philosopher Charles Taylor. In his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues that contemporary Western society is secular, but not in the sense that people have just stopped believing in God. Rather, Taylor argues that what it means to believe and the conditions of belief, have changed. The implicit background understanding of belief has become secular.

This is a notable revision of the secularization thesis. Going back to Max Weber, the secularization thesis has held that societies grow progressively less religious as they modernize. With every scientific advancement, every technological development, every social liberalization, religion loses its power. As a current defender of the theory has written, "the declining power of religion causes a decline in the number of religious people and the extent to which people are religious."[52] There is a natural, perhaps inevitable, historical progression from the cathedrals of the Middles Ages to the rising numbers of the "nones," those who, today, don't claim even nominal religious affiliation.

Taylor recognizes that something like secularization has happened over 500 years of Western history. "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society," he asks, "while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"[53] Howev-

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[51] Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretations of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412-454, here 443.

[52] Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Thesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2-3.

[53] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Balknap Press, 2007), 25.

er, Taylor rejects what he calls "subtraction stories." He doesn't think it is the case that human beings just "lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge." It's not like the secular understanding of the world was always there, the natural way to see things, but just obscured or corrupted by religious thinking. Secular modernity, rather, is "the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life."[54] People didn't just stop believing in God; there's more too it than that. One construal of reality was, according to Taylor, replaced by another.

Taylor's account of how this change happened has been criticized from a number of angles. Critical theorist Wendy Brown argues Taylor gets some important things wrong because he doesn't pay attention to material conditions.[55] Historian Jon Butler argues Taylor errs because he "so seldom inquires about the social imaginaries of ordinary people."[56] The historical story Taylor tells, to be sure, often only involves ideas. His theory of social change is, at best, underdeveloped.

However, because Taylor rejects subtraction stories, his revised account of secularization spends more than a little time attempting to articulate what he calls the "modern social imaginary." He shifts attention from the historical mechanisms of secularization to the condition of secularity. He shifts from the enumeration of expressions of belief to the considerations of its conditions. For Taylor, the secularization thesis's answers to the question "how did we get here?" did not spend sufficient time thinking about what 'here' is actually like. As he phrases it in the opening of *A Secular Age*, Taylor wants to ask, "What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age?"[57]

One important aspect of this is it allows Taylor to account for the persistence of religious belief in a secular age. The secularization thesis struggled to account for the continuing vitality of religion. It imagined belief as a peculiar rejection of modernity, most likely doomed for eventual extinction.[58] Taylor, on the other hand, wants to characterize religious belief, even in its most fundamentalist forms, as one possible vector of modernity. He says religious beliefs are also secular. That is to say, it is also operating within the modern social imaginary, with this unarticulated secular background understanding. The change, between 1500 and 2000, was not just or even mainly a change in whether or not believed. Rather, it was a change in how people believed, the terms and

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[54] Taylor 22.

[55] Wendy Brown, "The Sacred, the Secular, and the Profane," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed., Michael Warner et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2010), 83-104. See also Daniel Silliman, "The Possibility of Secularity and the Material History of Fiction," in *Claremont Journal of Religion,* 3.1 (2014), 20-39.

[56] Jon Butler, "Disquieted History in *A Secular Age*," in Warner et al., 193-216, here 207.

[57] Taylor 1.

[58] See Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (1969; repr., Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1971)

conditions of belief. "We're all secular now," philosopher James K.A. Smith explains, commenting on Taylor. "The secular touches everything. It not only makes *un*belief possible; it also *changes belief*—it impinges on Christianity (and all religious communities)."[59]

Understanding secularity, then, is helpful for understanding belief. It is helpful for understanding how belief is imagined in a secular age. This certainly turns out to be the case in examining evangelical fiction: the conditions of secularity that Taylor describes can be seen at work in how these novels stage belief. *Fictions of Belief* doesn't attempt to chart the changes of Western history, but does make use of Taylor's philosophy to get a better understanding of how belief is imagined in evangelical fiction.

Belief in American Fiction

Evangelical fiction has been left out of histories of the contemporary American novel. *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945*, for example, examines African-American, American-Indian and multiethnic fiction, as well as Jewish fiction, feminist fiction, Southern fiction and Cold War fiction. It does not cover evangelical fiction.[60] In 1,181 pages, *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* mentions a few authors of evangelical novel, but only in passing.[61] Wiley-Blackwell has published multiple academic works on the American novel, including *The Twentieth-Century American Fiction Handbook*; *A History of American Literature: 1950 to the Present*; *The American Novel Now: 1980 to the Present*; and *A Companion to the American Novel*, but none of these mention evangelical novels.[62] One Wiley-Blackwell collection of essays, *A Companion to Twentieth Century Fiction*, includes two studies of crime fiction and one of trash fiction, as well as pieces on black humor, the city novel, and the fiction of the Vietnam war. It has nothing on evangelical fiction, however.[63]

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[59] James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 20. Emphasis original.

[60] John N. Duvall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction After 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[61] Benjamin Cssuot, Clare Virginia Eby, and Benjamin Reiss, eds., *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 233, 853.

[62] Christopher MacGowan, *The Twentieth-Century American Fiction Handbook* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Linda Wagner-Martin, ed., *A History of American Literature: 1950 to the Present* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); and Patrick O'Donnell, ed., *The American Novel Now: 1980 to the Present* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Alfred Bendixon, ed., A Companion to the American Novel (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

[63] David Seed, ed., *A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

Some recent studies have called attention to the social infrastructure that shapes the field of American fiction, notably Mark McGurl's *The Program Era*, James F. English's *The Economy of Prestige*, and Beth Driscoll's *The New Literary Middlebrow*.[64] These cultural structures go a long way in explaining why evangelical fiction, produced by an entirely distinct publishing industry, as is explained in chapter one, has not been included in histories of the contemporary American novel. As of yet, however, no one has taken the next step, and included evangelical fiction in a fuller, more robust account.

Fictions of Belief does not try to situate evangelical fiction in the broader fields of American literature. It's worth noting, however, that evangelical fiction is not the only fiction that explores questions of contemporary religious imagination.[65] Religious experience—amid, against, or within secularity—has been a pronounced theme in American literature in the twentieth century.

Several scholars have noted a religious turn in American literature at the end of the century. John A. McClure, of Rutgers University, and Amy Hungerford, of Yale University, have both written that understanding how secularity shapes belief is key to understanding the higher reaches of postmodernist fiction. McClure says that with some contemporary literature, there's such a focus on the supernatural and questions of belief that it can seem like "it may be accurate to speak of the project of these texts as one of reenchantment."[66] He points to the works of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, Native American writers including Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich, and the African-born Canadian writer, Michael Ondaatje. In these literary novels, secular characters turn or are turned "back toward the religious" and the secular understanding of reality is unsettled, in the narrative, with a "religiously inflected disruption."[67] Each novel is imaginatively exploring new, religious ways of seeing and being. In the end, though, they don't try to re-enchant the world, McClure says, but rather offer a way of being that can be described alternately as an open-ended spirituality and a "stubborn spiritual obscurity." They suggest it is possible to be open

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[64] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); James F. English, *Economies of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Capital* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave McMillian, 2014). See also Winifried Fluck, Günter Leypoldt, and Philipp Löffler, eds., *Reading Practices: REAL Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature Vol. 31* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2015).

[65] For a very broad study of religious print culture, see Charles L. Cohen and Paul S. Boyer, eds., *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008). For the ways that the supernatural has been read in contemporary fiction, see Daniel Silliman and Jan Stievermann, "Reading the Supernatural in Contemporary American Ethnic and Supernatural Fiction," in Fluck, Leypoldt, and Löffler, 101-126.

[66] John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 7.

[67] McClure 3.

to a spiritual fullness, and a sense of "more," while not joining up with the "chain of command that runs from wrathful divinities through wrathful priests to a bellicose people."[68] It's a half-secular, partially (re)converted religious imagination.

Hungerford, looking at some of the same authors and seeing some of the same things, has a darker take. Rather than a new literary spirituality, she sees postmodern writers appropriating religious language in a desperate and doomed attempt to preserve the cultural authority of literature. Postmodern writers since the 1960s, including J.D. Salinger, Allen Ginsberg, Don DeLillo, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison, and Marilynne Robinson, have been remarkably religious, according to Hungerford. But postmodern literary belief is belief in meaninglessness. These writers have "become invested in imagining nonsemantic aspects of religious language in religious terms," Hungerford writes, and turned "to religion to imagine the purely formal elements of language in transcendent terms."[69] They have chosen form emptied of content. They have turned towards the numinous, but it is a numinous nothingness. What is at stake for these writers, according to Hungerford, is nothing less than the hope of literature. It is also nothing more. "The question," Hungerford concludes, "is whether we need that religiously inflected belief in meaninglessness, or the belief in form for the sake of form, in order to believe in literature. Does literature need to be somehow religious or to cast its power in religious terms in order to assert its value and move its readers?"[70]

The religious value of literature was never in question, on the other hand, for middlebrow American readers. As Erin A. Smith shows in her study of popular religious books in the twentieth century, "middlebrow reading and study offered a kind of secularized salvation" throughout the twentieth century. Smith starts her study by looking at the religious resonances of popular novels at the beginning of the century, such as Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*, and the fiction of Harold Bell Wright. She ends as participant-observer in a Unitarian Universalist reading group, reading Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. A survey of popular religious fiction might have also included Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, Eleanor H. Porter's *Pollyanna*, Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary*, Lloyd C. Douglas's *The Robe*, Thomas Costain's *The Silver Chalice*, the works of Chaim Potok, Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Lebowitz*, the works of Walker Percy, Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, Catherine Marshall's *Christy*, and many, many others. Smith finds that this fiction specifically encouraged and valorized a kind of religious imagination by calling for a certain type of middlebrow reading. Popular religious literature is "resistant," Smith observes, "to our literary ways of reading," which makes sense when one realizes "how its interpretive communi-

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[68] McClure 17.

[69] Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), xiii.

[70] Hungerford 137.

ty and its mission/goals were distinct from those of literary fiction."[71] This non-literary reading is, she argues, religious. "Quite pragmatically," she writes, "popular readers cared if these texts *worked* —that is, made them better people, managed their fears and anxieties, and made them feel as if their lives mattered in the larger scheme of things."[72] Middlebrow readers have a long history of imaging what belief is like and what it should be like in the creative space of fiction.

A full survey of the religious imagination in contemporary literature would also, of course, have to include the breadth of genre fiction. Religion has never been secularized out of popular, "lowbrow" fiction. The religious commitments of some of the most commercially successful novelists of the last 50 years, from the Southern Baptist John Grisham to the Mormon Stephanie Meyer, are well known. The themes are evident in their fiction, too.[73] Other successful writers, such as Thomas Harris, author of the Hannibal Lecter books, and Anne Rice, author of *Interview with a Vampire* and *Queen of the Damned*, have struggled with belief, and put those struggles into their novels.[74] William Blatty's *The Exorcist* was Bantam Books bestselling novel of the 1970s.[75] Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* sold more than 60 million copies between 2003 and 2006.[76] Stephen

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[71] Erin A. Smith, *What Would Jesus Read?: Popular Religious Books and Everyday Life in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2015), 1. See also Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[72] Smith 7.

[73] See Mary Beth Pringle, *Revisiting John Grisham: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 31-44, 59-74; Natalie Wilson, *Seduced by Twilight: The Allure and Contradictory Messages of the Popular Saga* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 133-156; and Maggie Park and Natalie Wilson, eds., *Theorizing Twilight: Critical Essays on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), especially Jessica Groper, "Rewriting the Byronic Hero: How the *Twilight* Saga Turned 'Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know' into a Teen Fiction Phenomenon," 132-146, and "Lindsey Issow Aerill, "Un-biting the Apple and Killing the Womb: Genesis, Gender, and Gynocide," 224-238.

[74] See Benjamin Szumskyj, ed., *Dissecting Hannibal Lecter* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), especially Robert H. Waugh, "The Butterly and the Beast: A Textual Analysis of Dr. Hannibal Lecter's Character and Motivation in Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon* and *Silence of the Lambs*," 68-86, and Ali S. Karim, "Looking Back in Anger," 147-160; Joan Frawley Desmond, "The Strange Inner World of Anne Rice: The Vampire Novelist Leaves the Church," North Carolina Register, Aug. 4, 2010, http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/the-strange-inner-world-of-anne-rice/.

[75] John Southerland, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction of the 1970s* (London: Routledge, 1981), 60.

[76] Anita Gandolfo, *Faith and Fiction: Christian Literature in America Today* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 19.

King has sold more than 350 million books and he has no trouble talking publicly about his belief in God.[77] He has also been called one of the "most spiritually attuned novelists."[78]

Horror, of course, as a genre, is particularly open to religious imaginings. Other popular genres might be less so. Joseph Bottom, a Catholic critic, notes that "the quantity of casual anti-Christianity in contemporary mysteries and thrillers is more than a little disturbing, their pages full of duplicitous televangelists, fundamentalist cult leaders, and serial killers enacting complex Catholic rituals."[79] Several scholars have argued that mystery novels are inherently hostile to religion. The detective is understood to be a secular alternative to (and opponent of) obscurantist clergy. The detective, as religious historian Carole M. Cusack has argued, replaces the priest as the person who safeguards society's moral order, has the power to ascribe "meaning to the otherwise random *minutiae* of existence," and proves the rationalist regime of knowledge.[80] This would seem to hold true for classic, hardboiled fiction, such as the work of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Ross MacDonald and Robert B. Parker. If a religious group appears at all in those men's novels, it's a strange sect involved in a crime or coverup.[81]

On the other hand, as Bottum has pointed out, there are "teetering stacks of mysteries with actual clerics starring as the detectives." Of course there are famous British examples, such as G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown novels but there are more than a few American examples as well. The novels of Michelle Blake, Anthony Boucher, Donna Fletcher Crow, Dorothy Salisbury Davis, D.M. Greenwood, Harry Kemelman, Ralph McInery, Julia Spencer-Fleming, and Aline Templeton all feature crime-solving clergy. The novels invite readers to imagine that religious authorities have special insight into the human heart and the human condition, even on the "mean streets" of a secular age. There are also popular crime writers who have imagined devout detectives who rely on their religious beliefs for solace and strength. James Lee Burke, for example, has had bestseller after bestseller with his Dave Robicheaux series, which started with *The Neon Rain* in 1987. The protagonist, like the author, regularly attends church and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. He's shaped by

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[77] Terry Gross, "Stephen King On Growing Up, Believing In God And Getting Scared," Fresh Air, National Public Radio, May 23, 2013, http://www.npr.org/2013/05/28/184827647/stephen-king-on-growing-up-believing-in-god-and-getting-scared.

[78] Steve Lansingh, "The Gospel According to Stephen King," Christianity Today, Dec. 1, 1999, http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/1999/decemberweb-only/41.0a.html.

[79] Joseph Bottum, "God and the Detectives," Books & Culture, Sept. 2011, http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2011/sepoct/goddetectives.html?paging=off.

[80] Carole M. Cusack, "Non-Mainstream Religions as 'Other' in Detective Fiction," in Carole M. Cusack, Frances Di Lauro and Christopher Hartney, eds., *The Buddha of Suburbia: Proceedings of the VIIIth International Conference for Religion, Literature and the Arts 2004* (Sydney: RLA Press, 2005), 159-74, here 161.

[81] See, for example, Hammett's *The Dain Curse* and Parker's *Valediction*.

a distinctly religious imagination.[82] There are religious themes and questions in other popular detective fiction at the end of the twentieth century, as well, such as in the work of Elmore Leonard, Walter Mosely, and James Ellroy.[83] Even the secularized genre of detective fiction tells stories about belief.

Lowbrow, middlebrow and highbrow fiction have all engaged with religious themes. They've all staged stories about belief, and invited readers to imagine what belief is like and what it should be like, and in the process revealed something about the secular social imaginary that Taylor describes. Evangelical fiction is thus not entirely separate from the wider fields of American fiction.

Fictions of Belief, however, has chosen to focus on evangelical fiction, reading five evangelical bestsellers and considering their contexts and their readers to better understand how evangelicals, specifically, imagined belief. Evangelicals, specifically, in their "shifting movements, temporary alliances, and the lengthened shadows of individuals," have been defined by belief. They need to be understood in terms of what they've imagined it means to believe.

Five Bestsellers Across Four Decades

This study begins with an analysis of Janette Oke's evangelical romance *Love Comes Softly*, first published in 1979. A landmark work, the novel sold more than one million copies and established the market for evangelical fiction. *Love Comes Softly* invites readers to imagine belief in this-worldly, rather than transcendent, terms. It stages belief as a spiritual fullness that occurs in the context of daily life. The chapter looks at the history of the emergence of evangelical print culture, showing how the practical realities of producing and distribution favored and encouraged a social imaginary that was, in Taylor's terminology, immanentist. Evangelical publishing achieved critical mass in the 1970s, and turned out a notable number of books that told readers they could have abundant life in the here-and-now. One of those books was Oke's novel. Another was Marabel Morgan's bestselling sex-and-marriage manual, *Total Woman*. The two books, considered side by side, reveal that at the end of the twentieth century, evangelicals imagined belief in an immanent frame. Belief was defined by the conditions of secularity.

Chapter two continues with an examination of Frank Peretti's spiritual warfare novel, *This Present Darkness*. Peretti, a former Assemblies of God minister, published his book in 1986. It was slow to sell at first, but eventually became a phenomenal hit. Peretti was deeply influenced by the

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[82] See Bill Phillips, "Religious Belief in Recent Detective Fiction," in Atlantis, Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies 31, no. 1 (June 2014): 139-151.

[83] See Charles J. Rezpka, *Being Cool: The Works of Elmore Leonard* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Charles E. Wilson, Jr., *Walter Mosley: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 101-122; Jim Mancall, *James Ellroy: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 169-171.

leading intellectual of the religious right, evangelical minister Francis Schaeffer. Following Schaeffer, he imagined belief as a claim that disturbs the epistemological foundations of pluralistic, public discourse. The novel tells the story of a Satanic conspiracy to take over a small American town, which is only stopped when the evangelical believers learn to rally together and pray. It pictures a local instantiation of the culture wars of the 1980s, but goes behind the scenes, to imagine conflicts between angels and demons. The novel, in this way, stages belief as necessary and inevitable public conflict. The novel imagines belief has to happen in the public square, within the secularity of that space but also challenging the secularity of that space. This chapter shows how evangelical's political activism was shaped and informed by one of the ways they imagined belief.

The next chapter looks at the most successful evangelical fiction of the twentieth century, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins's *Left Behind*. An apocalyptic novel, the narrative starts with the rapture of all true believers, and charts the conversion arcs of the protagonists who are left behind. The novel imagines its characters are compelled to choose belief, staging belief as choice that cannot not be chosen. The chapter puts this in the context of evangelical apocalypticism, looking at how expectation of the end of human history make people feel compelled to act. It puts the novel, further, in the context of popular evangelical apologetics, which understood belief to arise out of argumentative dichotomies, pushing people into clear, either/or decisions. Taylor talks extensively about the "fragilization" of belief, how the availability of multiple, plausible construals of reality makes any worldview feel like a choice. This produces a level of uncertainty, which some evangelicals attempt to overcome by imagining a belief that cannot be wrong. *Left Behind* invites readers to think of belief like this. The chapter concludes with an extensive survey of the variety of ways readers have responded to the novel.

Chapter four looks at the Beverly Lewis's series, *The Heritage of Lancaster County*. This is an evangelical romance with an Old Order Amish setting and Old Order Amish characters. Published in 1998, it has sold more than one million copies and established the incredibly popular subgenre of evangelical romance, the Amish romance. Throughout the twentieth century, Americans have used the Amish as symbols of authenticity and inauthenticity. They've imaginatively engaged with modernity and secularity with fictions involving the conservative anabaptist Christians. Lewis picks up this conflicted symbol, and puts it to evangelical ends. She tells the story of a girl who discovers she was not born Amish, but was secretly adopted. The protagnoist has to overcome the false identity that has been imposed on her to discover who she really is. As part of that process, she becomes an evangelical believer. The novel, like *Love Comes Softly*, imagines belief in terms of the assurance of immanent abundant life. It also, like *Left Behind*, imagines it as a choice that is compelled. Bringing the two aspects of the secular condition together, *The Heritage of Lancaster County* series stages belief as the realization of an authentic self. The chapter puts the themes of Lewis's novel

side-by-side with the conservative homeschool movement of the 1980s and '90s, to show how this aspect of secularity formed the background understanding of one of the ways evangelicals imagined belief.

The final chapter examines *The Shack*. This is, to date, the bestselling evangelical novel of the twenty-first century. Published in 2008, *The Shack* has sold more than ten million copies in eight years. The novel tells the story of a man who spends a weekend with God in a shack in the woods—or maybe only dreamed he did. The novel imagines belief happens in indeterminate, in-between spaces. In contrast to *Left Behind*, it imagines God disturbs and unsettles certainties. Belief is understood to be something that happens in liminality. This is shown to have a long evangelical tradition, with resonances going back to nineteenth century revivalist Charles Finney's own understanding of conversion. It is also compared to the self-consciously postmodern emergent church movement, which attempted to create liminal spaces on the margins of evangelicalism, and thought of belief as uncertain and open-ended. The chapter argues that some evangelicals have embraced secularity's fragilization of belief, taking it to be, in fact, a necessary condition of true belief.

The conclusion turns from bestsellers to the rest of the market, including the masses of self-published evangelical fiction. In the 2010s, there were hundreds of evangelical novels published with vanity presses. A look at a few of them shows they too are occupied with the imagination of belief. They too understand of belief in the secular terms explained by Taylor. This isn't something imposed on evangelicals from the top down. Rather, across the country, people who understand themselves to be believers, people who are defined by belief, are writing novels about belief. Few people will ever read them and the authors, though they might hope to be crafting the next unexpected bestseller, know that they will likely only sell a small number. Nevertheless, they feel compelled. They want to create their own fictional stage, construct their own fictional game of not-quite belief, and imagine what belief is like and what it should be like. In the process they, along with the bestselling novelists of the 1970s, '80s, '90s and 2000s, reveal evangelical *mentalités*.

Evangelicals don't imagine belief in just one way. There is a diversity to their dreaming. This cultural history of evangelicals argues that understanding this, examining this, considering these fictions and their historical contexts, can serve to uncover the evangelical imagination.

1

Imagining Immanent Belief

Marty does mundane chores. Then she does more chores.

In the days after her marriage of convenience, the protagonist of Janette Oke's bestselling 1979 novel cooks, cleans, and sews. The story does not skim over these activities, but dwells on them. The chores are not incidental to the fiction. They do not just add mimetic details for readers to imagine when they identify with the put-upon heroine, struggling in a strange pioneer cabin on an unnamed Western prairie. They are important. Marty thinks they are important and the novel presents them that way too.

It starts when 19-year-old Martha "Marty" Claridge is forced by circumstance to marry a stranger. Her husband Clem—"strong, adventurous, boyish Clem"—has died in an accident as they trekked west to claim free farm land on the open frontier.[1] Their wagon broke down. A horse ran away. Then the other horse fell and killed Clem, leaving Marty a pregnant widow with winter coming on.

"This was the West," she thinks. "Things were hard out here."[2]

She is then presented with an offer. A widower with a small child needs a woman to help him take care of the girl, and suggests that Marty needs a place to stay, at least until spring. Clark Davis proposes they solve each other's problems with a quick marriage, on the understanding it is simply a practical arrangement. She agrees. They marry. She goes to his house, a log cabin sheltered by trees on the north side and a small rise to the west, and she starts doing chores.

The first morning she makes coffee, which she is good at. Then she struggles with breakfast. The struggle is rendered in detail. It takes two pages for the author to describe how the heroine finds the eggs, milk, and bacon, which are stored outside in a kind of root cellar, a pioneer cooler opera-

[1] Janette Oke, *Love Comes Softly* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1979), 13.

[2] Oke 17.

ted with a rope-and-pulley. Then Marty tries to dress the young girl, whose name is Missie. This takes four pages. First she has to find the clothes, and Missie starts screaming. Breakfast starts to burn because the wood stove is too hot and then there's a spill and Marty doesn't know where a rag is in this strange kitchen. She burns her finger. Then she goes back to fighting with the crying, kicking child who doesn't want to get dressed. She finally gets her clothed. She calms the girl down, rocking her and whispering to her, and then cleans her face and combs her hair. Breakfast is ready, eventually, though only because Clark finished the cooking while Marty struggled with Missie. A pioneer wife's normal morning routine is too much for her to handle on her own.

Love Comes Softly is a landmark of American evangelical fiction. Oke's work "inaugurated the contemporary form of evangelical romance," as religious studies scholar Lynn S. Neal put it.[3] Industry experts agree. In 2016, the CEO of the American Christian Fiction Writers association said, for all extents and purposes, Oke founded evangelical fiction. "Would any of us who write for that market be writing today if not for the impact of her novels?" Colleen Coble asked ACFW writers rhetorically.[4] Evangelicals had written romance fiction before Oke did, of course, and they had certainly read it. But hers was the first really successful romance that was written, published, distributed, sold, and read as explicitly and intentionally evangelical. The novel was wildly successful, ultimately selling more than one million copies. In the process, *Love Comes Softly* established the market for evangelical novels. This market would grow to include the bestsellers considered in this study: Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's *Left Behind*, Beverly Lewis's *Heritage of Lancaster County* series, and William Paul Young's *The Shack*. The market would grow to the point that in 2016, one industry expert would estimate evangelical fiction sales add up to between $75 and $85 million annually.[5] Just counting evangelical romance novels, in one

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[3] Lynn S. Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 29. Notable predecessors include Grace Livingston Hill and Catherine Marshall. Both women had clear evangelical commitments, which were evident in their writing. However, their books were published by general trade publishing houses and distributed to the general book-buying market, and so not perceived as distinctly evangelical until later. Other authors were published and sold by evangelicals and for evangelicals, notably Lois T. Henderson and Argye M. Briggs. These women were not successful enough to demonstrate the possibilities market, though. It is in this sense that Neal is right to say Oke "inaugurated" the evangelical romance with *Love Comes Softly*.

[4] "ACFW to Honor Pioneer Novelist Janette Oke," Christian Retailing, June 27, 2016, http://christianretailing.com/index.php/newsletter/latest/28631-acfw-to-honor-pioneer-novelist-janette-oke.

[5] Lynn Garrett, "The Business of Christian Fiction," Publishers Weekly, May 20, 2016, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/70450-the-business-of-christian-fiction.html.

month in 2016, the top ten titles sold a combined 60,400 copies. That wasn't a particularly strong month of sales, either: In October 2015, the top ten sold a combined 89,280.[6]

In a way, *Love Comes Softly* started all this. And it's a novel that spends pages and pages on the details of chores.

"The real wonder of contemporary Christian writing," writes Nancy M. Tichler, in her encyclopedic survey of the field, "is the sheer mass of it. Clearly, the world is hungry for conversations about ultimate reality—even if the stories are encumbered by mundane descriptions of food and clothing."[7]

Love Comes Softly does not treat the mundane details of the day-to-day as an encumbrance, however. The novel rather imagines religious experience in this context. It imagines this context is critical. *Love Comes Softly* tells a story of a woman finding love and finding faith, and it tells the story so the two are very closely connected. Belief, in the novel, is like finding love. Finding love is like believing in God. For the protagonist and the readers who identify with her, these things are not unrelated to sewing a dress, caring for a child, or doing the dishes. The novel invites readers to imagine that spiritual fullness is not other-worldly, but this-worldly. It's not transcendent, but immanent. The novel tells the reader that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, including even the chores.

The Immanent Frame

One way to describe this attention to clothes, food, and the other apparently mundane details "encumbering" belief in *Love Comes Softly* is to say that belief is being imagined in an immanent frame. The philosopher Charles Taylor says the modern tendency to understand human activity in immanent terms is an important characteristic of what he calls "a secular age."

It is common to think of the word "secular" as designating the opposite of religion or the absence of religion. A secular government is not a theocracy, for example. Secular music is not a church choir. Heaven is not a secular concern. When Taylor talks about a secular age, though, this is

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[6] The Neilsen Company, Nielsen BookScan Report, Feb. 2016; The Neilsen Company, Neilsen BookScan Report Oct. 2015, http://www.christianretailing.com/index.php/best-sellers/nielsen-bookscan. According to Nielsen, the BookScan captures 85 percent of the market, so these sales numbers may be low.

[7] Nancy Tischler, *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Fiction: From C.S. Lewis to Left Behind* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2009), xix.

not what he means.[8] Religion has not disappeared from human society, not even from the advanced, technological, globally linked, hypermodern West. Nor is it disappearing, which has presented a challenge to the many theorists who, following Max Weber, predicted complete secularization.

Taylor, however, is not interested in the presence or absence of religious beliefs and practices. He is, instead, interested in the conditions of the possibility of the presence or absence of religious beliefs and practices. He is focused on the common cultural assumptions underneath religious activity. If someone doesn't believe, why doesn't belief seem plausible to them? If someone does, why does it? How have they imagined belief and what do they think belief is like, perhaps without even really thinking about it? Taylor directs attention to the "social imaginary." This is the mostly unarticulated background understanding people have of how things work and what makes sense. It is seen most clearly in expectations and explanations. "We have a sense," Taylor writes, "of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what mis-steps would invalidate that practice."[9] Similarly, there are common assumptions about what counts and what can count as a good justification.

In his massive 2007 work, *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues Western modernity is secular in this sense. Its social imaginary is secular. The secular, he says, "is a condition in which our experience of and search for fullness occurs; and this is something we all share, believers and unbelievers alike."[10] People live and move and understand themselves in secular terms. That is to say, "we come to understand our lives taking place within a self-sufficient immanent order."[11] In this immanent order, the highest possible good is thought of as human flourishing. There has been an eclipse of any higher, "transcendent" purpose. There are, Taylor writes, "no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing."[12] Appeals to something higher

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[8] Peter Berger misunderstands Taylor when he writes, "I disagree with its central proposition: We don't live in a 'secular age'; rather in most of the world we live in a turbulently religious age (with the exception of a few places, like university philosophy departments in Canada and football clubs in Britain). (Has Taylor been recently in Nepal? Or for that matter in central Texas?)" (Peter Berger, "How to Live in a (Supposedly) Secular Age," The American Interest, March 11, 2014, http://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/03/11/how-to-live-in-a-supposedly-secular-age/). Taylor is not talking about instances of religious activity. He's talking about the unarticulated background assumptions of human activity. Berger, in earlier work, also talked about such things. Where Taylor works to elucidate the "social imaginary," Berger attempted to describe the social construction of reality. See, for example, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treaties in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Random House, 1966) and Peter Berger, Brigette Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 1973).

[9] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 172.

[10] Taylor 19.

[11] Taylor 543.

[12] Taylor 18.

than human good—something transcendent as opposed to immanent, something other-worldly as opposed to this-worldly—wouldn't really make sense.

It's easy to imagine a world where transcendent explanations for human activity would be definitive. The bottom explanation, as it were, would be an appeal to eternal reality. Taylor talks about the divine right of kings in this way. Medieval European hierarchies were not justified, when they were justified, based on what was good for people. They were, rather, said to correspond to a higher, cosmic order. The social structure was understood to be "grounded cosmically, prior to us, there as it were, waiting for us to take up our allotted place."[13] The most persuasive answer to the question of why the king ruled, if it were asked, would have something to do with God, rather than the welfare of the masses.

The same was true for, for example, Puritan household codes. The order of the Puritan household was understood to serve important social functions, not least in establishing the disciplines that ensured social order. The family norms were also thought to be the best for all involved. The structure was even imagined to serve the best interests of women, thought they were notably legally and politically disenfranchised. For the Puritans, however, these good immanent outcomes were not sufficient justification. They thought it necessary to appeal to a divine order. This-worldly arrangements had to be grounded something transcendent, so the familial order might be explained by an analogy to Christ's relationship with the Church, or the relationship between God the Father and God the Son.[14]

This sort of transcendent justification can also be seen codified in the Reformed Protestant motto, *Soli Deo Gloria*, "to God alone the glory." The statement is importantly anti-anthropocentric. It suggests that the true measure or value of human activity is something beyond humanity. As John Calvin puts it, people ought to "acknowledge God to be, as He is, the only source of all virtue, justice, holiness, wisdom, truth, power, goodness, mercy, life and salvation."[15] Human flourishing is not the standard of justice or goodness; God's transcendent glory is. Human activity—from worship practices to the ways in which people respond to suffering—is to be evaluated only in terms of how it affects God.

With that sort of social imaginary, the statement "God's ways are higher than our ways," might be understood as a robust, legitimate explanation. In the condition of secularity, by compari-

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[13] Taylor 540.

[14] See Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Random House, 1980).

[15] John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," in *Calvin's Tracts Relating to the Reformation, Vol 1*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 123-236, here 127. See also Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against Idols: Reformed Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1986), 197.

son, saying God's ways are higher is equivalent to saying, "who knows?" It's not taken as an answer, but the denial or at best deferral of an answer.

In a secular age, the only legitimate answer, the bottom answer, has to be something about human flourishing. There has been, Taylor writes, a historic, "anthropocentric shift" in the West, which results in "the eclipse of this sense of further purpose."[16] Appeals to an ontologically higher reality don't make sense to most people. Sometimes such arguments strike people—even very devout people—as not just nonsensical but ethically appalling. A God whose transcendent purposes justify human suffering, for example, is seen as monstrous. That is not to say that appeals to a transcendent reality completely disappear. But they are less persuasive. Most people end up feeling an argument has to be ultimately anthropocentric, ultimately about human flourishing. That may not be articulated, but that's the intuitive sense of how things ought to go.

Even religious arguments become "secular" in this way. Between 1500 and 2000, according to Taylor, there has been "a revision downward of God's purposes for us, inscribing these within an immanent order which allows for a certain kind of human flourishing, consonant with the order of mutual benefit."[17] God's purposes and human flourishing are seen to be one and the same. To pray "thy will be done" is understood to mean "let humans flourish."[18] Anti-anthropocentric ideas are seen as being, importantly, in another way, actually anthropocentric. A Calvinistic statement such as "to God alone the glory," for example, is now justified in terms of how glorifying God is actually the best and most fulfilling thing for humans. Calvinism, once so austere, can be rendered a kind of hedonism. Popular Calvinist pastor John Piper made this case explicitly in his 1986 book, *Desiring God*. "The longing to be happy is a universal human experience, and it is good, not sinful," Piper explained. "The deepest and most enduring happiness is found only in God."[19]

There are legitimate reasons to quibble with Taylor's account of how things got this way. One can also question the boundaries of this secular age, who is included in his use of the second-person plural, "we."[20] Nevertheless, his description of the secular condition, of the immanent frame around contemporary religious activity, aptly characterizes *Love Comes Softly*. His understanding of secularity can explain why chores are so important in this popular work of imagination. It can also explain why it made sense to so many that a story about falling in love with a man could be, at the

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[16] Taylor 222.

[17] Taylor 290.

[18] Taylor 17, 222.

[19] John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 1986), 28.

[20] For a range of criticisms of Taylor's *A Secular Age*, see Michael Warner, Jonathan Van Antwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2013).

same time, the story about finding the love of God. Taylor's theory offers some insight into how, for some evangelicals, believing in God is imagined of as an act of trusting things will work out for the best in this life.

This chapter considers the relationship between evangelicals and secularity at the end of the twentieth century. It argues that these religious believers were not opposed to or oriented against "the secular," but rather imagined belief in the terms of secularity. It does this first by recounting the history of the evangelical booksellers that produced *Love Comes Softly* and the market for evangelical fiction. Evangelical bookstores have long been seen as emblematic of how the evangelicalism is "embattled but thriving" in secular culture. The historical approach gives a different perspective, showing how evangelicals constructed a market that encouraged a secular social imaginary. The chapter then looks at two wildly successful evangelical books from that market. These offer two windows on the same theme. Marabel Morgan's sex-and-marriage manual, *Total Woman*, and Janette Oke's novel both reveal one way evangelicals have imagined belief. They picture spiritual fullness as personal fulfillment.

The Rise of Evangelical Print Culture

Evangelical bookstores fostered a social imaginary within which the idea of immanent belief made sense. The evangelical idea of belief as an act of trusting that God will give you abundant life in this life was supported by what book historian Janice Radway calls an "institutional matrix."[21] It is helpful to understand the history of evangelical bookstores to understand how evangelicals have related to the secular.

Evangelical bookstores popped up across the United States in the 1970s. When the evangelical Christian Bookseller Association started in 1950, organizers were thrilled to get 279 store owners to come to a conference in Chicago.[22] The number of CBA-affiliated evangelical bookstores grew to 725 by 1965, and then reached 1,850 by the mid 1970s.[23] By the end of the decade, there were about 3,000 evangelical bookstores in the United States.[24] "The 1970s were a wild ride (and

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[21] Garrett; Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984), 19-45.

[22] Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, *His Time, His Way: The CBA Story: 1950-1999* (Colorado Springs, CO: CBA, 1999), 31.

[23] Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1995), 246.

[24] Michael Hirsley, "Christian Book Market Booms," Chicago Tribune, July 22, 1990, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1990-07-22/news/9003010903_1_christian-fiction-crossway-books-publishers-weekly

we mean that in a good sense)," Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz report in the CBA's authorized history. "The proof's in the pudding, and there was plenty of pudding in the 1970s."[25]

Not every evangelical bookseller was successful, of course. Many stores were run by people with little to no business experience, more interested in ministry than money. One Bible wholesaler recalled some bookstore owners would refuse to fill out credit applications to stock Bibles in their retail stores. They would just write "the Lord will provide" on the top of the form.[26] These mom-and-pop operations frequently found themselves in financial trouble. And even well-financed operations could flounder. The evangelical publisher Tyndale, for example, started a doomed bookstore chain with three stores in suburban Chicago malls. The stores attracted new customers for evangelical books, but not enough of them to pay the shopping centers' high rents. The stores operated at a loss until the threat of bankruptcy forced Tyndale to divest.[27]

As a whole, though, the religious retailing industry boomed in the 1970s. One successful chain, Family Bookstores, doubled its number of retail outlets between 1969 and 1973. And doubled again from 1973 to 1978. By 1980, the corporation had fifty-seven stores across America, and brought in annual revenues of $18 million.[28] That was the trend. The number of evangelical bookstores increased, and the amount each store was selling increased too.[29] By 1980, annual religious bookstore sales reached an estimated $770 million.[30]

A number of scholars have pointed out these bookstores embody evangelicalism's relationship to the secular. This relationship has been conceptualized in a couple of ways, which can be characterized, following sociologist Christian Smith's description of American evangelicals, as "embattled and thriving." First, bookstores are understood as a safe space where "embattled" evangelicals take shelter from secular culture. Literary scholar Anita Gandolfo argues this position in her study of Christian literature in contemporary America. Evangelical bookstores and the books they sell, Gandolfo notes, constituted a subculture, set apart from mainstream American culture. "It seems odd," she writes, "to find this emergence of a distinctly Christian subculture of Christian schools, bookstores, and literature, usually the mark of a marginalized group."[31] Christianity is the

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[25] Bickel and Jantzs 59, 60.

[26] Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 199.

[27] Kenneth N. Taylor, *My Life: A Guided Tour* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1991), 304-305, 313.

[28] James E. Ruark, *The House of Zondervan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 142-143.

[29] McDannell 246.

[30] Ruark 144.

[31] Anita Gandolfo, *Faith and Fiction: Christian Literature in America Today* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 64.

dominant religion in the United States. It doesn't make sense to think of it as marginal. And yet these Christians have had a hostile relationship with mainstream culture. They have felt marginalized, according to Gandolfo, by the "secularizing forces in American society."[32] They thus built a distinctive print culture to protect themselves. The goal was "keeping adherents safe." According to Gandolfo, "the proliferation of Christian literature is to provide conservative Christians an alternative to the secularizing influences of the dominant culture."[33]

Other scholars see a different relationship. They conceptualize evangelical bookstores as sites of secular adaptation. Evangelicals used to be separate and withdrawn. They were "nonconsumers with a vengeance," according to media studies scholar Heather Hendershot. Then, with these bookstores, they "adjusted their tolerance for secular ideas."[34] They learned to thrive in a secular environment.

From one perspective, Hendershot says, evangelical bookstores appear to shelter a subculture, but actually the bookstores are evangelicals' points of access to mainstream culture. Evangelicals learned to produce "alternative versions of secular commodities" and "these products help create a place at the table of middle-class consumer culture for American evangelicals."[35] The bookstores facilitated a process of appropriation. This was where evangelicals could take popular culture and make it their own, and in doing that refashion themselves as consumers. As evidence, Hendershot points to evangelicals' tendencies to produce imitations of popular culture.

There is some truth to both these characterizations of evangelical bookstores. Some people certainly have felt sheltered from a hostile culture in these space. They have experience evangelical bookstores as safe spaces providing safe alternatives (especially for their children). At the same time, the distinct evangelical products sold in evangelical bookstores can't be neatly separated from American consumerism and popular culture as "alternative." These stores sold "highly profitable expressions of popular culture," historian Stephen P. Miller points out, "which they billed instead as alternatives to popular culture."[36] The subculture, in some ways, accommodated what it was supposedly opposing. The stores and their product taught evangelicals to consume culture even when and if that consumption was conceptualized as resistance to culture. This fits what Christian Smith has

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[32] Gandolfo 65.

[33] Gandolfo 67, 65.

[34] Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and the Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), 33, 50.

[35] Hendershot 28, 32.

[36] Stephen P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* (New York: Oxford, 2014), 103.

argued. "Evangelicalism," Smith writes, "*thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat."[37] That tension can be read in the Christian bookstore

A historical account of evangelical bookstores offers a different perspective, though. On closer examination, the history of evangelical print culture doesn't show evangelicals constructing safe spaces, trying to escape secular culture. Nor does it show evangelicals developing ways to accommodate themselves to the secular. In fact, it's not clear that "the secular," a term equal and opposite "evangelical," is of critical importance to this historical narrative. It is clear, on the other hand, that an evangelical identity emerged with the emergence of a specific print culture. That identity, further, is constructed in and with secularity. The print culture that made the trans-denominational identity "evangelical" widely available when Janette Oke sat down to write *Love Comes Softly* also sustained the social imaginary of immanent belief.

The History of Evangelical Print Culture

Evangelical print culture grew out of a long history of changes in the publishing industry. This is a story that starts when American publishing came into its own at the turn of the twentieth century. The number of new titles that general trade houses put out in the United States tripled between 1880 to 1900. Population growth and rising literacy rates meant an increasing number of readers in America. At the same time, advances in printing technology meant mass publishing was cheaper, improving profit margins. Another dramatic change was that family-owned publishers such as Lippincott, Harper, Scribner, and Houghton Mifflin reorganized as corporations. They professionalized, capitalized, and made bookselling a big business. In 1900, 6,356 new titles were released in the U.S. About 7 percent of these titles were categorized as religious. Religious books sold a little better than poetry and drama in 1900, though not nearly as well as fiction.[38]

This burgeoning book industry was constrained, notably, by problems of distribution. "Book distribution," historian Michael Winship observes, "has often posed a more difficult problem for publishers than book production. This is especially true in a country like the United States in which production facilities, largely concentrated in eastern urban publishing centers, had to reach a diverse population spread over an extensive area."[39] Winship calculates that in 1914, there were only 3,500

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[37] Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago, University of Chicago, 1998), 89.

[38] Michael Winship, "The Rise of the National Book Trade System in the United States," in *A History of the Book in America*, ed. Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009), 56-77, here 61.

[39] Winship 56.

bookstores in America.[40] These were mostly in urban centers, inaccessible to a lot of people. Another way to distribute books was through general stores and department stores, but space was limited and so sales were limited too. Publishers also used traveling salesmen, who peddled subscriptions. This worked well for certain titles—Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs, for example—but wouldn't work for thousands of new books every year.

Denominational publishers, by comparison, didn't have this problem. A denomination could double as a distribution network. People across the country were already linked in religious communication channels and they were interested in buying books. Thus, at the start of the twentieth century, religious books were mostly produced by religious presses. These were mostly denominational presses and their distribution channels were denominational. Their readers identified with a particular religious group by reading its books and newspapers. In 1915, the *Federal Council Year Book* identified 389 Protestant periodicals. They were divided by denomination. The prolific Methodists printed sixty-nine newspapers and had several book publishers. The smallest Protestant group on the list, the 600-member Church of God, Adventist, had two papers.[41] "Denominations," writes historian William Vance Trollinger, Jr., "were undoubtedly the organizational structure for American Protestantism between 1880 and 1940, and they were the critical locus of identity."[42] Those identities were constructed and maintained, in part, by print cultures.

Whatever theological similarities a Methodist might have had with a Mennonite, for example, they were distinct textual communities in the early twentieth century. These religious groups can both be called "evangelical." They fit under the abstract, scholarly definition of the term.[43] They might have even both used the term themselves, in their respective theological explanations of denominational distinctive. In their day-to-day reality, however, Methodists and Mennonites were separated. Methodists, according to Trollinger, put out "a cascade of hymnals, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School materials, evangelicals tracts and a variety of other religious books and booklets."[44] They were by and for Methodists. The denominational publishers might occasionally turn an eye to non-Methodist book buyers, but they couldn't really reach them. Just getting books to

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[40] Winship 64.

[41] William Vance Trollinger, Jr., "An Outpouring of 'Faithful' Words: Protestant Publishing in the United States," in *A History of the Book in America*, ed. Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009), 359-375, here 360-361.

[42] Trollinger 360.

[43] One notably weakness of the famous "Bebbington quadrilateral" is it prioritizes beliefs to the exclusion of other factors. Try to explain why C.S. Lewis is accepted by American evangelicals while, say, Ellen White is not, and appeals to Christocentrism, Crucicentrism, etc., will not suffice. Analyzing evangelicalism as a discourse community can useful supplement these standards definitions.

[44] Trollinger 365.

non-Methodists would be an immense practical problem, requiring new, non-Methodist channels of distribution. To appeal to a non-Methodist book buyer, further, they would presumably need to produce books that were less distinctively Methodist. If they did that, however, publishers ran the risk of alienating their core clientele.[45] The same was true for Mennonites. The Mennonite Publishing House put out 262 books and pamphlets between 1908 and 1945.[46] It was a small business, but successful because it served a niche market. These were Mennonite publications, produced, distributed, and consumed by Mennonites. They were not readily available to "evangelicals" generally and it wouldn't have worked, financially, to try to sell Mennonite books as evangelical books.

There were some religious print material, of course, that crossed denominational lines. There were a number of ambitious publishing projects at the start of the century that brought together various Protestant groups into cooperative enterprises. Significant examples include the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and the Bible Institute Colportage Association.[47] These all used colporteurs—independent religious booksellers—to distribute books. The Bible Institute Colportage Association, founded by famed evangelist Dwight L. Moody in 1894, had about 100 of these booksellers in 1906. According to historian Candy Gunther Brown, however, these joint cooperative Protestant publishing ventures "at no point supplanted denominational identity."[48] Such endeavors only worked if the books were sold very cheaply, and if the stream of texts didn't create a print culture that challenged the denominations subsidizing the cost of the books. This was sometimes stated explicitly. Moody's group, for example, made it clear that the goal was to "carry the Gospel, by means of the printed page, where church privileges are wanting or not embraced."[49] The books were not meant to be read by Mennonites or Methodists, or even Christians who might identify with Moody. They were tools for evangelism. They weren't recruiting readers into a distinct print culture.

A new, trans-denominational print culture emerged with the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. As Protestant denominations divided in theological disputes, the fighting factions sometimes discovered they had allies in other denominations. They sometimes identified more with these

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[45] Brown 55.

[46] Trollinger 365.

[47] See David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (Oxford: Oxford, 2004);

[48] Candy Gunther Brown, *The World in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 39.

[49] A.P. Fitt, "WANTED!" in *Moody's Latest Sermons* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1900), no page number.

allies than with people in their own religious groups. New textual communities helped establish these new identities.

Fundamentalists, for example, could subscribe to the series of books from which they took their name, *The Fundamentals*. According to historian Timothy E.W. Gloege, the editors of *The Fundamentals* sought to "create a generic, nonsectarian, 'conservative' Protestantism free from denominational controls."[50] The editors developed a mailing list of 175,000 names. These were religious leaders who belonged to very different religious groups and who disagreed—sometimes fiercely—about theological issues they considered to be of the upmost importance. *The Fundamentals* told them that what they had in common was more important than what they didn't. Some agreed, identifying with this new religious brand. They subscribed to *The Fundamentals* and, in doing so, embraced this new identity. After the first volume of *The Fundamentals* was published, the editors reported receiving 300 or more grateful letters per day. Pastors from around the country said they didn't feel alone anymore. The publication, Gloege writes, "created an imagined community of Protestants united in their opposition to theological modernism."[51] Periodicals, such as *Moody Monthly*, the *Pilot*, the *King's Business*, and the *Sunday School Times*, served the same function.[52]

Some denominational booksellers also joined this trans-denominational Protestant identity. Notable, here, are the Dutch Reformed publishers in Grand Rapids, Michigan. At first a company like Eerdmans was strictly denominational. William B. Eerdmans himself was affiliated with Christian Reformed Church, and so was the company he named after himself. The company served the Dutch Reformed immigrants of western Michigan, selling theology books to students at Calvin College and Seminary and then later publishing the school's professors.[53] As Eerdmans expanded, the company relied on the immigrant church as a distribution network. Calvin graduates became pastors around the Midwest and Eerdmans sold them and their congregations books. As Dutch Reformed immigrants transitioned into English and found their place in America's religious landscape, Eerdmans helped them maintain their distinct identity.[54] The publisher acted as gatekeeper. In this role, however, it started selling non-Dutch Reformed books to Dutch Reformed readers. The Eerdmans's

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[50] Timothy E. W. Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2015), 9.

[51] Gloege 181.

[52] See also Trollinger, "Report from the Front Lines of Fundamentalism: William Bell Riley's The Pilot and Its Correspondents, 1920-47," in *Religion and the Culture of Print in Modern America*, ed. Charles L. Cohen and Paul S. Boyer (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2008), 199-214.

[53] Larry ten Harmsel, with Reinder Van Til, *An Eerdmans Century 1911-2011* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 14, 23.

[54] For a history of Dutch Calvinist immigrants see James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984).

brand guaranteed the orthodoxy of American authors who might have otherwise been suspect to devout members of the Christian Reformed Church. In the 1930s, Eerdmans sold the works of fundamentalist Presbyterians such as A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield, and people associated with Moody, such as Harry Ironside, a Plymouth Brethren preacher.[55]

Zondervan, another Grand Rapids publisher, followed this model. The bookseller was founded when two brothers, Pat and Bernie Zondervan, left their uncle William Eerdmans's company and started their own in 1931. The first book they sold was by J. Gresham Machen, the fundamentalist champion in the Presbyterian church.[56] *The Virgin Birth of Christ* had been published by Harper & Brothers the year before, to disappointing sales. It was supposed to be a great salvo in the fundamentalist-modernist controversies, but the New York publisher hadn't marketed the book successfully. Harper & Brothers thought only academics would really be interested in questions of the historicity of Jesus's birth and the problem of the relationship between what German theologians termed "*Historie*" and "*Geschichte*." Harper & Brothers priced *Virgin Birth* at $5 at the height of the Great Depression and sent it out for review at the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Christian Century*, the *Anglican Theological Review*, and *Deutsche Literaturezeitung*.[57] It was also advertized to mainline ministers with a notice in the *Religious Book Club Bulletin*, a journal associated with the Federal Council of Churches.[58] The publisher was apparently unaware that across Depression-ridden America, there were religious farmers, shopkeepers, and housewives who were very interested in these questions. The Zondervan brothers knew Dutch immigrants in Michigan would be interested. They saw an opportunity. They bought the remaindered stock for $1 per book, and resold them

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[55] Ten Harmsel 44.

[56] Ruark 18.

[57] This is contra Machen's biographer, D.G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Phillipsurg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 89. Hart says Harper marketed the book to fundamentalists, but fundamentalists didn't buy the book because "professional biblical scholarship had become too specialized for the person of average intelligence," and because they differed from Machen on issues of eschatology. The evidence doesn't support this. The relatively high cost of the book alone would suggest the book was not intended for a popular audience, and certainly not for poor fundamentalists in the middle of the Great Depression. The journals that reviewed the book—*Journal of Religion*, *Expository Times, Biblical Review*, *Anglican Theological Review*, *Die Christliche Welt*, and *Theologische Studien and Kritizen* (Hart 191 ft. 13)—also suggest the intended audience was well educated. Hart shows this was Machen's aim, and it seems like it was the result as well. He writes that the book "primarily attracted the attention of academics." There's no reason to think this was not Harper's plan. It was just not a particularly financially successful plan, which made room for the Zondervans to buy remained copies at one-fifth of the cover price.

[58] Erin A. Smith, *What Would Jesus Read?: Popular Religious Books and Everyday Life in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 87-88, 103.

through Dutch Reformed distribution networks for $1.95.[59] The nascent company turned enough of a profit to prove the business model worked.

The model had its limitation, though. Zondervan could typically sell only about a thousand books using a list of names from denominational year books and business contacts developed from the brothers' time at Eerdmans.[60] The distribution network was limited. Zondervan also had to compete with the more established and more trusted Eerdmans, and sell books to a niche of book-buyers who were already pretty well served. Zondervan needed new markets. The company found those markets when it tapped into new fundamentalist distribution channels. Zondervan started advertizing books through the *Sunday School Times*, the popular fundamentalist periodical. Then Zondervan bought its own fundamentalist periodical, the *Christian Digest*, a monthly magazine with thousands of subscribers. The publisher started selling books to and through the Gideons, traveling Christian businessmen known for putting Bibles in hotel rooms across the country. Zondervan then opened a bookstore at the Winona Lake Bible Conference, a Christian retreat center in Indiana affiliated with Moody, and popularized by the famous evangelist Billy Sunday.[61]

With these new distribution channels opened, Zondervan started selling an unprecedented number of books. Zondervan had its first big hit with *John and Betty Stam: Martyrs*. The Stams were missionaries to China, killed by Communists in 1934. A Christian Reformed Church missionary wrote up the story of the Stams's death and sent the manuscript to Zondervan because he knew the Zondervan brothers personally. The publisher got the president of Moody Bible Institute to write an introduction and printed up an unprecedented 5,000 copies. *John and Betty Stam: Martyrs* sold out within a year.[62]

The books sold to fundamentalists. There were men and women across the country who now thought of themselves as part of a trans-denomination Protestant movement thanks to a trans-denominational print culture. And they were ready to buy trans-denominational books. Zondervan published a second run of *John and Betty Stam* in 1936 and a third run in 1937. By the end of the 1930s, the publisher had sold more than 20,000 copies, more than twenty times the number Zondervan could typically sell to Dutch Reformed readers. The publisher all-but shed its denominational identity, and became a major supporter of fundamentalism and then, later, evangelicalism. As the

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[59] Ruark 18.

[60] Ruark 20.

[61] See Mark Sidwell, "The History of the Winona Lake Bible Conference" (Ph.D. diss., Bob Jones University, 1988); Rick Ostrander, "The Practice of Prayer in a Modern Age: Liberals, Fundamentalists, and Prayer in the Early Twentieth Century," in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965*, ed. Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, Mark Valerie (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2006), 177-195.

[62] Ruark 38-39.

company expressed this in a creedo in 1941: "we have pledged ourselves to publish only the soundest of fundamental, evangelical literature."[63]

With these new distribution channels opened, publishers' market incentives changed. A book that appealed specifically to Methodists or Mennonites or the Dutch Reformed was not going to sell as well as a book that appealed to a broad evangelical audience. Subjects that divided denominations also divided markets. Of course, books on practical issues like marriage and children and how to live day-to-day had perhaps the broadest appeal. Not everyone involved in evangelical publishing was happy about this—complaints about the dumbing down of evangelical publishing were perennial. But the market was the market. Further, the changing dynamics spoke to a developing evangelical identity and fostered a specifically evangelical imagination. Attention to immanent things was encouraged and rewarded.

Eerdmans followed Zondervan, expanding beyond its denominational boundaries to become an evangelical publisher. Baker, another Dutch Reformed publisher from Grand Rapids, Michigan, started putting out evangelical books starting in 1939. The Bible Institute Colportage Association rebranding itself as Moody Press in 1941, and began selling "Christian Classics" to this network of book buyers. With the boom of the postwar economy and the push to reform fundamentalism into evangelicalism, this picked up pace. When the Christian Booksellers Association was founded in 1950, there were 48 publishers identifying with the evangelical market, as well as 279 bookstores.[64] The CBA simplified distribution to evangelical bookstores and the number of bookstores increased. When this happened, new, explicitly evangelical publishers sprang up. Royal Publishers—which later acquired Thomas Nelson and turned it into an evangelical company—started in 1961. Tyndale started in 1962. Gospel Light, a Sunday School curriculum publisher, began a line of evangelical books under the name Regal Books in 1965. Bethany House was founded in 1966. Multnomah Press started in 1969. Whitaker House began in 1970 and Harvest House in 1974. Good News, a tract publishing company in Wheaton, Illinois, started an evangelical book division at the end of the 1970s.

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[63] Ruark 43. The name "evangelical" has never been as important to evangelicals themselves as it has been to historians of American religion. Evangelicals have also characterized themselves as "just Christian," "born again," "Bible-believing," "Gospel-centered" "believers," "Jesus followers," and various other names. There are, however, enough instances of the word evangelical, both in the mission statements of parachurch organizations, such as here, and in the names of trans-denominational organizations such as the National Association of Evangelicals, founded in 1942, and the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, founded in 1974, to justify using "evangelical." It is an analytically useful name, for historians, but it's important not to forget that as a thing-in-the-world, evangelicalism is not like, say, Catholicism or Mormonism. It's more akin to, say, conservatism or liberalism.

[64] Bickel and Jantz 31

The market expansion was notable—and noted. The New York Times reported that religious books were the "fastest growing segment of U.S. publishing," reflecting the "spirit of the 70's." In fact, the paper reported, "firms that emphasize the evangelical and inspirational aspects of religion have been growing by leaps and bounds." One hundred publishing houses were turning out religious books, but only two of them were big, general trade publishers from New York. There were 607 new religious titles released in the fall of 1976, but, the New York Times observed, "you'll find few of them in bookstores on New York's Fifth Avenue."[65] They were, instead, being sold in evangelical bookstores. Evangelical books were established as a distinct and independent enterprise.

A survey of the bestselling books in these evangelical bookstores shows a distinct sensibility emerged with this development of evangelical print culture. The bestselling marriage-and-sex manual *The Total Woman* shared shelf space with *Love Comes Softly* and the other novels that soon followed, including Zondervan's line of historical romances, "Serenade/Saga," and contemporary romances, "Serenade/Serenata." These were stocked alongside the most popular eschatological book of the era, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which set out to demonstrate how the apparently arcane and obscure prophecies of the Bible were immediately relevant to current events. Other really popular books in these stores were the bestselling biographical testimonies to God's transforming grace, such as Merlin Carrouthers's *Prison to Praise*, Chuck Colson's *Born Again,* and Joni Eareckson Tada's *Joni*. There were also child-rearing manuals, such as James Dobson's *Dare to Discipline,* and popular, practical, theological works, such as Charles Capp's *The Tongue: A Creative Force* and Billy Graham's *Angels: God's Secret Agents*. Whatever the differences between the diversity of books, they were together in evangelical bookstores. They shared shelf space, and because of that it was also readily apparent they shared certain assumptions. The various authors agreed with each other on big points of evangelical theology, such as the relevant authority and personal applicability of the Bible. They shared a social imaginary. In evangelical bookstores in the 1970s, that social imaginary notably included ideas about the ultimate concern of human flourishing.

The bookstores created the market for these books. That is especially clear with evangelical fiction. Without the bookstores, there wasn't a sustainable market for evangelical fiction. Evangelicals had been interested in fiction a while before Oke's novel came out, but with only limited success. Eerdmans published the Baptist Argye M. Briggs's *Root Out of Dry Ground* in 1948 and sold

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[65] "Paper Back Talk," New York Times, Oct. 31, 1976.

17,500 copies.[66] A successful novel such as Sallie Lee Bell's *Until the Day Break*, published by Zondervan in 1950, could sell as many as 75,000 copies. That was a big hit. A more moderate success, such as James H. Hunter's *Thine is the Kingdom*, which Zondervan published in 1951, sold 15,000 copies.[67] Many didn't do that well. Publishers were discouraged from investing in novels. For most of the 1960s and 1970s, evangelical fiction was, at best, published sporadically.

When evangelical publishers first looked at Oke's novel, they weren't sure they could sell it. Oke sent out half a dozen query letters. Some publishers didn't respond. Zondervan requested sample chapters but then, after reviewing three, rejected the novel. The fiction did not fit the company's "present publishing schedule."[68] Bethany House asked to look at the manuscript, too. At the time, the company hadn't published any fiction. Most of the editors weren't eager to try.

One, however, championed the book. Carol Johnson, one of the few female editors in evangelical publishing at the time, liked *Love Comes Softly*. She persuaded the Bethany House editorial board to publish it. The risky acquisition quickly paid off: at the CBA convention in 1979, booksellers snatched up forty-four of the forty-five available sample copies of *Love Comes Softly*. The last was shrink-wrapped to a bookstand to keep it from disappearing.[69] The booksellers knew there was a market for the fiction. Across the country, they stocked the novel and by the end of 1979 it was one of Bethany's bestsellers.[70] It continued to be a bestseller for years to come, selling an average of 50,000 copies a year for 20 years.[71] The success convinced other publishers to produce evangelical fiction too.[72]

When they identified why the fiction was popular, the publishers notably did not talk about creating a safe alternative to secular romance novels. Nor did they describe themselves as accommodating evangelicalism to secular culture, producing a product that would adjust readers' toleran-

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[66] Some readers were scandalized to find Briggs' protagonist, a small black girl, thought Jesus was black, but the novel was selected by the Montgomery Ward book club and went through several additional printings. Montgomery Ward wasn't interested in other evangelical novels, though, so that distribution channel was closed (Ten Harmsel 132). Evangelical publishers did not establish a reliable way to distribute books to the general market until Wal-Mart started stocking their wares. See Daniel Silliman, "Publishers and Profit Motives: An Economic History of *Left Behind*," in *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*, ed., Jan Stievermann et al., (New York: Oxford, 2015), 165-188.

[67] Ruark 56-57.

[68] Laurel Oke Logan, *Janette Oke: A Heart for the Prairie* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1993), 212.

[69] Marcia Z. Nelson, "InProfile: Carol Johnson: Christian Fiction Comes Softly," Publishers Weekly, Sept. 29, 2010, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/44627-inprofile-carol-johnson-christian-fiction-comes-softly.html

[70] Logan 213.

[71] "Gold / Platinum / Diamond Book Awards," Christian Book Expo, n.d., http://christianbookexpo.com/salesawards/gpd-past-winners.php.

[72] Neal 29.

ce for secular ideas. Rather, as evangelical publishers understood evangelical novels, they ministered to people's spiritual needs. The stories were stories of abundant life, helping readers imagine spiritual fullness that could be experienced in this, immanent reality. This is apparent in two Zondervan advertizements for romance novels in 1984. In one ad, a line of contemporary romances is promoted with the promise these books "capture the imagination…while speaking to the heart." Each romance "reveals the beautiful harmony of lives united in Him." A line of historical romances likewise offers readers stories of the "the accomplishment of living—and living with and through faith." The ad explains: "Our faith is inspired when we read of these people whose lives were in many ways more difficult than our own, yet who persevered and overcame hardships triumphantly."[73] These were books for people who were hungry for conversations about ultimate reality, but who didn't think spiritual fullness would be better if it was unencumbered by food, clothes, and romance love.

As Oke put it to a newspaper reporter, her books were "light reads" that help people see they can overcome life's troubles through a right relationship with God.[74] That, the bookstores, knew, would sell to Methodists, Mennonites, and women across the country who increasingly identified as evangelical.

The history of evangelical publishing shows the print culture did not develop either as a safe alternative to the general market or in imitation of it. Rather, every step of the way, the people involved rejected the importance of the distinction between religious and secular. "Over and over again these people insist that they express their Christian commitments through making, selling, and buying," religious studies scholar Colleen McDannell writes. "Christian retailing is possible because consumers refuse to separate the sacred from the profane, the extraordinary from the ordinary, the pious from the trivial."[75]

The bookstores embody a particular relationship between evangelicals and the secular condition. They imagine Christianity in an immanent frame. Evangelical authors, publishers, distributors, booksellers and book-readers understood books as a ministry, inspiring and moving readers, equipping them and empowering them for triumphant living. They thought belief in Jesus was important because of how it affects mundane, daily lives. So they produced, distributed, and consumed books that imagined spiritual fullness as personal fulfillment.

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[73] Facsimiles in Neal 31.

[74] Douglas Todd, "Christian Authors Keeping the Faith in Romance," Chicago Tribune, Feb. 2, 2001.

[75] McDannell 266, 261.

For more than a few evangelicals in the 1970s, belief was understood as personal fulfillment, and personal fulfillment was understood as good sex. There was a great flourishing of evangelical sex-and-marriage manuals at the time. These books argued belief—making Jesus Lord of your life and accepting the Bible as your daily guide—would bring you abundant life. That abundant life, however, was not imagined in transcendent terms of mystical union with God, but as something more immediate.

Evangelicals, as religious studies scholar Amy DeRogatis has shown, had their own version of the sexual revolution in the 1970s. There were, of course, evangelicals who campaigned against changing mores. There were many who made it their business to decry American society's evolving attitudes towards sex.[76] At the same time, though less noticed, evangelicals "did not turn away from the sexual revolution," DeRogatis writes, but "simply made it their own, publishing sex manuals, running sex workshops, and holding counseling sessions to instruct husbands and wives on the best techniques for a sexually satisfied marriage."[77]

There was a general boom of books on sex in the 1970s. The most comprehensive study of the literature of human sexuality found that in the 1950s there were only sixteen new books about sex published in the United States. There were sixty-one in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the number increased to 258.[78] Evangelicals didn't follow this cultural shift, they were part of it. Early examples of evangelical books on sex include *God, Sex and You*, by M.O. Vincent, published in 1970, and *The Marriage Affair*, by J. Allan Petersen, published in 1971. These were contemporaneous with the biggest secular titles on sex. David R. Ruben's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* —(But Were Afraid to Ask!)* came out in 1969 and Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex* was published in 1972. The first really popular evangelical book to offer advice on sex was Marabel Morgan's *The Total Woman*. It was published in 1973 and became the bestselling non-fiction title of 1974. Other evangelical titles followed, including *What Wives Wish Their Husbands Knew About Sex*, by James Dobson, in 1975, and *The Act of Marriage*, co-authored by Tim and Beverly LaHaye, in 1976.

One thing these books did was assert certain norms. Though evangelical sex manuals varied quite a bit when it came to approving or disapproving of particular acts, they all affirmed the importance of monogamous relationships, the rightness of heterosexuality, and the naturalness of gen-

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[76] See, for example, Janice M. Irvine, *Talk About Sex: The Battles Over Sex Education in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002).

[77] Amy DeRogatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford, 2015), 43.

[78] Suzanne G. Frayser and Thomas J. Whitby, *Studies in Human Sexuality: A Selected Guide* 2nd ed. (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1995), xi.

der roles. They articulated what the authors claimed were biblical principles, which established the limits of acceptable sex. At the same time, the 1970s manuals sanctified sex. They legitimated personal pleasure. In fact, they elevated sexual fulfillment to such an extent that it served to authorize moral limits and prohibitions. If some things are forbidden by the Bible, these books said, it was not to deny people pleasure, but to give them truer, fuller sexual satisfaction.

It is possible to see these evangelical books about sex as offering Christians reassurance. Though some conservative strictures remain in place, evangelicals are assured they can still enjoy sex. Though their minds are set on heaven, they can still enjoy this earth. DeRogatis says the manuals, in a sense, made sex safe for evangelicals. These books eased conservative Christians' accommodation to the cultural changes of the sexual revolution. The manuals, DeRogatis writes, "allow the faithful to participate in an American culture that they often describe as 'over-sexualized,' while still affirming biblical principles. Readers of these manuals learn that, within marriage, they can fulfill all their sexual desires—even those that don't seem orthodox—and still be assured of their salvation."[79]

A close reading, however, shows that is not quite the argument. Evangelicals did not say it was possible to achieve sexual satisfaction and still be a good Christian. They said sexual satisfaction was attainable through belief. They argued belief in Jesus and the Bible was directly, causally connected to complete personal fulfillment.

Spiritual fullness, in Charles Taylor's terms, is realized in the immanent frame of the bedroom.

And not just the bedroom, as Marabel Morgan told readers in *The Total Woman*. "For a change tonight," Morgan instructed, "place a lighted candle on the floor, and seduce him under the dining-room table. Or lead him to the sofa. How about the hammock? Or in the garden? Even if you can't actually follow through, at least the suggestion is exciting. He may say, 'We don't have a hammock.' You can reply, 'Oh, darling, I forgot!'"[80] Morgan wanted women to be sexually adventurous, and sexually fulfilled, not despite their belief but because of it.

Morgan herself had a born-again experience as a student at Ohio State University in 1960. As she would recall later, she had always believed there was a God, but God seemed impossibly aloof. She grew up in an unhappy home. Her father left when she was 3. The family was poor. Her mother wasn't a good homemaker and never cooked dinner. Morgan adored her stepfather, a policeman, but then he died of a heart attack when she was 14.[81] She turned to prayer, but it brought no

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[79] DeRogatis 70.

[80] Marabel Morgan, *The Total Woman* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1973), 120-121.

[81] Marion Knox, "The New Housewife Blues," Time, March 14, 1977, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,947281-3,00.html. There are hints that Morgan's mother had mental health issues.

comfort. She went to church, but that didn't help either. "Under it all, there was that one problem," Morgan recalled. "I felt empty inside. I felt guilty. I longed for something more."[82] She became a beauty queen, winning several titles in the Ohio Miss American pageant, and got a job as a beautician.[83] She attended college and was popular in college. She made some money and bought herself nice things. She still felt unfulfilled. Then she heard about Jesus.

"A friend told me that God loved me and had a wonderful plan for my life," she recalled. "God's love, for me! And Jesus said He came to give us abundant life. That sounded good to me."[84]

The friend, working with Campus Crusade for Christ, lead 23-year-old Morgan through the steps of conversion. Morgan acknowledged she was a sinner and prayed the sinner's prayer, inviting Jesus into her life. When she did, "the lights came on."[85] For someone like Morgan, Jesus's death on the cross was understood as substitutionary atonement for sin. Accepting Christ's sacrifice meant you would go to heaven when you died. Heaven, though, fades to the background. The focus is on the here-and-now. When Morgan prayed the prayer, she described feeling "plugged in" to the greatest possible power. She felt really, truly alive.

Morgan dropped out of college her sophomore year and went to work for Crusade. She went to the University of Miami with the parachurch organization to witness to college students. There she met Charlie Morgan, a law student two years her junior. They dated and got married in 1964. He became a tax lawyer and she became his wife. They had two daughters. They got a split-level home with a pool in a nice neighborhood in Miami.

Quickly, however, this American dream grew stale. In a few short years, the Morgan marriage lost its romance. "We went though the motions," Morgan wrote, "as though everything was just fine. But it wasn't."[86] By the end of the 1960s, the couple barely even talked. For a while, Morgan tried to convince herself this was just how it was. Young love matured, life settled down, and everything, honestly, got a little bit boring. That was only to be expected.

Morgan didn't accept that, though. She believed God had promised her abundant life. She believed that promise applied to her split-level home and the life she was making there. It applied to her marriage to a tax lawyer. She wanted abundant life now.

Her malaise might have lead her to feminism. Morgan's story exactly fit the pattern Betty Friedan described in *The Feminine Mystique*. She could have recognized her own unhappiness in

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[82] Morgan 173.

[83] Knox.

[84] Morgan 175.

[85] Morgan 178.

[86] Morgan 18.

Friedan's description of "a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the 20th century in the United States." Just as Friedan said, Morgan too, as she went about the daily grind of household chores, struggled to articulate how unfulfilled she was, to "ask even of herself the silent question—'Is this all?'"[87] Morgan could have been the poster child for second-wave feminism, and come, like many at the time, to see herself as trapped by the gender expectations of a patriarchal society.

But Morgan didn't pick up *The Feminine Mystique*. Though the book felt to some as if it "pulled the trigger on history," as one of Friedan's obituaries noted in 2006, to the evangelical housewife in Miami it made no impression.[88] Morgan would later tell a reporter she didn't even know there was a women's movement going on at the time. "I had a little baby," she explained. "I was knee-deep in diapers."[89] Besides, she wasn't interested feminist-style liberation, especially if it meant divorce. Divorce was the worst thing she could think of. What she wanted was a great marriage.

"I think in superlatives," Morgan wrote. "I wanted the best."[90]

She committed herself to figuring out how to get it. "I read until I felt cross-eyed at night," she wrote in *The Total Woman*. "I took self-improvement courses. I studied books on psychology. I studied the Bible. Over and over certain principles emerged and I began to apply them to my marriage—with stunning results."[91]

The principles Morgan discovered were pretty much the opposite of what Friedan and other feminists were advocating. What she learned was wifely submission. The problem in most marriages, according to Morgan's reading, was that there were two egos, clashing. There were two opinions, two views, too often locked in a struggle of wills. The solution to conflict was submission. The wife should do what the husband wanted. "Adapting to his activities, his friends, and his food is not always easy," she admitted, "but it's right."[92] Morgan based this on the Bible, citing, in particular, Ephesians 5:22, where Paul instructs women to submit to their husbands "as unto the Lord." It was part of God's design of marriage, she said, that the woman should submit to the man. Submission wasn't just good in principle, either. It also worked. Morgan tried it, and her marriage changed.

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[87] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 15.

[88] Patricia Sullivan, "Betty Friedan, 1921-2006: Voice of Feminism's 'Second Wave,'" Washington Post, Feb. 5, 2006.

[89] Jean Marbella, "Totally Marabel," Sun Sentinel (Miami, FL), Sept. 11, 1985.

[90] Morgan 1, 9.

[91] Morgan 22-23.

[92] Morgan 74.

She started submitting to her husband Charlie and noticed an immediate improvement. There was romance again. Life was full again. The couple talked as they hadn't talked in a long time, real "soul-to-soul communication."[93] It was like it was when they were dating. "We began to act like teenagers in love, not like tired, programmed, settled, married folks," Morgan wrote.[94] One night, shortly after she began applying the principles she had discovered, Charlie woke Morgan up after they had been asleep for several hours just to tell her he loved her. Then he started buying her gifts like he never had before. He had a new refrigerator delivered, out of the blue, just because he knew she wanted one.

Morgan was convinced she had discovered something revolutionary.

She decided she had to share. She packaged the principles into a seminar in 1971 and called it "The Total Woman." In living rooms and church fellowship halls, Morgan taught women the secrets she had learned. She explained, for example, the importance of the four As: to accept, admire, adapt to, and appreciate your husband. One homework assignment instructed women to write down a list of things they liked about their husbands and a second list of all his faults. They were then told to throw the second list away. In another exercise, each woman was told to practice telling her husband she loved his body. "Practice," Morgan instructed, "until it comes out naturally."[95] For another homework assignment, the women were told to surprise their husbands with sexy costumes.

"Your husband needs you to fulfill his daydreams," Morgan wrote. "Never let him know what to expect when he opens the front door; make it like opening a surprise package. You may be a smoldering sexpot, or an all-American fresh beauty. Be a pixie or a pirate—a cowgirl or a showgirl. Keep him off guard."[96]

A number of prominent women took Morgan's first seminars and publicly endorsed the Total Woman system. Sue Borman, wife of Apollo 8 astronaut Frank Borman, endorsed the classes, as did American pop singer (and future anti-gay rights activist) Anita Bryant.[97] Bobbie Evans, wife of Dolphins's offensive tackle Norm Evans, said Morgan's advice transformed her troubled marriage.[98] Evans was one of eleven wives of Miami Dolphins football players who took the semi-

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[93] Morgan 23.

[94] Morgan 23.

[95] Morgan 61.

[96] Morgan 95.

[97] Morgan 145, acknowledgements.

[98] Morgan 67-68. See also O.J. Parsons, "God, 'Total Marriage' Preserve Marriage," The Spokesman-Review (Spokane, WA), Oct. 2, 1976.

nar in 1971. The next season, the team went undefeated and won the Super Bowl—a fact Morgan didn't mind mentioning when she promoted her seminars.[99]

The seminars were popular and Morgan turned Total Woman into a franchise. Bobbie Evans was one of the first teachers. She taught the four As across the country, from St. Joan of Arc Catholic Church in Boca Raton, Florida, to Overlake Christian Church in Kirkland, Washington.[100] By 1975, there were more than 70 instructors teaching the course.[101] The women who attended the seminars were mostly white, middle class, and religious, though age range and education level varied widely and about one-third had jobs outside the home.[102] The classes cost $15, with instructors keeping $10 and sending Morgan $5.[103] Many seminars were well attended, according to local newspaper reports from the time. Two hundred women showed up for the classes in Saginaw, Michigan.[104] Courses held in a rented Unitarian church in Waukesha, Wisconsin, were attended by 112 women.[105] Eighty-four took the seminar in a Methodist church in Muncie, Indiana.[106] In Manitoba, Canada, one woman named Arnette McCrae estimated she taught the Total Woman course to 25,000 women over six years, starting when she was 24.[107]

Morgan received testimonials about the power of the Total Woman principles from all over. She got as many as 100 letters per day.[108] Many women found the exercises and homework assignments were powerful symbolic acts. They were icebreakers, as Time magazine's Marion Knox reported after surveying a sampling of Total Woman graduates, "that helped re-establish the habits of consideration and generosity after years of mutual resentment and marital coldness."[109] One woman wrote Morgan from San Juan, for example. She was in a hotel suite overlooking the ocean on a va-

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[99] Morgan 188. See also Vivian Brown, "Putting the 'Sizzle' in a Marriage: Or Why the Miami Dolphins Won the Super Bowl," Free Lance-Star (Fredericksburg, VA), April 22, 1975; Betty Jean Miller, "'Total Woman' Shows Results: Happy Mates," Evening Independent (St. Petersburg, FL), May 15, 1973.

[100] "'Total Woman' Course Set," Boca Raton News (Boca Raton, FL), Jan 28, 1977; "Evans Teaches Total Woman through April 30," Isiquaah Press (Isiquaah, WA), March 28, 1979.

[101] Andy Taylor, "Marabel and Charlie Morgan: Being a 'Total Woman' May Mean Love Under the Dinner Table," People Magazine, April 7, 1975, 44.

[102] Knox.

[103] Mary Beth Murphy, "For 'Total Woman' Her Man is King," Milwaukee Sentinel (Milwaukee, WI), Feb. 26, 1975.

[104] "'Total Woman' Learns to Play the Love Game," Argus-Press (Owosso, MI) Nov. 30, 1974.

[105] Margo Houston, "Total Woman Adds Up," Milwaukee Journal (Milwaukee, WI), March 31, 1975.

[106] Joyce Maynard, "The Liberation of the Total Woman," New York Times Magazine, Sept. 28, 1975, 48.

[107] "'Total Woman' Course Offered," Gazette (Montreal, Canada) Aug. 20, 1979.

[108] Brown.

[109] Knox.

cation her husband booked after she started submitting to him. "That course is powerful stuff!" she wrote on a postcard. "Those four A's are the key to making my man come alive!"[110]

Numerous women wrote to say they had become more sexually adventurous. They took Morgan's advice and put on costumes for their husbands. A physical therapist in Wisconsin met her husband at the door in a bikini and ski boots. It had the desired affect.[111] Another woman reported that, since she didn't have a sexy costume, she wrapped herself in Saran Wrap.[112] In Oklahoma, a woman repurposed a Halloween costume. She surprised her husband with a gorilla mask and a raincoat, wearing nothing underneath.[113] Another woman who took the course at a Southern Baptist church greeted her husband in the evening wearing only sheer stockings, high heels, and an apron. He reportedly shouted, "Praise the Lord!"[114]

There was an eager audience for the Total Woman message. The book became a bestseller. The evangelical publisher Revell printed 7,500 in 1973, and sold out quickly. Then Simon & Schuster bought the paperback rights for $600,000. The New York general trade publisher had had success with *The Joy of Sex* and believed it could sell a lot of *The Total Woman* as well. Simon & Schuster put out 2.5 million paperback copies in 1974, priced at $1.95 each.[115] It became the best-selling non-fiction of the year.[116] *The Total Woman* even outsold the definitive account of President Richard Nixon's political demise, *All the President's Men*, by 100,000 copies.[117] At the end of 1975, it was outselling Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, the classic feminist novel that celebrated the "zipless fuck."[118] By 1977, nearly 300,000 people had attended a Total Woman seminar and more than 3 million copies of *The Total Woman* had been sold.[119]

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[110] Morgan 86.

[111] Houston.

[112] This anecdote in particular captured the popular imagination. It was a plot point on an episode of the sitcom *Maude* ("Feminine Fulfillment," first aired Feb. 28, 1977) and makes an appearance in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, Fannie Flag's award-winning 1987 novel, later turned into a movie starring Kathy Bates. The Saran Wrap costume has been widely misattributed to the book, but was actually a reader's recommendation. See Rebecca L. Davis, "Eroticized Wives: Evangelical Marriage Guides and God's Plan for the Family," in *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desire, and Sexuality in Christianity*, ed. Margaret D. Kamitsuka (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010) 165-180, here 327, ft. 3.

[113] Morgan, *Total Joy* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976), 139.

[114] Morgan, *Total Woman*, 97.

[115] Patricia McCormack, " 'Total Woman' Author Gives God All the Credit for Book," Pittsburgh Press (Pittsburgh, PA) July 2, 1976.

[116] Taylor.

[117] McCormack.

[118] "Best Sellers," New York Times, Nov. 16, 1975.

[119] Knox; John Leonard, "Total Woman and Funny Women," New York Times, Jan. 9, 1977.

The book and its message also offended people. *The Total Woman* condemned wives to subservient drudgery, critics said. *The Total Woman* was old fashioned, full of religious ideas unsuitable for modern life and modern women. This was the professional opinion of William Masters and Virginia Johnson, the groundbreaking sex researchers who were working on their third book when *The Total Woman* was published. Masters and Johnson presented their work as scientific. They said Morgan, in contrast, was promoting "out-of-style dogma."[120] Many critics framed their criticism with this sort of opposition: out-of-date vs. up-to-date, anti-feminist vs. feminist, religious vs. secular.

Female journalists, reporting on Morgan and the Total Woman seminars, frequently pointed out how out of touch Morgan was. One reporter said Morgan seemed "caught in a '50s time warp," she was so out of step. "You wonder," the reporter wrote, "if she has ever heard of feminism, equality for women, opinions beyond roles in the kitchen and bedroom."[121] Another reporter openly mocked the Total Woman program. Morgan made ridiculous assumptions about a modern woman's daily life, Margo Houston wrote in the Milwaukee Journal. Houston couldn't call her husband at 4:30 and whisper into the phone, "I crave your body," because she was stuck in her daily commute home from the office at that time of day. She couldn't surprise her husband with a lunch-time tryst at his office, either. "Marabel," Houston said, "I only get a half hour for lunch and my husband works 20 miles away."[122] For most women, modern life wasn't like Morgan thought it was.

The harshest critics made comparisons to slavery. Sociologist Jean Chenger said the Total Woman program should have been titled "Yassuh Boss" because it "relegates women to the position of second-class citizen, a master-slave relationship."[123] In a long piece published by New York Times Magazine, journalist Joyce Maynard began by reflecting there must have been slaves who didn't want to leave the familiar bondage of their plantations when they heard about the Emancipation Proclamation. "There are some women, too, who don't want to be freed," she wrote. "There is a book for these women. It's called, 'The Total Woman.'"[124]

As the critics articulated their criticisms, however, the binary terms of the opposition became less distinct. The old and out-of-date was also, from a certain perspective, kind of modern. The offensive religious elements were also, in some ways, not religious. The anti-feminism contained

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[120] Knox.

[121] Marbella.

[122] Houston, "One of the Gals Writes Marabel," Milwaukee Journal, March 31, 1975.

[123] "According to the Gospel of 'Total Woman': Ten Commandments of Love Cost $15," The Citizen (Ottowa, Canada), Dec. 4, 1974.

[124] Joyce Maynard, "The Liberation of the Total Woman," New York Times Magazine, Sept. 28, 1975, 9.

recognizable elements of feminism. The Total Woman program could not be neatly and clearly opposed to secular culture.

Two feminists sat through a seminar taught by Bobbie Evans in 1977, for example, and critiqued it for a newspaper reporter. Many of their comments were snarky. One said the program wouldn't really fix these women's real problems. It was just a Band-Aid. The other said it was even worse than that: "It's a Band-Aid on a cancer." At the end of the sessions, though, the women said they were "surprised by the streak of feminism underlying much of Ms. Evan's discussion."[125] They then critiqued Evans for not insisting the ultimate answer to women's daily problems is to be found in God, even though that's not what they believed.

Maynard, reporting for New York Times Magazine, also saw the feminism in the anti-feminism. Though she started by comparing the women who read *The Total Woman* to slaves who didn't want to be freed, she came to identify and sympathize with them, to a certain extent.

Maynard went to a seminar at a United Methodist Church in Muncie, Indiana. Most of the more than eighty women, she said, were in their 20s or 30s. They were white, culturally conservative, Midwestern women. They almost all had bobbed hair and gold cross necklaces. These were women who built their lives around their marriages in a town where, Maynard reported, "a lot of canning goes on—also sewing and bowling and barbecuing and churchgoing."[126] Yet, though it seemed paradoxical, they had a sisterhood of the sort feminists hope for. They had that "instant recognition and understanding among women who've never met before, based solely on the common experience of femaleness and marriage."[127] They came together for the Total Woman seminar and they learned and shared and felt connected and empowered. Wasn't that a good thing?

Maynard's perspective shifted when heard the story of one woman who had always undressed in her closet so her husband wouldn't see her naked. She heard another woman say she was pretty sure she had never had an orgasm. The woman wanted to know if she would know, for sure, if she did orgasm.

"This Total Woman business," one seminar attendee explained to Maynard, "is giving women permission to be alive."[128]

Maynard felt conflicted about this. On the one hand, the Total Woman teachings seemed to demean women. On the other hand, the women seemed to be better because of the classes. She would prefer they rally to feminism and support political causes such as the Equal Rights Amend-

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[125] Audrie Krause, "The Key to Marital Success—or Pop Pyschology and Watered-Down Feminism?", Boca Raton News (Boca Raton, FL), Oct. 25, 1977.

[126] Maynard 48.

[127] Maynard 52.

[128] Maynard 58.

ment. At the same time, the Total Woman program spoke directly to their real-life situations. "For them," Maynard concluded, "Total Woman must be more liberating than anything a constitutional amendment could provide."[129]

Margo Houston, the Milwaukee Journal reporter, similarly felt the terms of opposition become conflicted. Attending a seminar for the newspaper, she started out completely alienated by the religious trappings of the Total Woman program. She told her readers she just ignored the parts where the instructor quoted the Bible. But then, as women started recounting their experiences and their struggles in their marriages, it didn't seem churchy. When the women shared their dreams and desires, Houston reported, they weren't that different from what you could read in Cosmopolitan, the New York magazine where feminist Helen Gurley Brown told women they could "have it all," love, sex, and money.[130]

It was a comparison Morgan herself recognized. "I realize that much of it sounds like something out of a slick magazine," she wrote in *The Total Woman*, "and in a sense it is."[131] Morgan was promising people personal fulfillment. She believed the second-wave feminist and working women and evangelical housewives all wanted the same thing, and they were right to want what they wanted. They just disagreed about how to get it. Morgan's answer was belief in Jesus.

As she explained it, all these women had a God-shaped hole in their hearts and their lives. "God is waiting and wanting to fill your vacuum," Morgan wrote, "to make you complete. Total. Right now you can become a Total Woman."[132] If they accepted Jesus into their lives, they would be really have it all. They would have abundant life. It wouldn't only save their souls, it would make sex better.

This was the defining argument of *The Total Woman* and all the evangelical sex manuals in the 1970s and after. Even evangelicals who were committed to the cultural wars and opposing the sexual revolution made this argument. Tim LaHaye, who was deeply involved in the organization of the religious right and would later co-author the *Left Behind* novels discussed in chapter 4, said that God had a wonderful plan for the life of every human. Part of that wonderful plan was amazing sex.

"I am convinced that God never intended any Christian couple to spend a lifetime in the sexual wilderness of orgasmic malfunction," LaHaye wrote. "If it isn't a pleasurable experience, He has something better in store for you."[133]

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[129] Maynard 65.

[130] Houston, "One of the Gals Writes Marabel," Milwaukee Journal, March 31, 1975.

[131] Morgan, *Total Woman*, 26-27.

[132] Morgan, *Total Woman*, 179.

[133] Tim and Beverly LaHaye, *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 147.

Belief was imagined in the context of the condition of secularity.

Romance, Human and Divine

Love Comes Softly was a very different sort of book. It was different in comparison to *Total Woman* and it was also something new for evangelical publishers, booksellers, and book buyers. On the other hand, it was very familiar. The novel told a story about finding abundant life. It invited readers to identify with a woman on the frontier, doing chores, stuck in a marriage, and learning that God had a wonderful plan for her life.

When Janette Oke sat down to write at her dining room table in Didsbury, Alberta, in the summer of 1977, she wasn't thinking of the history of evangelical publishing or evangelical books about sex. She was thinking, instead, about her own desire to flourish. She wanted to write. She was 42, the mother of four teenagers, the wife of a Bible college president, a part time accountant, and she dreamed of being a novelist. She had written stories as a child. She had written some poetry over the years too, but she was so busy with her children and church work and her accounting jobs that she couldn't really write seriously. She once looked at a mail-order writing course offered by the Christian Writers Institute, in Wheaton, Illinois. She scored well on the aptitude test, but decided the course was too expensive.[134] She still had the dream, though.

Oke was an avid reader. Her daughter, Laurel Oke Logan, says Oke usually read more than one hundred books per year.[135] Many of these were popular fiction, romances one could find at shopping centers in nearby Calgary. At the time, there was a notable diversification of romance novels. Previously, the popular paperback market had been dominated by gothic romances. When paperback publishers figured out how to cheaply produce romance novels and distribute them to women, they had notable hits with Phyllis Whitey's *Thunder Heights* and Victoria Holt's *Mistress of Mellyn*, both gothic romances published in 1960.[136] The market was soon flooded with similarly themed fictions. Between 1969 and 1972, there were about 400 new gothic romances published every year. There was then a slump in sales from 1972 to '74, and published started to look for something new, something different.[137] The change came with Kathleen E. Woodwiss's paperback original *The Flame and the Flower*, published by Avon in 1972. The book was described by indus-

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[134] Logan 207.

[135] Logan 207.

[136] Radway 31.

[137] Radway 33.

try experts as a "sweet savage romance" or an "erotic historical."[138] It is considered the ultimate "bodice ripper." In fact, in the novel, the heroine's bodice is actually ripped.

In *The Flame and the Flower*, "swashes are buckled; buckles are swashed," write Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, in their critical feminist appreciation of the romance genre. They say that in the 1970s, "there was a veritable arms race" among romance writers "to see who could come up with the moistest grottoes and the most potent (and jutting) spears of manhood so they could titillate without being considered obscene."[139]

To Oke, however, they did seem obscene. She thought some of the newer novels coming out weren't as "clean" as she would have preferred. They also didn't include faith. Even when the novels were set in a time and place that was really quite religious, they didn't talk about the characters' religious beliefs or their spiritual journeys. Oke started thinking about writing a story that was a romance but also about belief.

"She began to pray in earnest," Logan writes, in her biography of her mother. "She spent many nights lying in bed, working through the plot, living with the characters, and thinking of the theme—and praying."[140]

Oke talked to God about her novel. She told God the desire of her heart and said she trusted God wanted what was best for her. In prayer, she recommitted herself to submit to God's plans for her and for her novel. This, for her, was what it meant to believe in God.

Oke became a Christian at age 10 in the summer of 1945. She was at a camp run by the Missionary Church, a denomination of Anabaptists influenced by Wesleyan and Higher Life theology.[141] During the week, the young Oke, then named Janette Steeves, sat through multiple altar calls. The children, gathered from the Canadian prairie to the shores of Gull Lake, were asked, again and again, if they wanted to yield their lives to Jesus. The camp evangelist was a woman named Beatrice Hedegaard, one of the denomination's "Sister Workers" who ministered to the "needy prairies" of the Canadian West.[142] Hedegaard emphasized that belief was not just a matter of intellectually agreeing that God existed and that Jesus lived and died for your sins. Truly believing, Hedegaard said, meant turning your life over to Jesus, and truly, totally submitting to God. One night, the young Janette went forward.

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[138] Radway 34.

[139] Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* , New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009, 11-12.

[140] Logan 208.

[141] See Dennis D. Engbrecht, "Merging and Diverging Streams: The Colorful and Complex History of the Missionary Church," History of the Missionary Church, mcusa.org.

[142] See Janette Oke, *The Calling of Emily Evans* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany, 1990), 11-13.

As she described the moment more than forty years later, Oke remembered she felt free of shame. She had been worried about being embarrassed, standing in front of the other kids and moving to the front at the invitation. She wasn't, though. She felt free from shame and from the fear of shame. It was just a "wonderful realization of forgiveness."[143]

This became the core idea of how Oke understood belief. She thought of it as an act of submission. You should submit to God and trust God. "God's way is the best way," as one of her favorite hymns put it. "God's way is the right way / I'll trust in Him always / He knoweth the best."[144] If you did believe, you could fully submit, and if you submitted, Oke thought, God would give you abundant life. In your day-to-day experience, in the mundane details, you would be triumphant and could live victoriously.

So when Oke felt this strong, renewed desire to write a novel, she knew she had to submit it to God. "I'll give it to you," Oke prayed, "so you'll be free to bless it, Lord."[145] Then she felt what she always felt when she yielded to God: liberated, empowered, and free.

She started writing immediately.

She wrote the book "in little snatches." Working longhand, she wrote a little in the morning before going to her accounting job at a concrete company. She wrote for a few minutes on her lunch break. When the family went on vacation, Oke even wrote on a pad of paper on her knees in the front seat of the car. She finished the first draft in three weeks.[146] It was a romance novel, but also about belief, about how a woman learned to trust God and submit, and then could truly have abundant life.

The protagonist, Martha "Marty" Claridge, is in some ways a typical romance heroine. She awakens to love. At the same time, she is an evangelical heroine. She learns to trust God, to trust that God will work things out in her life. The romance narrative is also a conversion narrative.

The story starts with a marriage of convenience. Marty has only just buried her husband, Clem Claridge, when a man introduces himself. "My name be Clark Davis," he says, in the frontier dialect unique to the novel, "an' it 'pears to me thet you an' me be in need of one another."[147] The proposal shocks Marty. "*I'd rather die than marry* you," she thinks, "*or any man*."[148] Clark ex-

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[143] Logan 94.

[144] "God's Way," written by Lida Shrivers Leech in 1911. Leech was the organist at a Methodist church in Camden, New Jersey and the composer of more than 500 hymns. See Ernest K. Emurian, *Living Stories of Famous Hymns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1955). For Oke's love of the hymn, see Logan 156.

[145] Logan 209.

[146] Logan 210.

[147] Oke 19.

[148] Oke 20. All italics and irregular spellings original.

plains, however, that this will be a practical arrangement. It is a trade: She needs someone to provide for her and a place to live, at least until spring comes and she can return east. He needs someone to take of his daughter, "a little 'un, not much more'n a mite," since his wife has died.[149] They can help each other out.

It is not clear why marriage is necessary for the arrangement. It's not an issue of morality. Clark is not suggesting they have sex. They will not share a bed or even a room. Clark commits to sleep in a lean-to, outside the cabin, giving what was his and his wife's bedroom to Marty and his daughter, Missie. He is asking Marty "jest to be Missie's mama," he says. "Nothin' more." The marriage is perhaps thought of as an issue of propriety, necessary because people would think they were living "as man and wife," if they were living together in the small frontier cabin. But that's not explained. The marriage is just described in the novel as "the only sensible thing to do."[150] Marty is forced to agree and this sets up the major conflict in the novel, the conflict between her situation and her heart's desire.

She hates the idea of marrying Clark, but also accepts that this is how it has to be. She does need help. The wagon she and her husband were driving is broken down. One of their horses is lost, the other dead. She has no shelter for the winter. She doesn't have enough money to pay for help. Also she's pregnant. The facts of the situation compel her to accept help on whatever terms it's offered. She agrees to Clark's proposal, but it's really not a choice. She doesn't love this man. Nor does she expect to.

The romance novel heroine does not even believe she can find love. She loved her late husband, who "had captured her heart and her hand," but tragedy has taken that from her. Now there's just life. Just the West. "I hate this country!" she says. "I hate it! I hate him!"[151] She feels like she is forced to give up a dream, to give up her desire for a good life, the desire to be personally fulfilled. The thought of it almost overwhelms her. She tries not to think about it. "She couldn't face too far into the future," Oke explains, because "she was sure if she let her mind focus on the weeks and months ahead of her in this tiny cabin with a husband she had not chosen and a child who was not hers, she'd break under the weight of it all."[152] Marty thinks she will have to settle. She will have to accept that this is life, day after day without love.

There are signs, though, that Clark cares for her. He wants something better for her. In one early scene, he worries she doesn't have a bonnet to protect her from the sun. "What did he care

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[149] Oke 19.

[150] Oke 24.

[151] Oke 21.

[152] Oke 70.

about the hot sun on her head?" Marty wonders.[153] But he does. Later, Marty expects him to be mad when she makes a mistake while doing the chores. He's not. In fact, he seems to assume she's doing her best, and to trust that.[154] In another scene, Clark urges Marty not to work too hard. She has thrown herself into the chores, learning how to cook and clean, struggling to care for the child. He encourages her to take a break.[155] Clark is even sensitive when he eventually learns Marty is pregnant. He immediately offers to raise the child as his own. He also says, without prompting, that since it is important to Marty, he will make it clear to people that the child is her first husband's, not his, even as he provides for the baby. Clark, it turns out, is gentle, thoughtful, and kind.

Marty doesn't immediately see this. Or perhaps she doesn't understand what she sees. At first, she describes Clark as a "cold, miserable man."[156] She softens a bit when he is not harsh with her and she remembers he has also lost a spouse. She stops being angry at him. Still, though, she "felt him to be a stranger to avoid whenever she could."[157] She softens a bit more when they have the conversation about the coming child. When Clark makes it clear he understands about the baby, and how the child's paternity is important to her, Marty notes she is still trying to "sort out this man."[158] She doesn't know exactly what to think. She starts to reconsider, thinking her initial judgement might have been too severe.

The reader can see what Marty does not: Clark cares for her. He does not want her to accept the death of her dreams and the deadening of desire. He wants what's best for her. He wants her to thrive and be happy.

The novel suggests that Clark feels this way because of his evangelical belief. He extends grace to Marty because he has received grace from God. He wants what is best for her because God wants what is best for her. She should have what she wants, because that is God's greatest desire, that people flourish.

This is expressed in a speech Clark gives Marty the first morning. Clark starts out just explaining where things are, so Marty can find what she needs to do the chores. There are vegetables in the root cellar. Some canned goods. They are low on fresh meat, but there's pork in the smoke house and there will be more meat when the weather turns cold and he can hunt and there are fish, too, in the nearby creek, and an orchard of young fruit trees that might bear fruit next year. "I'm a

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[153] Oke 23.

[154] Oke 64.

[155] Oke 64.

[156] Oke 21.

[157] Oke 97.

[158] Oke 127.

tellin' ya this," Clark says, "so's ya be knowing the lay o' the land, so to speak." He doesn't mean just the physical lay of the land, though. All of this, he says, is God's blessing. God has provided. That means, he explains, "ya don't need to apologize for askin' fer what ya be needin'."[159] Clark is, in part, making a theological point. He believes that God takes care of him. He believes that, because he has a right relationship with God, God is his shepherd, and cares for him.

Clark, Marty will soon learn, has a very personal relationship with God.

Clark is an unusual romance hero. In Pamela Regis's study of the romance genre, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, she writes that the heroes in the twentieth-century novels tend to fall into two types. Some are "sentimental." These male characters are wounded, either physically, psychologically, or emotionally, and need to be healed by the heroine. The other type of hero is the "dangerous hero." The dangerous heroes were especially popular in the 1970s, though they can be found throughout the genre. These characters are portrayed as wild men who need to be tamed by the heroine.[160] They can sometimes even seem like they're the villain, not the hero. In fact, more than one such hero rapes the heroine in these novels. Rape scenes were "practically de rigueur Back in the Day," according to Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, feminist fans of romance genre who are critical of what they call the "Old Skool" romances of the 1970s and '80s.[161] The threat of danger is certainly present in Oke's depiction of Clark, but the heroine quickly learns he is not that sort of man. The fiction also hints at the idea the hero is wounded—he is a recent widow, after all. But he's not that kind of character, either. He's an evangelical hero, who loves God and only wants the heroine to trust that he wants the best for her.

Slowly, as Marty makes meals and cleans and sews, she realizes the kind of man this man is. She starts to trust him. She starts to believe again, and feel like herself again, and she starts to imagine that she might be able to have a fulfilled life. She is awakening to love, and at the same time, developing a personal relationship with God.

When the story starts, Marty is almost entirely unfamiliar with Christianity. She has never been to church, "apart from marryin' an' buryin'."[162] She has never heard a prayer outside of church, and actually doesn't think she has ever known anyone who has ever said such a prayer. She hasn't read the Bible. She believes in God, but just in the sense of intellectually agreeing that God exists. When she suffers, God feels aloof. She has not yielded her life to God.

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[159] Oke 43.

[160] Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2003), 112-114.

[161] Wendell and Tan 13. For a survey of the range of ways rape in romance novels has been interpreted by feminist critics, see Wendell and Tan, 136-147.

[162] Oke 30

There is a little organized religion on the prairie, but not much. There are no churches and no regularly scheduled religious services. A traveling preacher—a circuit rider, perhaps—comes through, but only on occasion. Some of the pioneers seem to like the man, though one gossip speculates "thet the visitin' parson had him something to hide, or he'd settle himself to one place."[163] Marty has only a vague impression of him, even after he buries her husband and preforms her wedding. The reader, likewise, is given no clear picture. Even his name is uncertain. At the beginning of the novel, he is "Pastor Magnuson."[164] Later, he is "Pastor Simmons."[165] The novel does not note the name has changed, but is explicit this is the same man.[166] It would seem to be a continuity mistake, but if no one caught the mistake it's because it doesn't really matter. The name is not important. To Marty and to the novel, the minister is merely a functionary. At Clem's funeral he just "spoke the words that were fitting for the occasion."[167] That's how religion is, for the heroine.

The only hint that belief might be something more than that solemnizing formality comes from the one personal thing the minister does when he buries Marty's husband. Before he leaves and continues on his circuit, he turns to Marty "and in a simple, straightforward manner took her hands in his and wished God to be very near her in the coming months."[168] Marty has no response. She's not even sure what that would mean.

Even basic Christian ideas confuse her. She's apparently never heard Psalm 23. When she does hear it, "Marty's mind kept puzzling over the Scripture passage."[169] She puzzles over the metaphor, wondering "*How could the Lord be a shepherd*?" She wonders too about the life application. Can anyone just take the words of the psalmist and make them their own? When Clark reads them aloud, is he also saying them for himself? Can other people also be comforted by this shepherd-like God? Marty notes that "Bible reading hadn't been a part of her upbringing."[170]

Marty is introduced to Christianity through Clark. For him, belief brings comfort. He doesn't talk about Christianity as a worldview. Belief is not about an epistemological theory (as it is in *This Present Darkness*, considered in chapter two). Clark doesn't talk about it in terms of intellectual assent to ideas, either. Belief is not about facts for him (the way it is in *Left Behind*, consid-

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[163] Oke 185.

[164] Oke 17.

[165] Oke 209.

[166] Oke 207.

[167] Oke 17.

[168] Oke 25.

[169] Oke 105.

[170] Oke 105.

ered in chapter three). Clark also never mentions eternity or God's transcendent purposes. For Clark, belief is personal and relevant right now, in this world. Everything, for him, fits in an immanent frame. It's all understood in terms of personal fulfillment and flourishing.

This is apparent in Clark's prayers. He prays a lot and Marty is initially shocked by this. The first day in his home, when he prays before eating, she "sat wide-eyed looking at this man before her, who spoke, eyes closed, to a God she did not see or know—and him not even a preacher."[171] It's not just that he is peculiarly devout, he is also so familiar with God. He addresses God as father, and assumes God is interested in the details of his daily life. He prays about the weather and the livestock. He compliments his new wife's hard work. He tells God how he's feeling.

Clark also appeals to the Bible regularly—but just a few, specific passages. These invariably emphasize the idea that God cares for people personally. Clark reads Psalm 23 several times. He leans heavily on the idea that when bad things happen, that can be understood as God's rod and staff, intended ultimately for his comfort. Clark also reads from Psalm 121, which says, "I will lift mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help."[172] For Clark this is the point. As he understands the Bible, the message of the book is that God, who runs the whole world, cares about him and the apparently mundane details of his life.

Marty starts to refer to God as "Clark's God." It's not a phrase Clark would disagree with. As the novel imagines it, God does, in a sense, belongs to him. Clark, for example, consistently links God with his own prosperity. In his four years in the West, he has done well. He has chickens, pigs, and cows, a vegetable garden, and grain fields, and they've all thrived. Clark explains this by saying "we have us real good land and the Lord be blessin' it."[173] God, as imagined here, is very interested in blessing this man's farm. Clark does not understand his own life to be part of some larger, divine plan. Rather, he understands the divine plan to be oriented around his own flourishing. He has a personal relationship with God and God, in an important way, belongs to him.

There are few statements about God's glory, which could be seen as speaking of transcendence. The character of God is always articulated in immanent terms, though. Clark speaks of the goodness of God, for example, but not in an ontological sense, where God is imagined as all-good or absolutely good. Rather, Clark talks about God being good in the context of God providing. "Thank ya fer this food ya provide," he prays in one scene, "by yer goodness."[174] God is the Almighty, but that almightiness is understood anthropocentrically.

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[171] Oke 30.

[172] Oke 41.

[173] Oke 43.

[174] Oke 30.

Clark does think that God is, in some sense, beyond human comprehension. What that means for him, however, is that humans do not always know how God's actions will result in human flourishing. They just have to trust that it will. When a storm comes and cancels plans for a Christmas party, Clark prays, "sometimes, Lord, we be puzzlin' 'bout your ways." Then, however, he suggests that God sent the storm at that time so that none of the neighbors would be caught outside. Clark thanks God for this. The puzzle is thus solved. Clark can't know, definitively, that that was God's purpose in sending the storm, but it's a good enough explanation for him. Similarly, when his prayers for "an extray cow or two" go unanswered, Clark says this is because God knows it's better for him not to have what he asked for than to have what he asked for.[175] There isn't a higher purpose.

With more serious tragedies, this trust that God always and only acts in the best interest of the believer can be more difficult. The problems of human suffering can, of course, cause people to have serious questions about belief (as in *The Shack*, considered in chapter five). For Clark, this isn't what happens, though. He trusts. When Clark's barn burns down, for example, there's not obvious way this will contribute to the family's flourishing. He nevertheless understands it as an opportunity to trust that God intends this for his benefit. How is a mystery, to him, but there's no question that that is the outcome of what God did and does. He reaches for his Bible and re-reads Psalm 23 to affirm this.[176]

There is actually a lot of tragedy in *Love Comes Softly*. There is, of course, the tragedy that serves as the inciting incident of the novel, and the tragedy that provides pivotal plot points, such as the barn fire. But the romance goes further than that in its depiction of tragedy. Almost every minor character is shown to have suffered. The novel imagines a world in which tragedy is always a reality. It imagines belief in the context of tragedy and imagines belief is important and relevant to this suffering.

After Marty has her baby, a stream of pioneer women come to visit. These are new characters, introduced three-quarters of the way through the story. As the women come through the cabin, the world of the novel expands. As it expands, it shows readers that Marty's tragedy is not unique. Every woman bears these burdens. Everyone goes through trials. Some, however, share their struggles with Jesus and have the assurance that their struggles will work out for good.

The first to visit is a woman named Wendy Marshall. Marshall is described as "small and young, with blond hair that at one time must have been very pretty."[177] She smiles, but still seems

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[175] Oke 189.

[176] Oke 196.

[177] Oke 175.

sad. At first it is just a hint. The protagonist intuits the sadness in the woman's eyes. Then the sadness rises up and overwhelms her. Marshall peeks in at the sleeping baby boy. She sees "the soft pink baby face, with lashes as fine as dandelion silk on his cheek," and she can't stand it.[178] She leaves the room, and goes and stands at the cabin window and cries. Marshall apologies to Marty, confessing that she had three children of her own but they all died.

"It's this wretched country," Marshall says. "If I'd stayed back east where I'd belong, things would have been different. I would have my family—my Jodi and Esther and Josiah. It's this horrible place."[179]

A Personal Relationship with God

The character's story is similar to Oke's personal experience. Shortly after she got married to Edward Oke in 1957, the couple moved from their home in Calgary to Mishawaka, Indiana. Edward took classes at Bethel College to complete his B.A., and took a job as an assistant minister at Beulah Missionary Church in nearby Elkhart. They had only just arrived and unpacked their belongings in their $65-a-month apartment when tragedy struck. Janette had a miscarriage.

Her sorrow was made worse by the feeling of being in a foreign county. "In the strange apartment," Oke's biography says, "miles from her mother, and with no doctor's care, she lay on the fold-out bed and cried."[180]

Her only comfort was her faith. Oke believed that, as she put it, God was God. She would submit to this tragedy, believing God would work it out for her good. In her mourning, Oke repeated to herself the refrain of a hymn: "God's way is the best way / God's way is the right way / I'll trust in Him always / He knoweth the best."[181]

Edward Oke graduated in the spring of 1958 and started seminary classes at Goshen College. Janette Oke took a job in the mail room of a manufacturing company and and taught Sunday School at the church where Edward was the pastor. Life seemed to be good and she got pregnant again.

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[178] Oke 176.

[179] Oke 177.

[180] Logan 139.

[181] Logan 156. The hymn is "God's Way," written by Lida Shrivers Leech in 1911. Leech was the organist at a Methodist church in Camden, New Jersey and the composer of more than 500 hymns. See Ernest K. Emurian, *Living Stories of Famous Hymns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1955), and William Jenson Reynolds, *Hymns of Our Faith* (: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1964).

Oke worried about the possibility of a second miscarriage. She prayed about it, though, and found peace. She told God she was surrendering her child, giving the unborn baby to God and trusting that it would all work out.[182]

She gave birth to a son in October 1959. He died before she even got to hold him. The infant had a heart murmur and an enlarged liver, though the pediatricians did not know the underlying cause. The doctors spent hours trying to save the child, but couldn't. The news was shattering. Years later she recalled thinking, over and over, "I didn't even get to hold him. I didn't even get to hold him."[183] After she got home from the hospital, Oke spend days looking at the empty crib in their apartment, just crying.

She said to God, "I know that I said you could take him—but I didn't promise not to cry."[184]

Oke, then, could well have been describing herself when, 20 years later, she wrote about the crying woman who hates the strange country that she feels took her children.

Lost children are not the only kind of tragedy the women in the world of *Love Comes Softly* suffer, though. Another character who comes to visit Marty and the new baby is burdened by poverty. She comes on the scene an "ill-clad stranger, with two equally ill-clad children."[185] The woman mumbles her name and the names of her children and doesn't make eye contact—too ashamed, it would seem, to be polite company.

Marty later learns the woman's husband is, as one neighbor puts it, "one lazy good-fer-nothin'."[186] Jedd Larson shirks work. He's generally irresponsible. He will, however, gladly help himself to other people's generosity. People look at Mrs. Larson—readers never learn her first name—and they either judge her or pity her. She can't stand it. But she doesn't have a choice.

Another woman's burden is more literal: she is overweight. Marty puts it politely, noting Maude Watley is "rather stout," but it is clear this is not a matter of a few spare pounds. Watley can barely walk. She doesn't walk into the bedroom of the cabin to see the baby, instead asking the baby be brought to her. When it's time to leave, she doesn't walk to the wagon but waits until it is pulled up to the front door. In the meantime, she eats "several helpings of cookies and loaf cake."[187] A

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[182] Logan 150.

[183] Logan 155.

[184] Logan 157.

[185] Oke 180.

[186] Oke 184.

[187] Oke 183.

neighbor gossips that Watley actually used to be a "dance-hall girl," before she was married.[188] The history of what happened is cryptic, but the suffering is plain.

Perhaps the starkest tragedy to befall one of the novel's minor characters is what happens to Laura Graham. Graham is the second daughter of one of the neighbors, 17 years old. She is barely mentioned until the last thirty pages, and then her story, her tragedy, is the cap on all the novels tragedies.

It starts when Graham gets pregnant before she is married. No one even knew she was even seeing anyone, but Graham, it turns out, has been secretly spending time with a bachelor named Milt Conners. And she got pregnant.

Her parents are upset and perhaps also scandalized, but Graham "stoutly insisted that she loved Milt and was going to marry him come what may."[189]

She does marry him and it seems, for a moment, that tragedy may be averted. The young woman "did not seem to carry the glow that a new bride should," but she does seem determined to make it work. She's committed to her marriage, even if Conners does have a deserved reputation for being wild. The women at the wedding hope her love might make her husband a better man.[190] Conners, for his part, looked "rather careless in demeanor and attire," but remembered to trim his beard before the big day.[191]

Things do not get better. Graham withdraws from the community. She refuses even small, neighborly favors. There are signs of spousal abuse: she carries a bruise on her cheek. Then it gets worse.

Clark brings Marty the news: "It's Laura. They done found her in the crik over by the Conners' cabin."

"Is she … is she … ?"

"She be dead, Marty."[192]

Marty is there when the young pregnant woman is pulled from the water. Graham's mother held the frail corpse in her arms, rocked back and forth, and cried. Then she wiped her tears, squared her shoulder, and began preparing for the funeral.

Everyone suffers in *Love Comes Softly*. Tragedy is a fact of life. The novel does not invite readers to imagine that belief changes that. It does suggest belief helps. Belief comforts. Further, the

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[188] Oke 185.

[189] Oke 205.

[190] Oke 205, 211.

[191] Oke 211.

[192] Oke 222.

novel imagines that the context of belief is this context of human suffering, and that belief is important because it is relevant to the kinds of tragedies these women endure. Put another way, in the world of *Love Comes* Softly, belief brings the reassurance that the meaning of suffering is immanent. God works all things together for the good of those who love him, and not in abstract, transcendent terms.

All of this appeals to Marty, but she is slow to submit.

Her first step is just thinking it would be nice to have that sense of divine assurance. It sounds nice. Like Marabel Morgan, she thinks the idea of "God's love, for me!" and the promise of abundant life is really attractive. But she's not immediately ready to believe.

She hears Clark reading from Psalm 121 and she wishes she had help coming from the hills.[193] She returns to the thought again, a short time later. While doing more chores, Marty sees the mountains to the west. "Far beyond the rolling hills," Oke writes, "blue mountains rose in majesty. Was it from those peaks that Clark was seeking the help of his God?"[194] The idea doesn't seem crazy to her. She's drawn to the thought of a God who cares about her like that.

Before long, Marty finds herself wanting to pray.[195] The thing she wants pray about is notably not a matter of ultimate reality. It's a mundane detail. In the process of doing her chores, Marty washed the cabin walls, including the chinking holding the logs together. This seems to have been a mistake. The hard white plaster turns muddy.[196] Pieces fall from the wall. It turns out not be serious—Clark fixes it easily—but that's the point. Marty is not interested in a God who would only care about serious, heavenly things. She's drawn to the comfort of a God who would care about little details that didn't matter, and care just because she was worried.

She hesitates, though. Marty explains this to herself as a knowledge problem. She doesn't know how to pray.[197] She thinks because she wasn't raised religious, she may have "missed out on something rather important," and so now lacks the skill of prayer that other people have. This explanation is not quite right, though. While it's true she lacks knowledge, the novel imagines this explanation is really an expression of fear. "Marty found herself wondering," Oke writes, "if she dared to approach Clark's God in the direct way that Clark himself did. She felt a longing to do so, but she held back."[198] It's emotional, not intellectual. Even when it's a statement about knowledge, it's a

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[193] Oke 41.

[194] Oke 47.

[195] Oke 61.

[196] Oke 64.

[197] Oke 61.

[198] Oke 105-106.

statement about desire: "She knew very little about God, and sometimes she caught herself yearning to know more."[199]

Marty does not take the direct approach, at first. Her first prayer in the novel is a tentative whisper. Ma Graham, the Davis's neighbor, comes by to help Marty learn to take care of a pioneer cabin. She teaches her to make bread, gives her a lot of recipes, and offer tips for making it through a frontier Winter. She reassures her everything will be OK. She mentions God, though barely. She acknowledges Marty's mourning in passing, and hints that she has had her own tragedies, in the past. Speaking from that experience, she says that time and God heal the heart.[200] When Graham leaves, Marty is so moved she is moved to pray. It's only tentative, though. She prays God will bless Ma Graham for her kindness, but then couches that request in a conditional: She prays that God would bless the woman "if there truly was a God up there somewhere."[201] She's not ready to risk more.

Marty's second prayer is even more tentative. It's not even whispered. It happens on a Sunday—the Lord's Day—and she is stirred by Clark's reading of Psalm 23. As he reads, he stops and explains a few things, offering "words of his own as background or setting to the Scripture."[202] Then he prays. She wants to participate in his prayer, but doesn't. At the end, however, Clark says "amen" and his daughter "declared her loud ''men,' too," and Marty is so close to joining them. She mouths the word, but doesn't make a sound.[203]

Marty turns from prayer to Bible-reading. She's inspired by the Christmas story. Clark reads the story aloud on Christmas day, when he and Missie and Marty are snowed in. He starts with the angel appearing to Mary to tell her she is going to have a child. In the Bible passage, the angel says, "Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God."[204] Clark reads on, about the trip to Bethlehem, about the inns where there was no room, and the stable with the manager where the infant was laid. Clark reads about the shepherds and how the angels appear to them and the one says again, "fear not," and tells them the good news.[205]

In the Gospel of Luke, the story leaves Mary pondering these things in her heart. In *Love Comes Softly*, the story has the same affect on Marty. "The story captured Marty's imagination,"

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[199] Oke 105.

[200] Oke 74.

[201] Oke 67.

[202] Oke 105.

[203] Oke 106.

[204] Luke 1:30. VERSION

[205] Luke 2:10.

Oke writes, "as she waited for the birth of her own first child, and she thought of it as she did the dishes."[206] Marty identifies with Mary. She thinks about what she would have done if she had been Mary.

As Marty hears the story, the nativity is about God providing in difficult circumstances. The story, of course, is also about the incarnation. The angel in the gospel says the child will be conceived miraculously by the Holy Ghost and will be the "Son of the Highest." Evangelicals understand Luke 1 and 2 as an account of how God became human. Marty notes that aspect, remarking that the "little baby born in a stable was God's Son."[207] For her, though, this divine parentage is part of the larger message of God's love and concern. The incarnation, in a sense, folds into the story about God's plan. Marty thinks Mary probably couldn't understand why it was part of God's plan to have God's son born in a barn. Mary could trust, though, that God would do what was best for the child. Marty can imagine herself like Mary. This means she can imagine herself trusting God.

"*Wouldn't be carin' fer my son to be born in a barn*," she thinks. "*Still—God did watch over Him, sendin' angels to tell the shepherds an' all. An' the wise men, too, with their rich gifts. Yes, God was carin' 'bout His Son*."[208]

God's plan might look different than one would expect, but you could still trust that God's plan was intended for human good. The incarnation, the nativity, and Marty's marriage of convenience are all part of God's plan, and the plan is fixed firmly in the immanent frame.

Marty ponders these things while attending to the dishes after Christmas dinner. She decides she would like to read the story again, so she sits down and picks up the Bible. She doesn't know how to read the Bible, though, just like she didn't know how to pray. "She wished she knew where to locate the Christmas story," Oke writes, "but as she turned the pages she couldn't find where Clark had read."[209] Marty ends up reading an entirely different portion of scripture, but the text still turns out to be about how God cares for people. Marty ends up reading Pslams. She read them "one after the other as she sat beside the warm fire." She didn't understand what she was reading, necessarily, but it didn't matter. "Somehow they were comforting," Marty thinks, "even when you didn't understand all of the phrases and ideas."[210]

The Bible comforts her. It assures her that God loves her and encourages her to take an emotional risk and respond to God. As presented in *Love Comes Softly*, this is, in fact, the point of the

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[206] Oke 152.

[207] Oke 152.

[208] Oke 152.

[209] Oke 153.

[210] Oke 153. See also Silliman, "The Bible in the Evangelical Imagination."

Bible. Marty phrases the key question this way: "Do ya really think thet God, who runs the whole world like, be knowin' ya?" Clark says yes. He says he believes. He's sure God cares for him. As he explains, "I believe the Bible, and it tells me thet He does."[211]

Marty finally feels that for herself when the snow begins to thaw. After her child is born and she names him after his father, Claridge Luke Davis, after Ma Graham tells her how love sometimes "comes sorta stealin' up on ya gradual like," after the barn burns down and then the neighbors help build a new one, Easter comes.[212] The traveling preacher, now known as Pastor Simmons, preaches about Jesus's crucifixion. Marty hears the message. She takes it personally. "She had heard before how cruel men of Christ's day had put him to death with no just cause," Oke writes, "but never before had she realized it had anything at all to do with her."[213] The preacher explains about sins, and how they separate people from God, and how Jesus came to take those sins, the cross serving as a bridge back to God. Marty, sitting on a bench, is moved to tears. "*I didn't know—I jest didn't know thet ya died fer me*," she prays. It's a spontaneous prayer, from her heart. When she realizes the magnitude of what Jesus did, and she knows God will go to any length for her, she responds with this outpouring of emotion, "her heart filled with such a surge of joy."[214] She is unafraid of the emotional risk of belief. She speaks to God directly.

"*I've given myself to be a knowin' Clark's God*," she thinks. And Oke tells readers Marty was "awed by the thought."[215]

The novel's conversion narrative could plausibly have ended there. The story goes on, though, to show how belief works out in Marty's life. At the end of the novel, after her conversion, Marty is confronted with two tragedies. The first is Laura Graham's death. The girl's tragic end hits Marty particularly hard. She goes to the woods, to the place where Graham died, to think about it and pray.

"She really needed a place to think," Oke writes, "to sort things out." Marty sits by the water, leans against a tree. "I know thet yer good," she says to God. "I know thet ya love me, thet ya died for me; but I don't understand 'bout losin', 'bout the pain thet goes so deep I can't see the end. I don't understand at all."[216] The pain and tragedy is a mystery, but because she has found faith, be-

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[211] Oke 189.

[212] Oke 173.

[213] Oke 210.

[214] Oke 210.

[215] Oke 210.

[216] Oke 226.

cause she believes, Marty is confident the human suffering can be explained in terms of God's love for her.

This is similar to how the Okes dealt with their loss, after the miscarriage and the child who died in infancy. They understood it as "a growing time." They believed that God, in fact, would use the tragedy in their lives, making it meaningful, in a real and practical way. "They were reminded," Oke's biography says, "that if they planned to serve in the ministry, in years ahead there would doubtlessly be many times when they would be called upon to share the grief of someone in their congregation." That didn't mean it didn't hurt. It didn't mean it wasn't horrible. But, the Okes felt that God helped them through the tragedy. In fact, "Janette was thankful that a loving God had cushioned the blow as only He could. He had prepared her heart so there was no bitterness, and he was with her daily, helping her with her sorry and tears."[217]

Oke puts this belief in the mouth of her protagonist: "*I thank ye, Lord, that ye be teachin' me how to rest in you*," Marty prays towards the end of the novel. "*Ya be comfortin' me, and I be grateful for it*."

Then there is a near tragedy but it is avoided. In the last chapter of the novel, Marty is mending clothes. She takes the time to teach Missie a little about sewing too. Marty gives the girl a scrap of cloth and a button, threads a needle and shows her how to sew the button to the cloth. "Ya may as well learn how it be done," Marty says.[218] In the process, the girl spills the buttons. When they pick them up again, they miss one. The four-month-old baby puts it in his mouth and chokes. The button lodges in his throat and Marty can't get it out. She tries, but it is stuck, blocking his airway.

The family rushes to town to see the doctor. The baby's breathing is ragged and he is "struggling furiously, his little fists flailing in the air as he fought for breath."[219] Clark pushes the horses until they're described as galloping the wagon over the frontier roads. The family gets to town, goes straight to the doctor, and the doctor immediately does surgery. Marty, Clark, and Missie wait in the front room. The wait is soon over, though. The surgery is successful and everything is fine. The doctor tells them they are lucky.

Clark says, "It weren't luck."[220] Marty thanks God. God is their shepherd, the help from the hills, who preserves them, going out and coming in.

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[217] Logan 158.

[218] Oke 229.

[219] Oke 230-231.

[220] Oke 234.

They don't imagine that they were somehow guaranteed to be free from tragedy, but Marty, following Clark, believes that God has a wonderful plan for her life, and that means this life, in this world.

The novel concludes with Marty in Clark's arms. She didn't even realize it was happening, but now she loves this man. "This man," Oke writes, "who comforted her when she sorrowed, understood her joys, gave her strength when her own strength was spent, shared with her his faith, and introduced her to his God. There was so much she felt. The strange, deep stirring within her—she understood it now."[221] The married couple embraces. She yields to him, "looking deep into his eyes" and "feeling the strength of his body tight against hers."[222] Love, at the end of the narrative, overcomes all obstacles. Submitting to it and trusting it empowers one to live triumphantly and abundantly. They live happily ever after, which is to say, the evangelical heroine enters a state of immanent eternity.

In an Immanent Frame

When reflecting on the novel for the 2003 republication, Janette Oke wrote that she really identified with the characters. "Each struggle Clark and Marty worked through," she wrote, "I struggled through with them. Each triumph they experienced was my own. Each truth about the faithfulness of the God they served was a wonderful reminder to me."[223]

Many felt this way. Lynn S. Neal, in her study of the readers of evangelical romance novels, reported that evangelical women actually read evangelical romance novels for lots of reasons. Some emphasized the pleasure of reading. Some talked about how their reading linked them to other women. At the same time, Neal says scholars "should not underestimate the importance of evangelical romances for understanding how women practice their evangelical identity on a daily basis."[224] Readers, that is to say, often identified with the protagonist of Oke's novels and the many romances that followed, and identified specifically with the story about belief in the context of everyday life. Neal observed that women who were devoted to the genre "imagine evangelical romance reading as a devotional practice *through* which to articulate a women's faith and a women's ministry."[225] The fiction, as these women understand it and experience it, is about belief. It is about the possibility of

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[221] Oke 236.

[222] Oke 237.

[223] Oke, "Introduction."

[224] Neal 103.

[225] Neal 106.

belief that leads to spiritual fullness, which can be realized in the context of all the day-to-day reality that others might see as just an encumbrance.

The same social imaginary that's visible in a close reading of *Love Comes Softly* can be seen elsewhere. Across the US and Canada in the 1970s, evangelical women thought if they followed God's plan and trusted God's purposes, they would become total women. Following Marabel Morgan, these women thought it superlatives. Their superlatives, though, were in an immanent frame. They wanted the greatest marriage. The best sex. The most fulfilled life. They understood belief as an act of trust that things would work out for good—really good—and work out that way in the here-and-now.

Other books in the evangelical bookstores that boomed in the 1970s were similarly sold as relevant to life right now. It's normal to think of belief and believing as separate from or opposite to "the secular." It may be, as Taylor argues, that religious belief used to be "some great project of self-surpassing," and "the aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing."[226] But that's not how it was here. In a secular age, secularity is the context of belief. Secularity is the conditions of the possibility and plausibility of belief. On the shelves of evangelical bookstores, this meant there were books about belief and sex and romance novels that might seem to some to spend too much time describing chores. Belief, in the evangelical bookstores, was sold in secular terms. It was imagined, in the evangelical imagination, in an immanent frame.

[226] Taylor 629, 510.

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Imagining Public Belief

Troubled in his soul and on the verge of losing control of his church, Hank Busche goes for a walk. He goes to the center of town and sits on a public bench.

He says, "I'm here, Satan."[1]

Busche is the protagonist of Frank Peretti's landmark work of evangelical fiction, the spiritual warfare novel *This Present Darkness*. The fictional small-town pastor is not imagined in the fiction as seeing Satan or any of Satan's minions in the bustling business district in the bright of day. He sees only the town center. He has been flailing to reach this town with the Gospel and failing as a minster. His evangelical community church is divided and planning a congregational vote on whether or not to keep him as pastor. He has been told he will lose the vote. These struggles have sapped his strength and confidence and he admits, sitting there on the bench, that his prayers feel ineffectual. He admits even to doubting the existence of the supernatural entities he believes are behind the facade of church politics, behind the facade of the town that ignores him and his message. "It was amazing," he reflects, "how well the demons could hide, even behind the doubts he sometimes felt about their very existence."[2] Despite his doubts, Busche goes to the center of town to face his adversary directly. From that public space of a city bench, he speaks to the supernatural realms, saying, "I can't see you, and maybe you can move faster than I can, but I'm still here, and by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit I intend to be a thorn in your side until one of us has had enough!"[3]

The site of this declaration is important. This is the public square, the public sphere. Peretti's novel stages what it is like for belief to happen here, in this space. *This Present Darkness* is a novel

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[1] Frank Peretti, *This Present Darkness* (1986: repr., Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2001), 88.

[2] Peretti 88.

[3] Peretti 88.

about belief in the secular space of the public sphere. It invites readers to imagine belief in this context, thinking of belief as pubic and problematically public.

The Secular Public Sphere

In the secular condition, the space of public discourse is secular. It is, in the philosopher Charles Taylor's terminology, immanentized. As discussed in the previous chapter, this means that ultimate justifications cannot be transcendent truths, cannot be appeals to a higher metaphysical order. Instead, appeals must be made to human flourishing. Theological claims, familial structures, and political regimes have to be grounded in accounts of how they will, respectively, be good for people and help people realize abundant life in the here-and-now.

In political philosophy, this secularity of the sphere of public discourse is critical to solving the problem of legitimization. The question is how can a state, which reserves for itself a monopoly of violence, justify its own authority? "Legitimacy is a contestable validity claim," writes philosopher Jürgen Habermas. "Legitimacy means there are good arguments for a political order's claim to be recognized as right and just; a legitimate order deserves recognition."[4] Historically, such legitimation was religious. Medieval European political orders, for example, appealed to eternal, transcendent realities. They could thus be thrown into crisis by new religious movements, which contest the revelation of the transcendent order that grounded the status quo. Habermas offers the spread of Christianity in the third century in the Roman Empire and the religious underpinnings of the German Peasants' War in 1524 and 1525 as examples of such legitimation crises. Modern liberal democracies, however, claim they are legitimate because doing what is best for people. They claim, further, that they know what is best for people because they are acting in accord with the will of the people. The authority of the state is grounded, then, in the consent of the governed, in public opinion.

Public opinion might be determined by popular elections of representatives, or referendums, or through opinion polls or other means. Regardless of the specific mechanism for determining public opinion, there is this idea that there is such a thing as "the public," and that the public has a will, has a determinable opinion about public matters, which it will express. Public opinion, in order to be understood as public opinion, has to be the result of public discourse. The liberal democratic state has to be grounded in public opinion and public opinion has to be grounded in public discourse.

In his major work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas shows how this fiction of the public arose out of specific institutions and networks of conversation. The

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[4] Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 178.

public was constituted by its discourse. In practice, this meant conversations in European coffee houses, *salons*, and *Tischgesellschaften*, and then later "through the medium of the press and its professional criticism." These discourse communities "formed the public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters."[5]

Such conversations, of course, do not, in fact, include everybody. There are very real barriers to entry. In the eighteenth century, a "stratum of 'bourgeois' was the real carrier of the public, which from the outset was a reading public."[6] For Habermas, however, the public discourse is not public because all of the public or even most of the public participates in the conversation. It is public, rather, in principle. The discourse is structurally in such a way that it, in principle, is universal. The discourse that grounds the public opinion that legitimates the state is itself grounded in universal pragmatics, the presuppositions of communicative action.

Habermas identifies four presuppositions of public discourse. He thinks those who engages in public discourse have implicitly accepted four things: First, they have accepted that everyone involved in the conversation shares the background understanding that there is a world of independently existing objects. The world really is out there. There are objective facts about the world. Second, people involved in public discourse accept that everyone involved is rational, and can be held accountable to rules of rationality. Third, everyone accepts, at least implicitly, that constative statements are constative statements. That is to say, they assume that speech acts declaring something to be true or false are universal claims. The validity of such statements is not conditional, contextual, or subjective. Fourth, everyone involved in public discourse has implicitly accepted the preceding three presuppositions about the demands of argumentation.[7]

Another way to say this is to say that public discourse is secular. It is free from transcendent claims and doesn't depend on religious revelation or dogma. The rules of the discourse are established by the discourse itself, and it is universally available to everyone (in principle) because of its secular structure. The publicity of public discourse is its secularity.

Habermas makes this explicit when he talks about how religious claims, which appeal to special, revealed knowledge, are inadmissible in the public sphere. "The truth contents of religious contributions," he writes, "can enter into the institutionalized practice of deliberation and decision-making only when the necessary translation already occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e. in the political public sphere itself." He thinks that "citizens of faith may make public contributions

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[5] Jürgen Habermas, *Social Structures of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1989), 51.

[6] Habermas, *Social Structures*, 23.

[7] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 28.

in their own religious language only subject to the translation proviso."[8] Habermas says religious people may be allowed to participated in the conversation about public things, but only if they forego all explicitly religious reasoning. They must accept, to start with, that revealed knowledge will have no privileged position in the discourse and they must, further, accept "the scientific monopoly on the production of factual knowledge."[9] In order to be taken as rational statements and admitted into public discourse, religious statements have to be, as it were, de-transcendentalized. They have to be made secular.[10]

When the public sphere is understood in this way, the religious, in turn, is construed as necessarily private. Indeed, this is often understood as a key feature of secularization and the secular condition: beliefs are taken as akin to taste preferences. In the process of secularization, beliefs become "mere beliefs, opinion, or (a term that eloquently expresses what goes on here) 'religious preference.'"[11] What it means to believe in one or another ultimate good or metaphysical picture, as a cultural practice, is something like what it means to think Ingmar Bergman's movies are superior to George Lucas's. One is certainly entitled to have beliefs, in this secular condition, but it is considered wrong to impose them on others and silly to think they have any normative force in public conversations.[12]

One of the ways evangelicals have imagined belief is to imagine it in the public sphere, challenging the secularity of that space. This chapter looks at how evangelicals have imagined belief to be a violation of secularity's division between public and private. It examines, first, the history of American evangelicalism's engagement with the public square, showing that evangelicals were motivated not just by particular issues of concern, but by what they perceived as the secular nature of the public space. Second, this chapter turns to the thought of Francis Schaeffer, a key player in the political mobilization of evangelicals and the rise of the religious right, showing how he made an epistemological argument against secular knowledge. Third, the chapter looks at how Frank Peretti's fiction invited readers to imagine belief. *This Present Darkness* staged spiritual warfare going on being the scenes of contemporary American cultural conflicts as a way of staging be-

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[8] Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 131-132.

[9] Jürgen Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing," in Jürgen Habermas et al, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 21.

[10] This translation does happen, in practice, with some frequency. See Daniel Silliman, "Habermas and the Problem with the 'Problem' of Religion in Public Discourse," The Religious Studies Project, March 13, 2014, http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/2014/03/13/habermas-and-the-problem-with-the-problem-of-religion-in-public-discourse-by-daniel-silliman/.

[11] Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (1969, reprt.: Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1971), 62.

[12] See Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 103.

lief as a public conflict over the nature of public space. Finally, this chapter looks at the variety of ways readers have responded to this invitation to imagine belief.

Evangelicals and the Public Sphere

Evangelicals have frequently found themselves in conflict over the secularity of public space.

Public engagement has been a key feature of American evangelicalism. Some would even say it is the key feature. For a historian such as David Bebbington, of course, activism is only one quarter of the classic definition of what it means to be evangelical.[13] In the standard narrative of evangelical history, though, it can seem like the most important one.

The standard narrative notes that revivalist Protestants who emphasized personal piety and the importance of an individual conversion or "born again" experience were a political force in the nineteen century. They were reformers. "Commitment to social reform was a corollary of the inherited enthusiasm for revival," writes historian George Marsden. "Yet social reform was not really a secondary concern."[14] They were at the forefront of every major social movement, from efforts to ban dueling, to abolitionism, to women's suffrage, to prohibition.[15] Something happened in the early twentieth century, however. These culturally engaged Christians went into retreat. They became fundamentalists. The movement "quickly lost its position as a nationally influential coalition," Marsden writes, and "fundamentalists retreated from their notorious national campaigns."[16]

They became separatists and cultural isolationists after the 1925 Scopes trial, according to the standard narrative. They had campaigned against the teaching of Darwinism in American schools and when they took that battle to court in Dayton, Tennessee, they won. But only technically. In the court of public opinion, the anti-Darwinists were soundly defeated. The historian Randall Balmer, along with many others, marks this as the historical pivot. "The ignominy surrounding the Scopes trial," he writes, "convinced evangelicals that the larger culture had turned against them. They responded by withdrawing from the culture, which they came to regard as Satan's domain, to construct an alternative universe, an evangelical subculture."[17]

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[13] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-19.

[14] George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12.

[15] Evangelicals were also sometimes on the opposite side, opposing these reforms. See Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006) and Robert Elder, *The Sacred Mirror: Evangelicalism, Honor, and Identity in the Deep South, 1790-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), for two historical works that complicate the idea of evangelicals as reformers.

[16] Marsden 6.

[17] Randall Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism: From Revivalism to Politics and Beyond* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2010), 49.

They remained in self-imposed exile for fifty years, reemerging in the 1970s as the religious right.[18] In the 1970s, they shake the separatist, fundamentalist identity, and became evangelicals.

Recent scholarship has challenged this narrative. What this standard story misses is the many ways fundamentalists were involved in politics—even national campaigns—between 1925 and the 1970s. Fundamentalists were players in the 1928 presidential election, opposing the Democratic candidate Al Smith because he was a Catholic and against prohibition.[19] Some were active in opposing Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.[20] When Harry Truman ran for president in 1948, fundamentalists were politically powerful enough that his campaign took them into account. His strategy was to emphasize his own religious faith, and speak with moral clarity to those who felt the world, today, was "one unholy confused cacophony." Truman, a Baptist himself, would address Americans as "fellow believers."[21] On the other hand, as his campaign manager William J. Bray recalled, the campaign worked hard to keep Truman out of the churches where fundamentalist pastors would preach against him even as he sat in a pew.[22] During his presidency, the fundamentalists spoke out in favor of his use of nuclear weapons to end World War II, and then against his health-care plan, which they called "socialized medicine." They also gave active support to Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952.[23]

The historical record shows "they never retreated from the public square," as Daniel K. Williams writes in *God's Own Party*. What happened in the 1970s was not reengagement. Rather, the revivalist Protestants who emphasized personal piety and the importance of conversion experience, at this moment, overcame their own regional divisions and committed themselves to a particular party. "Evangelicals gained prominence during Ronald Reagan's campaign not because they were speaking out on political issues—they had been doing this for decades—but because they

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[18] See William Martin, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religions Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996); Kenneth J. Heineman, *God Is Conservative: Religion, Politics, and Morality in Christian America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and Ruth Murray Brown, *For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002).

[19] Barry Hankins, *Jesus and Gin: Evangelicalism, the Roaring Twenties and Today's Culture Wars* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), xx.

[20] Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap, 2014), 232-262.

[21] Truman Reelection Campaign, "Foot-Notes on the Opportunities of the White House in the Political Battles of 1948," Truman Library, n.d., http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/1948campaign/large/docs/documents/index.php?documentid=6-13&pagenumber=1.

[22] William J. Bray, "Recollection of the 1948 Campaign," Truman Library, August 1964, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/1948campaign/large/docs/documents/index.php?pagenumber=1&documentdate=1964-08-00&documentid=1-3&studycollectionid=Election.

[23] Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 19, 39, 36-39.

were taking over the Republican Party," Williams writes.[24] It was also during this time that they stopped worrying about and focusing on Catholicism as the main threat to American, and turned their attention instead to communism, or, more generally, secularism.[25]

Historian Matthew Avery Sutton identifies the source of this historical narrative of retreat and reengagement to Carl F.H. Henry. Henry was the founding editor of the flagship magazine of American evangelicalism, *Christianity Today*, and worked, as much as anyone, to identify evangelicalism with an engagement with the public sphere. He made his argument in a slim 1947 book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. The book makes an argument for engagement and in the process mischaracterizes his position, evangelicalism, as a clean break from the past, fundamentalism. "Since the publication of *The Uneasy Conscience* historians and evangelicals have been seduced by Henry's vision of the past and his call for a new, culturally engaged evangelicalism," Sutton writes.[26]

Henry's historical narrative of engagement, disengagement and then reengagement needs to be rejected. The standard narrative of fundamentalist retreat and evangelical resurgence will not suffice. Henry's argument does, however, call attention to an important aspect of this engagement as it happened throughout the twentieth century. His argument shows how evangelicals have imagined belief to be necessarily public.

Evangelicalism's "supreme aim," according to Henry, "is the proclamation of redeeming grace to sinful humanity." Yet, this is concern is not restricted to transcendent things, not just a concern about souls in eternity. It also necessitates cultural engagement. This is because, "the redemptive message has implications for all of life." It cannot be relegated to "heavenly-minded" pursuits. "The implication of this for evangelicalism seem clear," Henry wrote. "The battle against evil in all its forms must be pressed unsparingly," according to Henry. "We must pursue the enemy, in politics, in economics, in science, in ethics—everywhere, in every field, we must pursue relentlessly."[27]

For Henry, it was not just particular issues compelling evangelicals into the public sphere; it was the nature of belief. And they were not just fighting over particular issues. They were fighting against the secularization of that space.

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[24] Williams 2.

[25] Williams 5.

[26] Sutton 294.

[27] Carl F.H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947, repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 84, 65, 86.

This is one way evangelicals have imagined belief. It can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Marsden pins the date to 1868, but one need not be that precise to see the larger movement.[28]

In the late nineteenth century, the natural sciences and the humanities both increasingly embraced methodological naturalism, accepting only natural accounts of natural phenomena as valid knowledge. Religious authority and dogmatic claims lost credibility; supernatural entities not subject to empirical tests were—in a literal sense of the common metaphor—ruled out. Scholars gradually became convinced that "attributing the phenomena they investigated to the will of God was too facile and insufficiently explanatory."[29]

By the beginning of the twentieth century, as Jon H. Roberts and James Turner explain in their history of these intellectual developments, "the very idea of what counted as an explanation had changed."[30] Knowledge had secularized. Rationality had become immanentized.

The shift was recognized and opposed by Christian fundamentalists (as they were known at the time). Presbyterian theologians at the Princeton Theological Seminary are symptomatic, here. Starting in the 1880s, B.B. Warfield and others responded to the rising dominance of methodological naturalism in their defense of the Bible, simultaneously seeking to defend the Bible as a valid source of knowledge in its own right and to show its credibility in matters of history and science. The articulation of this became increasingly important to them. Presbyterians declared the Bible's inerrancy an essential doctrine in 1910, 1916, and 1923.[31]

The next generation of conservative Presbyterians theologians, following Warfield, continued this fight. J. Gresham Machen reiterated the argument that the Bible is a storehouse of facts and contended that theology is "just as much a science as chemistry."[32] For Machen, scientific facts could only be thought of as true if they were true in the same way that theological facts were true. Truth was a matter of metaphysical reality and not confined to only what could be discovered using a naturalistic methodology.[33] Though Machen's epistemological arguments were taken more seriously than, say, William Jennings Bryan's, the end result was the same. Machen eventually felt he

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[28] Marsden, *Fundamentalism in American Culture*, 93.

[29] Jon H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 49.

[30] Roberts and Turner 29.

[31] George M. Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 112.

[32] Quoted in D.G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), 91.

[33] Hart 96.

had to leave Princeton. This marked the end of a struggle that had started in the 1880s. The first Bible Colleges were established. Nyack College in 1882, Moody Bible Institute in 1887.[34] Each rejected the idea that knowledge could be neutral, that knowledge could be secular.

By 1920, there were thirty-nine Bible Colleges in the United States, offering alternative education, with alternative standards of scholarship, based on different criteria for determining what is true. The conservative Presbyterians at Princeton continued longer than most other conservative Christians, but finally came to the same point. For them, Machen's more-or-less forced exit from Princeton in 1929 signaled the complete triumph of secular, naturalist epistemology in academia.[35]

The secularization of public political debate followed. The Scopes trial has probably been over-emphasized in its importance, but it evidences the same theme.[36] Legally, the case was about teaching evolution in the public schools. Popularly, however, the case was about whether or not religious revelation would be taken as legitimate knowledge in the public sphere. This was apparent in the trial itself.

Attorney Dudley Malone, for example, argued that only scientific authorities could properly say what should be taught in a public high school. The Bible had no place in the discussion. "Keep the Bible," he said. "Keep it as a consolation; keep it as your guide, but keep it where it belongs, in the world of your own conscience, in the world of your individual judgement."[37] William Jennings Bryan, on the other hand, sought to argue religious knowledge was not only legitimate knowledge, it was the basis of all knowledge. "Christians know," he said in a speech following the trial, "that 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' now just as it has been in the past, and they therefore oppose the teaching of guesses that encourage godlessness among the students."[38] This was, importantly, an epistemological debate.

The same challenge to the nature of the public sphere can seen in the fight over religious broadcasting. Starting in the 1920s, the mainline Federal Council of Churches pushed broadcasting

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[34] Larry J. McKinney, "The Fundamentalist Bible School as an Outgrowth of the Changing Patterns of Protestant Revivalism, 1882-1920," *Religious Education: The Official Journal of the Religious Education Association*, 84:1, 589-605, here 594.

[35] Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 34.

[36] Historian Edward J. Larson writes, "As a historical event and topic of legend, the trial had taken on a life and meaning of its own independent of the overall creation-evolution controversy" (*Summer of the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion,* New York: Basic Books, 1997, ix).

[37] "Malone Demands Freedom of Mind," New York Times, July 17, 1925, http://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1925/07/17/104179477.html.

[38] William Jennings Bryan, "Closing Statement of William Jennings Bryan at the Trial of John Scopes," in *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism: A Documentary Reader*, Barry Hankins, ed., New York: New York University, 2008, 84-95, here 86.

corporations to stop accepting paid religious programing. Instead, they should give a portion of airtime to the ecumenical organization as a public service, which they could use to justify their federal communication licenses. The free programing wouldn't be political. It would present religion ecumenically, non-controversially, and respect the line between politics and religion in public discourse. The change would also effectively exclude fundamentalists from the airwaves. Many fundamentalist preachers had their own radio programs, but these were paid programs, supported by religious groups who opposed the Federal Council of Churches. The most well-known was Charles Fuller, who's *Old-Fashioned Revival Hour* was carried on hundreds of stations and reached an estimated 20 million people.[39] In 1929, the Federal Council of Churches convinced the National Broadcasting Corporation to give them free programming and end paid religious programming. Other broadcasting corporations followed until, in the 1940s, only the Mutual Broadcasting Corporation would air fundamentalist programs.[40]

To the theological conservatives, it seemed clear that an argument for the religious neutrality of public discourse was, in practice, an argument for their exclusion. They could not participate in public discourse, then, without challenging the terms and conditions of that space.

This was important to the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals. The first president of the group, Harold J. Ockenga, was one of J. Gresham Machen's students and a close associate of Carl F.H. Henry's. He defined the NAE's mission as engagement with the public sphere.[41] For him, this also meant challenging the public sphere's secularity. The task, as he explained it to seminarians at the newly founded Fuller Theological Seminary a few years later, was to "redefine Christian thinking." Ministers were charged with showing their followers that the "secularist, rationalist lie of 'scientific naturalism'" was incompatible with Christian belief.[42]

One of the NAE's first actions was to form a lobbying arm devoted specifically to the issue of religious broadcasting, the National Religious Broadcaster's association. The association eventually won, convincing the Federal Communications Commission that broadcasters could fulfill the public service requirement of their license with paid programming. This ruling provided the founda-

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[39] Williams 16.

[40] Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion and Popular Culture in America*, (Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press), 2002, 80-141; Mark Ward, Sr., *Air of Salvation: The Story of Christian Broadcasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 17-21; James Deforest Murch, *Cooperation Without Compromise: A History of the National Association of Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 75-80.

[41] Harold J. Ockenga, "Christ for America," *United We Stand: A Report of the Constitutional Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals, May 3-6, 1943* (Boston: National Association of Evangelicals, 1943), 11, 13.

[42] Qtd. in Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 62, 63.

tion for the rise of televangelism and the great evangelical media empires of the last decades of the twentieth century.[43]

It wouldn't be right to say that every political engagement of evangelicals was actually an epistemological argument about the foundation of the public sphere. But more than a few of them were. From the fight over prayer in schools, to Bible reading in schools, to current battles over religious liberty, this issue was key.

Francis Schaeffer Imagines Belief

In the second half of the twentieth century, there was a serious, sustained effort on the part of evangelical leaders to get lay evangelicals, the people in the pews, to reimagine their religious commitments as inescapably political. Evangelicals in this period argued that this is what belief means in cultural practice. Belief requires opposition to the secular, or what evangelicals in this era increasingly called "secular humanism."[44]

An important figure in this history is Francis Schaeffer. According to historian Barry Hankins, "Schaeffer was the most popular and influential American evangelical of his time in reshaping evangelical attitudes towards culture."[45] Schaeffer developed a powerful articulation of the Christian worldview and an argument for the importance of thinking about worldviews, which became very important to American evangelicalism.

Schaeffer was a conservative Presbyterian with a deep interest in art and philosophy. He established a mission in Huemoz, Switzerland in 1955 called L'Abri. There, Schaeffer and his wife Edith ministered to wayward American and European youth, teaching them that Christianity offered the only meaningful way to live, the only coherent alternative to existential despair.[46] Schaeffer's grasp of philosophy, art, music, popular culture and modern theology was often very tenuous. Even evangelicals who are fundamentally sympathetic to Schaeffer's project have pointed out that Schaeffer often made factually incorrect claims. "While there can be no certainty on this point, it is high-

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[43] Williams 17.

[44] The extent to which "secular humanism" was seen as the enemy is perhaps best captured by Randall Balmer in his spiritual autobiography of President Jimmy Carter. Balmer writes that as the rising religious right took aim at Carter, they cast the devout Southern Baptist president as a secular humanist. When Bailey Smith, the newly elected head of the Southern Baptist Convention, visited Carter in the Oval Office in 1980, Smith told Carter that he and the other Southern Baptists were praying for him. "We are praying, Mr. President," Smith said, "that you will abandon secular humanism as your religion." Carter didn't know what a secular humanist was, or why his fellow Southern Baptists would think he was one (Randall Balmer, *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 123).

[45] Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer and the Shaping of Evangelical America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), Kindle loc. 105.

[46] Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, Kindle loc. 887.

ly unlikely that Schaeffer ever actually read Hegel, Kant, Kierkegaard, and the other modern thinkers he would later critique in his lectures and books," Hankins notes. "Schaeffer was a voracious reader of magazines and the Bible, but some who lived at L'Abri and knew him well say they never saw him read a book. It appears highly likely, therefore, that Schaeffer learned western intellectual history from students who had dropped out of European universities."[47] Those who defend Schaeffer maintain that these details don't particularly matter. It's just nit picking. As Philip Yancey, an editor for *Christianity Today*, wrote in 1979, "He speaks in italics."[48] Many evangelicals found him very compelling.

Schaeffer saw despair in contemporary philosophy, art, music, popular culture, and liberal theology. Moreover, he argued modern people were not wrong to despair. Despair was only the logical conclusion of worldviews that did not start from Christian presuppositions about the reality of God and the nature of truth.

This was the Schaefferian apologetic. For him, the fundamental argument for Christianity was an argument about presuppositions. He critiqued Western culture from G.W.F. Hegel to Marcel Duchamp ("whom every Christian ought to know," Schaeffer wrote), and from Ingmar Bergman to the Beatles.[49] He analyzed each in terms of expressed worldview. He analyzed worldviews as regimes of knowledge, the outworking of the most basic tenets about truth and truth's knowability. Secular presuppositions, he said, made a coherent and meaningful life impossible. This was the dilemma of the modern condition.

The evangelical worldview, in Schaeffer's account, was based on the presupposition of God's existence, which entailed ideas of objective reality and absolute truth. The "antithesis," a word Schaeffer used to mean an irreconcilable opposite, was secular humanism.[50] Secular humanism was the predominant worldview in Europe and America, according to Schaeffer, found in everything from *Phänomenologie des Geistes* to "St. Pepper's Loney Heart Club Band." It was antithetical to Christianity because it started from human experience rather than God's existence. In this system of thought, "men and women, beginning absolutely by themselves, try rationally to build out

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[47] Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer,* Kindle loc. 653.

[48] Philip Yancey, "Francis Schaeffer: A Prophet for Our Time?" *Christianity Today*, March 23, 1979, 18)

[49] Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview, Volume One, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 1 - 202, here 33.

[50] In Schaeffer's obituary in *Christianity Today*, this term is deemed one of Schaeffer's significant contributions to evangelical thinking. "Though he did not originate the term," the magazine noted, "Schaeffer's usage of the phrase 'secular humanism' in his books of the 1970s introduced the concept to the Christian public" (Stephen Board, "An Evangelical Thinker Who Left His Mark: Francis A. Schaeffer IV: 1912-1984," *Christianity Today,* June 15, 1984, 60).

from themselves, having only Man as their integration point, to find all knowledge, meaning and value."[51]

This, notably, is the kind of knowledge that Habermas would say is public. It is kind of knowledge necessary for the public discourse to be equally open and available to all. Schaeffer was not alone in finding this secular foundation for knowledge problematic. The question of how modern societies can decide questions of value without appealing to arguments by force, from authority, or special revelation, dates at least to Max Weber's argument that such choices are always irrational. This is the problem of the "polytheism," or pluralism, of modernity. Conflicts of values are irreconcilable, he wrote, a kind of "war of the gods."[52]

The year Schaeffer went to Switzerland, this question was popularized by the public intellectual Walter Lippmann in his book *The Public Philosophy*. Lippmann, no conservative culture warrior, was skeptical of mainstream liberalism's belief that liberty and democracy were possible without a commonly shared criterion for determining "the good," without first principles and a transcendent moral order. In the modern, secular age, Lippmann wrote, it "became the rule that ideas and principles are private—with only subjective relevance and significance." And yet, "if what is good, what is right, what is true, is only what the individual 'chooses' to 'invent,' then we are outside the traditions of civility," and the public discourse can only collapse into arguments by force and from authority.[53] Lippmann and others who followed him, including Habermas, would argue that there was a way to save secular reason and public discourse and avoid this breakdown.[54] Habermas would argue from the pragmatics of communicative theory. Schaeffer's response was more radical.

In his lectures on Western intellectual history, Schaeffer would grant that secular humanism's approach to knowledge seemed promising at first. Many were originally very optimistic about what they could know and how certain they could be of what they knew, working only with knowledge that was available to all equally. Without revelation, however, without God to guarantee the absolute quality of truth, that optimism was unsustainable. The rationalist project collapsed into anti-rationalism. Soon they were lost. When men and women begin thinking "absolutely by themselves" they can't really know anything, because their knowledge isn't objective. A naturalistic

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[51] Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, 9.

[52] H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 323-359. See also Rogers Brubaker, *The Limits of Rationality: An Essay on the Social and Moral thought of Max Weber* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1984).

[53] Qtd. in Marsden, *The Twilight of the American Enlightenment: The 1950s and the Crisis of Liberal Belief* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 47.

[54] See Lassman.

methodology could only lead to confusion and disorientation. "We can see it in the drug addict—he has often lost the distinction between reality and fantasy," Schaeffer wrote. "But the scientist can be in the same place. If he loses the epistemological base, he, too, is in a serious position. What does science mean once you are no longer sure of the objectivity of the thing, or you are no longer on an epistemological base which gives the certainty of a correlation between the subject and the object, or a clear base for the difference between reality and fantasy?"[55] Modern philosophers ended up, logically and inevitably, in the existentialist despair Jean-Paul Sartre imagined as hell in *No Exit*.

"It was as though the rationalist suddenly realized that he was trapped in a large round room with no doors and no windows, nothing but complete darkness," Schaeffer wrote. "From the middle of the room he would feel his ways to the walls and begin to look for an exit. He would go round the circumference, and then the terrifying truth would dawn on him that there was no exit, no exit at all!"[56] The culture at large, the culture that the real-life counterparts of Hank Busche were trying to reach, had merely followed the philosophers into this crisis.

Peretti cites Schaeffer as one of the biggest influences on his thinking.[57] This image of a featureless room seems to have made a particular impression. Peretti turned this example from Schaeffer's first book, *The God Who is There*, into a talk he gave at a Christian worldview conference in the 1990s. The talk was broadcast widely on evangelical radio stations by Focus on the Family.[58] Peretti reprised the speech in 2005 as an address at Liberty University, the school founded and at that time run by religious right leader Jerry Falwell.[59]

"Imagine a really really big room," Peretti told the students at Liberty, "but this a featureless room. There is nothing in this room. It's dark in this room. There aren't even any corners in this room. It's a round room. I'm groping about, trying to find where I am. You need to have some point of reference to tell you where you are."

On stage, a few feet from Falwell, Peretti acted out the problem of being lost in this space without fixed references. Waving his arms and walking with exaggerated steps through the imagi-

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[55] Schaeffer, *He is There and He is Not Silent* in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview, Volume One, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1982) 275 - 384, here 338.

[56] Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, 10.

[57] Peretti, *The Wounded Spirit* (Nashville, Tenn.: Word, 2000), 191; Kevin Martineau, "Interview with Author Frank Peretti and Book Giveaway," Shooting the Breeze (blog), March 28, 2012 http://kevinmartineau.ca/frank-peretti-interview-giveaway/.

[58] Focus on the Family, "What We Believe (feat. Mr. Frank Peretti)," *Focus on the Family Daily Radio Broadcast*, August 28, 2014.

[59] Peretti, "The Chair," Liberty University Convocation, Oct. 21, 2005, YouTube video, http://youtu.be/M-YQXFkN8aY.

nary formless void, Peretti finally found what, in his performance, stood for a moral absolute: a chair. From the fixed point of the chair, he could measure and explore the space. The chair could serve as the basis for knowledge as long as, like absolute truth, it didn't move.

"In order for a fixed point of reference to be any good," Peretti said, "it has to be separate from you, and it can't move …. This is the essence of Christian thought, is that we do have a fixed point of reference by which we measure Right, Wrong, True, False, Good, Evil, all those big absolutes."[60]

Elsewhere, Peretti argues that it is this lack of absolutes that is to blame for modern atrocities from the Holocaust to the 1999 Columbine High School shooting. Citing Columbine-shooter Eric Harris' statements about evolution and natural selection, Peretti writes, "with God rejected, morality becomes arbitrary. The rights and dignity of others become secondary. Unbridled violence by a Hitler or a Harris, to get what he wants, to guard what is his, or to seek revenge, becomes a perfectly logical alternative."[61]

Without a presupposition about the existence of God as the fixed point of reference, Schaeffer argued that despair was the only logical conclusion. Most humans, however, can not live consistently with their beliefs. They dwell in contractions and often attempt half-hearted, jerry-rigged solutions. This dilemma of inconsistency could be found throughout modernity, Schaeffer noted, where "in men like Ingmar Bergman we find a denial of the existence of God but an interest in demonology."[62] Without the existence of God, what other choice did he have?[63]

Calling for conflict

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[60] Peretti, "The Chair."

[61] Peretti, *Wounded Spirit*, 110.

[62] Schaeffer, *Death in the City (*1969: repr., Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002), 38. The Swedish director Bergman's films are known for their existentialist angst and religious themes. The connection to demons that Schaeffer references here was more explicit than that, though. Bergman described his life as permeated by a "heavy inheritance of universal terror." He said anxiety was "my life's most faithful companion, inherited from both my parents, placed in the very center of my identity—my demon and my friend spurring me on (John Lahr, "The Demon-Lover," *The New Yorker*, May 31, 1999, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1999/05/31/the-demon-lover). These references were commonly treated metaphorically, but Christians committed to supernaturalism might treat them as literal. Bergman included a small drawing of a demon in his signature from the 1950s onward (Jan Holmberg, "Angels and Demons," Ingmar Bergman, May 8, 2012, http://ingmarbergman.se/en/universe/angels-and-demons). Peretti was not someone who watched arthouse cinema, however. His novels were informed by concerns about re-emergent neo-paganism and the demonic influences in popular films such as Star Wars, Superman, and the Indiana Jones movies (Peretti, "Forward," in *This Present Darkness* (New York: Howard Books, 2012, i-ii).

[63] Schaeffer never says why people should be so committed to consistency, even in cases where they reject the presuppositions necessary for rational thinking. He seems to believe that this value, logical consistency, is valued in every worldview. That would contradict a core commitment of presuppositionalist argument, though.

It was with this line of argument that Schaeffer imagined the defense of the faith. To argue for Christianity was not to argue for specific propositional truth claims, such as "God exists," "the Bible is the word of God," or "Jesus died for your sins." Rather, to argue for Christianity was to argue that propositional truth claims are only possible if knowledge is based on an absolute. The Christian position, for Schaeffer, was that "there are no neutral facts, for facts are God's facts."[64] The conflict between the believer and the non-believer was not over facts, but over worldviews undergirding the possibility of facts. Everyone had a worldview, according to Schaeffer, whether they reflected on it or not.[65] Most accepted the worldview they were given, directly and indirectly, in the culture they consumed. Because in Western culture the publicly acceptable knowledge was secular knowledge, the culture had drifted towards relativism. Many now doubted the possibility of propositional truth claims. "There is no use talking today until the presuppositions are taken into account," Schaeffer wrote.[66]

After a decade of engaging with whatever English-speaking youth wandered into L'Abri, Schaeffer took to the American evangelical lecture circuit to make the case for this sort of apologetic engagement.[67] His first talk was at Park Street Church in Boston in 1964, pastored at the time by Harold J. Ockenga.[68] The next year, 1965, Schaeffer gave a week-long series of lectures at Wheaton College, Billy Graham's alma matter and a preeminent evangelical institutions.[69] In 1968, as his previous lectures were edited into book form and published under the titles *The God Who is There* and *Escape from Reason*, he returned to the U.S. and did a 14-city tour. In each city, he made the case that evangelicals should think of beliefs in terms of clashing worldviews and irreconcilable presuppositions.

Schaeffer's message had significant impact on American evangelicals. It convinced them to take culture seriously and to engage with it critically. It convinced them such engagements and con-

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[64] Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, 138.

[65] David K. Naugle glosses this point in his book *Worldview: The History of a Concept*: "All people have a worldview and nobody, whether a ditchdigger or professional thinker, can live without one. Philosophy is the only unavoidable occupation" (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002, 29-30). This is a paraphrase of Schaeffer. See Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 279.

[66] Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, 138.

[67] The language of Huemoz, Switzerland was French, but Schaeffer did not speak French (Philip Yancy, "Schaeffer on Schaeffer, Part I: An Interview," *Christianity Today,* March 23, 1979, 21). Records of attendance were not kept at L'Abri, so it is unclear how many people came there. According to one of Edith Schaeffer's fundraising letters, in one six-week period in 1956 there were 187 visitors at L'Abri. Whether that number was usual or not is unclear (Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, Kindle loc. 846).

[68] Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, Kindle loc. 1071.

[69] Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, Kindle loc. 1078.

flicts were not just good, but necessary, because of the nature of belief.[70] As historian George Marsden writes, "Schaeffer provided what became the most influential analysis of what he believed was the larger issue at the heart of the new culture wars. The choice for America, he proclaimed, was simply between a return to Christianity or a takeover by secular humanism and eventually authoritarianism."[71]

There are many examples of young evangelicals changed by Schaeffer's lectures, but one case especially notable in this context is Lane Dennis. In 1965, Dennis was working in the tract-publishing company his father had founded in Westchester, Illinois, less than 15 miles from Wheaton. He was a production manager in the printing division, helping to publish 14 million gospel tracts per year.[72] Dennis went to Wheaton to hear Schaeffer lecture in 1965 and "began, for the first time, to find a way to understand the flow of life in history and philosophy," according to the authorized history of the family's publishing company.[73] Dennis "learned from Dr. Schaeffer how to integrate these new understandings into such diverse realities as everyday business and social upheaval in the 1960s."[74] Because of this new understanding, Dennis started Crossway, a book-publishing division of the business, with his brother Jan Dennis.

The Dennis brothers published *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian World View* in five volumes in 1982, two years before Schaeffer died. With a mission inspired by Schaeffer, they published a whole list of books in the 1980s that were important to the nascent religious right. A brief catalog shows how Christianity was being conceptualized—or re-conceptualized—as necessary worldview conflict: *A Time for Anger: The Myth of Neutrality*, by Franky Schaeffer (Francis' son) in 1982; *The Stealing of America*, by John Whitehead in 1983; *The Healing of the Homosexual*, by Leanne Payne in 1984; *Who Speaks for God?* by Charles Colson in 1985; *The Way Home: Escape from Feminism, Back to Reality*, by Mary Pride in 1985; *The Child Abuse Industry*, by Mary Pride in 1986; *Dark Secrets of the New Age: Satan's Plan for a One World* Religion, by Texe Marrs in 1987; *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media*, by Marvin Olasky in 1988; and *Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics*, by Doug Bandow in 1988.

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[70] Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, Kindle loc. 1263.

[71] Marsden, *Twilight of the American Enlightenment*, 141.

[72] Good News, *Where There Is a Vision: The Inspiring True Story of God's Faithfulness Through Fifty Years of Publishing The Good News* (Westchester, Ill.: 1988), 72.

[73] Good News 78-79.

[74] Good News 79.

Lane and Jan Dennis also accepted a novel manuscript titled "The Heavenlies" from Frank Peretti after fourteen other publishers rejected it. The brothers were looking for novels written from a Christian worldview. The idea was to promote evangelical fiction that would compete with popular American novelists, who, they thought, "could write well only about the confusion and chaos they experienced in their own lives and saw reflected in the wider culture … below the line of despair, as Francis Schaeffer so aptly put it."[75] This work, about the cosmic spiritual conflict behind the cultural wars, seemed like it was what they were looking for.

Evangelical Horror

Peretti's manuscript was an unlikely fit for the evangelical fiction market of the late 1980s. The proven sellers were romance novels and this was a story about angels and demons fighting to control a small town. Peretti's work, by contrast, is recognizably part of the tradition that H.P. Lovecraft called the "spectrally macabre."

Lovecraft, one of the most significant twentieth-century writers of America horror, said the genre's supernatural elements served to give readers a shiver of the numinous. Readers "tremble at the thought of the hidden and fathomless worlds of strange life which may pulsate in the gulfs beyond the stars, or press hideously upon our own globe in unholy dimensions which only the dead and the moonstruck can glimpse."[76] The genre imagines a world that is like the readers' everyday reality, but then, using the style of realism, disrupts that mimetic representation with depictions of spectral and occult forces.

The most popular author of the "spectrally macabre" at the time Peretti wrote was Stephen King. Peretti's work is thematically similar to King's. King's novel *'Salem's Lot*, published in 1975, is about unnatural evil taking over an iconic American town and it was a huge commercial success. His novel *It*, published the same year as *This Present Darkness*, imagines another small American town haunted by another malevolent force, which memorably takes the shape of an evil clown.

Peretti borrowed this genre and repurposed it to evangelical ends. In Peretti's adaptation, it is not the moonstruck who sense cosmic horror, but evangelical believers. Nor does this expanded perception of reality drive them insane. Instead, they come to grasp an expanded understanding of reality. Peretti's protagonists recognize the truth of the evil lurking beneath mundane reality. As they become aware of what Lovecraft describe as "the beating of black wings" and the "scratching

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[75] Good News 83, 101-102. Ephesians 6:12, in the Revised Standard Version, reads, "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places"

[76] H.P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1973), 14.

of outside shapes," they're moved to true belief, which is imagined in the novel as belief that challenges the secularity of public space.[77]

Though horror was unheard of in evangelical fiction, then, the Dennis's had reason to believe the story would resonate with readers. It appealed to them, additionally, because of how it staged the worldview thinking promoted by Schaeffer's ministry. a main protagonist makes a decision to confront Satan in a public space, he could have directly quoted the dramatic closing of one of Schaeffer's 1968 lectures: "There is death in the city; there is death in the city; there is death in the city."[78]

Jan and Lane Dennis wanted a novel with broad appeal that would allowed readers to easily, imaginatively engage with the problems their other writers approached prosaically, a novel which would not just make assertions about the condition of evangelical believers' belief in the secular humanist world, but invite readers to experience themselves in that conflict. This seemed like the right novel. They retitled Peretti's work *This Present Darkness*, hoping evangelical book buyers to recognize the reference to Ephesians 6:12 and the similarity to C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*. It was published in 1986.[79]

The fiction met a receptive audience. Sales were slow at first, but then blossomed beyond anyone's expectations. Peretti was working in a ski-equipment factory at the time, having burned out as the minster of a small pentecostal church. He was initially disappointed with the book's reception. "I'd call the publisher every month," he said. "I'd go into the locker room there at the factory, and there's a pay phone on the wall and I'd call the publisher and I'd get the last month's sales figures. And we were doing, oh, 40, 50 copies. I mean, it was just trickling out the door. I was thinking, I'm going to be working in this factory forever."[80] Then evangelical pop singer Amy Grant be-

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[77] Lovecraft 16. For more on how *This Present Darkness* fits into the broader literary landscape, see Daniel Silliman and Jan Stievermann, "Reading the Supernatural in Contemporary American Ethnic and Christian Fiction," in *Reading Practices: REAL of Research in English and American Literature Vol. 31*, eds., Winfried Fluck, Günter Leypoldt, and Philipp Löffler, (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2015): 101-126.

[78] Qtd. in Hankins, *Francis Schaeffer*, loc. 1529. In his book with this title, *Death in the City*, edited from a student group's transcription of the 1968 lectures by Jim Sire for InterVarsity Press, the thrice repeated phrase has been modified. The book reads, "Because man has turned from God, there are hungers on every side; there is death in the *polis*, there is death in the city!" (39).

[79] Good News, 83, 101-102.

[80] Susan Wingate and Joshua Graham Interview Frank Peretti, Dialogue: Between the Lines, BlogTalk Radio, April 5, 2012 http://www.blogtalkradio.com/dialogue/2012/04/05/dialogue-between-the-lines, accessed Oct. 6, 2014.

gan to mention the book on stage during her 1987 tour.[81] Grant dominated Contemporary Christian Music at the time and was the genre's first crossover success.[82] Her promotion of Peretti's novel had an immediate impact. "Amy Grant plugged it and was excited about it," Peretti recalled. "Whoa. 4,000 copies. Well, I called in the next month, 'we sold about 30,000 copies.' And the next month, 'we sold about 60,000 copies.'"[83] By the end of 1989, about 500,000 copies of the book had sold and more than 200,000 copies of the sequel had been pre-ordered.[84] Crossway had to subcontract the printing to other publishers to meet the demand. It was an evangelical blockbuster. According to a Christian Bookseller Association history, "people were coming into (Christian bookstores) bleary-eyed after staying up all night to finish the book. They wanted five more copies to give away to friends."[85] The novel ultimately sold more than 2.5 million copies.

Reading This Present Darkness

This Present Darkness is the story of a the fictional small town of Ashton, whose civic leaders have joined in a secret New Age, neo-pagan group. The faculty of the local liberal arts college, law enforcement officers, city council members, and liberal ministers, "a cross section of Ashton's best" have formed a local branch of the Universal Consciousness Society.[86] They are working towards a sort of New Age *parousia*, a coming of the Universal Mind, in which "all the inhabitants of the world will make a giant evolutionary leap and meld into one global brain, one transcending consciousness."[87] The Universal Conscious Society is fronted by a global corporation, the Omni Corporation. The Omni Corporation is secretive and powerful, with controlling interests on every level of the global economy, from oil production to banks to retail outlets.[88] The Omni Corporation has sig-

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[81] Peter Gardella, "Spiritual Warfare in the Fiction of Frank Peretti," in Colleen McDannell, ed., *Religion in the United States in Practice, Volume Two* (Princeton: Princeton, 2001), 328-345, here 329; Andrew Abrams, "Moved by the Spirit of the Lord, Frank Peretti Writes Theological Thrillers that Sell to High Heaven," People Magazine, June 18, 1990, http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20117976,00.html.

[82] David W. Stowe, *No Symapathy for the Devil: Christian Pop Music and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina, 2011), 247.

[83] Wingate and Graham

[84] Wingate and Graham; Edwin McDowell, "Book Notes," *New York Times*, June 28, 1989 http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/28/books/book-notes-484889.html.

[85] Bruce Bickle and Stan Jantz, *His Time, His Way: The CBA Story: 1950-1999* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: CBA, 1999), 94.

[86] Peretti, *This Present Darkness,* 466.

[87] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 254.

[88] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 277-278.

nificant political influence, nationally and internationally.[89] All of the world systems are being quietly taken over. This is not just the work of a new religious movement or a conglomerate of the global economy, though. It is ultimately spiritual. As one character who has been driven out of the town says, "You have no idea who you're really dealing with. There are forces at work in that town—." He clarifies: "political, social … spiritual too, of course."[90] The conspiracy is the work of a demonic lord known as the Strongman. The Strongman is an intimate of Satan himself and commands an army of lesser demons, "a vicious global tyrant responsible over the centuries for resisting the plans of the living God and establishing Lucifer's kingdom on earth."[91] His plan, as the novel starts, includes taking over Whitmore College, the fictional school at the center of Ashton, and then Ashton, turning the small American town into a beachhead for a New World Order.[92]

The demons occupy the town at the novel's opening. They inhabit physical space in this fictional world and are described by Peretti in visceral, fleshy terms. Many have thick, leathery hides. They have talons and yellow eyes and speak in gargling voices. The Strongman is described as looking like "a monstrous, overweight vulture" who resides at the center of a violent, churning cloud of lesser demons, who fly like flocks of bats. Individual demons often have particular features fitting specific tasks. One has "knuckles honed into spikelike protrusions" while another is "like a slimy black leech."[93] At the same time, the demons are not corporal, but spiritual. They can't be perceived directly by the people of Ashton. They are invisible, not-there presences, immaterial and yet interacting with the world. One demon is described as a "breach torn in space," a shadow with "an animated, creaturelike shape" that "crawled, quivered, moved along the street."[94] Another is described as "an eerie projection in midair, a glowing painting on black velvet" that seems like something only imagined.[95] These demons are all over the town and yet the town doesn't appear any different than normal. Ashton looks, Peretti writes, "like the background for every Norman Rockwell painting."[96]

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[89] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 280, 222.

[90] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 86.

[91] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 176, 432-433.

[92] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 471.

[93] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 56, 43.

[94] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 4.

[95] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 68.

[96] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 3.

Regular people in the town know something is wrong, but can't quite identify the change. "People around here are starting to act weird," one notes. "I think we're being invaded by aliens."[97] A retired dean of the college observers an influx of newcomers, noting they "all seemed to have a very unique rapport with each other—their own lingo, their own inside secrets, their own ideas of reality."[98]

The leader of this secret group of human conspirators is a character named Juleen Langstrat, Whitmore College's professor of psychology of the self. She teaches classes such as "Pathway to Your Inner Light," "Introduction to God and Goddess Consciousness and the Craft," and "How to Enjoy the Present by Experiencing Past and Future Lives."[99] Outside of class, she leads Ashton's elite in the experimental spiritual practices of the Universal Consciousness Society—worshiping demons through meditation aimed at achieving the universal mind. She leads the group in a chant of the name of the demon Rafar, the Strongman's deputy devil, an ancient prince of Babylon who now is lord of Ashton. These secret religious sessions are also politically powerful. "Our purpose here," Langstrat says to one gathering, "is to combine our psychic energies to assure the success of today's venture. Our long awaited goal will soon by realized: The Whitmore College campus, and afterward the whole town of Ashton, are going to become part of the New World Order."[100]

The take-over effort is effected through practical measures, in addition to these combined psychic energies. Peretti describes how a growing number of Ashton's businesses are secretly controlled by the Omni Corporation. The members of the Universal Consciousness Society all give what they own to the corporation or one of its fronts, possibly to gain membership. Others not interested in turning their property over are forced to sell. Small businesses, for example, find themselves hit by bills for taxes they have already paid. Their protests unheard and unheeded, the property is seized and put up for auction, only to be bought by a representative of the Omni Corporation. Likewise, civic leaders who don't voluntarily associate with the neo-pagan group are driven out. This includes elected officials and those on every level of the judicial system, but also the town's pastors, the man who runs the local newspaper, and the administrators of Whitmore College. Several who attempt to stand against the conspiracy are set up on charges of child molestation. Others are falsely accused of rape and extra-marital affairs, hounded by rumors that destroy their reputations or their mental health, or both. Each leaves Ashton convinced that standing against this quasi-secret

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[97] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 142.

[98] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 212.

[99] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 122.

[100] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 471.

movement would result in their personal destruction.[101] Each is replaced by an associate of the Universal Consciousness Society. The conspirators then use their position to further the planned takeover, harassing opponents, and putting the college in such a precarious financial position that it will seem legitimate to sell the school itself to the Omni Corporation.

"Let the Devil have that town!" one beleaguered character says at a point where the protagonists are not sure if the evil referenced is a metaphor or a living being. "If he wants it so bad, let him have it."[102]

Remapping the Sacred and the Secular

One of the ways to read the novel is to treat the supernatural forces as metaphors. As metaphors, many of the threats imagined here map directly onto the concerns of the nascent religious right in the 1980s. Conservative Christians at the time *This Present Darkness* was published, for example, were very worried about the New Age movement.[103] Other anxieties—the changing economy; recreational drug usage among teens; fathers' place in the family; the possibility of false accusations of child molestation—are also really representative of common white evangelical fears. More than other novels considered in this study, *This Present Darkness* can seem to be a work of propaganda. As the novel connects cultural concern to cosmic struggle, it can seem the spiritual aspects function in this fiction to valorize the real concerns, which are secular. This is how journalist Daniel Radosh reads *This Present Darkness*. "Peretti's preferred form of warfare was not spiritual but cultural," he writes.[104]

The spiritual aspect, for Radosh, is best interpreted as an intensifier. What the fictional pastor, sitting on a public bench, is really worried about is the practical question of whether or not he will keep his job as minister. By talking about Satan and invisible demons, Busche makes that everyday crisis seem more special than it is. He makes it otherworldly. Likewise, in an early scene when demons gather at the college—descending "into the catacombs of the basement level" a "dismal nether world" of low ceilings, heating ducts and water pipes all painted a dirty beige"—that

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[101] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 284-285.

[102] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 284.

[103] See Richard Beck, *We Believe the Children: The Story of a Moral Panic in the 1980s* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015).

[104] Daniel Radosh, *Rapture Ready!: Adventures in the Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 97.

only highlights evangelical's existing concerns about higher education.[105] What would otherwise be simply secular concerns about sources of authority are, here, reimagined so as to seem to be something more than that.

In this reading, the spiritual aspect of spiritual warfare is being staged in such a way that a particular voting bloc's concerns are seen as very important, their issues presented as non-negotiable. Those who disagree with the religious right are demonized, literally. The issues are no longer available to everyone equally for rational public discussion. Debate is just ended with demons. "Common ground will never be possible because they don't object to specific ideas that can be reframed or adjusted," Radosh writes of the audience for *This Present Darkness*. "We want to persuade them, reason with them, listen to them, and accommodate them. They want to save us. It's not even the same playing field."[106]

That's not quite right, though. It's not the case that spiritual warfare fiction stages these cultural conflicts as part of a different playing field, it's that it invites readers to imagine the playing field differently. Throughout the novel, major and minor characters come to this realization. Again and again, they model for the reader a re-imagination of the relationship between metaphysical commitments and the issues of the secular public sphere. In one example of this, eighteen to twenty people from the church gather at "a modern log cabin on the outskirts of town."[107] They are brought together by their concerns for the town, including the curricula at the college. The group is representative of the grass roots of the 1980s religious right. These are the people who would buy the books published by Crossway. This is Jerry Falwell's constituency, which he described in the early days of the Moral Majority as "people from many church backgrounds, concerned about the nation's moral drift and its impact on their families, but unorganized and unable to stop the decline."[108] This group would also be the intended audience for Schaeffer's lecture tours. One man, in this group, reflects the cultural clashes they have all been witness to in Ashton have left him feeling threatened. "Oh, it's a war, all right," he says. Another, echoing a common argument made by the religious right in their attempts to mobilize evangelicals, says the real reason for the town's moral decline is Christians' lack of engagement. "The problem is we've all just sat to the side and let it happen," he says. "It's time we got concerned and scared." Here, though, the act of getting

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[105] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 56. The college building where the demons gather for a conference is named Stewart Hall. While this name has significance for those familiar with the work of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, that reference would not likely have meant anything to evangelical readers in the 1980s. This author can find no evidence Peretti knew of Hall.

[106] Radosh 111.

[107] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 264.

[108] Edward E. Plowman, "Is Morality All Right? The New Religious Lobbies Say 'Yes'—With Impact," *Christianity Today,* Nov. 2, 1979, 78.

concerned is not the kind of act recognized in the secular public sphere. The characters are portrayed as coming to the realization that the political playing field is not what they've been taught. The group in *This Present Darkness* does not call for a boycott or a get-out-the-vote campaign. They call for prayer. "It's time we got concerned and scared," the one man says, but continues, "and on our knees to see that the Lord does something about it."[109]

Concerns about moral conditions are presented in *This Present Darkness* as more properly concerns about spiritual conditions. The meeting that starts with discussions about public issues in the town ends in prayer and worship. "Someone started a simple song of worship," Peretti writes, "and those who knew it sang, while those who didn't know it learned it." Above them, unseen and invisible but also physically there "in the rafters," warrior angels join the song, "their voices smooth and flowing like cellos and basses in a symphony."[110] The spiritual aspect of this scene functions not so much to affirm the rightness of these nascent culture warrior's concerns as it does the rightness of this response. As an angel comments in an opening passage that introduces Busche, who is shown "kneeling in earnest prayer, his head resting on the hard wooden bench, and his hands clenched with fervency," the point is that praying is "not so insignificant."[111] If that's the case, though, it cannot be completely separated from the sphere of cultural concerns, a private matter of belief. The novel invites readers to imagine that the private and the public, the sacred and the secular, are not so neatly separated.

Another example of this is staged with the character Edith Duster. She is an older woman, a former missionary to China, now retired, who is greatly respected by the minister and others in the church. Busche goes to her to discuss church politics, and when he does, Duster turns the conversation to spiritual things. "That church can't possibly survive if half the congregation removes its support," the minister says. The older woman replies, "Oh, but I've had dreams of angels lately."[112] This is not a non sequitur, in the novel, but rather meant to adjust expectations of what is sequitur.

Those angels later state the point directly, waking Duster from her sleep to tell her Busche has been arrested. The demonic take-over of the town has attempted to stop the pastor with the justice system, putting him in jail on false charges. Duster is told this news and told it is urgent she respond—by praying. An angel explains, "we are going into battle for the town of Ashton. The victory rests on the prayers of the saints of God."[113] Duster gets out of her bed and down on her knees.

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[109] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 265.

[110] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 267.

[111] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 6.

[112] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 146.

[113] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 401.

"She prayed," Peretti writes. "She prayed. She prayed."[114] This is shown to have an immediate effect, as the novel pulls back to look at Ashton from above, quiet in the pre-dawn hours, and then turns to the sky, where angel warriors are stirred by the old missionary's intercession.

Of course, what is being imagined here are angels rallying to defend an evangelical pastor who has been arrested on trumped-up rape charges when he takes a stand against the evil forces threatening to take over an idyllic American small town. This can certainly be interpreted as a valorization of the religious right. Yet, what is most directly valorized by the depiction of the stirring angels is actually an older woman's prayers. The novel is not clarifying the sides of a cultural conflict but inviting readers to re-imagine the terrain of that conflict. As religious studies scholar Jason C. Bivins notes in his study of evangelical erotics of fear, "Peretti's fiction has energetically identified tools of Satanic machinations, frequently naming long-standing sources of evangelical concern." This, however, is not a simple matter of representation, but a remapping. These concerns of the religious right "are advanced through a medium of popular entertainment engaged in the kind of boundary negotiation central to the religion of fear," Bivens writes. "Such narratives remap the world."[115]

In one of the few academic studies of some of the religious practices associated with the spiritual warfare fictionalized by Peretti, that remapping is seen as key. Prayerwalks, of the sort Busche takes when he goes to the center of Ashton to confront Satan, are an evangelical practice that emerged under the influence of experimental pentecostal theology in the 1980s.[116] David Walker McConeghy writes that the practice challenges common conceptions of the designation of sacred and spiritual places. Traditionally, theorists of sacred space have connected sacrality with the quiet of a religious sanctuary. The sacred has been understood as walled off and set apart from the hustle of the ordinary world.[117] In this schema, the division between sacred and secular and between spiritual and ordinary is the division of private and public. Spiritual space has been understood to be spiritual specifically in how it's not public, while public space has been understood to be public

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[114] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 402.

[115] Jason C. Bivens, *Religion of Fear: The Politics of Horror in Conservative Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 178.

[116] David Walker McConeghy, "Geographies of Prayer: Place and Religion in Modern America" (doctoral dissertation, University of California Santa Barbara, 2013); C. Peter Wagner and F. Douglas Pennoyer, ed., *Wrestling with Dark Angels: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Spiritual Forces in Spiritual Warfare* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1990). These prayer practices were widely promoted by pentecostals in the early 1980s, starting with a class on "Power Evangelism" taught by John Wimber and C. Peter Wagner at Fuller from 1982 to 1985. The class was very controversial and much discussed among pentecostals. It was at this same time that Peretti was writing *This Present Darkness*, though it is not clear that he drew any of the novel's ideas directly from the teachings of Wimber or Wagner.

[117] See David Chidester and Edward Linenthal, eds., *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1995), 9-16.

specifically because it is postmetaphysical. Practices of spiritual warfare, however, replaced the sacred/secular bifurcation of space with other oppositional relationships, God/Satan, angels/demons, the Christian worldview/secular humanism. The practice of prayerwalking involved acting out this alternative understanding of the world, where "the world was not either sacred or profane. It was either God's kingdom or reader for spiritual warfare to make it God's kingdom."

As McConeghy explains, "Through prayerwalking, all space was in the process of becoming sacred …. This drove prayerwalkers to move continuously and deliberately through the world to judge the battle lines and make a stand against Satan. Their motion itself produced religious space."[118] Beliefs are taken outside the four walls of the church and made public, an act that changes their experience of the sacred and of the secularity of public space.

This Present Darkness likewise made it possible for people experience the relationship between their beliefs and that secular space in a different way. The novel invited readers to think of beliefs as public, and to entertain the idea that that was problematic. Of course, many have read the novel as simply a re-telling of the culture war, with the cosmic aspects of the story interpreted in much the same way that white and black hats are understood in classic Westerns. This reading is especially common for those who struggled to suspend disbelief enough to enjoy the novel. A closer reading, though, shows that the fiction is less devoted to representing certain beliefs as true and right than it is to imagining or reimagining those beliefs as public. Belief, here, is a cultural practice in the secular public sphere, but more, a cultural practice that challenges the nature of the publicness of that sphere.

Contesting Public Space

In addition to remapping the relationship between the public sphere and beliefs, *This Present Darkness* also reimagines the public sphere itself. The novel represents the publicness of the space of public discourse as contested. In contrast to the normative ideal of open pre-political discourse articulated by Habermas, *This Present Darkness* represents public discourse as always political, the conditions always part of a power struggle. The novel is full of meetings where this happens. It begins and ends this way.

This Present Darkness can actually be thought of as a novel about meetings. There are government meetings, business meetings, college meetings, church meetings, prayer meetings, family meetings, and more. People meet for counseling and spiritual guidance, for political conspiracy and confrontation, to gather information and give it. And those are only the human meetings: *This Present Darkness* is fascinated by the concept of supernatural meetings and spends not a little time

[118] McConeghy 71.

describing the organizational structure and rules of order for the meetings of both angels and demons. The demons are shown as obsessed with respect and decorum.[119] Rules are enforced with sudden violence and superiors humiliate underlings at will.[120] Angels, on the other hand, have productive meetings. They trust each other, can disagree without threatening anyone's status, and end in purposeful unity, re-dedicating themselves to their mission in unison, "For the saints of God and for the Lamb!"[121]

There are a great variety of meetings in this novel. The variety alone is a challenge to a normative vision of what a meeting should be. The structure of the discourse is not always the same. Meetings do not always operate according to the same rules and presuppositions, and the communicative practice is different in different meetings, so one cannot easily deduce pragmatic, self-evidencing principles of communication, such as publicness. Instead, what is imagined in this is novel is a world of meetings where meetings are not only the site of conflict, they are the subject.

Illustrating this, the first meeting in *This Present Darkness* takes place in the shadows. In fact the meeting is described as "some shadows moving stealthily."[122] This secret meeting—a gathering of the conspirators who, as readers and protagonists will later learn, are taking over Ashton—is also peculiarly public. It is at a carnival. At the dark edge of warm summer night of "roaming, cotton candied masses," five people meet. They are behind a booth where teenagers throw darts at balloons to win prizes. It is never explained why the conspirators meet here, but presumably, on the level of plot, it is the very publicness of the place that allows it to be inconspicuous. Carnivals also, of course, have a long literary tradition, including in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. They have frequently served as sites of deconstruction, where hierarchies are inverted and existing orders are subverted from within. Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin famously argued that for Rabelais, the carnival was internal to the religious, medieval regime, and also a hidden polemic against it. With the carnival, "Rabelais' polemical task," Bakhtin wrote, was "to purge the spatial and temporal world of those remnants of transcendent worldview still present in it."[123] Peretti's carnival can be seen as reversing this reversal, since it is precisely in this "purged" space that angels first appear in the novel. They disrupt the space, showing it to be, in literary terms, liminal. The carnival in *This Present Darkness* is both public and not. It is in the

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[119] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 58.

[120] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 62.

[121] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 56.

[122] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 3.

[123] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans., Caryl Emerson and Matthew Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1989); See also: Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought* (London: Routledge, 1995).

middle of the town, put on by the town, and open to all. Yet it is also on private property, a vacant lot owned by a private individual. The carnival is also owned and operated by private contractors, "a traveling troupe of enterprising migrants."[124] It is neither simply public or private, but is problematically both. This meeting that happens in the first few pages of *This Present Darkness* happens in this public/private space and is itself arguably public, but arguably private. The narrative starts by starting that argument.

A young reporter, guided by angels, takes a picture of the meeting. The shadows are lit up by the flash of her camera. The conspiracy is documented and brought out into the open.[125] The reporter, Bernice Krueger, is reprimanded when she takes her picture, told "This is a private meeting."[126] She recognizes two of the people, the police chief and a leading liberal minister. The other three she doesn't know. A short time later, she is arrested on charges of prostitution. She is convinced the arrest is retaliation for exposing the meeting, part of a cover-up, and is fiercely committed to exposing that meeting.[127]

On the other hand, the new editor of the Ashton Clarion, Marshall Hogan, initially assumes the whole thing is a mistake. However, when the police chief and the liberal minister both deny being at the meeting and at the carnival, and even deny knowing each other, Hogan reacts, like his reporter, by trying to uncover the secret and make it public. He quickly catches the two men in a lie, proving they do know each other.[128] The film that would have documented the meeting also turns out to have been destroyed by the police without explanation, convincing the editor something nefarious is going on.[129] Hogan identifies a third member of the conspiracy as the psychology professor at Whitmore College, Juleen Langstrat.[130] As reporter and editor begin to piece things together, figuring out who knows who and what their connections are, Hogan pauses to ask whether this information they're gathering is rightly public or private. Are they "blurring the lines"?[131] Where are the lines? They don't decide the question, but choose to take an aggressive position contesting the

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[124] Peretti, *This Present Darkness,* 1.

[125] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 3.

[126] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 18.

[127] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 16.

[128] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 95.

[129] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 80.

[130] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 104.

[131] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 107.

claims of privacy, committing themselves to making these things public. "If it's a stone," Hogan says, "turn it over."[132]

The editor comes to this position at least in part because he is aggravated by another meeting where publicness is contested. This is the meeting of a college class. Hogan's daughter, Sandy Hogan—"a beautiful redhead … nothing but potential"—is a freshman enrolled in several of Langstrat's lectures.[133] Hogan is working at the small town newspaper in part to slow down and be a better father to his daughter. In one early scene in the novel, he goes to to Whitmore College to pick up Sandy after work. The school is presented as an idyllic space, an ideal institution of higher learning. "The campus looked like most American campuses," Peretti writes. "It was everything a college should be." There are wide lawns with sophomores throwing frisbees, long brick walkways, and elm-lined streets. The oldest lecture halls are red brick with white pillars, and the newer psychology building is "patterned after some European cathedral with towers and archways."[134] This secular temple of knowledge is not clearly secular, however, in the sense of being public. The college at the center of the town is, in fact, privately endowed. Immediately on entering the psychology building, Hogan wonders if he was wrong to assume he would be welcome there.

When he finds the room where Langstrat is teaching, Hogan knows, intuitively, that the rules of discourse in this space do not allow him to engage or to question what is being said. Privately, he is very critical of the lecture, which he describes as a "funny conglomeration of sixty-four dollar words which impress people with your academic prowess but can't get you a paying job."[135] Hogan decides, nonetheless, that he would like to quietly listen in the back of the lecture hall while he waits for his daughter, if for no other reason than to understand what she is being taught. "Then it happened," Peretti writes. "Some kind of radar in the professor's head must have clicked on. She honed in on Marshall sitting there and simply would not look away from him."[136] Hogan is kicked out. It's not immediately clear why. The rules of the space, the pragmatic presuppositions on which it operates, are mysterious to him. Hogan knows that he violated a discursive norm, but not what that norm is. "So who stole all the 'No Parents Allowed' signs?" Hogan asks his daughter. "How was I to know that she didn't want me in there? And just what's so all-fired precious and secret that she doesn't want any outsiders to hear it?"[137] The professor, of course, is leading a local effort in a

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[132] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 107.

[133] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 39.

[134] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 40.

[135] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 41.

[136] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 42.

[137] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 45.

neo-pagan conspiracy to establish a New World Order. And conspiracies depend on keeping secret meetings from becoming public.

In the democratic ideal of public discourse, the form of a meeting is imagined to be pre-political. The shape of the space in the culture for debate is conceived of as uniform in every important way. For Habermas, the universal aspect of this claim is critical. The discourse must be grounded in the pragmatic principles of the public sphere in order for it to be rational. "These universal claims," Habermas writes, "are set in the general structures of possible communication. In these validity claims communication theory can locate a gentle but obstinate, a never silent although seldom redeemed claim to reason."[138] The claim of rationality is undercut if meetings, and the silent rules that give shape to the space for that discourse, are not neutral. Peretti's novel of spiritual warfare fiction focuses on ways in which meetings are not neutral, not pre-political, and not universal. The contest of cultural conflicts, as staged in *This Present Darkness*, starts with the rules about what is allowed in meetings and who is allowed in meetings. The first pragmatic principle of the public sphere, its publicness, is challenged.

As the protagonists of *This Present Darkness* learn to re-conceive of the relationship between the spiritual and the secular, and between the public and the private, they also learn the importance of challenging the form and the rules of public discourse. The novel climaxes with a meeting where this happens. Busche and Hogan lead the mobilized Christians to the college where the beachhead of the New Age conspiracy is about to be established. The the "fired up saints," the "Remnant," stay outside and pray.[139] The now-converted newspaper editor and the pastor go in to the administration building and find the conference room where the board of regents is meeting with the head of the Omni Corporation and a team of lawyers to complete the secret sale of the school to the Universal Consciousness Society front.

Hogan goes in first, bursting in, interrupting, and shocking the gathered conspirators. "How did you get here?" he is asked. Hogan responds literally, "I took the elevator!"[140]

As a newspaper editor, his presence in the room, like the novel's opening camera flash, makes the conspiracy public. Busche follows Hogan and, in this now-public space, immediately addresses the demonic forces, which are described for the reader in the same way that everything else is described, presented here as real as the lawyers even though, from the perspective of the characters in the room, the spirits are invisible. For them, the demons still hide behind the facade of

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[138] Habermas, "Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures," in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 95-129, here 97.

[139] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 505, 476.

[140] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 481.

the secular. The novel, however, presents the demons as facts. Busche, Peretti writes, now "knew whom he faced."[141] The meeting becomes an exorcism.

Worldview thinking

Ashton is saved, in the end, by a remnant of the Christian worldview. This is true in the sense that the "Remnant," a biblical term Peretti uses for the culturally engaged evangelicals who challenge the secular public sphere, are activated and thwart the Universal Consciousness Society's conspiracy.[142] It is also true in another sense. In the novel, the remnant of the Christian worldview is strong enough in the town to enable the people of Ashton, in the last minute, to recognize a choice between irreconcilable presuppositions. By engaging in what those following Schaeffer have called worldview thinking, characters in the novel see themselves to be facing a choice between Christianity and existential despair. They see their thinking must start from a fixed point of reference, the absolute of God's existence, or, as the dichotomy would have it, they lose their grasp on reality. They will become disoriented, no longer able to say with any certainty what is true. That's the choice. Peretti, here, is staging the Schaefferian apologetic. He imagines the town being seduced away from Christian truth in the process that Schaeffer describes taking place in Western history. He imagines, further, that Schaeffer's worldview thinking can work to save this idyllic American town and, by extension, America. Belief is presented here as a totality built on an epistemological presupposition, which is necessarily irreconcilable with other sets of beliefs, which are also totalities that follow logically from their own epistemological foundations. Thinking about belief like that is shown, in *This Present Darkness*, to be of critical importance.

Sandy Hogan is a symbolic stand-in for the town in the novel. Her arc is presented directly in the text, a narrative of demonic seduction, while the town's parallel seduction is revealed in a more fragmentary manner, with bits of fact uncovered and minor characters coming in to offer pieces of exposition. Sandy's story shows the human costs of the take-over while the parallel account of Ashton shows the scale of the conspiracy. There are other characters who follow this same trajectory. The police chief, a demonized high school student, and others all have this narrative arc. Sandy's is the most fully told, though. Tracing her seduction and how the remnant of the Christian worldview in her saves her from the demons will show how Peretti stages the Schaefferian apologetic in this novel.

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[141] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 482.

[142] See Romans 11:5 and Revelation 12:17. The term is explicitly eschatological.

Sandy starts as girl defined, most of all, by her rocky relationship with her father the newspaper editor.[143] She has been raised on a healthy diet of pop psychology and taught a very liberal form of Christianity on Sundays. She learns to look within herself for truth. "Each person must find his own way, his own truth," the liberal minister of Ashton explains. "What had remained in the darkness of tradition and ignorance, we find now revealed within ourselves … we are inherently divine in our very essence, and have within ourselves the capacity for good, the potential to become, as it were, gods."[144] At Whitmore College, in the guise of open exploration and self-discovery, she has come to fully embrace what Peretti will describe as the "doctrine of demons," which is that the self is the source of knowledge.[145] She is taking Langstrat's classes. Langstrat's lecture, presented in snippets early in the book, starts with the modernist epistemology of Rene Descartes, "the simple ontological formula, 'I think, therefore I am,'" and then veers off in a mystical direction.[146]

Veering off, the education of Sandy Hogan soon moves outside the class room. An older student encourages Sandy to "tune in" to the universe. He tells Sandy that the only way to find peace is to stop worrying about who's right and who's wrong. She should give up the idea that opposites are irreconcilable and embrace, instead, the oneness of everything. "The peace, the unity, the wholeness are really there," the boy says. "Once you stop listening to the lies your mind's been telling you, you'll see very clearly that God is big enough for everybody and *in* everybody."[147] Sandy, like the town, finds this foreign at first. She says, "I'm from the old Judeo-Christian school of thought, you know."[148] Nevertheless, she values an open mind and tries to "tune in" to truth beyond the antithetical. The novel at that point pulls back, giving the reader the spiritual perspective of what's really happening: "Meanwhile," Peretti writes, "with very gentle, very subtle combing motions of his talons, Deception stood behind Sandy, stroking her red hair and speaking sweet words of comfort to her mind."[149]

The next step in Sandy's seduction by the demon Deception is private therapy sessions in Langstrat's home. Sandy is taught to meditate. She learns to explore other levels of consciousness, to sink within herself to "the deeper level where true psychic ability and experience could be found." In that process, she is connected to a spirit guide, Madaline. Visualized as a young girl with

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[143] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 39.

[144] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 92, 171.

[145] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 234.

[146] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 41.

[147] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 155-156.

[148] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 154.

[149] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 157.

cascading blonde hair and dressed in shimmering white linen, the spirit guide tells Sandy that each life is "simply a step upward." The guide takes her hand and leads her into the illusion of paradise.[150] The girl with the concerned father and the formerly Judeo-Christian worldview thus accepts a demon into herself willingly.

The horror of this becomes apparently only in the last step of the seduction, when Sandy is about to sacrificed in a Satanic ritual. She follows her spirit guide deeper and deeper in her meditative practices, seeking spiritual fulfillment, higher consciousness and self-realization.[151] Then, in a climactic scene, as Marshall Hogan and Busche rush to confront the regents who are meeting with the Omni Corporation to turn the college over to the New Age conspiracy, the Universal Consciousness Society gathers in another room of the building and chants the name of the demon Rafar. Sandy goes into her trance, following her spirit guide into the darkness, and finds heavy chains locked to her wrists.[152] The spirit guide gives Sandy a knife and tells her to cut the chains. "These chains are the chains of life," the demon says, "they are a prison of evil, of the lying mind, or illusion! Free your true self!" At the same time, in the waking world, one of the neo-pagan devotees places a real knife in "the entranced Sandy's hand."[153] If she cuts her chains in the trance, she will slice her wrists in real life.

In the final moments, though, Sandy finds some source of strength to resist the consummation with evil. There is yet, Peretti writes, a "last remaining shred of her old, discarded Christian heritage still holding her."[154] She cannot accept that synthesis of antithetical concepts, that freedom is slavery, that pain is pleasure, that death is life. Before it is too late, she sees the true nature of her spirit guide. Madaline is not a beautiful blonde girl, but an ugly demon, her skin "soot-black and leathery," her eyes, "huge yellow orbs," her jaws are a lion's, with drool to complete the picture. The vision of the truth awakens Sandy: "From the somewhere in the blackness, this tunnel, this nothingness, this altered state, this pit of death and deception, she screamed from the depths of her tortured and dying soul."[155]

The space that Sandy finds herself in—"this tunnel, this nothingness"—is not dissimilar to the featureless darkness that Schaeffer offered as a metaphor for the philosophical dilemma of modernity in *The God Who is There*. In that moment, as she screams for a way out, Sandy's recog-

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[150] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 331.

[151] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 465.

[152] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 491.

[153] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 498.

[154] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 465.

[155] Peretti, *This Present Darkness*, 484.

nizes the existential despair that Schaeffer argued was the only logical alternative to the Christian worldview. She comes to the edge of suicide, which Schaeffer thought was actually a reasonable response to a meaningless universe. "These people are in total desperation," Schaeffer writes. "We are fighting for our lives. If we love people, this is no age for a lack of comprehension, no age to play small-sized games."[156] How she got there similarly matches Schaeffer's account of Western history. First she rejected the idea that there was an external absolute that was the source of knowledge. She tried to build a worldview starting from herself as the source of meaning and knowledge. In this, she gave up the certainty of the truth, and started to believe that the truth and its opposite, its antithesis, could be reconciled. She accepted there was no fundamentally importance difference between what was true and what was not. This experiment in rationalism without the foundational Christian presuppositions then led to anti-rationalism. Secular humanism led to neopaganism. Sandy Hogan, like Ingmar Bergman before her, gave up God and ended up with demons.

This slippery slope, from epistemological atheism to mystical irrationality, may seem far fetched. It's worth noting, however, that the quandary that Sandy is in is related, in certain ways, to the quandary that Descartes encountered when he tried to establish a firm, humanistic foundation for rational thought. Descartes' approach to assuring himself of the veracity of Enlightenment thought was systematic skepticism, which included raising the issue of a hypothetical evil demon deceiving him about everything. When he believed himself to be sitting by the fire, how could he know he wasn't being deceived by an evil demon? Descartes solution to the evil demon problem was God, specifically a God who, via the ontological argument, both exists and is good. He saves the modernist project of certain, rational knowledge by this move. Sandy Hogan's cry from the dark tunnel is the same move. While Descartes wouldn't have agreed with this characterization, for someone like Schaeffer or Peretti or Jan and Denis Lane, this Cartesian turn to a God who ensures the correctness of knowledge is a turn away from humanism and back to Christianity. The modernist project of certain, rational knowledge, can only succeed if it is firmly founded on the presupposition of God's existence. "Christianity has the opportunity," Schaeffer argued, "to say clearly that its answer has the very thing modern man has despaired of …. It provides a unified answer for the whole of life. True, man has to renounce his rationalism; but then, on the basis of what can be discussed, he has the possibility of recovering his rationality."[157]

Sandy, crying out, recovers her rationality. She recovers the idea the truth is the truth. She re-grasps the idea that in order to know the truth, she cannot look within herself, but needs to start

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[156] Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview, Volume One, A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1982) 207-270, here 250.

[157] Peretti, *This Present Darkness,* 262.

from an absolute point of reference. Secular humanism cannot provide a firm foundation for knowledge. While Sandy herself doesn't put it in these terms, she is saved by worldview thinking. In presenting this moment in this way, the novel presents Christianity as most essentially a system of thought. Belief, here, has been imagined as public conflict. It is a totality, a worldview, which is necessarily public and necessarily in conflict with other beliefs. In *This Present Darkness*, this is what belief means. To believe is to clash with the secular worldview. That clash isn't over specific propositions, most essentially, or specific matters of public concern. It is a clash, instead, over regimes of knowledge and over the nature of the public discourse in which the clash occurs.

Imagining belief

The fictional account of this conflict of belief was thrilling to many. Jim Daly, president of Focus on the Family, was so enthralled with the story that, as he later recalled, he and his wife couldn't stop reading it aloud to each other as they drove across the country.[158]

Not everyone found the story so compelling, though. On the social cataloguing site GoodReads, nearly 67,000 readers have rated the book. More than 1,000 gave it only one out of five stars. One disapproving woman wrote the novel "basically brainwashes you into thinking that anything other than the specific type of Christianity it condones is in fact a lie of the Devil."[159] Another reported she "just couldn't get past Mr. Peretti's simplistic, black and white style."[160] A third woman, more harshly, wrote, "I found this book on the train in Ft. Lauderdale and honestly considered throwing myself on the tracks."[161]

There were those, however, who took the fiction "full and straight," who embraced what Stuart Hall would call the dominant reading. Some of these readers suspended disbelief to the point that they began to experiment with practices of spiritual warfare in their real lives, reading the novel as a kind of prayer manual. It's hard to know how many readers tried on the interpretive framework of *This Present Darkness* to this extent. This popularity of the practice of prayer walking and spiritual warfare seems to owe more to the classes on the subject taught at Fuller than to the 2.5 million fiction sales. There were frequent enough reports of people reading the novel in this way, however, that Peretti felt the need to speak against it. By the 1990s, his books were prefaced with a disclaimer

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[158] Focus on the Family.

[159] Cassie, "Cassie's Reviews," GoodReads, Nov. 14, 2012, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/455588205?book_show_action=false&page=1.

[160] Marsha Anne, "Marsha Anne's Reviews, GoodReads, Jan. 17, 2011, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/141528762?book_show_action=false&page=1.

[161] Danyell, "Danyell's Reviews," GoodReads, Feb. 23, 2008, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/16192810?book_show_action=false&page=1.

stating they were works of fiction.[162] Peretti was not trying to be didactic. He was rather inviting readers to imagine belief in the secular condition.

The majority of readers seem to have read it in this way. They negotiated through the text, suspending disbelief but also always being aware they were playing a game of "as-if." They were imaging a world, and on that mental stage, imaging what belief was like and what it should be like. On GoodReads, numerous positive reviews specifically speak to the text's fictionality. One writes, for example, that the book was both true and fiction. "Sure it's fiction but man," she writes, "this particular fiction has become my fact by deliberate choice because for me there is no down side in doing so …. If you're a christian, Frank Peretti pulls away the curtains and give a view of what 'might' be going on in the day-to-day goings on angels."[163] Another five-star reviewer of the book writes, "It is absolutely fascinating to get a glimpse of what the spiritual realm of our existence might be like!"[164] She is approaching the work as fiction, but finds it plausibly not just as a story, but as a perspective on reality.

The novel's real significance is as a novel. Those who read it accepted an invitation to suspend their disbelief and imagine the world in a particular way. They imagined angels and demons. The imagined Satanic conspiracies in small-town America. They imagined a praying pastor was not so insignificant, and followed that pastor when he went to the public square to pray, and directly address the supernatural. In this, the novel helped some evangelicals entertain certain ideas about what belief is like in the modern, secular condition. While Henry, Ockenga, Schaeffer and others were arguing that Christians should and must culturally engage, that their belief needed to be brought to the public square, and that, further, they need to understand their faith as a challenge to the public square, Peretti gave readers a chance to experience what belief like that would be like.

This Present Darkness staged a story where belief was presented as problematically public, a challenge to secular space. Belief, as a cultural practice, imagined as sitting on a public bench and announcing, "I'm here, Satan."[165]

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[162] Gene Edward Veith, "This Present (and Future) Peretti," *World Magazine,* Oct. 25, 1997, http://www.worldmag.com/1997/10/this_present_and_future_peretti.

[163] Sherae, "Sherae's Reviews," GoodReads, April 26, 2012, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/319636591?book_show_action=false&page=1.

[164] Jeneatte, "Jeanette's Reviews," GoodReads, July 24, 2009, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/63595115?book_show_action=false&page=1.

[165] Peretti, *This Present Darkness,* 88.

3

Imagining Compelled Belief

There is no room for respectful disagreement in the apocalyptic world of *Left Behind*. There is, instead, a fierce dichotomy: things are either true or false.

You believe. Or you think believing is wrong.

The leading protagonist of the novel articulates the force of the dichotomy as he tries to convince the other characters of *Left Behind* that the mass disappearance they experienced is the rapture foretold by biblical prophecy. Rayford Steele is convinced he is living through the earth's last days, the end of human history. Some people disagree with him and he understands that. What he doesn't understand is when people agree-to-disagree with him. He doesn't understand how people can be neutral and think all views on the matter are equally valid and should all be respected.

One woman, for example, says she doesn't know if Steele's apocalyptic theories are true, but she knows he "is sincere."[1]

Steele scoffs.

"What good was that?" he thinks. "If he believed and she didn't, she had to assume he believed something bogus or she would have to admit she was ignoring the truth. What he told her carried no other option."[2]

This is a critical feature of the bestselling evangelical novel *Left Behind*. This is how this work of fiction stages belief. Authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins imagine the world after the rapture, when, according to some evangelicals, all true Christians will be caught up into heaven. They imagine a world where the Antichrist rises to power and rules as a global tyrant. In *Left Behind* and its twelve sequels and three prequels, published between 1995 and 2007, LaHaye and Jenkins tell the story of a plucky band of rebels who convert and believe in Jesus in defiance of that

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[1] Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1995), 389.

[2] LaHaye and Jenkins 397-398.

new world order. The novels' central theme is belief, and they stage belief in the condition of that conflict. As they present it, belief is best understood as a compelled choice. This is different than in *Love Comes Softly*, considered in chapter one, where belief is imagined as personal reassurance, or *The Shack*, considered in chapter five, where belief is pictured as thriving with uncertainty. In *Left Behind*, belief means inescapable intellectual assent. True belief comes out of a forced dichotomy, the either/or, where there is no other option. The believers of *Left Behind* are strong, bold, and most of all certain. They're completely confident in their beliefs because, in the world of these novels, real belief, true belief in Jesus and in a particular version of evangelical eschatology, is a choice you can't not choose.

The Possibility of Unbelief

The idea of belief as a choice is important to the character of secularity. The philosopher Charles Taylor helpfully distinguishes between secularism, secularization, and secularity. Secularism is a political philosophy, which holds that public discourse and the public square should be free from or neutral towards religious beliefs.[3] Secularization is the process in which, according to some now mostly discredited sociological theories, societies inevitably become irreligious as they modernize.[4] Secularity, in contrast, is about conditions and possibilities. Taylor says secularity can be "described in terms of the possibility or impossibility of certain kinds of experience."[5] Chief among these is the experience of belief. Specifically: the experience of belief as individual choice.

There was a time in Western history, according to Taylor, when belief was not a choice. Unbelief, in fact, was virtually unthinkable. It wasn't a real possibility. No one didn't believe in God and, what's more, people were not practically able to not believe in God. "People," rather, "lived naïvely within a theistic construal."[6] They dwelled in a cosmic order. This meant people experienced their social reality as being embedded in a transcendent reality, secular time embedded in sacred time, and human drama within a providential one. People not only assumed the ontological reality of God, God was the assumption of their assumptions. God was part of the common background understanding that made the world make sense. The explanation of simple cause and effect, for in-

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[3] See Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2011); Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

[4] See Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Washington, D.C: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999), 1-18; For a defense of the secularization thesis, see Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford, 2011).

[5] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 14.

[6] Taylor 14.

stance, involved, in the background, the idea of the logical necessity of the uncaused cause. The explanation for the relationship between animals and humans, in the same way, assumed the conception of the hierarchical order of the great chain of being. People experienced the world as "enchanted," or, as Taylor describes it, they experienced their selves and their own minds as "porous." Even the experience of their own minds was linked with what they understood to be the experience of impinging outside entities, from humors to spirits to saints to God. Everyday social life, the "utterly solid and indispensable reality" that normal people lived in without any active conceptualization, was "intertwined in the sacred, and indeed, it was unimaginable otherwise."[7] God could be taken for granted. God was taken for granted. There was no atheism in the modern sense.

Taylor pinpoints this time as the year 1500. He's not alone in this claim. French historian Lucien Febvre has argued that in sixteenth-century France, not believing in God was a cultural impossibility. Despair was possible, and could go by the name of unbelief, but "a coherent rationalism was not yet in existence at the time." It is completely wrong, Febvre writes, "to think that the unbelief of men in the sixteenth century, insofar as it was a reality, was in any way comparable to our own."[8]

Even in late eighteenth-century America, not believing in God appears to have been practically, if not theoretically, impossible. There were men who attacked Christianity, such as Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine, but they didn't reject God as such.[9] Allen was considered in his day to be a horrible infidel, but his target was "priestcraft." He was quite willing to invoke "the name of the Great Jehovah" when he captured Fort Ticonderoga from the British in 1775. He just wouldn't allow that any class of men had privileged access to the Supreme Being. Paine, likewise, famously started his landmark *Age of Reason* with a confessional claim: "I believe in one God, and no more."[10] To do otherwise would have made as much sense to him as to denounce reason itself, since the ontological and the epistemological were understood to be bound together. The concept of a knowable natural order depended on the idea of a Providential deity. "Without some sort of God, the world disintegrated into incomprehensibility," historian James C. Turner explains. "Giving up

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[7] Taylor 43.

[8] Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais* , trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1982), 461, 460.

[9] See Martin E. Marty, *The Infidel: Freethought and American Religion* (Cleveland, OH: Meridian, 1961), 22-26.

[10] Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason,* ed (1796: repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Michigan Legal Publishing, 2014), 3.

God meant abandoning any coherent world picture. Unbelief therefore came close to being, in the primal meaning of the word, unthinkable."[11]

There is perhaps only one identifiable early American who managed to disbelieve in God for any length of time: Joel Barlow, a mostly forgotten diplomat and poet.[12] Barlow didn't focus so much on whether or not God existed, however, but on whether or not a Supreme Being could be sentient. According to Barlow's biographer, he embraced radical materialism between 1799 and 1802. In European salons, engaging with the thought of some of the most radical elements of the French Revolution, Barlow came to believe "there was no such thing as an intelligent God and that all religions were illusions."[13] He was, it seems, alone among his countrymen in his unbelief. Barlow did not publicize his atheism and there is some evidence he gave it up, adopting a more respectable Deism before too long. Unbelief, it would seem, was very difficult to do.

Belief was the default. Of course not everyone was devout and not everyone pious. Not everyone turned their thoughts towards God. But people lived with the certainty of the reality of God, whether they thought about it or not. Belief in that condition could be naïve. In secularity, by contrast, belief is always at least partly a conscious choice. "We live in a condition," Taylor writes, "where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on. We cannot help looking over our shoulder from time to time, looking sideways, living our faith also in a condition of doubt and anxiety."[14] There are multiple choices, always available, so each choice is always also a provisional rejection of another plausible option. "What previously was fate now becomes a set of choices," sociologist Peter Berger writes. "The individual may choose his *Weltanschauung* very much as he chooses most other aspects of his private existence."[15]

People continue to believe in this secular condition, of course. In some cases, they even use the exact same words to confess their beliefs in the exact same rituals. But that belief is qualitatively different. No matter the choice, it is experienced as a choice, and not something that can be taken

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[11] James C. Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1985), 3.

[12] Turner 44.

[13] Richard Buel, Jr., *Joel Barlow: American Citizen in a Revolutionary World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2011), 237.

[14] Taylor 11.

[15] Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979), 15.

for granted. As Taylor says, belief is necessarily "open to doubt, argument, mediating explanations, and the like."[16] Belief is not naïve anymore.

This broad historical shift may be overstated. Though not directly in response to Taylor, historian John H. Arnold has argued, for example, that at least some forms of unbelief existed among common people in medieval Europe, though finding it requires a very careful reading of the silences of the historical record.[17]

Taylor's picture of what belief was like before secularity is important quite apart from its historical veracity, however. Cultural memories move and inspire people whether or not they're factual. His before-picture is important as an articulation of what many people today think belief should be like. There are people who don't believe, but feel nostalgic for what they imagine belief was like before it became so implausible. And there are people who go to great lengths, in various "fundamentalist" projects, to attempt to recapture the possibility of that kind of belief. They want an old-time religion or an *ancien régime* when belief wasn't a choice.

The desire for old-time belief can be somewhat complicated for American evangelicals. American evangelicals do sometimes want belief like this and imagine belief could be so certain as to be beyond doubt, but that also creates a bit of tension for them. The *ancien régime* that Taylor is describing, after all, was not an evangelical one. From a certain Catholic perspective, in fact, evangelicals, with their theology of individual salvation and the importance of making a personal decision for Jesus, are a prime example of how Protestantism is a secularizing force. One need not embrace historian Brad Gregory's narrative of *The Unintended Reformation*, however, to recognize the historic importance of choice for evangelical theology. From Charles Finney's anxious bench to Billy Graham's altar calls, the concept of individual choice has been central to evangelicalism.

Belief has to be chosen, for evangelicals. And yet, they have also sometimes imagined that choice as unavoidable. It wouldn't be an act of will as much as a surrender. They have imagined belief as so certain it would feel like it was beyond doubt, because it arose out of a either/or with no middle option. This is how *Left Behind*, the bestselling evangelical fiction of the twentieth century, imagines belief. The series stages the condition of secularity, where every belief can always be doubted, and then imagines one situation where doubt is impossible. It stages a scenario where, as one *Left Behind* character puts it, "the only logical explanation is God."[18] There is a choice that cannot not be chosen.

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[16] Taylor 31.

[17] John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).

[18] LaHaye and Jenkins 165.

This chapter considers how evangelical belief is sometimes imagined as compelled. It looks first at apocalypticism, considering how anticipation of the end of human history can shape people's imagination, putting them in a place where they feel compelled to act. The chapter then turns to the history of evangelical apologetics, examining how belief was also conceptualized as compulsion in the development of popular arguments for Christianity. This chapter continues with a close reading of the first book of the *Left Behind* series, showing how compelled belief is the central theme. Finally, it turns to the mass audience for the novels, looking at the diversity of readers' responses and how people reacted to the novels presentation of the struggle to believe.

The Compelling Apocalypse

Tim LaHaye thinks the apocalypse is important because it is compelling. He doesn't think it is necessarily as essential a Christian doctrine as, say, the Trinity or believer's baptism, but he thinks it should be prioritized for pragmatic reasons. Long before he came up with the idea for a novel fictionalizing the rapture and the tribulation, LaHaye was arguing evangelicals should be giving the doctrine of the imminent end of human history a special emphasis.

LaHaye holds to a theology of the End Times called premillennialism. In this view, Jesus Christ could return from heaven at any moment, and gather up true believers in a rapture. Jesus will then allow a period of tribulation, where the world is ruled by the Antichrist. At the end of that period, Christ and the saints will meet the Antichrist and his followers on the plains of Armageddon in a final battle, which ushers in Jesus's 1,000-year reign over earth from the restored city of Jerusalem.

This theology is not universally agreed upon, either by American evangelicals now or by Christians historically. A 2016 survey of Protestant pastors in the United States found that about half subscribe to this theology, broadly speaking. Others embrace an eschatology called amillennialism and others postmillennialim.[19] Premillennialism is more popular among Baptist and Pentecostals, less among Methodists and those in Reformed traditions. Among premillennialists, too, there is a range of beliefs. Some, in recent years, have specifically opposed their understanding of the theology to LaHaye's popular representation. A 2009 collection of essays on premillennialism, for example, carried the subtitle, "An Alternative to 'Left Behind' Eschatology."[20] This disagreement is also reflected in the recent survey. Though about half of Protestant identify as premillennialists, only 36 percent agree with LaHaye about the rapture. Similarly, 51 percent have a different idea of the Antichrist: 19 percent emphasizing it isn't an individual person, 14 percent saying the biblical

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[19] For a survey of Protestant eschatologies, see Robert G. Clouse, ed., *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

[20] Craig L. Bloomberg and Sun Wook Chung, eds., *A Case for Historical Premillennialism: An Alternative to 'Left Behind' Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009).

figure is better understood as a personification of evil, 11 percent saying they didn't know, and 6 percent identifying the biblical character with a historical person, such as the Roman Emperor Nero.[21]

LaHaye would argue these people are wrong, and they've read the Bible wrong. But he would also say, and has said, that his understand of the End Times is best because it moves people and motivates them to action. LaHaye is a Baptist minister and one of the architects of the religious right. He played a key role in almost every significant Christian Right campaign of the late twentieth century.[22] He has committed his life to activating evangelicals and to convincing non-Christians to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. He has found his evangelical eschatology is most effective to those ends. The idea of the rapture has an impact on people. LaHaye argues his understanding of the apocalypse is compelling in three ways: It moves evangelicals to evangelize, and to become politically active, and it moves non-evangelicals to convert.

Evangelicals evangelize more and more fervently, according to LaHaye, when they think the rapture will happen soon. If they are waiting for Jesus to return and think he could return at any moment to snatch true believers from the earth before the beginning of the reign of the Antichrist, they are not waiting passively. The doctrine "provides Christians with an at-any-moment expectancy," LaHaye writes, which "produces an evangelistic church of soul-winning Christians."[23] He argues there is a causal connection between missions movements and the doctrine of the rapture. According to LaHaye, the Plymouth Brethren minister John N. Darby recovered—some critics say "invented"—the doctrine of the rapture in the nineteenth century. Since then, "the gospel has spread to every continent of the globe."[24] The one thing followed the other. The connection is very clear in at least some cases. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, is one twentieth-century example. A 1948 seminary class on prophecy moved him to leave school and start evangelizing. "I'm not going to be sitting here studying Greek when Christ comes!" Bright said.[25] The idea of the apocalypse works, here, by forcing people to face a dichotomy. Either one is evangelizing, or one is not. There is no third option. The expectation that Jesus could return at any moment forces this eit-

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[21] Bob Smietana, "Only One-Third of Pastors Share 'Left Behind' End Times Theology," Christianity Today: Gleanings, April 4, 2016, http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2016/april/sorry-left-behind-pastors-end-times-rapture-antichrist.html.

[22] Randal J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2011), 165.

[23] Tim LaHaye, *No Fear of the Storm: Why Christians Will Escape <u>All</u> the Tribulation* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1992), 19, 18.

[24] LaHaye 16.

[25] John Turner, *Bill Bright and Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelialism in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008), 30-31.

her/or, which forces people to make a conscious choice. American evangelicals such as Bright have responded positively to this dichotomy.

LaHaye claims the same eschatological idea had the same result in the first century. He says early Christians held to the rapture, though the doctrine was later lost in the Catholic corruption he attributes to Origen and Augustine, among others.[26] When the church imagined that Jesus was coming back soon, though, they "turned the world upside down."[27] Anywhere and everywhere Christians have thought the rapture would happen and could happen at any moment, they have become "soul-winning, missionary-minded, and spiritually productive" believers.[28]

The doctrine of the rapture doesn't just turn Christians into missionaries. It also, according to LaHaye, motivates American evangelicals to political activism. This seems counterintuitive to a lot of people. If the world has no future, why would anyone work to make it better? The logic of the theology would seem to suggest, as historian Paul S. Boyer argues, that believers' energies "are better spent in winning souls for Christ than in trying to shape world events." In fact, Boyer says, the theology should logically "imply passivity, since society's evils and injustices merely bore out the prophesied degeneracy and wickedness of the present age."[29] All this talk of the end of human history could justify cultural separatism and a retreat from public life. It could allow religious communities to opt out of political engagement and even civil discourse. Religious studies scholar Robert Fuller argues it does. He says for Christians awaiting the end, the "belief that Jews, Catholics, socialists, humanists, or feminists are in league with the Beast has made the most uncivil behavior toward the 'social other' a badge of piety and religious devotion."[30] Evangelicals, Fuller claims, don't care about the neighbors they are actively preparing to leave behind.

Some proponents of the idea of the rapture have more or less agreed with this. Cultural withdrawal makes sense.[31] Political retreat seems logical. Hal Lindsey, a twentieth-century prophecy popularizer, put it colorfully: "God didn't send me to clean the fishbowl. He sent me to fish."[32]

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[26] LaHaye 235. LaHaye takes his early church history from Dallas Theological Seminary's John Walvoord. For scholarly studies of the eschatologies of the early church, see Charles Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001) and Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002).

[27] LaHaye 16.

[28] LaHaye 66.

[29] Paul S. Boyer *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1992), 148, 298.

[30] Andrew Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 198.

[31] See Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014), 33-34.

[32] Hal Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), frontpiece.

For LaHaye, however, the compelling need to evangelize is also a compelling reason to get involved in politics. If time is short, the need to spread the gospel is urgent. Evangelicals therefore need to get involved in politics to protect the freedom they need to preach the gospel at home and abroad. "Anyone who will not use his influence to preserve his freedom while he has the liberty to do so," LaHaye writes, "does not deserve freedom and will surely lose both his freedom and his influence."[33] This is a familiar rhetoric on the right wing of American politics. This is not surprising, since LaHaye was a part of the right-wing movements that developed in the 1960s. He supported Barry Goldwater for President in 1964 and in 1965 wrote the actor Ronald Reagan a two-page fan letter urging him to run for Governor of California.[34] LaHaye was also an active member of the John Birch Society, a secretive group which opposed communism and what it held to be the conspiracy behind the conspiracy of communism.[35] Many in those movements were quite pessimistic about the long-term prospects of preserving liberty and resisting tyranny. They were all committed, however, to holding out as long as possible. LaHaye took the same stance, and justified it evangelistically. As he said in a John Birch Society-recruitment film in the early 1960s, "if we don't stop the advance of communism, none of us will be free to preach the gospel."[36] Some in the John Birch Society were worried LaHaye's apocalyptic preaching would "neutralize" people, politically. But he said that wasn't the affect at all. The evangelical eschatology actually showed people why they should care about political issues. Expecting the rapture, American evangelicals would support a bold foreign policy that allows them to send missionaries around the globe. Imagining the apocalypse reveals the eternal stakes of fights over even apparently amoral issues, such liberal plans for "over taxation and exorbitant government spending."[37] Waiting for Jesus, they would oppose the

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[33] LaHaye 147.

[34] Tim LaHaye, "Remarks," Council for National Policy's Policy Counsel, Oct. 2, 2010, http://www.cfnp.org/Document.Doc?id=173.

[35] Some scholars have been rather coy about connecting LaHaye to the John Birch Society, saying, for example, that he was "like a John Bircher" (Stephens and Giberson 168). By his own account, though, LaHaye was very involved in the secretive society. He was friendly with the founder, Robert Welch, close friends with second president, Larry McDonald, and lead the San Diego-area coordinator in a prayer to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. LaHaye's church was open to Birchers and a number of Southern California leaders attended (LaHaye, *No Fear*, 146). He also spoke at training seminars—which outsiders are not typically invited to do—and appeared in promotional material for the society in the 1960s (Heather Hendershot, *What's Fair on the Air? Cold War Right-Wing Broadcasting and the Public Interest* (Chicago, University of Chicago, 2011), 2-4). LaHaye continued to subscribe to the Bircher's Illuminati conspiracy theory at least until the 1990s. In 1992, he wrote that "an enormous amount of evidence proves that the secularization of our once Judeo-Christian society has not been an accident but is the result of the devilishly clever scheming carried on by this secret order" (LaHaye, *No Fear*, 136).

[36] Hendershot 2.

[37] LaHaye, *No Fear*, 147.

expansion of government, fighting for the freedom that allows them evangelize until they're snatched away.

Not all evangelicals who held to premillennialism have been political, of course, but that wasn't because they were waiting for the rapture. "That has nothing to do with prophecy," LaHaye wrote, "but it has everything to do with apathy."[38] If people embrace the idea of the rapture, they realize they have to act and act now.

The historical record says LaHaye is right, by and large. Evangelicals have been motivated by the rapture to get involved in politics, as historian Matthew Avery Sutton has shown in his book *American Apocalypse*. "They never retreated," Sutton writes. Because of their eschatology-inspired confidence that Earth's time was running out, evangelicals "have consistently insisted that God has called them to use their talents to occupy, reform, and transform their culture in ways that matched their beliefs and ideologies."[39]

One example Sutton cites is James Gray, who trained preachers and evangelists at Moody Bible Institute from 1904 to 1934. Gray preached political involvement from the pulpit of Chicago Avenue Church (later renamed for Dwight L. Moody) along with the doctrine of the rapture.[40] Apocalyptic expectation also inspired opposition to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Across the country, people who were waiting for the rapture saw Roosevelt's New Deal as a satanic trick, preparing their unbelieving neighbors to accept the dictatorship of the Antichrist.[41] They "moved seamlessly from prophetic utterances to political critiques of New Deal programs and back again," Sutton writes.[42] Opposing liberalism, for them, was necessary groundwork for evangelism. This was true, too, in the 1970s and 1980s, when evangelicals organized into a solid voting bloc and aligned themselves with the Republican Party, and in the 1990s, when LaHaye conceived of the idea of the novel, *Left Behind*.

LaHaye was generally right about the impact of the theology. There may be an argument that people shouldn't be compelled by the idea of the end of the world to get involved in politics, but they frequently are. Perhaps this is a contradiction, or perhaps critics of rapture theology don't understand it as well as they think. Boyer concludes, somewhat begrudgingly, that "the contradiction may be more apparent than real, since the spiritual and secular realms obviously overlap." After all, "their political involvement could be justified as a legitimate extension of their evangelistic

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[38] LaHaye, *No Fear*, 147.

[39] Sutton xiii-xiv.

[40] Sutton 36.

[41] Sutton 240-241.

[42] Sutton 242.

mandate."[43] For a lot of rapture-believers, this was exactly right. Political activism wasn't even a question. It was a divine mandate.

The third way the idea of the rapture is so compelling, LaHaye argues, is to non-Christians. The theology of the apocalypse is an important tool for evangelism. LaHaye had personal experience with this. He recalls one instance on a flight from Salt Lake City to San Francisco, when he was "seated next to a salesman who claimed he had never read a Bible."[44] The man was, by his own account, almost completely unchurched. He preferred to golf on Sundays, if he did anything. LaHaye asked the man to read a passage from Revelation. "I handed him my Bible," LaHaye writes, "with only a brief instruction: 'This is a prophecy about a future event.'"[45] The salesman was quickly converted. The apocalyptic vision compelled him to give his life to Christ. The idea he was reading about a future event was powerful because it showed him how the Bible was relevant to the present moment. With the brief reading instructions, LaHaye showed the salesman the Bible applied to him directly and immediately. The vision of the end of human history was compelling, also, because it presented the man with a dichotomy. He was either saved or unsaved. His name was in the book of life, or it wasn't. He would be taken up in the rapture or he would suffer the tribulation.

This was the motivation behind the creation *Left Behind*. It was the motivation, in fact, for a lot of apocalyptic fiction. Consider the early examples of the evangelical genre from the beginning of the twentieth century. *Titan, Son of Saturn: The Coming World Emperor: A Story of the Other Christ* was published in 1905. By 1917, the novel was in its tenth printing, with 10,000 copies sold.[46] Little is known about the author, an Ohio doctor named Joseph Birkbeck Burroughs. In the introduction, though, Burroughs states his reasons for writing a novel about the world after the rapture. "The book Titan has been written in the form of a religious story," he says, "that these coming events may be vividly real to the reader, and lead many to search the Scriptures to see whether these things are so."[47] The book is didactic, in some ways, but it is also a novel. It invites readers to imagine the rapture and the world after, suspending their disbelief to engage with the author's eschatological vision. It the context of fiction, the novel presents believing readers with the dichotomy of whether or not they're doing enough to evangelize the world. It presents non-believing readers with the choice of who to identify with in the story, the characters who are raptured or those left behind?

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[43] Boyer 301.

[44] LaHaye, *No Fear*, 241.

[45] LaHaye, *No Fear*, 242.

[46] Crawford Gribben, *Writing the Rapture Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 33.

[47] Joseph Birkbeck Burroughs, *Titan, Son of Saturn: The Coming World Emperor: A Story of the Other Christ*, eighth edition (Oberlin, OH: Emeth Publishers,1911), 5.

Imaginatively engaging with these dichotomies can, Burroughs thought, transform readers before it's too late.

A 1937 novel had similar evangelistic intentions. It was written by an Indiana home-furnishing salesman named Forrest Loman Oilar. The purpose was stated even in the title: *Be Thou Prepared for Jesus is Coming*. The publishers' notice for the apocalyptic novel proclaimed it would inspire Christians, but would have an even more powerful impact on those who didn't believe. "Every non-Christian who reads it," the publisher promised, "will receive a new line of thought."[48] Readers would be forced to face the dichotomy: Either you're ready for Jesus to come back or you're not.

These novels, and others in the genre published before *Left Behind* broke through to mainstream book markets, were probably read mainly by people who were already waiting for the rapture. Nevertheless, the authors believed the fictional stories would and could convert people. Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins thought that too.

The two men talked about the evangelistic potential of the story in their first meeting. LaHaye and Jenkins met in a hotel near the Chicago O'Hare airport, brought together by their agent to discuss the potential writing project. LaHaye proposed he would outline the prophetic timeline and Jenkins would write a compelling story to fit it. LaHaye thought his eschatology needed to be made into a novel to reach more people. Jenkins's first question was whether the intended audience would be believers or non-believers. LaHaye said: both.[49] The novel was supposed to make the eschatological ideas clear and accessible, but more importantly, it was supposed to move Christians to action and convert non-Christians to belief. Jenkins tried to write the novel so that readers would suspend their disbelief, imagine the rapture and life after the rapture, and identify with the protagonists as they are converted to evangelicalism. Some evangelical publishers were skeptical that such a story could work. Jenkins started, however, with a scene LaHaye had seen on another airplane, where a married pilot flirted with a woman who didn't seem to be his wife. "When my agent shopped the first ten-page chapter of the first book," Jenkins later recalled, "it contained one scene written from the perspective of the pilot of a 747. In the middle of the night, over the Atlantic, about a third of his passengers disappear right out of their clothes, leaving everything material behind. That's enough drama to engage the reader."[50]

The apocalypse, Jenkins thought, could grab people's imagination. Jenkins tried to write it so that, in the safe space of fiction, readers would be drawn in, and come face-to-face with the di-

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[48] Qtd. in Gribben 54.

[49] Jerry Jenkins, *Writing for the Soul: Instruction and Advice from an Extraordinary Writing Life* (Cincinati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2006), 3.

[50] Jenkins 163.

chotomies that would make they feel like they had to make a choice. *Left Behind* would stage those apocalyptic dichotomies so readers would feel they either had to believe or disbelieve.

Demanding a Verdict

Rapture novels are not the only place where American evangelicals have imagined belief like this. The same picture of true belief as a certainty that arises out of a dichotomy can be seen in popular evangelical apologetics. In *The Case for Christ*, for example, apologist Lee Strobel asks readers to imagine they are on a jury. They should weigh the evidence for and against Jesus. They should be open minded. But they have to come to a decision. "Ultimately," writes Strobel, "it's the responsibility of a jury to reach a verdict."[51] People have to choose: belief or unbelief.

The apologist William Lane Craig, similarly, starts his popular textbook with an attack on relativism. There cannot, he says, be multiple right answers to the question of Christianity's truth. There can be no middle ground. Christianity is true or false. God exists or does not. If one person believes and another doesn't, it makes no sense for them to agree to disagree. "Now I can imagine some of you thinking," Craig writes, "'Rational arguments for the truth of Christianity no longer work! Rather in today's culture we should simply share our narrative and invite people to participate." That approach, however, "could not be more mistaken."[52] Even if not everyone will be persuaded by evidence and arguments, evangelicals should still force that confrontation.

Craig himself does this professionally. He has had at least ninety-eight public debates with atheists since 1982. Videos of his debates with New Atheists have been viewed more one million times each on YouTube.[53] As religion writer Nathan Schneider notes, such debates literally stage the dichotomy of belief/unbelief. "In these debates, there can only be two sides, with nothing in between," Schneider writes. "One side must be right, and the other must be wrong."[54] The loser is overwhelmed by facts and arguments and, at least theoretically, should convert or deconvert because of it.

The idea of forcing the dichotomy is perhaps most clearly stated in the title of evangelist Josh McDowell's extremely popular apologetics manual: *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*.

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[51] Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 18.

[52] William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 18.

[53] "Debate - William Lane Craig vs Christopher Hitchens - Does God Exist?" YouTube, Jan. 27, 2011, https://youtu.be/4KBx4vvlbZ8; "Richard Dawkins Vs. William Lane Craig Debate," YouTube, Oct. 23; "The God Debate II: Harris vs. Craig," YouTube, April 12, 2011, https://youtu.be/yqaHXKLRKzg.

[54] Nathan Schneider, *God in Proof: The Story of a Search from the Ancients to the Internet* (Berkeley: University of California, 2013), 207.

This has never been the dominant way evangelicals have talked about belief. In fact, some of the most famous evangelical conversions disregard arguments. They have relied on internal, emotional evidence, rather than the sort of facts one could cite in a debate. The revivalist John Wesley's famous evangelical conversion, for example, happened when he felt his heart "strangely warmed."[55]

Billy Graham, similarly, has talked about belief as a kind of trust, rather than an intellectual conclusion. In his autobiography, Graham writes about struggling over whether or not he could believe the Bible. He ultimately decided to trust the reliability and personal relevance of the text without depending on arguments. He prayed, "Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word—by *faith!* I am going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts."[56] The evangelical bestsellers considered in this study also show other ways belief has been imagined. In *The Heritage of Lancaster County* series, examined in chapter five, belief is conceived as a realization of personal authenticity. *The Shack*, examined in chapter six, pictures belief as something that happens amid ambiguities and tensions, as opposed to certainty.

Evidentialist-driven arguments are not new to American Protestantism, however. Apologetics was established as an academic discipline in the United States in the nineteenth century. In response to the rise of deism, the young republic's top universities developed courses on Christian evidence. These relied on Baconianism to defend the reasonableness of Christianity.[57] Harvard started such a course in 1807, Princeton in 1821, and Amherst, Dartmouth, Williams, and Yale followed in 1822. The most popular text in these classes was William Paley's *Natural Theology*.[58] Paley's arguments, such as the blind watchmaker argument, would later play a role in debates over the existence of God. In the context of the early nineteenth century, however, the existence of some sort of God was assumed. The question was whether observations of nature could support orthodox Christian conceptions of God, proving them to be as rational or more rational than the Deist conception.

This kind of apologetics project was notably not aligned with the enthusiastic and experiential kinds of belief associated with the Second Great Awakening. The academic apologists of this era were not part of what historian Nathan Hatch memorably called "storming heaven by the back

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[55] John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley* (Chicago: Moody, 1951), 36. See also Daniel L. Burnett, *In the Shadow of Aldersgate: An Introduction to the Heritage and Faith of the Wesleyan Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2006), 35-36.

[56] Billy Graham, *Just As I Am* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 139.

[57] See Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1977).

[58] James Turner 96-98, 257-259. See also James O. Filbeck, *The Christian Evidence Movement* (Kansas City, MO: Old Paths Book Club, 1947).

door."[59] The reasonable Christianity these apologists defended was, for the most part, of the more formal variety.

When apologetics was adopted for revivalist Christianity, there was a marked emphasis on forcing a choice. Alexander Campbell, an active figure in the Second Great Awakening, agreed to publicly debate Christianity with the utopian socialist Robert Owen in 1829. Campbell had been reluctant to get caught up in debates, originally. He thought they were a distraction from the true issues, which were issues of the heart. He changed his mind, however, when he saw how a debate could grab and hold people's attention.[60] A staged debate could, further, put the audience in the position of experiencing a dichotomy. Campbell began and ended the debate with Owen with comparisons between light and darkness. He concluded by insisting people take sides. "My proposition is," Campbell said, "that all the persons in this assembly who believe in the Christian religion, or who feel so much interest in it, as to wish to see it pervade the world, will please to signify it by standing up."[61]

In the twentieth century, a number of evangelicals engaged in academic apologetics. Edward J. Carnell is a prime example. With an advanced degree from Harvard and another from Boston University, he was, historian Mark Noll writes, "a leader among those [evangelicals] who sought training at the nation's best graduate schools."[62] He was seen as living proof that evangelicalism was not an anti-intellectual project.[63] For him, apologetics could prove the intellectual credibility and respectability of evangelicalism. "My concern," he wrote in the preface to his award-winning 1948 book, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, "is to encourage those who, like myself, feel a burning within them to know if Christianity can be accepted with the consent of all our faculties."[64]

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[59] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1989), 49.

[60] Campbell's first theological debate was on the issue of infant baptism, not apologetics. One measure of the success of the first debate was how many copies of the printed version sold: the first edition was 1,000 copies, the second 3,000. Both sold out. Campbell further secured thousands of subscriptions to his newspaper, *Christian Baptist*. See Bill J. Humble, *Campbell and Controversy* (Kansas City, MO: Old Paths Book Club, 1952) and Richard J. Cherok, *Debating for God: Alexander Campbell's Challenge to Skepticism in Antebellum America* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University, 2008).

[61] J.J. Haley, *Debates that Made History: The Story of Alexander Campbell's Debates with Rev. John Walker, Rev. W. L. McCalla, Mr. Robert Owen, Bishop Purcell, and Rev. Nathan L. Rice* (Saint Louis, MO: Christian Board of Publications, 1920), 115.

[62] Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 212; Kenneth Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 213.

[63] Rudolph Nelson, *The Making and Unmaking of an Evangelical Mind: The Case of Edward Carnell* (New York: Cambridge, 1987), 8.

[64] Edward Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (org. 1948: repr., Alhambra, CA: Green Leaf, 1997), 11.

As a professor at Fuller Theological Seminar, he made a notable impact. About 80 percent of graduates in the 1950s named him their most influential instructor.[65]

Carnell's apologetics could seem too abstract, though, and inaccessible. It was not clear his philosophical approach could be useful for evangelicalism. He also, on several occasions, seemed to back away from confrontation.[66] The appeal of apologetics, however, was how it could force an either/or question.

For American evangelicals, the golden example of successful evangelical arguments was C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*.[67] Lewis was BBC radio's "voice of faith" in Great Britain during World War II. The public broadcasting service wanted "a sensible, engaging, and authoritative voice that commanded confidence and elicited affection."[68] Lewis, a literature professor at Oxford and Cambridge, filled the role. He gave twenty-nine talks to an estimated average audience of 600,000 people.[69] The talks were collected into a single volume and published in 1952. The resulting text made a common-sense case for the reasonableness of Christianity. His arguments were smart, but not inaccessible. Lewis wasn't interested in a big philosophical project. He just wanted to show Christianity comported with reality. In clear and friendly language, *Mere Christianity* asserted belief was at least plausible and should be considered. The book took apologetics out of the classroom and made it useful for evangelism.

Lewis himself quickly turned away from apologetics. Even before *Mere Christianity* was published, he decided he wasn't enough of a philosopher to make the best case for the rationality of Christianity.[70] In 1948, he debated the subject of philosophical naturalism with Catholic philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. The two were on the same side of the issue, but Anscombe though Lewis's argument for their side was seriously flawed. Anscombe, making use of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy, showed Lewis he was making some basic philosophical mistakes. He failed to distinguish between "reasons" and "causes" and misunderstood the difference between "irrational" and "non-

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[65] George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 301.

[66] In a popular evangelical devotional magazine Carnell wrote that "Modern Man" "cannot cope with the feeling he must stand mobilized against a hostile and changing social order." It seemed like a statement that was true for him personally. He was exhausted by the demands evangelicals. See Nelson 4, 12; and Marsden 195.

[67] For a history of *Mere Christianity*, see George M. Marsden, *C.S. Lewis's* Mere Christianity*: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton, 2016).

[68] Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis: A Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2013), 205, 206.

[69] Bob Smietana, "C.S. Lewis Superstar," Christianity Today 49.12 (2005), 28.

[70] McGrath 257.

rational."[71] The encounter was embarrassing and "slightly bruising" for Lewis, according to historian Alister McGrath's 2013 biography.[72]

Lewis, besides, felt more drawn to the imaginative work of fiction. He explained this in a letter to Carl F. H. Henry a few years later. Henry, a proponent of smart and culturally engaged evangelicalism, wanted Lewis to do more of what he had done in *Mere Christianity*. Henry invited Lewis to write apologetics for *Christianity Today*. Lewis declined. He was done with "frontal attacks," he explained. He was turning his attention to "fiction and symbol."[73]

Mere Christianity was, regardless, incredibly important to American evangelicals. Lewis became kind of the patron saint of evangelicalism, though he did not himself identify with the movement or adhere to its standards.[74] "Lewis's writing," writes Noll, "constituted the single most important body of Christian thinking for American evangelicals in the twentieth century."[75]

By the 1970s, whenever there was a high-profile evangelical conversion, *Mere Christianity* seemed to be involved. The book was everywhere. When a dozen or more of the musicians in Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue had born-again experiences in 1976, there was a copy of *Mere Christianity* circulating behind the scenes of the tour.[76] When President Richard Nixon's "hatchet man" Chuck Colson converted before being sent to prison for obstruction of justice in 1973, he cited *Mere Christianity*.[77] When Campus Crusade decided it needed an apologetics textbook to help campus evangelists, the central argument was taken from *Mere Christianity*.

One reason the book was so important was that it presented readers with a dichotomy. Lewis claimed there was no third way between belief and unbelief. One has to choose. Look at Jesus, he wrote. A lot of people don't want to believe in Jesus, but they don't want to disbelieve either. They want a middle option, where they reject the idea that Jesus is God but accept him as a great moral teacher. But that's illogical.

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher," Lewis argued. "He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is

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[71] McGrath 255.

[72] McGrath 253.

[73] McGrath 259.

[74] J.I. Packer, "Still Surprised by Lewis," Christianity Today 42.10 (1998), http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/september7/8ta054.html?share=2pzkqeEt0Ng1CEF3F7ghfObHtcy2Bg52.

[75] Noll 218.

[76] David W. Stowe, *No Sympathy for the Devil: Christian Pop Music and the Transformation of American Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011), 226.

[77] Chuck Colson, *Born Again* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), 124.

a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was and is the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse."[78]

Colson said it was this passage that pushed him to accept Jesus as his Lord and Savior. "Lewis puts it so bluntly," he recalled in his memoir, *Born Again*, "that you can't slough it off: for Christ to have talked as he talked, lived and he lived, died as he died, he was either God or a raving lunatic."[79] As Colson was reading, he could feel the middle ground disappearing. It was now impossible. He knew he had only two options. "Either I would believe," he wrote, "or I would not—and believe it all or none of it."[80]

Josh McDowell felt similarly compelled by Lewis's argument. When he first encountered the passage in *Mere Christianity*, though, he wasn't particularly impressed. In 1958, 19-year-old McDowell left his native Michigan on a quest to disprove Christianity. God, as he saw it, was "a public relations myth."[81] The quest led him to the British Library where, as he recounts it in his autobiography, he presumptuously examined the *Codex Sinaiticus* in its bulletproof display case. He could only see two pages of the manuscript, and he didn't read Greek, but the object nonetheless reassured him in his unbelief. This was, after all, "*still a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy*."[82] It couldn't be trusted. McDowell approached a librarian and demanded to know how much the text had been altered. The librarian sent him to Alan Cobb, a British barrister and amateur evangelical apologist. Cobb introduced McDowell to the works of C.S. Lewis. Cobb pointed McDowell to this specific passage of *Mere Christianity*, about how Jesus claimed to be God and so was either a liar, a lunatic, or correct. McDowell ignored it at the moment. But later it hit him. Sitting in an evangelical library near the Baker Street tube station in London, McDowell suddenly knew that Cobb and Lewis were right. It seemed, in an instant, irrefutable and unavoidable. "I felt like a train lurching into the station," McDowell later wrote, "letting off a last burst of steam while coming to a final stop. I was speechless. I didn't know where I was. I only knew I had arrived."[83] He returned to Michigan and responded to an altar call on December 19, 1959, at 8:30 p.m.[84] It felt, to him, like he was submitting to an obvious truth.

The dichotomy had forced him to surrender to Jesus.

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[78] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952, repr.: New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 52.

[79] Colson 136.

[80] Colson 140.

[81] Josh McDowell and Cristóbal Krusen, *Undaunted: One Man's Real-Life Journey from Unspeakable Memories to Unbelievable Grace* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2012), 92.

[82] McDowell and Krusen 87.

[83] McDowell and Krusen 127.

[84] McDowell, *More than a Carpenter* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1977), 124.

McDowell made this dichotomy the centerpiece of his apologetics textbook, *Evidence that Demands a* Verdict, which has sold more than one million copies and which one editor of *Christianity Today* judged to be "doubtless the most popular apologetics handbook of our time."[85] When it was published in 1972, McDowell was a staff member for Campus Crusade for Christ. He helped train evangelists to go to college campuses and convert people. To help them answer skeptics, McDowell compiled what he called "documentation of historical evidences for faith in Christ."[86] The documentation consisted mostly of long quotes pulled from various Christian scholars. As the title indicates, though, the evidence of the book was imagined to carry an explicit demand.

Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade, explained this in the foreward. "The evidence proving the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ," Bright wrote in the forward, "is overwhelmingly conclusive to any honest, objective seeker after truth." There would be some, of course, who wouldn't believe. Those people, Bright assured readers, were "simply *unwilling* to believe!"[87] There is no such thing as honest disagreement. The verdict of belief is truly being demanded.

McDowell rendered Lewis's dichotomy in a chart that could be easily recreated by evangelists on any chalk board on any college campus.

The top line said, in all caps, "JESUS CLAIMS TO BE GOD."

Below that, McDowell wrote, "(TWO ALTERNATIVES)." An arrow pointing left indicates one option: "Claims were FALSE." Below that, another either/or: "He KNEW His Claims Were FALSE" or "He DID NOT KNOW His Claims Were False." If the former is true, according to the chart, Jesus was a liar who died because of his lie. If the latter is true, Jesus was sincerely deluded. That's one set of choices.

An arrow pointing to the right side of the page shows the other: "Claims were TRUE." Below that, the conclusion, "He is LORD."

This is followed by another two alternatives, "You can ACCEPT" or "You can REJECT."[88]

If the dichotomy isn't clear, McDowell states it multiple times on the following page. "Jesus claimed to be God," he writes. "He did not leave any other options. His claim to be God must be either true of false." Then he repeats himself. "Jesus' claim to be God must be either true or false,"

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[85] John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "Books: By Their Books You Shall Know Them," Christianity Today 40.10 (1996), http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1996/september16/6ta058.html?share=2pzkqeEt0NgR2zTX5iExOecmO6s%2bXP0o.

[86] Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Historical Evidences for the Christian Faith* (Arrowhead Springs, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972), iii.

[87] Bill Bright, "Foreward," in McDowell, i-ii, here i.

[88] McDowell, *Evidence*, 108.

he says. "If Jesus' claims are true then He is the Lord and we must either accept or reject His Lordship."[89]

McDowell wants to force people to make a choice. He is also very clear he doesn't think the choice is a choice. He personally experienced conversion as a realization. He was, in a sense, overwhelmed by the facts. He thinks the dichotomy of *Mere Christianity* can force people to have that kind of moment of recognition, where they will be faced with a choice they can't not choose. "I cannot personally conclude that Jesus was a liar or a lunatic," McDowell writes. "The only other alternative is that he was the Christ, the Son of God, as he claimed."[90] If others are not so persuaded, McDowell, following Bright, thinks they probably aren't being honest with themselves.

This wasn't the main way Campus Crusade approached evangelism. The group relied more telling people that Jesus loved them and had a wonderful plan for their lives.[91] At the same time, the popular apologetics manual shows that belief could be imagined like this, as a forced choice.

One way that evangelicals imagined belief was as something arising out of a sharp dichotomy. They thought of it as something that could be compelled. Belief could feel, they suggested, something like the old-time belief that Charles Taylor describes, even though in the condition of secularity it is never simply naïve. In secularity, believers can feel their belief is real, because for them, it is something they personally chose. And it can feel certain because it's something they couldn't not choose. When faced with someone who wants to agree to disagree, the believer can scoff like the main protagonist of *Left Behind*. This is an either/or.

Reading Left Behind

Left Behind is about belief. The central theme of the novel and its sequels is the struggle with secularity and this same idea, belief that is a choice that cannot not be chosen. Other features of the fiction have attracted more attention from critical observers, however. The novels are almost always read as political commentary or theological argument. Cultural studies professor Hugh B. Urban, for example, writes that *Left Behind* is "clearly a commentary on the processes of globalization and America's role in a transnational era."[92] He argues the novels offer insight into the President George W. Bush's foreign policy. He reads *Left Behind* side-by-side with neo-conservative policy writing.

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[89] McDowell, *Evidence*, 109.

[90] McDowell, *Carpenter*, 33.

[91] For a someone typical account of a Campus Crusade conversion, see Marabel Morgan's story, described in chapter two.

[92] Hugh B. Urban, "America, Left Behind: Bush, the Neoconservatives, and Evangelical Christian Fiction," *Journal of Religion & Society* 8 (2006), 3, 4.

While Urban admits there is no "coded message woven subliminally into the *Left Behind* books," there is, he writes, a deep link between the political vision and the fictional narrative. He sees an "affinity" between "the Evangelical Ethic and the Spirit of Neo-Imperialism."[93]

This is fairly typical. Many people have seen the novels through this political lens, especially at the start of the Iraq war.[94] "We understand immediately," the essayist Joan Didion wrote on reading the novels in 2003, "this will be an end-times scenario with a political point." For Didion, the politics of the books—which had then sold about 55 million copies—offered insight into the religious radicalism of Bush and the evangelicals who had voted for him. "The President's preferred constituency," according to Didion, "feel secure about whatever destructive events played out in the Middle East because those events were foreordained, necessary to the completion of God's plan, laid out in prophecy, written the books of Genesis and Jeremiah and Zechariah and Daniel and Ezekiel and Matthew and Revelation, dramatized in the fifty-five million copies of the 'Left Behind' books."[95]

Other critics have paid less attention to the politics, looking more at the theology. They have read *Left Behind* as most essentially a project of eschatological explication. Religious studies professor Glenn W. Shuck, for example, treats the novels as theology that is only lightly coated in fictionality. *Left Behind* is "taking the seemingly allegorical language of Revelation and transforming it into a literal set of predictions for the immediate future," Shuck writes. "The upshot, of course, is that LaHaye and Jenkins warn their readers that time is running out and God is losing his patience."[96]

There is some truth to these interpretations. The novels do stage a specific evangelical vision of the Earth's last days, presenting those theological ideas in narrative form. The novels are also political. They tell stories that include conflict in the public square, and those fictional conflicts re-

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[93] Urban 10.

[94] Right wing proponents of the war, on the other hand, did not make this connection. The neo-conservative journal the *Weekly Standard* first mentioning the fiction series in 2002 in a piece criticizing evangelicals. The reporter, who self-identified as a lapsed Episcopalian, described *Left Behind* and other evangelical cultural products as a corruption of Christianity (Stephen Bates, "The Jesus Market," *Weekly Standard*, Dec. 16, 2002, http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-jesus-market/article/3260). The most prestigious conservative magazine, *National Review*, assigned an ex-evangelical who had converted to Catholicism to review *Left Behind*—but only when the twelfth installment was published. He panned the series as "bloated, stilted, and corny" (Carl E. Olson, "The 12th Coming of Less-Than-Glorious Fiction," *National Review*, April 2, 2004, http://www.nationalreview.com/article/210135/12th-coming-less-glorious-fiction-carl-e-olson). Olson didn't rate the politics of the novels any better. He thought they were, at best, goofy (Olson, "Looks like Saddam is Not the END After All," *National Review*, Dec. 29, 2003, http://www.nationalreview.com/article/208982/not-biblical-bang-carl-e-olson?target=author&tid=901377).

[95] Joan Didion, "Mr. Bush & the Divine," *New York Review of Books*, L, no. 17 (2003), 81-86, here 82, 86.

[96] Glenn W. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The* Left Behind *Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University, 2005), 41.

flect the religious right's political concerns. LaHaye understood both the theology and the politics to serve a higher purpose, though. And a close look at the novels shows the political issues and the theological issues are secondary. The aim is to compel belief. *Left Behind* "highlights belief about as dramatically as any fictional scenario could," writes Amy Hungerford in her study of American literature and religion since 1960. "Believing in Christ is not only, for these writers, the defining characteristic of true religion, subject only to the free choice of the individual, but it defines the fate of every character in the novel."[97] The heart of the fiction is the struggle to believe in a secular age.

For Jerry Jenkins, the most important element of popular fiction is the characters. In his novel-writing-advice guide, *Writing for the Soul*, the man who wrote *Left Behind* says "character is the foundation for fiction."[98] Plot is important, but beginning writers (and some critics) make the mistake of thinking the plot keeps people turning pages. Actually it's the characters. Jenkins says that even a literal cliffhanger, with a mother and baby plunging off the edge of a mountain road, is more compelling if the reader knows the characters' backstory. Readers feel more invested if they know something about that fictional mother and baby. The best plot, further, isn't imposed on the characters, but comes out of internal tension. Jenkins is a strong advocate of plot and personally loves cliffhangers. But when he writes fiction, that's not where he starts. He starts with his characters. "I put the characters on the page," Jenkins explains, "give them opposing goals or opinions and let the consequences play out in my mind as I record what happens."[99] Whether or not one agrees with this position aesthetically, it can be helpful in understanding Jenkins's writing. The narrative events that stage a version of evangelical eschatology and political conflicts are less important to him than the characters and how they change. In *Left Behind*, the story is built on the protagonists' transformation. Those character arcs, critically, go from unbelief to belief.

There are two protagonists in the first novel in the series. The story of the first days of the apocalypse, is told from these two perspectives. Both characters start out skeptical. They do not believe in Jesus and do not believe in the rapture, two beliefs which are, for the purposes of this fiction, so closely linked as to be almost indistinguishable. Both characters go through the same process of change, as they experience the aftermath of the rapture, and end up in the same place, achieving total certainty. With these characters' transformations, the novel presents a specific understanding of what conversion is like and what belief is like. The novels stage the conversion experience, inviting readers to identify with these characters as they go through this change and experience belief.

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[97] Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (Princeton: Princeton, 2010), 120.

[98] Jenkins 148.

[99] Jenkins 128.

Narrative Arc to Belief

The characters' arcs to belief follow these steps: In the opening exposition, they are indifferent to belief. One has been told about the imminent return of Jesus, but can't and won't imagine it. He doesn't think it really relevant to his life. He is not antagonistic towards belief but is uncomfortable being put in situations where he has to take a position. The other doesn't know about the doctrine of the rapture, specifically, but has had friends push him on the question of whether or not God is active in human history and in his life. He doesn't actively disbelieve, but avoids answering the question. Then the inciting incident happens, in literary terms, and everything changes and the characters are confronted with a different world. In the opening pages, Jesus returns in the rapture and catches all the true Christians up into heaven. All the true believers vanish suddenly and everyone else is left behind. The thing that seemed completely unthinkable is now very thinkable. Both characters are forced to recognize they will have to make a choice in his response to this event. They are faced with a pressing dichotomy. They are compelled, and will have to either believe or not believe. They cannot remain ambivalent. The characters' conflict, here, are primarily internal. Even as the novel deploys the tropes of a disaster story, depicting a world of crashed cars, jammed phone lines, and panicked people, the real challenge is belief. In the rising action of the character arcs, they are confronted with obstacles to certainty. They want to be certain about the rapture. They are confronted, though, with the many other possible explanations of the cataclysmic event. These range from spontaneous human combustion to secret weapons technology to alien invasion. The characters resist belief even as they long for it. One is over-analytical and hyper-critical, by nature. The other has made a career out of skepticism and professional distance. At the climax of the character arc, however, each protagonist puts aside other theories and accepts what they know to be true. They surrender. They acknowledge the evangelical eschatology, and give themselves to Jesus. This is shown as an act of submission they are compelled to make. In one sense it is a choice, of course, but the characters experience it as a choice they can't not choose. Thus compelled, they achieve certainty. The conflict resolves and they each really, truly believe.

The *Left Behind* series was phenomenally successful. For the first printing of the first book, Tyndale did a run of 35,000 copies in 1995. The series then broke through to mainstream markets to become the bestselling evangelical fiction of the twentieth century. The fifth installment sold 3.5 million copies in 1999, and became the first novel from an evangelical press to appear on *Publishers Weekly*'s annual bestseller list. Four printing presses worked for forty days to print the seventh book in May 2000 and it took seventy-nine semi-trucks to deliver the 2 million copies to distribution warehouses across the country. All those copies were sold in less than a month. The books flew off the shelves. When publishers stopped counting, more than 65 million copies of the sixteen-part

series had been sold and *Left Behind* and its vision of the apocalypse was firmly lodged in the American popular consciousness.[100] The novels reached a mass audience with their stories imagining belief as absolute certainty. How the novels stage conversions and imagine belief deserves to be read very closely.

The first person to go through the narrative arc to conversion in the first novel of the series, *Left Behind*, is Rayford Steele. Steele starts out an unbeliever—specifically not believing in an evangelical vision of the apocalyptic future. Before the rapture happens, he does not think it will happen. He doesn't even entertain the thought. His wife tells him about the evangelical apocalyptic narrative over breakfast. She is excited about the prospect of Jesus's imminent return. "Can you imagine, Rafe," she asks him, "Jesus coming back to get us before we die?"[101]

He can't.

It seems so implausible.

He won't: even just imagining the idea requires him to take a step towards belief that he doesn't want to take.

Irene Steele is not asking her husband to believe, in this scene, but only to suspend his disbelief with her and imagine the rapture. He resists even that, though. He finds even the idea of the exercise humiliating. Just entertaining the possibility of the rapture would require an act of humility and submission he finds distasteful. That's not who he is. "He didn't want to articulate it," he thinks, "but the fact was, he was brighter—yes, more intelligent."[102] His wife tends to get carried away with her enthusiasms. She's not as rational as he is. She is a "more emotional, more feelings-oriented person." He, in contrast, wants to remain in control of his emotions and sees himself as being in control of his own life, captain of his own destiny. He doesn't want to cede any of that, even if it's just to imagine being snatched up into heaven. He won't consider the possibility of his wife's theology. It's fine for her, though. They can agree to disagree.

Willingness to imagine the Rapture divides the Steeles. Irene Steele has joined a new, evangelical church that focuses a lot on personal relationships with Jesus and the doctrines of the End Times. The Steele family had been nominally religious before. New Hope Village Church, however, is different. It's different in part because the people won't let Rayford Steele not care. They practically force him to have a position on whether or not God is active in the world and in human history. At this church, before he stopped going, people asked him—directly—"what God was doing in

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[100] Daniel Silliman, "Publishers and Profit Motives: An Economic History of *Left Behind*," in *Religion and the Marketplace in the United States*, ed., Jan Stievermann et al., (New York: Oxford, 2015), 165-188.

[101] LaHaye and Jenkins 3.

[102] LaHaye and Jenkins 5.

his life."[103] The Steeles' previous church, by contrast, had "demanded little and offered a lot."[104] It was respectable and gave the family certain social connections in their suburban Chicago community. Irene Steele grew dissatisfied with that mainline Protestant placidity, however, and found a church that was more "literal and personal and challenging."[105] She started listening to evangelical radio. She started reading her Bible, praying for her husband to "get saved," and thinking about how Jesus could come back at any moment to snatch true believers into heaven. Rayford Steele just checked out. He put his energy into his career as a pilot with Pan-Continental Airlines. He spent his Sundays fixing things around the house or resting. He didn't actively oppose his wife's religious activity, but tried to avoid it. He didn't want to be put in a position where he had to have a position, and either believe or disbelieve. He preferred the ambiguity of uncertainty. "I'm happy for you," Steele tells his wife, adding, with a bit of an edge, "that you can be so cocksure."[106]

When the rapture does happen, Steele knows what it is. This, notably, is not presented as being the same as belief. Steele does not immediately convert when the rapture happens and all the committed Christians disappear off the earth. He, rather, is moved to think that what his wife said would happen has probably happened. When he's forced to care, to have an opinion, he leans towards thinking his wife was right. The event does not change what he believes, at first. It changes what he can imagine.

The rapture happens in *Left Behind* while Steele is flying a 747 from Chicago to London. He's thinking about having an affair with a flight attendant, Hattie Durham, though not sure if he really would. He's entertaining the idea. Then the flight attendant tells him "people are missing."[107] It's a lot of people. Dozens. At least. Their clothes are still on the airplane, but the people have vanished. Steele says he doesn't know what has happened, but he does. "The terrifying truth," LaHaye and Jenkins write, "was that he knew all too well. Irene had been right. He, and most of his passengers, had been left behind."[108]

At the same time, Steele can also conceive of other possible explanations. He remains uncertain because there are other theories. Another pilot, flying in the opposite direction from Paris to Chicago, tells Steele his first thought was spontaneous human combustion. The disappearances are also reminiscent of "the old *Star Trek* shows" where people were dematerialized and

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[103] LaHaye and Jenkins 2.

[104] LaHaye and Jenkins 124.

[105] LaHaye and Jenkins 125.

[106] LaHaye and Jenkins 5.

[107] LaHaye and Jenkins 16.

[108] LaHaye and Jenkins 19.

rematerialized.[109] It occurs to Steele the event could be caused by a weapon, "some world power doing this with fancy rays."[110] That's only the start of the many explanations that are going around. When Steele tunes in to an all-news radio station, "every conceivable explanation was proffered."[111] Given that kind of confusion, he can't be sure. He knows, according to the novel, but doesn't believe like his wife believed. He isn't "cocksure."

Steele turns the plane around and returns to Chicago. The world is a mess of crashed cars and planes and panicked people trying to check on loved ones. Steele calls home but no one answers. "If you're there, pick up," he says, leaving a message on the answering machine. "I sure hope you're there."[112] He doesn't think they are. Steele sees other people convinced that what has happened is the rapture and it strengthens his feeling that that's what has happened. On a TV in the airport, for example, he sees a story about how the event unfolded at a soccer game at a school for missionary kids in Indonesia. Most of the spectators disappeared. All but one of the players vanished mid game, leaving their jersey and the soccer ball behind. The remaining student, suddenly alone on the field, killed himself. Steele thinks the student was driven to suicide because he knew the truth. "Of all people," Steele speculates, "that player, a student at a Christian school, would have known the truth immediately. The Rapture had taken place. Jesus had returned for his people, and that boy was not one of them."[113] Steele himself is still not a believer, but this interpretation of events is now the version he can imagine most easily. Seeing someone so absolutely convinced has the affect of making it more plausible.

When he gets home, the question of belief really becomes personal. Steele's wife and young son are gone. They have vanished out of their beds. When his wife talked about prophecy over breakfast, it didn't really seem relevant to his life. Now it is very relevant. Waiting in the empty house for his college-age daughter Chloe, who has also been left behind, Steele wonders "how they had missed everything Irene had been trying to tell them, why it had been so hard to accept and believe."[114] He commits himself to seriously considering the Rapture. He "would be on a mission, a quest for truth."[115]

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[109] LaHaye and Jenkins 26.

[110] LaHaye and Jenkins 27.

[111] LaHaye and Jenkins 29.

[112] LaHaye and Jenkins 49.

[113] LaHaye and Jenkins 48.

[114] LaHaye and Jenkins 102.

[115] LaHaye and Jenkins 103.

Once he has done this, he feels the rapture is the only possible explanation for what has happened. The other theories don't make sense. The rapture is true. As it's presented in the novel, Steele reaches this conclusion without getting any new information. He thinks the rapture is plausible, feels he's forced to have a position on the question of whether it's true or not, decides he's going to be serious about it, and then reaches the conclusion the evangelical eschatology is not only true, it is the only reasonable thing to believe. The either/or compels to this point. He does not develop additional arguments. He doesn't get this from reading the Bible. Steele does turn to the Bible at first, but finds the text isn't particularly helpful. He flips through. He can't find anything that specifically speaks to being "left behind." There's no index with a listing for the Rapture. Nothing obvious jumps out. He reads several passages from Revelation where Jesus says "I am coming quickly," but he doesn't know what that means since the Bible is very old.[116] Then Chloe Steele comes home and Rayford tells her her mother was right about the Rapture. Chloe argues with him. She says there are lots of possible explanations and it's just not clear what to believe. "In California," she says, "they're actually buying into the space invasion theory."[117] It might be easier to think their vanished loved ones are in heaven, but how could you know? How could you be sure? Rayford Steele is sure. To him it is now clear. He has moved past doubt. Chloe asks him, "You're saying the only logical explanation is God, that he took his own and left the rest of us?" Rayford agrees: "That's what I'm saying."[118]

According to the elder Steele, he has, at this point, considered all the possibilities. It can't have been aliens. That is just silly. It can't have been a mysterious weapon, because the Cold War is over and "there's no Soviet threat anymore."[119] Besides, only certain people disappeared: the real Christians, who all believed Jesus was coming to take them exactly like he did. These arguments, however, are all retroactive. Critical evaluation follows rather than precedes Steele's certainty. Further, he is not endorsing the rapture as the most likely scenario or the best explanation he's heard thus far. He believes this theory is more than a theory. When Steele sees the rapture as a real possibility, he sees it as the only possibility. Other theories are not serious and don't have to be seriously considered. Steele got to this point through a process of imagination, and now he's absolutely sure.

This conception of certain belief emerging from a dichotomy is affirmed when the Steeles visit New Hope, Irene Steele's evangelical church. An assistant pastor there named Bruce Barnes has been left behind, along with some members of the congregation. They are certain the rapture

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[116] LaHaye and Jenkins 122.

[117] LaHaye and Jenkins 159.

[118] LaHaye and Jenkins 165.

[119] LaHaye and Jenkins 166.

was the rapture, and represent belief to the Steeles as this sort of total certainty. Barnes is completely confident, though he confesses this was't always the case. That's why why he was left behind. "I thought I believed everything there was to believe in the Bible," Barnes says.[120] But he wasn't a real Christian. Because he wasn't really committed. "It should have been obvious to me," he says. "When people found out I was on the pastoral staff at New Hope, I would tell them about the cool pastor and the neat church, but I was shy about telling them about Christ."[121] Before the rapture, he was worried about what other people thought and always aware, in his thinking, of other people's views. When people asked him "if New Hope was one of those churches that said Jesus was the only way to God," he "did everything but deny it."[122] Barnes didn't want to have to take a strong position. He didn't want to be put on the spot, like Rayford Steele when people asked him what God was doing in his life.

Barnes, more than anyone else, gives voice to the theology of the authors of *Left Behind*. However, he seems disinterested in explicating the details of the apocalypse at hand. He doesn't talk about the rapture itself, either what it is or how it fits into God's larger plan. His focus, instead, is on belief. Barnes explains how people are sinners, in God's eyes, but "Jesus took our sins and paid the penalty for them" when he died on the cross.[123] This is a "supernatural transaction." But the credit from Jesus's death can only be applied to the individual's life through belief. And you have to really believe. You have to "see the truth and act on it."[124] The apocalypse is important only because it makes it clear belief is personally relevant. It is important because it forces confrontation with a critical dichotomous question. Everything comes down to a single either/or.

Chloe Steele argues with Barnes, just like she argued with her father, and like her father initially argued with himself. How can one be sure when there are other possible explanations? "There's every kind of theory you want on every TV show in the country," she tells the pastor. "And each is self-serving."[125] Barnes doesn't answer this directly. Instead, he makes a little speech about the suspension of disbelief. "I have asked for a few moments of your time," he says. "If I still have it, I want to try to make use of it. Then I'll leave you alone. You can do anything you want with what I tell you. Tell me I'm crazy, tell me I'm self-serving. Leave and never come back. That's up

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[120] LaHaye and Jenkins 195.

[121] LaHaye and Jenkins 197.

[122] LaHaye and Jenkins 197.

[123] LaHaye and Jenkins 201.

[124] LaHaye and Jenkins 200.

[125] LaHaye and Jenkins 190.

to you. But can I have the floor for a few minutes?"[126] This is about one-third of the way into the novel, and can be read as a metafictional comment, addressed to skeptical readers as well as the skeptical character. In his fiction-writing-advice guide, Jenkins says the suspension of disbelief is very important to him personally. "Readers are to temporarily choose not to disbelieve what might otherwise trip up their logical minds," he writes. "All I'm asking is what any novelist asks: a temporary, willing suspension of disbelief."[127] As a novelist, Jenkins knows readers have good reasons to not believe the story he's telling, so he only asks them to take the first step toward belief. Barnes, likewise, asks that objections and alternative explanations be put aside, at least for the moment. His listeners and the novel's readers should take the first step towards belief, deciding the story is at least plausible.

Barnes is here rephrasing Irene Steele's original question to her husband, "Can you imagine Jesus coming back to get us before we die?" The question, for his listener, and by extension the novel's reader, is whether the account is believable enough to be imagined. The novel suggests that if people can see the rapture is possible, and if they feel forced to take a position on the question and take the question seriously, they will realize, as Rayford Steele did, the rapture is the only possibility. There's a direct line from believing something is plausible to believing it with absolute certainty. Barnes strategically pushes his listeners (and the novel's readers) to take the first step. They must begin with the simple "yes" or "no," accepting there is no third choice.

Steele is very impressed with this mode of argument and how it blocks off alternative explanations. It forces the listener's hand, in a sense. Presenting people with an initial dichotomous choice compels them to face the truth they know, deep down, is true, or to acknowledge their own active disbelief. "Rayford thought Barnes was brilliant," LaHaye and Jenkins write. "He had put Chloe in her place, leaving her no smart remark."[128] Chloe Steele thinks she is being intellectually honest. She's asking questions because she wants to know the truth. Rayford Steele, however, reflecting on his own thinking process, now believes bringing up the diversity of possible positions one could take is not honesty, but dissembling. Looking at his daughter, he thinks she is just finding ways to avoid being forced to reckon with the truth. "You'd have to be blind not to see the light now," Rayford thinks. "Had he been this pseudosophisticated at that age? Of course he had. He had run everything through that maddening intellectual grid—until recently, when the supernatural came crashing through his academic pretense."[129] Barnes's approach of asking for the suspension of

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[126] LaHaye and Jenkins 190.

[127] Jenkins 130-131.

[128] LaHaye and Jenkins 190.

[129] LaHaye and Jenkins 237.

disbelief disables the "maddening intellectual grid." It forces people, whether they are "pseudosophisticated" or not, to start by agreeing the rapture is plausible or taking the position they won't even consider it.

Steele goes on to adopt this strategy himself. He presents evangelical eschatology as the only theory that can be considered. In one scene, he starts his explanation of the rapture by announcing that his theory is "more than a theory."[130] He pays a waiter so the discussion will not be disturbed.[131] He then speaks for "a little over half an hour" without interruption.[132] In another scene, he starts by setting out the terms of his proselytizing. "I'm not here to argue with you," he tells a woman he wants to convert, "or even have a conversation."[133] She must accept those terms. "I don't see how I have a choice," she says.[134] Steele says she he is giving her one choice, to listen to him or not. If she is going to agree to listen to his story, though, she has agree to submit in the act of listening.

For himself, Steele responds positively to being forced to submit to belief. He is moved by Barnes's presentation on the need to see the truth and act on it, and do his part of the "supernatural transaction" of salvation. Listening to Barnes, Steele "felt he had found exactly what he was looking for. It was what he had suspected."[135] He has the same response of recognition he had when the rapture happened. Now, however, he is ready to forsake all the other theories. He nevertheless hesitates. "He wanted to pray, to be sure," LaHaye and Jenkins write. "Could he be more sure?"[136] The novel's implication is that he couldn't. Steele leaves New Hope with a video tape of a sermon about the rapture. The pastor of the church recorded the message before the apocalypse, and left it at the church for the eventual day it would be needed. Steele takes home a copy. He puts it in the VCR and settles in front of the TV.[137] The now-raptured pastor, Vernon Billings, addresses the camera and says the rapture has happened. He says this with complete confidence. What is perhaps more remarkable is that Billings believes the person watching the video after the Rapture will also

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[130] LaHaye and Jenkins 383.

[131] LaHaye and Jenkins 382.

[132] LaHaye and Jenkins 384.

[133] LaHaye and Jenkins 367.

[134] LaHaye and Jenkins 368.

[135] LaHaye and Jenkins 201.

[136] LaHaye and Jenkins 206.

[137] In the repackaged, 2011 version of the book, the technology is updated. The VCR becomes a DVD player, the video tape a DVD. The unmarked revision is somewhat awkward, though, as Rayford Steele rewinds the DVD. DVDs, of course, do not rewind. See LaHaye and Jenkins, *Left Behind* (2011, reprt.; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1995), 223.

have that confidence. "You know what I'm saying is true," Billings says.[138] He explains that the Bible predicted everything that is happening, but tells his future viewers, "You won't need this proof by now, because you will have experienced the most shocking event of history."[139]

Billings shows them a proof text for the eschatological doctrine, 1 Corinthians 15:51-57. "We shall not all sleep," the pastor reads, "but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet."[140] Steele doesn't know what this means. To him, the text is confusing. Some of it just sounds like gibberish. As he listens to the pastor, though, he understands the Bible applies to his present situation and can be used to shed light on how God is at work in human history. Billings tells viewers they are going to face special challenges, because they've been left behind. Steele understands, too, that the point of the rapture and the subsequent time of tribulation is to force him to submit to belief. The rapture is compelling him to believe. "It was time to move beyond being a critic," Steele thinks, "an analyst never satisfied with the evidence. The proof was before him: the empty chairs, the lonely bed, the hole in his heart. There was only one course of action."[141] Steele goes to his knees. He puts his palms down on his living room carpet, and put his face to the floor in a gesture of supplication. In the video, the pastor says, "Pray after me," and Steele repeats the words he is told to say: "Dear God, I admit that I am a sinner. I am sorry for my sins. Please forgive me and save me. I ask this in the name of Jesus, who died for me."[142] As he sees it, Steele has no other choice.

Submission is key to how *Left Behind* imagines belief can be certain. Steele's conversion arc climaxes when he submits to belief. His internal conflict resolves when he reaches this point where he feels forced to believe and feels he can be certain, in his belief, because he didn't have a choice. Amy Hungerford detects a homoerotic charge in this submission. She locates the tension of the story in the opposition of "feminine" passivity and "masculine" action. Belief becomes a gender problem. To believe, Steel has to do this characteristically feminine thing, submit, while maintaining and reaffirming his place in the heteronormative and patriarchal order. "Submission," Hungerford writes, "is an essential aspect of belief," as it's imagined in *Left Behind,* "but one surrounded with anxiety." The "somatic accompaniments of conversion" are particularly troubling for the straight male characters concerned about emasculation, because they "cannot fail to look like signs of erotic

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[138] LaHaye and Jenkins 211.

[139] LaHaye and Jenkins 209.

[140] LaHaye and Jenkins 210. The novel uses the New King James Version of the Bible.

[141] LaHaye and Jenkins 214.

[142] LaHaye and Jenkins 216.

attraction."[143] If submission is thought of as feminine, however, the resultant certainty is conceived as masculine. Steele is presented as a man's man, and more so after his conversion. He rejects ambiguity, overcomes uncertainty, and achieves belief beyond doubt. Whether or not it is useful to think of this resolution in gendered terms, the novel makes submission central. Belief—real belief—is imagined as certainty. The first step to certainty is the suspension of disbelief, which involves a dichotomy and then submission. The last step is accepting what one is compelled to accept.

The other hero and convert of *Left Behind* is a reporter, Cameron "Buck" Williams. Williams's character follows the same arc. He too starts in a place of unbelief. A journalist, he is professionally skeptical. Unlike Rayford Steele, however, Williams starts out open to at least the possibility the rapture is the rapture. This openness is also part of his job as a journalist. He wants to get to the bottom of things and is attuned to the idea that things are not always as they appear. He is not gullible. He does his own reporting. But he will follow a lead that might, at first, appear outlandish. He will accept, at least as a working premise, the idea that the outlandish might be true. This is his job. And Williams is good at his job. He has won journalism's top prizes—a Pulitzer before turning 25 and a prestigious war correspondence award before he was 30.[144] Williams is introduced to readers as the "youngest ever senior writer for the prestigious *Global Weekly*," jetting around the globe and reporting on the most important stories.[145] Further, as he's done that reporting, readers are informed, he has seen things that make him think the evangelical eschatology is—at the very least—plausible.

A little more than a year before the rapture, Williams reported on Russia's surprise attack on Israel. He was in Israel reporting on another story when it happened. The scene unfolds in a flashback early in *Left Behind*. "The assault became known as the Russian Pearl Harbor," LaHaye and Jenkins write. "The Russians sent intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear-equipped MiG fighter-bombers into the region. The number of aircraft and warheads made it clear their mission was annihilation."[146] The Israeli military scrambled, but they were outnumbered and out-gunned. The nation seemed obviously doomed and "from what he heard and saw in the military bunker, Buck Williams knew the end was near."[147] The destruction of Israel was miraculously averted at the last moment, however. An inexplicable firestorm, accompanied by a hailstorm, rain, and an earthquake, destroys the airborne Russian forces. "The sky was afire," Williams recalls. "He stood in stark terror

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[143] Hungerford 126.

[144] LaHaye and Jenkins 228.

[145] LaHaye and Jenkins 6.

[146] LaHaye and Jenkins 10.

[147] LaHaye and Jenkins 11.

and amazement as the great machines of war plummeted to earth all over the city, crashing and burning. But they fell between buildings and in deserted streets and fields. Anything atomic and explosive erupted high in the atmosphere, and Buck stood there in the heat, his face blistering and his body pouring sweat. What in the world was happening?"[148]

Williams thinks it could have been a miracle. Possibly it was God divinely intervening into human affairs to protect the Jewish nation-state. He's impressed when Jewish scholars point out the apparent connection between the event and biblical prophecy. He was "stunned when he read Ezekiel 38 and 39," which describes an army attacking from the north "like a cloud" "in the later days," only to be thwarted by "flooding rain, great hailstones, fire, and brimstone."[149] Williams is not moved to belief, though. He thinks it plausible the events were divinely foretold in the Bible, but he's also aware of other explanations. His editors at the newsweekly are not convinced the event was a miracle and Williams admits to himself he wouldn't buy this theory either, "had he not been there and seen it himself."[150] In fact, even his firsthand knowledge is not strong enough to enable him to rule out those other possibilities and be certain he saw God acting in human history. He comes close to believing, but hesitates. He can't be certain. Christian friends pushed him to commit to belief, but Williams "wasn't prepared to go that far." The event nonetheless has changed him. It expanded what he could imagine. After this inciting incident, he is, he knows, a different person. Now, "to him," LaHaye and Jenkins write, "nothing was beyond belief."[151] This is not to say, however, that he believed.

Williams was raised a Christian. He is from Arizona, where his dad and brother make a living as truckers, transporting oil and gasoline. Williams went to church and Sunday school with his family but quit as soon as he was allowed to decide for himself. His family's religion was too nominal to seem to matter to him. There was a "lack of any connection between the family's church attendance and their daily lives."[152] Williams had basically nothing to do with religion after leaving Arizona and the family business for an Ivy-League education and a high-powered career as an up-and-coming journalist. "He had built his life around achievement," LaHaye and Jenkins write, "excitement, and—he couldn't deny it—attention. He loved the status that came with having his byline, his writing, his thinking in a national magazine."[153] While Williams has occasionally said a

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[148] LaHaye and Jenkins 13.

[149] LaHaye and Jenkins 13-14; Ezek. 38:16, 22 (New King James Version).

[150] LaHaye and Jenkins 13.

[151] LaHaye and Jenkins 15.

[152] LaHaye and Jenkins 109.

[153] LaHaye and Jenkins 357.

prayer when in trouble, he "had never considered himself religious."[154] He "never claimed any devotion to the faith."[155] This is true even after the apparently miraculous firestorm in Israel. He identifies himself as, at most, a Deist.[156]

When the rapture happens, Williams is sleeping in first class on Rayford Steele's Chicago-to-London flight. He's following a tip that the world's bankers, a "secret group of international money men," are secretly meeting and planning to establish a global currency.[157] Williams is not convinced it is true, but just because it is a conspiracy theory "doesn't mean it's not true."[158] He's awakened when another passenger, an old woman, cries out that her husband is missing. "He's gone!" she says. Williams assures the woman that her husband is probably just in the bathroom and will return momentarily. She doesn't think that's right. Her husband's clothes are on his seat. "The pant legs still hung over the edge and led to his shoes and socks," LaHaye and Jenkins write. The senior's glasses and hearing aid have also been left behind and are sitting on top of the clothes. When Williams goes to look for the man he finds many people are missing on the plane. "All over the plane," he sees, "people were holding up clothes and gasping or shrieking that someone was missing."[159]

Williams does not immediately know what this is. Unlike Steele, he is not familiar with the idea of the Rapture. He apparently doesn't even know the term. His first thought, trying to make sense of things, is that it might be a new kind of kidnapping. "His mind searched its memory banks," LaHaye and Jenkins write, "for anything he had ever read, seen, or heard of any technology that could remove people from their clothes and make them disappear from a decidedly secure environment. Whoever did this, were they on the plane? Would they make demands?"[160] No one comes forward with demands, however, so Williams abandons the ransom explanation.

When the plane lands in Chicago, Williams still doesn't know what has happened. He still hasn't heard the word "rapture." He races to the exclusive Pan-Con Club and checks his email. His editor has asked the reporting staff to "begin thinking about the causes. Military? Cosmic? Scientific? Spiritual?"[161] It is not clear from the text how these categories are to be understood. The cate-

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[154] LaHaye and Jenkins 357.

[155] LaHaye and Jenkins 108.

[156] LaHaye and Jenkins 79.

[157] LaHaye and Jenkins 84.

[158] LaHaye and Jenkins 85.

[159] LaHaye and Jenkins 23.

[160] LaHaye and Jenkins 23.

[161] LaHaye and Jenkins 55.

gories are apparently not important. What is important in the editor's email is the breadth of possibilities. They are going to consider every explanation. The number of possible answers, however, seems to move the reporters to a place where they don't need to know the answer. "Whether we'll come to any conclusions," the editor says in a personal email to Williams, "I don't know, but at the very least we'll catalog the reasonable possibilities."[162] Just as the great plethora of possible theories to choose from made Steele's quest for certainty more difficult, Williams is going to have to wade through a lot of explanations. "Ideas are like egos," his editor says, mangling a familiar idiom, "everybody's got one."[163] People will have to agree to disagree.

When Williams is introduced to the idea of the rapture, it is within this evaluative framework of plausibility. In the Pan-Con Club, there is a doctor working. He treats Williams for free, calling it "a Rapture Special."[164] Williams doesn't know what this is and the doctor doesn't have time to explain. He only says, "Is there any other explanation that makes sense?"[165] It's a yes-or-no question. The doctor seems to have reached the point in the conversion process where he has apparently considered and rejected all the theories, determining the rapture to not only be the best explanation but the only one a reasonable person could believe. The doctor doesn't have time to explain, though. He only declares how obvious it is, and then moves on. Williams thinks the doctor is making an assumption. But he wants to know more. He's eager to investigate an apparently unsupported and outlandish assumption, and is more than willing to adopt the premise the rapture could be true. "How could you rule out anything at this point?" Williams thinks.[166]

Williams teeters on the edge of belief for a long time. In one scene, for example, he finds himself almost praying, but hesitates. Trying to travel twenty miles through the mess of New York City in the aftermath of the rapture, he says, "Oh, God, help me," even though he doesn't mean it as a prayer. He was, LaHaye and Jenkins write, "more exasperated than praying."[167] He was close to praying, though. He immediately finds a bicycle leaning against a wall with a sign saying it is free to borrow and he thinks, in that moment, about really praying. But he doesn't. He isn't forced to take a position, forced to submit to belief, so he doesn't. He puts it off.

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[162] LaHaye and Jenkins 56.

[163] LaHaye and Jenkins 56. The common English-language idiom is "ideas are like assholes—everybody's got one." Google can find only eight instances of this comparison between ideas and egos, all of them connected to *Left Behind*.

[164] LaHaye and Jenkins 59.

[165] LaHaye and Jenkins 60.

[166] LaHaye and Jenkins 62.

[167] LaHaye and Jenkins 128.

Williams does not immediately investigate the rapture, after it happens. He goes off on another investigation, following a rabbit trail of secret bankers and world currencies. This seems initially unrelated to the rapture, and it's not clear why the news magazine should give this investigation priority. It is important to the plot, though, as it sets off the novel's other storyline about the rise of the Antichrist. Williams's editor is convinced there is something going on while the world is distracted, and wants his best reporter to look into it. As the novel unfolds, the shadowy connections become visible. The "international monetarists setting the stage for one world currency" turn out to be connected to religious Jews interested in rebuilding the holy temple in Jerusalem. This, in turn, is connected with a group with representative leaders from the world's religions who are trying to established a one-world religion.[168] The religious, financial, and political powers are all converging at the time the rapture happens.[169] All are giving authority to an obscure Romanian politician "who looked not unlike a young Robert Redford."[170] Williams is investigating the rise of the Antichrist as it happens in the final third of *Left Behind*.

This global conspiracy is important to the authors. The details matter to LaHaye, whose commitment to conspiracy theories dates back to his involvement in the John Birch Society. The conspiracy serves Jenkins as well, allowing him to keep up the pace of the action of the narrative. While one protagonist is going to meet with a left-behind pastor and ask how he can be certain in his belief, the other protagonist barely escapes dying in a car bomb, fakes his own death, and goes on the run with a phony passport. This "keeps the storyline moving," as Jenkins explains in his how-to book on writing fiction.[171]

The conspiracy is also important, though, because it illuminates the novel's ideas about belief. As Williams pursues and is pursued by shadowy forces, *Left Behind* articulates some principles about how the world works. Williams's investigation shows that things are not always what they seem. There is "the power behind the power."[172] Random and apparently meaningless events are actually part of a plan. Frequently, "something is cooking" behind the scenes.[173] The truth of what is happening is hidden. Many people, of course, dismiss even the possibility of hidden truth, waving it away as crackpot, conspiratorial thinking. "There are books about this stuff," Williams acknowledges. "People make a hobby of ascribing all manner of evil to the Tri-Lateral Commission, the Illu-

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[168] LaHaye and Jenkins 57.

[169] LaHaye and Jenkins 141.

[170] LaHaye and Jenkins 114.

[171] Jenkins 137.

[172] LaHaye and Jenkins 84.

[173] LaHaye and Jenkins 105.

minati, even the Freemasons, for goodness sake."[174] Important aspects of the conspiracy theory are shown to be true, though. And Williams's investigations proves the foundational principle of conspiracy theories, that the truth is cloaked, but can be uncovered by serious investigation. This is critical to conspiracy theories and to the evangelical eschatology staged in *Left Behind*. Doubt is dangerous.

Doubt, in this view of how the world works, is at best an indication someone has not investigated seriously enough. At worst, doubt is part of the disguise of truth, part of the deception that is enabling the power behind the power to get away with its plan. There is no good-faith doubt. Honest doubt, in fact, is just what it feels like to be deceived. As it's imagined in the investigation of interlocking conspiracies in *Left Behind*, doubt has to be overcome in order for one to apprehend the truth. The truth isn't grasped tentatively and cautiously, with careful analysis of all the evidence. Rather, it's a matter of clear and distinct perception. As Steele explains, "most people are blind and deaf to the truth until they find it; then it makes all the sense in the world."[175]

To really know what's going on, one has to be free of doubt.

Williams, following the same character arc as Rayford Steele, see someone who is free from doubt before he himself is ready to believe. Witnessing someone's confident belief that the rapture is the rapture helps move him in that direction. This happens when Williams is at the airport. He tries to contact an editor at the Chicago offices of his newsmagazine. Lucinda Washington is a fifty-ish black woman, according to LaHaye and Jenkins. She and Williams have interacted previously. The editor, a committed Christian, gently pushed the aggressive young reporter towards faith. "Come on, Cameron," she said during one exchange. "You know you got your mind right when you saw what God did for Israel."[176] He demurred. Washington pressed on: "Stay in town long enough to come to my church," she said, "and God'll get you."[177] Trying to arrange a way out of Chicago in the mess of the aftermath of the mass disappearance, Williams thinks Washington might be able to help him. He calls her at home. She isn't home. A boy answers the phone and identifies himself as Washington's son and says his mother isn't there. "Is she still at the office?" Williams asks. The boy says no. In fact, "she's nowhere." Washington is one of those who disappeared, along with her hus-

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[174] LaHaye and Jenkins 175. This is a reference to the John Birch Society, known for promoting conspiracy theories about cabals of "insiders." One prominent, popular example of this is Gary Allen's *None Dare Call it Conspiracy* (1971: repr., Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer, 1976). LaHaye, for his part, described himself in the 1990s as "a forty-five-year student of the satanically-inspired, centuries-old conspiracy to use government, education, and media to destroy every vestige of Christianity within our society and establish a new world order. Having read at least fifty books on the *Illuminati*, I am convinced that it exists" (LaHaye, *No Fear*, 136).

[175] LaHaye and Jenkins 332.

[176] LaHaye and Jenkins 79.

[177] LaHaye and Jenkins 80.

band the rest of the Washington family, except for this one son. Williams expresses his condolences but the left-behind son says he is not upset. "I know where they are," he explains. "If you know my mama, you know where she is, too." In case that's not true, he adds: "She's in heaven."[178] The boy is completely convinced of this and his belief affects Williams's own view.

Williams is shown in the next scene convinced that the rapture is at least plausible. He calls his father and finds the elder Williams is convinced the disappearance couldn't have been religious. The elder Williams considers himself a Christian, after all, and he was left behind. If Jesus was taking people to heaven, he would have gone to heaven too.[179] The younger Williams disagrees. His father wasn't really Christian. He wasn't like Washington, who was "bright, healthy, happy, strong, and a forcefully personality," which communicated her commitment to her belief. The elder Williams, by comparison, went to church, but there was a distinct lack of "any connection between his family's church attendance and their daily lives."[180] Cameron Williams think his father's doubt is only self-deception. His father is trying to avoid the obvious truth, that the Rapture is the Rapture, by denying even the possibility it could be.

And it could be, Williams thinks. He struggles with even this tentative claim of plausibility, though. The rapture is so strange. Like Bruce Barnes, Williams thinks of this in terms of the suspension of disbelief. If this were a movie, would he be willing to put aside his skepticism at least for a little while? Would he be able to submit to the narrative and accept the invitation to just imagine the Rapture? He doesn't know. "Nothing could have been scripted like this," he thinks. "If somebody tried to sell a screenplay about millions of people disappearing, leaving everything but their bodies behind, it would be laughed off."[181] There is something a little unusual in this reflection. The novel sets up a paradox for the reader, here. The protagonist of the novel is speculating that audiences would find the story that he's in unbelievable. If readers, agree, and find it unbelievable, then they believe him and so *Left Behind* is, after all, believable. If they disagree with the character, on the other hand, that means they don't find it unbelievable that it's unbelievable, and so it is believable. Either way, *Left Behind* turns out to be believable. With this trick, the novel attempts to force readers to recognize they are open to the possibility of belief. Their answer to this yes-or-no question has to be yes. Williams himself answers "yes." He still has doubts. He is not ready, yet, to close off and reject all the other possible explanations for the disappearance, but he becomes certain the rapture is believable.

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[178] LaHaye and Jenkins 96.

[179] LaHaye and Jenkins 108.

[180] LaHaye and Jenkins 109.

[181] LaHaye and Jenkins 110.

Williams recommits himself to the plausibility of the rapture when he returns to the investigation of the mass disappearance in the last quarter of *Left Behind*. An editor at the newsmagazine points out that respectable opinion is coming to a consensus. In the weeks after the event, smart people are all arriving at the same conclusion. They think "it was a natural, some kind of a phenomenon where all our high-tech stuff interacted with the forces of nature and we really did a number on ourselves."[182] This view has become so dominant, other views are starting to seem silly. It couldn't have been aliens. It's ridiculous to think it was Jesus. "I've got an uncle who thinks it was Jesus," the editor says, "but he also thinks Jesus forgot *him*. Ha!"[183] Williams won't dismiss the idea so cavalierly. He feels some social pressure to reject the evangelical eschatology. And yet, "something made him wonder if there wasn't something to this Rapture thing."[184] It's believable—and maybe more.

He can't be sure, though. Investigating the theories of the mass disappearance, Williams interviews Steele. He wants the perspective of "a professional," and "someone who was right in the middle of the turmoil when it happened."[185] Williams is very impressed by the pilot. Most of all, he is impressed with Steele's adamant certainty. "I have more than a theory," Steele tells him. "I believe I have found the truth and know exactly what happened."[186] Steele explains how the unfolding events were foretold by Biblical prophecy. He cites chapter and verse. Williams is unfamiliar with the citations. As Steele reads to him from Revelation, Williams thinks the verses could be "mumbo jumbo." The confidence of Steele's reading, however, makes Revelation "appear clear."[187] For a moment, Williams gets a glimpse of the kind of certainty he wants, the kind of certainty he could have if he believed. Other, alternative explanations are blocked, pushed away. Steele's theory that the Rapture is the Rapture appears "profound and convincing."[188] It is, for Williams, "the only theory that tied the incidents so closely to any sort of explanation."[189] The thought gives him chills. His pulse races and his heart beats loud in his ears.

Williams again stops short of belief. Even as he finds Steele's argument persuasive, he is not compelled to make a personal decision about what he believes. He is, after all, a journalist. "This

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[182] LaHaye and Jenkins 355.

[183] LaHaye and Jenkins 355.

[184] LaHaye and Jenkins 357.

[185] LaHaye and Jenkins 364.

[186] LaHaye and Jenkins 383.

[187] LaHaye and Jenkins 385.

[188] LaHaye and Jenkins 386.

[189] LaHaye and Jenkins 385.

had not begun as a personal quest, a search for the truth," Williams notes to himself. "This was merely a fact-finding mission." His job was to "round up all the theories, from the plausible to the bizarre."[190] While he leans towards Steele's theory, it's not personal and he doesn't have to take a position. He's not forced to take a position. So he doesn't, at least at first.

Despite the pretense of professional distance, Williams is compelled by Steele's reasoning to recognize he either believes or he does not. He personally has to take a position. He "knew instinctively," LaHaye and Jenkins write, "that if any of it was true, all of it was true."[191] There isn't any legitimate middle ground and he is going to have to make a choice. He is being compelled. It keeps him awake that night. "Could he be on the cusp," he wonders, "of becoming a born-again Christian?"[192] Williams gets up and paces, thinking over the pilot's explanations of evangelical eschatology. He thinks about his doubts and starts to see that, like his father's, they are not honest, but rather function to protect his self-deception. Doubt is just a way to avoid tough questions. After God so directly intervened into human history, though, "everyone in the world, at least those intellectually honest with themselves, had to admit there was a God."[193] Williams wants to be intellectual honest. He has built up his emotional defenses, over the years, to avoid being put into this position where he would have to take a personal stance. Now it was personal, however, and Williams is "unable to separate himself from his story."[194]

This rising action reaches its resolution when Williams goes to meet the Antichrist. The obscure Romanian politician connected to the interlocking conspiracies of global currency and one-world religion has risen to power. Nicolae Carpathia is made head of the United Nations. He demonstrates an ability to "capture the imagination of the world."[195] He starts making bold, unexpected moves: Carpathia wants to relocate the UN headquarters from New York city to "New Babylon," and calls for a resolution unifying the world's religions.[196] As he does so, the "core group" of left-behind converts tries to figure out if Carpathia is the Antichrist, or if it's someone else. They are pretty confident he is the Antichrist. "I don't see," one reflects, "how I could come to any other conclusion."[197] The group warns Williams before he travels back to New York to report

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[190] LaHaye and Jenkins 386.

[191] LaHaye and Jenkins 393.

[192] LaHaye and Jenkins 396.

[193] LaHaye and Jenkins 394.

[194] LaHaye and Jenkins 393.

[195] LaHaye and Jenkins 358.

[196] LaHaye and Jenkins 353.

[197] LaHaye and Jenkins 427.

on a big announcement from the newly empowered Carpathia. Williams takes note of the accusation, scribbling it down: "*Carpathia. End times. Antichrist?*"[198] It is at this moment he realizes he is ready to submit to belief. He's ready to reject all doubts and embrace the evangelical eschatology with certainty. "He was no longer wondering or doubting," LaHaye and Jenkins write.[199] "This business of an Antichrist who deceives so many … well, in Buck's mind it was no longer an issue of whether it was literal or true. He was long past that."[200] Williams goes to the men's restroom in the UN. He locks the door and prays, surrendering his life to Jesus. He makes the supernatural transaction and it works: all doubt disappears. Belief, here, is presented as something he chose, but there is no question it was the right choice. When Williams steps out of the restroom and goes to Carpathia's press conference, he possesses total certainty.

The brand new believer possesses a certainty so strong it can withstand even the Antichrist. Carpathia controls perceptions of reality at the press conference. He exerts a "hypnotic power," deceiving people, controlling their minds. He commits a double murder in front of the whole room, then tells them that's not what they saw. It was a murder-suicide. He wasn't involved. They will remember only that and, more significantly, that he, Carpathia, is in power. "You will understand cognitively that I am in charge," the Antichrist tells those gathered in the room, "that I fear no man, and that no one can oppose me."[201] Everyone there is deceived. Except the newly converted Williams. He and he alone knows the truth.

Williams's knowledge notably is not troubled by other theories. He's not disturbed by the fact that other people saw what he saw and saw it differently. Previously, Williams was concerned about collecting the whole range of explanations, weighing different theories. He questioned his own firsthand experience because there were other theories out there. Now, he's certain. He meets with an editor who adamantly disagrees with him about what happened at the meeting. Williams knows the man is deceived. There is, further, no room to agree to disagree. Disagreement only reinforces Williams's certainty: "The power Carpathia held over those people knew no limits. If Buck had needed any proof that his own faith was real and that God was now in his life, he had it."[202] He knows what he knows. Williams calls the believers in Chicago after the press conference that turned

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[198] LaHaye and Jenkins 435.

[199] LaHaye and Jenkins 440.

[200] LaHaye and Jenkins 441.

[201] LaHaye and Jenkins 457.

[202] LaHaye and Jenkins 466.

into a murder cover-up. "Let me tell you this: Carpathia is your man," he says, "no question."[203] Belief has changed him.

At the end of his character's arc, Williams has achieved absolute certainty. He started out as unbeliever who didn't even think belief was relevant to him. He was indifferent to belief. Then the inciting incident happened. He was moved to think the evangelical eschatology was plausible. Williams defends the plausibility of the evangelical eschatology, but is still always aware of other interpretations and explanations, and so cannot be certain that one particular view is right. This is this character's internal conflict. He faces external conflict at the same time, as he investigates and reports on an international conspiracy. That investigation importantly informs the character's (and the novel's) sense that reality is not always as it appears and that doubts function to conceal, rather than reveal the truth. The rising action reaches its climax when the character is compelled to take the issue of belief personally. The force of the logic of apologetics push him to see there is no legitimate middle ground. One either believes, or doesn't. The character submits to belief, achieving absolute certainty.

The novel concludes with Williams declaring his belief to Rayford and Chloe Steele and Bruce Barnes. They form themselves into a "Tribulation Force," dedicated to opposing the new world government and world religion and all the deceptions of the Antichrist. In the final scene, the four believers are leaving the Chicago O'Hare airport, "striding four abreast, arms around each other's shoulders, knit with common purpose."[204]

The Final Dichotomy

The rest of the *Left Behind* series is the same way: belief is the core theme. This can be illustrated with a quick look at the fifth novel in the series, *Apollyon*, and the final installment, *Kingdom Come*. The fifth book is the first that was made available to a mass audience, through distribution at Wal-Mart, Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.com. It is set during the seven-year tribulation period of the apocalypse. The Antichrist has been killed, but has then risen again. He is more powerful than ever and is trying to crush the last opposition to his reign, a network of underground house churches. The novel narrates the conflict between the Antichrist and the remnant of believers, but that conflict is not the real conflict. As one character says early in *Apollyon*, "who will win in the end was determined before the beginning of time."[205] The stakes are so low they can seem to be "just a matter of

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[203] LaHaye and Jenkins 468.

[204] LaHaye and Jenkins 468.

[205] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Apollyon: The Destroyer is Unleashed* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1999), 17.

going through the motions," as another character describes it. "The Bible's already told the story," he explains. "We win."[206]

The conflict that creates the tension in the novel is the struggle of various characters to believe. The stakes of these plot lines are incredibly high, the outcome very uncertain. Williams and other members of the underground church try to convert Chaim Rosenzweig, a prestigious scientist and Israeli hero. Rosenzweig is skeptical of evangelical end-times theories. More than that, he resists having to have a theory, trying to take refuge in safe, respectable agnosticism. He sees multiple prophecies literally fulfilled, though, and hears a Messianic Jewish rabbi accurately predict each event before it happens. "I don't know what to make of it," Rosenzweig says, "except that I feel a bigger fool every day."[207] Even as he teeters on the edge of conversion, though, the scientist resists. Numerous people around him find themselves compelled to believe—including his driver, a minor character who converts in the first fifth of *Apollyon*, following the same arc from unbelief to total certainty. Rosenzweig himself has too much pride to submit, though. Williams pushes him until he admits that he can believe, he just won't.[208]

The last novel in the series is set during the one-thousand-year reign of Christ. Satan is bound in hell and the world in *Kingdom Come* is an idyllic, edenic utopia. The first chapter opens with a leopard and bear climbing into a tree to eat leaves. Even wild animals are free of violence in the new world.[209] God's natural order has been restored and all conflict has been put to rest. All conflict except, importantly, the internal conflict over the need to believe. Even in the millennium, as imagined by LaHaye and Jenkins, people wrestle with belief. Children born in the millennium have to submit and totally trust Jesus, just like their parents did to get into the kingdom in the first place. That doesn't always come easy. "Despite being born and raised in homes of believers and in a society where every adult was a follower of Christ," LaHaye and Jenkins explain, "children old enough to understand" "still had to come to faith in Jesus on their own and for themselves."[210]

On the one hand, doubt is impossible in the millennial kingdom. Jesus is obviously God. This world is something like how the *Ancien Régime* is imagined, in that way. At the same time, naïve belief is still impossible and belief is a choice one has to make. And many don't make it. One woman explains this after her conversion. "I could not doubt that Jesus was the Lord and the Son of

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[206] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Apollyon*, 160.

[207] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Apollyon*, 280.

[208] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Apollyon*, 343-344

[209] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Kingdom Come: The Final Victory* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2007), 1.

[210] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Kingdom Come*, 50.

God and God," she says. "I just didn't know what I wanted to do about it."[211] Others rebel against the millennial order, and choose to ally themselves with Satan, despite his subjugated state. They will only submit to belief when they are forced to. They are forced to, along with Satan, on the last day of the millennium. A "millions-strong enemy" gathers to make war on God and out in front is Satan himself, "a shining light, a gleaming sword raised high."[212] Satan screams, "charge!" but Jesus says "I AM WHO I AM."[213] The Satanic army is instantly vanquished and Satan is forced to his knees. Before being cast into an abyss, he surrenders. He submits. Satan is compelled to say, "Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord!"[214]

Watching the final judgement, Rayford Steele has the realization that every human being had a choice and each one's ultimate, eternal fate was based on that choice, even if the choice didn't always seem to be a choice to the one doing the choosing. Steele reflects that, "Jesus sent no one to hell," for example. "They chose their own paths."[215] Heaven is the same way. Gathered together at the end, the members of the Tribulation Force, along with billions of believers, and millions of readers, are shown that great city, made of pure gold, like clear glass, with pearl gates and lit with a light "like a most precious jasper stone." Jesus speaks: "On the basis of your faith," he says, "I invite you into the eternal city the Father and I have been preparing for you."[216]

From beginning to end, *Left Behind* is about belief. For sixteen novels and more than 6,600 pages, belief is imagined as something compelled.

Readers' Responses to Left Behind

The novels' readers were not all moved to belief. Some were, though. As millions of people read these novels, some felt compelled to believe. Suspending disbelief and imagining belief like this, they experienced belief for themselves. There are no reliable figures, but LaHaye and Jenkins have estimated that thousands came to Jesus because of the books. The authors have received an untold number of emails expressing sometimes ecstatic appreciation for the fiction, specifically for how it grabs readers and pushes them to new or renewed Christian commitment. The *Left Behind* website features hundreds of these testimonials.

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[211] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Kingdom Come*, 93.

[212] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Kingdom Come*, 346.

[213] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Kingdom Come*, 347.

[214] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Kingdom Come*, 349.

[215] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Kingdom Come*, 352.

[216] LaHaye and Jenkins, *Kingdom Come*, 353.

Some of the more riveting testimonies have been retold in *These Will Not Be Left Behind*. The book was put out by Tyndale in 2003, one of a number of official companions to the novels. It is written by Norman B. Rohrer, an evangelical author of as-told-to autobiographies and the founder of an evangelical writing correspondence course.[217] *These Will Not Be Left Behind* features 30 narratives, each the story of how someone read *Left Behind* and was completely changed.

The first story in the book is about a Littleton, Colorado woman named Darlene Snyder. Snyder had a very hard life. Her father, an evangelical minister, died of colon cancer when she was young. She grew into a rebellious 1960s teenager, talking back to authority, skipping out on her high school classes, and staying out late at night. When she was 15, her mother sent her to what Rohrer describes as "a Christian home for troubled kids," but things only got worse. She started having sex with "a rebel named Gary."[218] Then she was raped. At 16, Snyder ran away. She went to Florida and did a lot of drugs. "She used LSD, mescaline, and marijuana," Rohrer writes. "She took hallucinogenic mushrooms, barbiturates, quaaludes, methedrine, and cocaine—whatever gave her a buzz in her reckless pursuit of pleasure."[219] Snyder's life "stabled off" in the 1990s, but she still drank, used foul language, and avoided church.

Her life changed, however, when she started listening to *Left Behind* on audio cassette. On a drive between Littleton and Denver, Snyder "popped the first cassette into her player and turned up the volume."[220] The story soon overpowered her. "Somewhere in the Rocky Mountains," according to Rohrer, "conviction shook her. She griped the steering wheel with all her might, gasping with sobs as the narrator on the cassette tape continued. Two decades of rebellion were melting away like the snowpack in the spring."[221] Snyder was transformed. In much the same way that characters in

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[217] "Q&A with Norm Rohrer," Evangelical Press Association, n.d., https://www.evangelicalpress.com/rohrer/; The group was taken over by Jerry Jenkins in 2001 and shut down by Jenkins in 2014 (Marcia Z. Nelson, "Jerry Jenkins Shuts Christian Writers Guild," Publishers Weekly, Nov. 12, 2014 http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/64715-jerry-jenkins-shuts-christian-writers-guild.html).

[218] Tim LaHaye, Jerry B. Jenkins and Norman B. Rohrer, *These Will Not Be Left Behind* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2003), 5.

[219] Rohrer 6.

[220] Rohrer 4. The geography of this story doesn't check out. It is about 10 miles from Littleton to Denver and one need not cross any mountains on the short trip. The description of a long drive and mountain crossing relate more to the convert's psychology than the terrain.

[221] Rohrer 5. The narrator of the audio version of *Left Behind* is Frank Muller, a Shakespearian actor who became something of a celebrity for his work on audio books. The Library Journal called Muller the "first true superstar in the world of spoken word audio" and Stephen King said that when Muller records a book, "the blind will see, the lame will walk, and the deaf will hear." (Michael Ollove, "Hanging on His Every Word Giving Voice: Audio Books Superstar Frank Muller Vividly Brings to Life Characters from Hamlet to Hannibal Lechter," The Baltimore Sun, March 31, 1996 http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1996-03-31/features/1996091070_1_frank-muller-audio-books-voice). Muller, incidentally, is responsible for Jerry Jenkins's friendship with Stephen King (http://www.jerryjenkins.com/guest-blog-from-stephen-king/).

Left Behind are compelled to believe, she was compelled to believe. As Rohrer recounts it, that moment in the car changed everything. As a sign of her belief, she got baptized and bought the rest of the *Left Behind* audio books.

There's no way to know how many of the millions of people who read LaHaye and Jenkins fiction were like Darlene Snyder. There is ample evidence, though, that there were some. Snyder and people like Snyder read the novels about belief and felt compelled by the fiction to submit their lives to Jesus, and really, truly believe. They fulfilled LaHaye and Jenkins's hopes for the novels. This is one of the ways people have read *Left Behind*.

Cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall would describe Snyder's reading as a "dominant" reading. According to Hall, not everyone receives a text in the same way. Readers have choices. They start from different places. This is important to keep in mind when trying to understand the cultural import of a bestseller like *Left Behind*. Too often, as religion writer Amy Johnson Frykholm has argued, "the audience of *Left Behind* is assumed rather than investigated."[222] The books were read by masses of people. The readers weren't all evangelicals, nor were they all moved to become evangelicals. Broadly speaking, as discussed in the introduction, there are three ways readers can respond to the message of a text. First, they can accept it's social imaginary. Second, they can reject it. Third, they can accept some of it and reject part of it, too. Hall calls these the dominant reading, the oppositional reading and the negotiated reading. With *Left Behind*, these reading positions are best understood in terms of how belief is imagined. In the dominant position, readers take the text "full and straight." These readers accept the message of the text as the authors intended. They respond like Snyder did when she felt compelled to belief while driving through the Rocky Mountains. In the case of *Left Behind*, these readers believe and experience belief as a choice they are compelled to make.

Among the millions of readers of *Left Behind*, more than a few didn't like the book. They also need to be taken into account as part of the mass phenomena of these bestsellers. There is, again, no way to determine how many, exactly, responded to *Left Behind* this way, but there is ample evidence these oppositional readers exist.

On the social cataloguing site GoodReads, for example, more than 11,000 readers have given the book a one-star rating. For every five people on the site who loved the first novel of the series, one absolutely hated it. One Seattle woman gave the book one-star and reported that she loathed *Left Behind*. She says she read the book because her partner liked the series. She hated it, though, and ultimately also broke up with the man. "They're the only books he ever read," she wri-

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[222] Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture:* Left Behind *in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford, 2004), 179.

tes, "so maybe that should have told me something."[223] Another GoodReads user writes his parents forced him to read *Left Behind* in 1998 when he was a senior in high school. They found and threw out an armful of objectionable literature, including books by Henry Miller, Ralph Ellison, and Friedrich Nietzsche. As punishment for the bad books, they assigned him *Left Behind*. The whole experience is remembered in terms of force, but where the man's parents hoped the compelled reading would turn into compelled belief, it didn't work out that way. "It was quite possibly the very worst book I've ever choked down," the New York man writes, "and remembering these pages of absolute shit brings bile to my throat to this day."[224]

For some people, disliking the book was really personally important. It allowed for separation and distinction from believers over matters of belief. People respond to the text with declarations they don't believe or that they believe differently. Anthropologist James Bielo discovered this sort of reading of *Left Behind* in his study of emergent evangelicals. These evangelicals self-consciously cultivate criticism of what they see as mainstream evangelicalism, and position themselves as outsiders within evangelicalism. In conversations with Bielo between 2007 and 2010, emergent evangelicals regularly referenced *Left Behind* to make these critiques. They book was very important to them, as something they disliked. "It was a readily identifiable source against which they formulated and articulated their own kingdom theology," Bielo writes. They "constantly used *Left Behind* and its eschatology as a foil."[225]

Perhaps the most intense oppositional reading comes from progressive evangelical blogger Fred Clark. Clark has been criticizing the *Left Behind* series on his popular blog, line by line and plot-point by plot-point, for more than a decade.[226] He spent five years just on the first book in the series, starting in October 2003 with an analysis of the pornographic allusion of the name Rayford Steele.[227] Clark concluded his review of the first book in September 2008, criticizing how unbelievable the story was.

"This is the great and insurmountable failure of *Left Behind*," he writes. "It set out to be a work of propaganda, a teaching tool mean to demonstrate—the authors would say to *prove*—that

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[223] Kelly H. (Maybedog), "Kelly H. (Maybedog)'s reviews," GoodReads, Sept. 13, 2008, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/32822216?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1.

[224] Nick Black, "Nick Black's Reviews," GoodReads, April 18, 2009, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/53194000?book_show_action=true&from_review_page=1.

[225] James Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: New York University, 2011), 143.

[226] Fred Clark, "Left Behind Index (the whole thing)," Slacktivist, Nov. 5, 2015, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2015/11/05/left-behind-index-the-whole-thing/

[227] Clark, "Pretrib Prono," Slacktivist, Oct. 18, 2003, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2003/10/18/left-behind-pretrib-porno/.

the events it describes could and indeed *will* really happen. Yet their attempt to present a narrative of such events instead demonstrates—I would say proves—that these events could not and indeed will not ever happen."[228]

As Clark reads *Left Behind*, it is not only implausible, it is so implausible as to compel disbelief. "Those events are not about to occur," he writes. "They will *never* occur. They *can* never occur. Don't believe me? Go read *Left Behind* and see for yourself."[229]

Clark uses the text to make important distinctions between his evangelical belief and the way belief is imagined in *Left Behind*. He and others read the book oppositionally. This still means imaginatively engaging with the question of what belief is like in secular conditions, but coming to contrary conclusions.

Most readers are probably somewhere between Clark and Snyder, between belief and disbelief. This sort of reading is negotiated reading, according to Hall. This is apparent in some of the mixed reviews of *Left Behind* on GoodReads. About 20 percent of people who rated the book on the site gave it three out of five stars. More than 28,000 people wrote that there were parts of the book they liked, parts they didn't. An Indianapolis, Indiana woman reported she enjoyed it, but only because she "was able to get past the preachiness" and "just read it as a mystery/thriller type novel."[230] Others respond similarly. A Saint Paul, Minnesota man says he only started reading because he worked in a chain bookstore in the 2000s and people repeatedly asked him if the series was good. "Turns out, it wasn't too bad," he writes. "It's a fairly action-packed trip across a post-apocalyptic Earth, following a rag-tag group of unlikely guerrilla fighters determined to fight the power. I enjoyed it as such."

The bookstore clerk gave up on the series after several installments, when, as he puts it, "the praying started to get out of hand."[231]

Readers were sometimes very aware of their negotiations with the religious message of the text. One woman picked up *Left Behind* at the end of November 2014, noting this was her second attempt at reading the book. "Made it halfway last time," she wrote, "but it's been three years." She read sixty-eight pages the first day, and read another eighty-nine in the next three days. She marked the book as "read" on her Goodreads page three days after that, and gave it three stars. She loved

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[228] Clark, "L.B.: Freeze Frame, Roll Credits," Slacktivist, Sept. 19, 2008, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2008/09/19/lb-freeze-frame/.

[229] Clark, "L.B.: Freeze Frame, Roll Credits."

[230] Melissa, "Melissa's Reviews," GoodReads, April 1, 2008, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/19231295?book_show_action=false&from_review_page=1.

[231] Lesmana, "Lesmana's Reivews," GoodReads, April 20, 2007, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/817806?book_show_action=false&from_review_page=1.

the set-up for the plot and thought the villain was "awesome," but there were other parts she struggled with. "I wish I thought I would enjoy the rest of the books in this series," the Goodreads user writes, "but I think because my own inner religious fight I would have a hard time feeling as though the religion push wasn't a personal thing." She concluded she would return to the series "if I figure out my religion."[232] By her account, the woman doesn't feel compelled to believe, nor to reject belief. She might actually prefer to be so moved by the book that she would have a conversion experience while driving over the Rocky Mountains, but that's not what happened. She and many others read the book and think about belief, but don't go through any dramatic change. She could suspend disbelief enough to imagine being compelled to belief, but then she could and would put the book down. It was fiction, and worked, sometimes but not always, on the level of fiction.

Even some of the readers who identify as evangelical believers read *Left Behind* this way. Amy Johnson Frykholm studied these readers specifically in her book *Rapture Culture*, looking at how *Left Behind* is received, as the subtitle put it, "in Evangelical America." The reception, she found, is more varied and more negotiated than one might expect. There are, for example, evangelical readers of *Left Behind* who are not committed to the novel's eschatological vision. Even evangelicals who read the books and enjoy the books "are not unanimously convinced," Frykholm writes, "that the end will be soon, nor are they convinced that Timothy LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's version of the end is correct."[233] The novels, in fact, seem to encourage theological disagreement among evangelical readers.

Because of its status as fiction, *Left Behind* invites imaginative engagement with its theological themes. That books open up a space for speculation, and thus disagreement. One reader told Frykholm her reading lead her to disagree with her Baptist pastor about whether people could be saved after the rapture. Another evangelical woman, through her reading, ended up having a lot of conversations with her Catholic husband about whether or not devout Catholics who don't believe in the rapture will be raptured or left behind. The fiction didn't simply settle questions. Some evangelical readers, of course, are "committed to belief in the rapture and tribulation before they open the first page" of *Left Behind*.[234] For them, "the rapture is a tangible hope and a pressing reality."[235] Reading a novel about life after the rapture makes that hope really vivid. But they too are reading fiction, and engage *Left Behind* as fiction.

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[232] Lexi, "Lexi's Reviews," GoodReads, Dec. 5, 2014, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1118841993?book_show_action=false&from_review_page=1.

[233] Frykholm 107.

[234] Frykholm 67.

[235] Frykholm 4,103.

"Over and over again in interviews," Frykholm reports, "I ask the question, 'Are these books accurate? Is this the way the world is going to end?' Over and over again, I receive the same answer, 'Yes, but they are just somebody's interpretation. They are only fiction.'"[236]

These believing readers are negotiating with the text. They accept parts, but not everything. For them it is true, but fictional at the same time. The book doesn't compel them to belief. It rather invites them to play with the ideas. They can, as fiction readers, experience what it might be like to believe beyond all doubt.

No Room to Disagree

Left Behind shows one way American evangelicals have conceived of belief. It is imagined as a choice that cannot not be chosen. In the secular condition, as Charles Taylor explains, the idea that belief is a matter of choice and that there are a range of possible choices has undercut the possibility of certainty in belief. Evangelicals have sometimes wanted certainty. They have, at the same time, insisted belief must be a choice. This creates a tension characteristic of the struggle to believe in the secular age. A close reading of *Left Behind* illuminates this tension and shows how, for evangelicals who imagine belief in this way, the tension is resolved. The history of popular evangelical apologetics reveals the same. A study of evangelical apocolypticism gets at this, too. Evangelicals have thought of belief in terms of a response to a dichotomy. They imagine a forced question: yes or no, true or false, belief or unbelief. Other options are excluded, and one is faced with an either/or. The answer, then, is compelled. Belief is compelled. There's no room to agree to disagree.

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[236] Frykholm 133.

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Imagining Authentic Belief

The week before she gets married, Katie Lapp's father and mother sit her down for a talk. They need to tell her something. "You see," says her mother, "we never told you the truth, Katie—not all of it."

The young Amish woman feels a rising panic. Her heart beats hard and she's crying. Everything sounds like it's far away. Her ears are ringing. She is afraid of what she doesn't know and, more, of what she does. Deep down in her heart there is something bothering her that she cannot articulate. She is soon to marry the religious leader of her Old Order Amish community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. He is a widower with five children. Her first love, a boy her own age, has died, and though she has lingering feelings for him, she's about to be wed to this respected older bishop. As she takes her marital vows, Lapp will be transformed from a girl to the woman she has spent her life preparing to be. She will take her place in her community and tradition. She will fulfill her destiny as a woman, becoming a wife, mother, and homemaker. Yet it feels wrong. She cannot say exactly how, but that's how it feels. This destiny somehow, she senses, doesn't fit. As the day approaches, the question she cannot ask becomes more and more insistent until this moment when her parents tell her they have not told her the truth.

"What … truth?" she asks.

"The truth," her mother says, "about who you are … really."[1]

The Shunning, by Beverly Lewis, is the 1998 Amish romance novel that launched that phenomenally popular subgenre of evangelical fiction. These books are written and published by evangelicals, distributed and sold by evangelicals and mainly read by evangelical women. Their protagonists and settings, however, are Amish. Much as Regency romances take a specific and real historical moment in British history and make it the backdrop for their contemporary fantasies,

[1] Beverly Lewis, *The Shunning* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 1997), 167. All ellipses and italics are original.

Amish romances use the conservative anabaptists to tell evangelical stories about faith. The first evangelical author to do that was Beverly Lewis. The Amish, as she imagined them, were the setting for the struggle for self realization and belief.

The Shunning sold about 100,000 copies per year in its first ten years of publication, passing the 1 million mark in 2008.[2] Lewis's other novels, many with similar settings and themes, have also done well. To date, she has sold more than 17 million books. Her success has inspired many evangelical writers and publishers, and the Amish have become very popular in evangelical fiction. By the second decade of the twenty first century, Amish romances were the dominant genre of evangelical novel. In 2012, there was a new Amish romance novel published, on average, every four days. For the Christmas-shopping season of 2015, an Amish romance novel was published every two.[3]

Lewis's incredibly successful and influential Amish novel is most basically the story of how a young woman learns she is adopted. Katie Lapp, it turns out, was born Katherine Mayfield. She was not born "Plain." Over the course of *The Shunning* and its two sequels, *The Confession* and *The Reckoning*, she discovers who she is, really. The novels stage the drama of the heroine's journey, her quest to find herself and be herself. Readers follow along as the character achieves authenticity.

This is one way that evangelicals have imagined belief at the end of the twentieth century. The three novels stage a search for authenticity, and invite readers to imagine that true belief is self realization. As they present it, belief is best understood as becoming who you really are. This is similar, in a number of ways, to how belief is sometimes conceived as an assurance of abundant life, as in *Love Comes Softly*, discussed in chapter two. It is similar, too, to how belief is imagined in *Left Behind* as an overwhelming certainty, discussed in the previous chapter. Here, however, the certainty doesn't come from a forced dichotomy but out of the individuals' self realization.

To believe, in Lewis's trilogy, is to experience personal fulfillment as a choice that can't not be chosen. To believe is to fulfill the authentic imperative to be yourself.

The Authentic Imperative

The idea of authenticity is important in secularity. The philosopher Charles Taylor goes so far as to suggest the secular age might be thought of as the "Age of Authenticity."[4] It forms an essential part of the unarticulated background understanding of the contemporary conditions of belief. In secularity, belief has to feel a certain way, to feel right. It has to be connected to human flourishing, enab-

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[2] "Gold / Platinum / Diamond Book Awards," Christian Book Expo, n.d., http://christianbookexpo.com/salesawards/gpd-past-winners.php.

[3] Valerie Weaver-Zercher, *Thrill of the Chaste: The Allure of Amish Romance Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 4-7, 96-98.

[4] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 473.

ling people to achieve their own individual fullness. It has to, further, feel somehow personal. The modern social imaginary, Taylor writes, assumes that "each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one's own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside."[5]

Authenticity is related to the immanentist order, discussed in chapter two, and to the problem of choice, discussed in chapter four. According to Taylor, there has been, first, an anthropocentric shift in the social imaginary of the West, so that now, at bottom, the most legitimate and legitimating argument has to be an argument about human flourishing, rather than a claim about higher, transcendent reality. Of course, appeals to human flourishing can still be impossibly abstract. People have to seek out ways to make flourishing real in their own lives. There has been—not unrelatedly—an explosion of possible choices in the modern world. One level of the unprecedented modern choice is entirely mundane: people have a lot more freedom to make personal decisions about where they will work, where they will live, and who they will marry. People get to choose whether they prefer spicy spaghetti sauce or extra chunky.[6] On another level, people can choose whether or not to believe in God. They can choose their construal of reality, the *Weltanschauung* of their preference. Of course, people don't just get to choose, they have to choose. This can undercut the certainty of any choice, however, since the person who made the choice can always imagine they could have made a different decision.

Authenticity works as a way to legitimate a choice with a powerful appeal to intimate, individual flourishing. Authenticity can explain how a choice wasn't a choice, but had to be chosen. At the same time, it works as a way to personalize and individualize "human flourishing." To say something is authentic is to say it wasn't imposed from the outside; it is personal. Belief, sometimes, is imagined in this way as the fulfillment of the imperative to "be yourself."

Taylor traces the ideal of authenticity back to the Romantic poets. They felt called to live up to their own originality. "This is the idea," Taylor writes of authenticity, "which grows in the late eighteenth century that each individual is different and original, and that this originality determines how he or she ought to live."[7] Self-expression was key. People need to express themselves freely and truly and be themselves, to be fulfilled. "The good life," Taylor writes, "comes to consist in a

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[5] Taylor 474, 475.

[6] See Malcolm Gladwell, "Malcolm Gladwell: Choice, Happiness, and Spaghetti Sauce," TED, Feb. 2004, https://www.ted.com/talks/malcolm_gladwell_on_spaghetti_sauce?language=en.

[7] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 375.

perfect fusion of the sensual and the spiritual, where our sensual fulfillments are experienced as having higher significance."[8]

Whatever the historical provenance, this ideal became widely available to middle class Americans in the consumer revolution of the twentieth century.[9] The consumer revolution gave people more choices. The increase of choices had the effect of making even minor choices appear individually meaningful. Each choice said something about the consumer. Each was an expression of identity. This was heightened further when the mass markets of prosperous post-war America segmented into distinct demographic categories. Marketers combined psychology and demographics ("pyschographics") to address consumers personally. "Rather than aim to sell commodities in as much volume as possible to the mass," writes historian Lizabeth Cohen, "the modern-day marketers, equipped with advanced psychographic tactics, identify clusters of customers with distinctive ways of life and then set out to sell them idealized lifestyles constructed around commodities."[10] Marketing focused in on the consumers identity, connecting the consumption to people's conceptions of themselves. The question was always, what does this product say about you as a person? Consumption was promoted as self realization.

The authentic imperative is baldly expressed in many famous advertizing slogans, from Mac's injunction to "Think Different," to Burger King's "Have It Your Way!" Taylor cites a beer commercial from the 1970s which enjoined people to "be yourself in the world of today."[11]

There is, notably, an internal tension in these injunctions. The authentic imperative can be seen as somewhat self-contradictory. "Authentic" implies something given. It implies something is true, or good, or right, by virtue of its giveneness. The imperative indicates the opposite. The imperative says you are not you, and you should be. You should be what you already are, but which you are also not. That tension is apparent in these ads, which might seem to condemn people for not living up to their full potential, for failing to do something that should come quite easily, to just be yourself in the world of today. (For, really, who else would you be? And when?).

On the other hand, these ads can be seen as upbeat affirmations. They address the prospective consumer as someone who is always right, and necessarily right. You are doing what you have to do, the ads say, and choosing as you have to choose, because you are being you. That kind of authenticity is critical. As Burger King put it in a corporate press release explaining the message of its advertizing, "Self-expression is most important and it's our differences that make us individuals ins-

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[8] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 373.

[9] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 474.

[10] Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 299.

[11] Taylor, *Secular Age*, 475.

tead of robots."[12] Consumers are affirmed by the consumer society. Their individual choices are valorized.

"This contemporary social imaginary is crystallized in terms of authenticity," writes philosopher James K.A. Smith. "So the primary—yea, only—value in such a world is *choice*."[13]

An individual choice is right because it is chosen by an individual. At the same time, that value is undercut by the imperative nature of the command to make a choice as an expression of identity. The implication of the imperative is that a choice is only right when and where it is authentic. Partly, this seems to emerge from the anxiety of having too many choices. As the number of available brands of a particular commodity multiplies and diversifies, it's increasingly difficult to differentiate on the basis of use value. There can be little apparent reason to prefer this beer over that one, or one hamburger place over another. It's only a matter of taste. And taste is an expression of individuality. The authentic imperative makes this the paradigmatic case of a correct choice. You should be authentic. You should be your individual self. In which case, you could not have done otherwise than you did, which is to be what you already are. A choice is thus presented as the right choice when it cannot not be chosen. Choices must be authentic choices.

The tension of this dilemma is important in romance novels. In the genre, the heroine has to choose the hero. But she cannot just choose the hero. It must be a choice that she has to make, that she couldn't not make, authentically. This is a key element, necessary for the narrative to have its satisfying end. In her study of the history of the genre, for example, literary scholar Pamela Regis found that despite changing fashions, the narratives always trace the arc of a heroine as she achieves individual emotional fulfillment and a sense of personal, spiritual fullness.[14] Regis refers to this as "affective individualism."[15] In the happy denouement, the heroine gets her heart's desire and it has a higher significance, brining together the sensual and the spiritual in an immanent frame.

The moral rightness of fulfilled desire empowers the heroine to overcome the barriers to her emotional fulfillment, frequently social and religious barriers. "The romance novel puts the heroine at the center of the book," Regis writes. "Her desires are central."[16] The heroine asserts her right to make choices, and self-actualizes through those choices. At the same time, the choices are authori-

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[12] Maureen Morrison, "Burger King Launches New Tagline: 'Be Your Way,'" Ad Age, May 19, 2014, http://adage.com/article/news/burger-king-launches-tagline/293283/.

[13] James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 85.

[14] Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 206.

[15] Regis 56.

[16] Regis 29.

zed by their authenticity. The heroine doesn't argue that she must be free to love the hero just because. Rather, she argues her love is true and good and right because it will be emotionally fulfilling, and it will be emotionally fulfilling because it is authentic to her. It is who she is—really. The romance heroine adheres to the ideal Taylor describes as an important part of the operative background assumption of secularity, that "each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity."[17] That is central to romance novels. It is also central to how *The Shunning*, *The Confession*, and *The Reckoning* stage belief.

In the *Heritage of Lancaster County* trilogy, the heroine experiences the call to believe as the call to be herself. The struggle to believe is shown as the struggle with the contradictions and tension internal to the quest for a fulfilled emotional life. The founding novels of the most popular genre of evangelical fiction, the Amish romance, are about belief and about what belief is like. The story invites readers to imagine belief as the choice that cannot not be chosen, the choice which is completely emotionally satisfying and also eternally meaningful.

This chapter considers how evangelical belief is sometimes imagined as authenticity. It looks first at the fantasy of the Amish, and how Americans have imagined them as ideal examples of authenticity and also inauthenticity. The chapter then looks at two evangelical movements that have understood belief as authenticity. These are distinct, but both exhibit the same imaginary at work. The first is the radical homeschooling movement of the 1980s and '90s, which was partly inspired by the Amish and which sought to reclaim an authentic Christian way of life. The second is Lewis's romance novels, which stage belief in terms of the imperative of an emotionally fulfilling sense of self. Finally, this chapter will consider how reading Amish romances can shape an evangelical imaginary, giving readers a sense of what belief is like in the condition of secularity.

Imagining the Amish

The Amish are a fantasy of authenticity. Or, alternatively, they are a fantasy of inauthenticity.

The Amish have long been, as historian David Weaver-Zercher writes, "remarkably useful symbols" in the American imagination.[18] These traditionalist anabaptists, known for their iconic black buggies and conservative dress, have been understood as rejecting "modernity." Sometime these pictures are entirely inaccurate, but they're nonetheless powerful.[19] Accuracy isn't that important, when it comes to cultural symbols. Various visions of how and why the Amish reject what

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[17] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.

[18] David Weaver-Zercher, *The Amish in the American Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 20.

[19] For a detailed look at the Amish, see Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989).

they reject enable Americans to give shape to otherwise vague ideas of the nature of the present age. Thinking about the Amish allows people to identify particular aspects of contemporary life and then take a position on whether they like it or not. The Amish are conjured, as Weaver-Zercher has demonstrated, so that people can pledge themselves to particular values. Chief among these is the value of a fulfilled, authentic self.

When the Amish are criticized, their critics frequently appeal to the ideal and imperative of authenticity. The Amish are judged for suppressing individuality and free expression. This criticism was especially pointed at the beginning of the twentieth century. As the more conservative of anabaptist communities, including some of the Amish, resisted technological changes and gradually became more distinct from their neighbors, they were frequently discussed as examples of failure. The Amish had failed to progress. They had failed to see the value of modern advancements. This was not just a matter of technology, either. The Amish way of life failed to provide people with the conditions necessary for personal fulfillment and fullness.

An observer in 1907, for example, commented that the conservative anabaptists were "lacking in courtesy, in suavity of manner, in politeness." They were rude. And this affected their aesthetic sensibilities as well. They were lacking, the observer continued, "in delicacy of tastes, in appreciation of the beauties of nature and in love of art, painting, sculpture, music and literature."[20] Rejection of modern fashions and technologies was interpreted as personal deficiency. It was thought, Weaver-Zercher writes, that "the asceticism of the Amish people had robbed them of their humanity, including the happiness that under natural circumstances accompanied the wonder of motherhood."[21]

The first novelist to write about the Amish made this lack of emotional fulfillment a central theme. Helen Reimensnyder Martin said the Amish were characterized by their "bovine dullness."[22] The title character of Martin's 1905 novel *Sabina: A Story of the Amish* is too stupid, notably, to know whether or not she is happily married.[23] The romantic ideal and the central theme of romance novels, individual happiness, are unattainable for her. More than that, she is not just, like so many romance novel heroines, prevented from personal fulfillment by her society or religious strictures or the world imposing a particular way of life, she doesn't even know she's is unfulfilled. She doesn't know to ask herself whether she is or not. The woman lacks not just the technology and gadgets of

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[20] David Weaver-Zercher 31.

[21] David Weaver-Zercher 36.

[22] For an examination of the political commitments informing Martin's characterizations of the Amish, see Beverly Seaton, "Helen Reimensnyder Martin's 'Caricatures' of Pennsylvania Germans," Pennsylvania Magazine of German History and Biography 104 (1980): 86-95.

[23] Helen Reimensnyder Martin, *Sabina: A Story of the Amish* (New York: Century Company, 1905), 231.

modern convenience, but even her own subjective sense of self. She cannot be herself; she cannot know herself.[24]

There are reasons to question the accuracy of Martin's representation of the Amish. The fictional presentation is less committed to what the Amish are really like, however, than it is to the standard of affective individualism. Sabina's condemnation to an old order of wifely drudgery at the end of the novel stands in contrast to the novel readers' experiences, in reading a novel. It can thus serve as a negative comparison, increasing appreciation for the fulfilling, modern lives of readers. The image of the backwards Amish woman underscores certain values. Imagining the Amish in this way allowed people to position themselves on the side of progress. It allowed them, more importantly, to demonstrate that they favored progress not for its own sake, but because it contributes to a particular kind of human flourishing. They judged the Amish negatively as a way of expressing the value of personal emotional fulfillment.

Perceptions of the Amish generally grew more positive over time, but as symbols they continued to serve this purpose. Imagined positively, the Amish also helped Americans conceptualize the present and commit themselves to affective individualism. As the twentieth century progressed, the Amish were "quickly and thoroughly recast as virtuous Americans" and "became increasingly robust representatives of America's past."[25]

This shift can be dated to the New Deal's Work Progress Administration, which funded efforts to find and document an authentic American folk culture. The market for "Amish country" tourism started at this time, and became big business with the construction of the interstate system in the 1950s. By 1963, roughly 1.5 million tourists drove out to Lancaster County every year, spending $45 million annually.[26] Though some were still suspicious of the apparently authoritarian and dogmatic religion, increasing numbers of modern Americans looked at the bearded men, bonneted women, and multiplying children with nostalgia. They approached the Amish wistfully, with a sense of loss, even if they couldn't exactly articulate what they admired about that way of life. It seemed better, simpler, more fulfilling. It seemed exempt from the many modern ills that plagued the tourists' own communities and families. The Amish became a kind of free-floating critique of the hollowness of modern life.

The Amish served a whole range of conservative political critiques in this way. The writer Albert Jay Nock, for example, saw these religious communities as havens of authenticity, protected from the moral degradation wrought by government aid. "The Amish best the New Deal's whole

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[24] Valerie Weaver-Zercher 25-32.

[25] David Weaver-Zercher 68, 70.

[26] David Weaver-Zercher 83.

program of social security, hands down," he wrote in 1941. "So also with 'relief.' No Amishman's name was ever yet on the relief roll in Lancaster County, and none ever will be."[27]

President George H.W. Bush similarly pointed to these communities as living proof of conservative values. He went to Lancaster County in 1989 to promote for his anti-drug program D.A.R.E., Drug Abuse Resistance Education. Though traditionalist anabaptists are generally reticent to engage in any political activity, Bush found a way to use them as political props.[28] "As we look at a national drug problem," the President said, "we find that in communities such as yours, because of your adherence to family values and faith, the problem appears to be close to nonexistent."[29] This might not have been exactly accurate, but it also didn't matter. The Amish were a symbol and a fantasy.

They were imagined as a critique of the hollowness of modernity: the modernity of social safety nets, for Nock, and the modernity of drug abuse, for Bush. In these conservative critiques, society was supposed to provide personal fulfillment and opportunities for self actualization. It failed. The Amish were conceived as an alternative reality, where life was richer, more fulfilling, and meaningful. In thinking about the Amish, conservatives made an argument about their commitment to human flourishing.

The Amish have been especially symbolically powerful when it comes to education. Americans across the political spectrum grew critical of public education in the 1960s and '70s.[30] For conservatives in particular, schools came be seen as places where the worst of modernity was imposed on local communities. Public schools were places where local community leaders sometimes suddenly had no power. Parents and pastors were frequently frustrated to find they had little or no say over what children learned about sex, human origins, the meaning and purpose of life, or even what constituted good literature. The federal government racially integrated schools, erasing long-established boundaries and interfering with social practices that had existed for generations. When the government imposed new rules for religious pluralism, Protestants were required by force of law to act as if Protestantism was not the official religious culture even though it was, without question,

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[27] Albert Jay Nock, "Utopia in Pennsylvania: The Amish," in *Snoring as a Fine Art: And Twelve Other Essays* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises, 2007), 29-42, here 34.

[28] Some anabaptists see political activity as incompatible with the doctrine of *gelassenheit*. For a study of modern Republican efforts to engage these communities in electoral politics, see Donald B. Kraybill and Kyle C. Kopko, "Bush Fever: Amish and Old Order Mennonites in the 2004 Presidential Election," Mennonite Quarterly Review, April 2007, 165-205.

[29] George H.W. Bush, "Remarks at a Meeting With Amish and Mennonite Leaders in Lancaster, Pennsylvania," March 22, 1989, *The American Presidency Project,* http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16824.

[30] See Milton Gaither, *Homeschool: An American History* (New York: Palgrave, 2008).

the dominant one. Many on the right objected. These critics found their objections were more popular when represented by the Amish.

The central principle of American conservatism, as articulated by conservative political philosopher Russell Kirk, was that "the best possible—or least baneful—form of government is one in accord with the traditions and prescriptive ways of its people."[31] That principle was more palatable to the broad American public when the people and their prescriptive ways were imagined as Amish than when they were imagined as Mississippi racists. Kirk did not himself engage with questions of segregation. He avoided the issue, even when it was a defining feature of American conservatism.[32] He did write, however, about government interference with the education of the Amish. Catholic himself, Kirk trumpeted the Amish cause in conservative journals such as National Review and America, and in syndicated columns published in newspapers from Pennsylvania to South Carolina to Florida.[33]

Likewise, Wisconsin state legislator Kenneth Merkel, a member of the conspiratorial anti-communist John Birch Society, found it easier to attack public education in the name of the Amish than on behalf of his own controversial organization.[34] Another group, the National Committee for Amish Religious Freedom, was organized on this same basis in 1967. None of the members were Amish. They were, instead, conservative opponents of public education who found the Amish useful in advancing their cause.[35] They defended the Amish in court in Wisconsin vs. Yoder when the

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[31] Russell Kirk, "The Best Form of Government," *Catholic World,* Vol. 192 (December 1960), 156–63.

[32] A recent, critically acclaimed biography of Russell Kirk, Bradley J. Birzer's *Russell Kirk: American Conservative* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015) never mentions segregation. A survey of older biographies shows they don't mention it either. Segregation was, at the very least, not a pressing issue in Kirk's thought. He apparently made no direct statement about Jim Crow laws, though Jim Crow may be thought the context when he wrote against reform movements, arguing people ought to "prefer the devil they know to the devil they don't" (Birzer 3). Perhaps Kirk's most direct statement on segregation came when he wrote approvingly of Ohio Senator Robert Taft's support for "separate-but-equal" education, which Taft defended as a "state's rights" issue. In Kirk's account, Taft, the model conservative, reluctantly supported segregation because of his principled commitment to limited government, rather than out of any racial animus (Russell Kirk and James McClellan, *The Political Principles of Robert A. Taft*, 1967, New Brunswick: N.J.: Transaction, 2010, 74-75).

[33] See Kirk, "The Amish Case," *National Review*, July 7, 1972, 747; "The Court Finds for the Amish," *America*, May 27, 1972, 554; "Harassing the Amish," Spartanburg (South Carolina) Herald, Oct. 17, 1965; "To the Point," Reading (Pennyslvania) Eagle, Dec. 9, 1965; "To the Point: Tolerating the Amish," The Ocula (Florida) Star-Banner, March 20, 1966.

[34] Shawn Francis Peters, *The* Yoder *Case: Religious Freedom, Education, and Parental Rights* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 2003), 43.

[35] William C. Lindholm, "The National Committe for Amish Religious Freedom," in Douglass B. Kraybill, *The Amish and the State, 2nd ed.,* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 109-124; Peters 50-59.

Amish, for religious reasons, wouldn't defend themselves. The case was made in the name of the Amish, if not quite on their behalf.[36]

The lawyer in that case had a long history of fighting for private, religious education.[37] William Ball was (like Kirk) a conservative Catholic. He represented the Catholic Church in Pennsylvania for more than a decade. He lobbied the Pennsylvania legislature to provide funds for Catholic charities and drafted legislation that would channel state money to the church schools. He defended the constitutionality of the practice before the Supreme Court in 1971, in Lemon vs. Kurtzman.[38] There were no Mennonites or Amish involved in that case. Ball nonetheless found it useful to invoke the iconic image of a bonneted young women during oral argument.

Justice Byron White asked if religiously committed teachers could be trusted to teach strictly secular subjects, if that was the requirement of the state funding for their salary, without bringing religion into the class room. Ball said they could.

"We have girls in Mennonite bonnets," Ball told the court, "they're as religiously committed as human beings can be. But we trust, we trust these people, having made a commitment under a state contract, we trust these people to observe the law."[39]

The religious commitment, here, is turned from a reason not to trust someone into a reason to trust them. The imagined religious woman is actually especially trustworthy because she is authentically religious. She is imagined as the ideal American, respecting the legal boundaries of the separation of church and state while engaged in the civil practice of volunteerism necessary to a free republic. Ball knew the rhetorical force of the figure of the bonneted woman.

In Wisconsin vs. Yoder, argued the following year, Ball went further, and presented the Amish as an ideal American community. They had maintained an idyllic form of life, which served as a critique of contemporary society's spiritual emptiness. They resisted public education, he said, not out of opposition to education per se. Rather, the Amish "do not want their children and they do not want themselves to be exposed to the spirit of luxury, lust, temptation, of strife, consumerism, competition, speed, violence, and other such elements, as are commonly found in our American way."[40] The religious community was not stopping its members from fully developing as individu-

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[36] Peters 54.

[37] Peters 59-61.

[38] Lemon vs. Kurtzman is renowned for the "Lemon test," which the court used for determining whether or not a law violated the First Amendment prohibition against "respecting an establishment of religion." The test is reviled by conservative legal experts, including, notably, the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia.

[39] "Lemon v. Kurtzman," Oyez, https://www.oyez.org/cases/1972/71-1470.

[40] "Wisconsin v. Yoder," Oyez, http://www.oyez.org/cases/1970-1979/1971/1971_70_110.

als. It was not condemning them to lives of bovine dullness. It was, instead, providing them a context in which they could flourish and lead meaningful and emotionally fulfilling lives by being themselves, by being Amish. Further education, in this case, would not lead to self-actualization. It would subvert it. The argument that had once been used against the Amish and for modernity was re-purposed as an argument for the Amish and against laws requiring school attendance. In either case, the Amish were imagined in a way that rallied people around the ideal of authentic self-fulfillment.

The legal impact of Wisconsin vs. Yoder was limited. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Amish but circumscribed the ruling so that it did not generally apply to all religious claims of exemption from state and federal education laws.[41] The ruling nevertheless was important to the many conservatives who had begun to think of education as a religious practice. There was significant growth in the number of Christian schools at the time. The American Association of Christian Schools, for example, had 80 affiliated schools at its founding in 1972, with a total of 16,000 students.[42] By 1983, it had grown to 1,100 schools with 160,000 students. Three regional organizations, which would later merge to form the Association of Christian Schools International, represented 308 schools in 1973. A decade later, ACSI had 1,900 schools with total enrollment of 270,000 students.[43] Many of these depended, legally, on the Yoder decision. They were also inspired, in part, by how they imagined the Amish.

Homeschoolers were also inspired. Homeschooling advocates based some legal arguments on Wisconsin vs. Yoder.[44] More importantly, though, they have used the example of the Amish in making their case in the court of public opinion. Homeschoolers could win public sympathy by linking their cause with the Amish, even if that link was only tenuous.

When a state legislator in Virginia, for example, sought to study homeschooling reporting regulations, the Home School Legal Defense Association characterized the move as a threat to the Amish. The proposed resolution would have studied the state's religious exemption to education reporting rules. The state had about 32,000 homeschool students in 2014. Of those, about 7,000

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[41] Peters 172, 175.

[42] The founder, Al Janney, an Independent Fundamentalist Baptist, got involved in Christian schooling specifically in response to the 1960s Supreme Court rulings about prayer and Bible reading in schools. Desegregation was also an issue, as one black couple found out when they attempted to enroll their daughter. They were handed a note that read, "the policy of this school is one of non-integration." The school defended the policy in court on the grounds that segregation was a religious belief, protected by the First Amendment. The school lost their case in federal court. See "Racial Exclusion by Religious Schools: Brown v. Dade Christian Schools, Inc.," Harvard Law Review, 91, no. 4 (Feb. 1978), 879-886.

[43] Gaither 108-109.

[44] Gaither 178. See also Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff, "A Homeschooler's History of Homeschooling — Part 1," Gentle Spirit Magazine, 6, no. 9 (2000), 37.

were considered exempt from all reporting or testing under a 1976 law providing a religious exemption from all government oversight. Thomas Rust, a Republican from Fairfax, Virginia, wanted the state's eduction department to study how eligibility for the exemption was determined and whether or not the children withdrawn from the public schools under the exemption were getting an adequate education. The homeschooling advocates claimed the study was only a pretext for a more nefarious agenda, expanding state power and curtailing religious liberty. If the study went forward, homeschooling advocates warned, it could lead to criminal prosecution of bonneted women in buggies.[45] They argued the Amish "could be in danger of criminal prosecution if the religious exemption statute is threatened." They then drew a direct comparison to "many other deeply religious families" who (unlike the Amish) object to providing the state any documentation of what happens in their homes.[46]

On its face, this was a bizarre claim. The Amish don't homeschool their children. The resolution not only didn't target the Amish, it is difficult to conceive of any circumstance in which it could have applied to them. The point, however, was the comparison. Like the Amish, homeschoolers had constructed this alternative way of life to protect their children from the problems "commonly found in our American way." They had created this space where their children could flourish and really, truly, be themselves. Any legislation that threatened homeschooling was just like legislation that would criminalize the Amish way of life. The Amish were, here, a very useful symbol. People who were skeptical of homeschooling would change their minds if they thought about it in these terms. They allowed people to align themselves politically with homeschoolers, even if they didn't find homeschoolers themselves particularly likable. To be against the regulation of homeschoolers was to be in favor of children's emotional fulfillment. The Virginia legislation was quashed.

The Amish could be imagined as exemplars of authenticity, or inauthenticity. Sometimes, in fact, they could be imagined as kind of both. As a child, Beverly Lewis felt conflicted about the Amish. She grew up in Lancaster County, the heart of so-called "Amish Country," where her father pastored an Assemblies of God church. One Amish family near her had thirteen children. It seemed like an amazing, wonderful way of life to young Lewis, but she was also taught to condemn the

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[45] HSLDA, "Call Now to Thwart Attack on Religious Homeschooling," HSLDA E-Altert Service, Jan. 13, 2014, http://www.hslda.org/elert/archive/elertarchive.aspx?6893. For more on the political power of the Home School Legal Defense Association, see Jessica Huseman, "Small Group Goes to Great Lengths to Block Homeschooling Regulation," ProPublica, Aug. 27, 2015, https://www.propublica.org/article/small-group-goes-great-lengths-to-block-homeschooling-regulation.

[46] Susan Svrluga, "Thousands of Virginia Students Aren't Required to Get an Education," Washington Post, Sept. 11, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/thousands-of-virginia-students-arent-required-to-get-an-education/2012/09/10/144fb9f0-fb54-11e1-b153-218509a954e1_story.html; Susan Svrluga, "Virginia Lawmaker Seeks to Clarify Education Law on Religious Exemption," Washington Post, Jan. 14, 2014.

Amish for thinking they could save themselves with good works instead of trusting in Jesus. She felt similarly conflicted when she heard her maternal grandmother's stories. Her mother's parents, Omar and Ada Ranck Buchwalter, had left a strict Mennonite church and become pentecostals. When Ada Buchwalter told young Beverly stories of her childhood, the girl sometimes had the sense her grandmother's childhood was amazing. Other times, the stories presented a picture of an oppressive community that imposed rules on young Ada and tried to keep her from becoming who she really was.[47]

The Amish could be a fantasy of authentic life, or the opposite. The pursuit of self realization could look like a woman in a bonnet, a man in a buggy, or like the rejection of that life of rules.

Homeschooling and the Logic of Authenticity

Conservative Christian homeschoolers upheld authenticity as an ideal and understood belief in terms of authenticity. Inspired, in part, by the Amish, these homeschoolers attempted to construct their own lifeworlds according to the imperative to "be yourself." This countercultural movement—which in the early 1980s and peaked in the late 1990s—thus exhibited the internal tensions of the idea that belief is the realization of who you are, but aren't yet, but should be.

For these homeschoolers, the location of their children's education was only one aspect of a larger cultural project. Homeschoolers have been, of course, quite diverse. John Holt, an early advocate, pointed out that homeschoolers do not agree on what's wrong with public schools. "Some may feel that the schools are too strict; others that they are not strict enough," Holt wrote. "Some may feel that the schools teach a dog-eat-dog competitiveness; others that they teach mealy-mouth socialism. Some may feel that the schools teach too much religion; others that they don't teach enough, but teach instead a shallow atheistic humanism."[48]

The people most commonly associated with homeschooling in the 1980s and '90s, however, were conservative evangelical Christians.[49] By some estimates, 85 to 90 percent of homeschoolers

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[47] "Interview," ChristianBook.com, n.d., http://www.christianbook.com/Christian/Books/cms_content?page=963441&event=CF.

[48] Gaither 127.

[49] When the New York Times started reporting on homeschooling in the mid 1990s, for instance, the paper found it important to mention that not all homeschoolers were motivated by religion. Though "home schooling has long been associated with fundamentalist Christians who want a religious focus in their children's education," a 1995 report put it, "more families of varying income levels and ethnic backgrounds are joining the movement for reasons that have nothing to do with religion" (Abby Goodnough, "Kitchen-Table Classrooms," New York Times, Sept. 24, 1995). The paper made the same observation in 1998 and again in 2000 (Louise Yarnall, "Where the Kitchen is Also the Classroom," New York Times, Oct. 29, 1998; Peter T. Kilborn, "Learning at Home, Students Take the Lead," New York Times, May 24, 2000).

fit this classification.[50] These religious homeschooling notably saw homeschooling as about more than just education. It was part of a larger cultural project.

Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff, a leader in the movement from 1989 to 1994, describes how it involved a whole lifestyle. "Pregnancies and births were celebrated and welcomed," Seelhoff writes, "gardens were planted, wheat was ground for homemade bread, home businesses were created, books on discipline and Christian parenting were read and discussed thoroughly, simplicity was viewed as desirable. These homeschoolers' lifestyle made them very different from the cultural mainstream."[51] Seelhoff, her family, and many other families sought to create a counterculture.

The movement had no central organization or formal incorporation but was held together by a network of magazines and seminars. Seelhoff's monthly magazine, *Gentle Spirit*, had more than 15,000 subscribers in the early 1990s, at the height of its popularity.[52] A year's subscription cost around $20 and a single issue could cover topics as diverse as children's games and how to make cottage cheese, a discussion of natural medicine and instructions on how to sew a prayer bonnet.[53] Almost every issue featured articles on gardening.

The most influential homeschooling seminars, likewise, were about a lot more than homeschooling. A week-long seminar taught by Bill Gothard, for example, emphasized "basic life principles," such as the importance of submission to authority. It also touched on topics as diverse as contraception, debt, and rock music. More than 10,000 students enrolled in Gothard's homeschooling correspondence program, Advanced Training Institute, after their parents attended one of his seminars in the mid 1980s.

Greg Harris, another popular speaker on the homeschool circuit during this time, treated homeschooling as an aspect of a larger theology of the family. His seminars treated homeschooling as one aspect of a complete worldview, a home-centered lifestyle movement. He also advocated home birth, house churches, and home-based business.[54] It was a "total lifestyle."[55]

This was a separatist movement that sought the space and the freedom to really live out of an alternative way of life. "Inside my home," wrote Mary Pride, perhaps the most influential early leader, "we are building a Christian culture. We don't have to guess and wonder about deep political

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[50] Gaither 142.

[51] Seelhoff, "A History of Homeschooling Part III: 1990-1992," Gentle Spirit Magazine, 6, no. 11 (2000), 43.

[52] Helen Hegener, "Interview with Cheryl Lindsey Seelhoff," Home Education Magazine, Sept. 1999, http://homeedmag.com/seelhoffvs.welch/interview.html.

[53] See Gentle Spirit Magazine, Vol. 4, No. 7, Feb. 1993.

[54] Gaither 148-152.

[55] Pride, *The Way Home* (1985; repr., Fenton, MO: Home Life Books, 2010), 4-5, xiii.

theories such as theocracy v. pluralism v. natural law v. who-knows-what. My home *is* a Christian nation."[56]

For many, the choice to homeschool and to radically re-orient one's life around the home became, in fact, synonymous with true Christianity. This is what it meant to live out Christian belief. This is what it meant to follow the Bible in every aspect of life. Real commitment to Christian living looked like this.

There were a series of choices involved in this journey, starting with the decision to educate children at home and the decision to not use birth control. Each choice, however, was conceived as not being a choice. One movement leader, Skeet Savage, described how the lifestyle wasn't a choice even when her husband left her and their six children. "I believed with all my heart," wrote Savage, the editor of the magazines *An Encouraging Word* and *Homeschool Digest*, "that God had given me six children to raise to his glory, and homeschooling, in my estimation, was not an option—it was a mandate!"[57]

In the early days, many homeschoolers were, in fact, breaking the law. They took that risk because they saw the choice as a religious duty. They were called by God to separate themselves. It was divine command. Many homeschoolers were so concerned about this religious mandate to purity that they even pulled away from their local churches, and split from fellow homeschoolers who were not as religious, not as radical.

"These people became increasingly separated," Seelhoff writes. "They often felt that God had led them to this lifestyle, that they were part of a 'remnant' of obedient Christians in an age in which most Christians were less obedient. They looked to the Amish, Conservative Mennonites, and other 'plain' churches as role models."[58]

The radicalness of conservative homeschoolers was often signified with women's "plain" clothing. Like the Amish, they saw clothing as a way to distinguish themselves from and break with the culture around them. The comparison was occasionally explicit. One woman in Texas, for example, expressed her desire for this alternative lifestyle in terms of her willingness to change her clothes. "I was ready to join an Amish church," she recalled to journalist Kathryn Joyce, "and only wear gray or tan dresses."[59] Women in the movement did not restrict the color palette of their clothing in quite that way, but they did adopt very strict standards of dress. They wore long, homemade dresses. They wore denim skirts and jumpers with high-necked blouses. They grew their hair long.

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[56] Pride, *All the Way Home* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1989), 239.

[57] Skeet Savage, "Comfort and Advice for Single Parents," Single Parent Homeschool, n.d., http://singleparenthomeschool.christianhomeeducation.org/comfortss.htm.

[58] Seelhoff, "A History of Homeschooling: Part V," Gentle Spirit Magazine, 7, No. 2 (2000), 2.

[59] Kathryn Joyce, *Quiverfull: Inside the Christian Patriarchy Movement* (Bostom: Beacon Press, 2009), 109.

Some, citing 1 Corinthians 11:6, covered their heads. The fashion has been frequently described as "Little House on the Prairie," connecting the style to Laura Ingalls Wilder's memoir of the American frontier of the 1870s and '80s and the TV show that fictionalized that story for NBC from 1974 to 1982. The style, that is to say, evoked a past heavy with nostalgia. The clothes seemed to be from a time when people valued modesty and simplicity. They seemed to be from a time before consumerism. They communicated a rejection of the present in favor of a preferred, imaginary past.

That rejection, of course, can be framed in terms of the imperative of authenticity. In age of mass production and mass consumption, many of these clothes were hand made. Rather than accepting their assigned role of "consumer," these women created with their own hands. Instead of buying something off a rack, accepting what someone else thought a woman should look like, these women made their own decisions and made their own clothes. The clothes they did buy—such as the denim jumpers—were valued for being unfashionable and out-of-step. The style was distinctive, making a statement against cultural conformity.

At the same time, what was most distinctive about these clothes was their conformity. The look seemed to be a uniform, worn by every conservative Christian homeschooling mom.[60] As a uniform, the clothes communicated a job. They didn't express a person's personality or individual taste. They didn't represent self-expressive choices. The clothes showed, rather, that these women were effacing their identities, sacrificing their selves to the responsibilities of their role as homeschooling mother. Here, the internal tensions of authenticity are apparent. These clothes are choices against choice. In choosing to wear clothes that communicated an absence of choice, these women rejected the idea of the importance of individuality and self-actualization while, at the same time, expressing their identity and actualizing themselves through that act of self-erasure. According to the ideals of Romantic identity, people are most truly, authentically themselves when they throw off societal expectations to be who they truly are. With their jumpers and homemade dresses, the women of this homeschool movement fulfilled that ideal. By rejecting it.

The same dynamic can be seen in how homeschooling women rejected feminism. Kathryn Joyce argues this was the core of the cultural project of conservative Christian homeschoolers: they were deeply anti-feminist and militantly pro-natalist. Joyce calls the movement "Quiverfull." The name is taken from Psalm 127, which compares children to arrows and fathers to warriors. Joyce writes that these families made that metaphor central to their lives. Having children was thought of as a militant act. The domain of women was conceived as the site of a world-historical battle. "Quiverfull women are more than mothers," Joyce writes. "They are domestic warriors in a battle against what they see as forty years of destruction wrought by women's liberation: contraception,

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[60] Joyce 5.

women's careers, abortion, divorce, homosexuality, and child abuse, in that order."[61] The name "Quiverfull" was not widely used by the people Joyce is describing. Some have explicitly rejected it.[62] The more common self-appellation in the 1980s and '90s was simply "the homeschool movement." Opposition to feminism was central to the movement's self understanding, though. Mary Pride, for example, described herself as someone who rejected feminism—or "radical" feminism—to become a Christian.

In her very influential 1985 book, *The Way Home: Beyond Feminism, Back to Reality*, Pride argues that feminism has infected American churches. Christians have accommodated themselves to modern culture, starting with the acceptance of birth control and the idea of family planning.[63] They have, in their daily lives and practices, implicitly endorsed feminism. Some have even endorsed it explicitly. In her mocking, outraged style, Pride heaps scorn on the prospect of ever reconciling women's equality and the gospel message. "Stop and think calmly about this for a minute," she writes of evangelical feminists. "We are being asked to kill our babies, endorse homosexuality (and perhaps become lesbians), nag our husbands to do our jobs so we can do theirs—under threat of divorce—and all in the name of *Christ!*"[64]

Pride holds that feminism and Christianity are not only incompatible, they are diametrical opposites. Christianity calls for people to worship and submit themselves to God. Feminism, on the other hand, promotes self fulfillment. It is fundamentally self-centered, according to Pride. Feminism says that women find meaning and satisfaction in themselves, by becoming and being who they truly and authentically are. For feminism, Pride writes, "the burning question becomes, 'What will fulfill me as a woman?"[65]

This promise of self fulfillment is a trick, though. She argues that feminism focuses women on themselves and that this wrong, but also ineffectual. Women aren't fulfilled by pursing their own interests. Women are deceived into seeking after and even engineering their own oppression. Desiring meaningful work and a sense of purpose, women are conned into abandoning their meaningful work and their true purpose as mothers. "With all our modern talk of liberation, women fail to realize that the homeworking wife is actually the only liberated female!" Pride writes. "Feminists have foolishly claimed that women's role as a homeworker is the result of male patriarchal bias. The opposite is true. Non-Christian male patriarchal societies have always enslaved women *outside* the

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[61] Joyce 135.

[62] Pride, *The Way Home*, 219.

[63] Pride, *The Way Home*, 75.

[64] Pride, *The Way Home*, 11.

[65] Pride, *The Way Home*, 9.

home; Christianity sets us free."[66] This line of argument contains a notable reversal. Christianity and feminism are completely opposed at the start of the argument but then, on a deeper level, they share a goal and share an understanding of what makes a woman's life meaningful. For Pride, it turns out, it is not wrong for women to pursue personal fulfillment. Feminists are just pursuing it wrong. In rejecting feminism, then, Pride is rejecting the ideal of self fulfillment. By embracing it.

This is the internal tension of the imperative to authenticity. It is, in fact, the same tension internal to Romantic narratives. In Romantic narratives, as Regis recounts, the heroine is forced to deny who she truly is and live a life that has been imposed on her. She then breaks free. The heroine claims the right to say for herself who she is. She claims the agency to make her own choices. She claims that power, though, in the name of that which cannot be chosen. By an act of will, she surrenders her will. Happiness, in these narratives, is achieved by the release from societal strictures. It is also, importantly, achieved by a surrender of personal agency. The heroine gives up agency, acknowledging that she cannot chose whom she loves, cannot chose who she is. She embraces her own sexual desire—but only accepts it as legitimate because it is "awakened," rather than chosen.[67] Only when the Romantic heroine really reckons with her lack of choice will she be truly happy. In the very traditional form of the Romantic narrative, affective individualism is achieved by expressing oneself. And one expresses oneself—one's identity—by submitting oneself, one's free will. In this way, the internal contradiction within the ideal of the subculture constructed by conservative Christian homeschoolers was not unusual. Homeschooling moms imagined themselves in Romantic narratives, in a popular dialectic of self fulfillment and abnegation.

This is certainly how Pride tells her story. As a young woman with a background in computer programing, she was pressured to go to work to provide for her husband when he was in seminary. "Women today are being pushed," she writes, extrapolating from her own experience, "in some cases with the church's blessing, into working outside the home *whether they want to or not*" (emphasis original).[68] Some women, according to Pride, were being forced into this situation by the misogynistic men in their lives. A modern man sees their wives like a farmer sees a cow, "$10,000 a year on the hoof!" He "brutally forces his wife to put the children in day-care, forbids her to become pregnant, and sends her out into a job she does not want."[69] The violent imposition of an identity didn't just happen at work, either. It happened in the bedroom. Women were being pushed and pressured by their husbands, by society, by marital counsellors, and by "modern sexperts" to submit

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[66] Pride, *The Way Home*, 160, 161.

[67] See Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984), 126.

[68] Pride, *The Way Home*, 161.

[69] Pride, *The Way Home*, 161.

to "freaky sex."[70] Women were forced to participate, Pride writes, in "the stuff on which X-rated movies thrive."[71] This was demeaning. It was demeaning not just because the acts themselves are ridiculous (Pride gives the example of a wife wrapped in Saran Wrap, which was popularized by the Total Woman seminars discussed in chapter two) or perverted (Pride seems particularly appalled by oral sex). More than that "freaky sex" demeaned women because it forced an identity on them.

They were not given the opportunity to realize their own humanity, to be themselves and express themselves in their own way. Instead, women were told they have to behave a certain way. "We are now seen," Pride complains, "as fancy vessels for men to relieve their sexual frustrations …. We are *women*, *females*, able to bear and nurse children. We don't need to dress like prostitutes or behave like actresses in an X-rated movie to enjoy our sexual nature."[72]

Society tried to force an identity on Pride. It tried to force her to be someone she wasn't. It tried to tell her who she was and who she should be, but she resisted. Following the Romantic narrative arc, she chose to be who she really was, declared she had no choice in the matter, and found personal fulfillment.

There are hints in Pride's book that the reality of her journey of self discovery was not quite as smooth as the narrative would have it. Pride, in some passages of *The Way Home,* deeply resents society telling her who she is and who she is supposed to be, but there are other passages where she acknowledges she embraced this identity society assigned her. It felt, at least at times, like this was who she really was. Giving up her career to become a "homeworker" felt like becoming someone she wasn't. "I myself did not know how to cook decently, sew respectably, or do the laundry when I started," she notes in the final pages of *The Way Home*. "I had never been a hostess or taught a child. All I was good at was writing computer programs and passing tests!"[73] This new identity did not immediately seem authentic. Pride does think it's right for a woman to be a homeworker, though, and she thinks that because it is right it should be personally, emotionally fulfilling.

If Christian wives and mothers accept the truth of this, of who they are, and submit, they will be fulfilled. They will find they are at home, both in the literal sense and in the deeper sense of being authentic. "Don't you enjoy holding a sweet, warm little baby and watching him contentedly nurse at your breast?" Pride asks. "Don't you treasure that first little smile as your baby drinks you in, the most important person in his world? … Doesn't it make you feel special that God has trusted

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[70] Pride, *The Way Home*, 24.

[71] Pride, *The Way Home*, 28.

[72] Pride, *The Way Home*, 30.

[73] Pride, *The Way Home*, 214.

you to nurture and protect this tiny morsel of helpless humanity?"[74] These are rhetorical questions. The answer should be "yes."

For Pride and for the many women who joined the conservative Christian homeschool movement in the 1980s and '90s, that was the right answer. They testified to the truth of this answer in the terms of personal fulfillment. Pride collected some of these testimonies in her follow-up book, *All the Way Home*. Women from around the country wrote to Pride to tell her how they had been influenced by her writing to "come home" and find themselves.

A woman from Delaware told Pride she was apprehensive about breastfeeding her baby, but did it because she was supposed to. "Now I can say," she writes, "that nursing my children has been one of the sweetest experiences of my life!"[75] A woman from California reported her joy at having another child.[76] A woman from Oklahoma wrote that her husband has gained influence in their community because of their family. "Our joy about our family is evidence," she tells Pride, "and although some think we're crazy, I think they secretly admire us for taking a stand and following God's perfect will in this day."[77]

Pride, who herself once struggled to answer those rhetorical questions in the affirmative, assured her readers that this radical lifestyle was not only God's will, it was rewarding. "As I look around at our six children studying, playing, and helping around the house," she writes, "our home office and basement warehouse; our shelves lined with books full of ideas for future projects; our garden-to-be, full of beautiful dreams; and my dear husband who has worked so hard with me—my heart overflows with thanksgiving to God …. now I can report that God blesses those who are faithful in even tiny things." This was the promise of going home, and all the way home. There, you would flourish. There, you could be yourself.

This conservative Christian homeschool movement peaked in the late 1990s. Historian Milton Gaither pinpoints the date as 1998.[78] One need not be that precise, though, to note there was a change around that time. This seems to have been a result of a mix of factors. For one thing, at the turn of the century the eldest homeschool students came of age. Despite the hopes of the movement and the fears of critics that these young people would become shock troops in the culture wars,

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[74] Pride, *The Way Home*, 39.

[75] Pride, *All the Way Home*, 96.

[76] Pride, *All the Way Home*, 59.

[77] Pride, *All the Way Home*, 238.

[78] Gaither 173.

many did not replicate their parent's radical lifestyle.[79] It has been reported, for instance, that fewer than one percent of graduates from Bill Gothard's homeschooling program enrolled their own children in the Advanced Training Institute.[80] Many homeschool graduates moved on with their lives and went on to do other things.

The movement was not simply a failure, though. It was also partly a victim of its own success. Schooling children at home achieved wider public acceptance. Antagonisms eased and homeschoolers felt less of push towards separatism.[81] The number of new people interested in the radical lifestyle movement slumped, and the market for seminars declined. Gothard's seminars, for example, grossed $8 million in 1980.[82] A decade later, they grossed $3.3 million.[83] In 2010, they grossed $219,372.[84] Homeschool leaders who depended on seminars for their income transitioned to other things.

Still others were pushed out of the movement when they failed to live up to its standards. Seelhoff, for example, was ostracized when her marriage ended. She had a troubled marriage. Her husband was physically abusive and abandoned the family. When she quietly filed for divorce and started a relationship with another man, there was a scandal. Her magazine, which had been grossing $300,000 annually, soon failed as subscribers and advertisers learned of the personal details.[85] Seelhoff sued a number of homeschool organizations and leaders, including Harris and Pride, for violating antitrust law by conspiring to take her business. Most of the lawsuits were settled out of court for undisclosed amounts. In the one that went to trial, a jury awarded Seelhoff $1.3 million.[86]

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[79] For more on people who rejected their homeschool-movement upbringing, see "The Raised Quiverfull Project," Love, Joy, Feminism, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/lovejoyfeminism/raised-quiverfull-project; Vyckie Garrison's No Longer Quivering, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nolongerquivering/; and R.L. Stollar's Homeschoolers Anonymous, https://homeschoolersanonymous.wordpress.com.

[80] "An Open Letter from Bill Gothard's First Generation to Basic Seminar Attendees," Recovering Grace, July 11, 2011, http://www.recoveringgrace.org/2011/07/basicseminarletter/.

[81] Gaither 173, 198.

[82] Russell Chandler, "Moral, Morale Questions Rock Gothard Ministry: Preachers Message of Morality Hypocritical, Disgruntled Ex-Employees, Followers Charge," L.A. Times, April 5, 1982.

[83] Angela Bradberry, "Minister's Kingdom Not Without Foes," Chicago Tribune, Dec. 29, 1992.

[84] Internal Revenue Service, Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt From Income Tax, Institute in Basic Life Principles (2010), http://www2.guidestar.org/FinDocuments/2011/366/108/2011-366108515-0882c46b-9.pdf. Gothard resigned from the organization in 2014 in the midst of a sexual scandal (Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Conservative Leader Bill Gothard Resigns Following Abuse Allegations," Washington Post, March 7, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/conservative-leader-bill-gothard-resigns-following-abuse-allegations/2014/03/07/0381aa94-a624-11e3-b865-38b254d92063_story.html).

[85] Seelhoff, "A History of Homeschooling: Part V," Gentle Spirit Magazine, 7, No. 2 (2000), 4-5.

[86] Shay Seaborne, "The Truth about Cheryl," Home Education Magazine, Sept. 1999, http://homeedmag.com/seelhoffvs.welch/truth.html.

Even without collusion or personal problems, many movement magazines ran into financial trouble in the 1990s. Pride's magazine, *Help for Growing Families*, stopped publishing in the middle of the decade. A popular magazine for fathers in the movement, *Quit You Like Men*, folded in 2000. Sluggish subscription rates and increasing competition from internet message boards made sustaining a profitable magazine difficult. The movement that was once held together by a network of magazines and seminars was forced to change and become something different.

The conservative Christian homeschool movement didn't cease to exist, of course. It declined, but also diversified, evolved, and continued in different forms. In the 2000s and 2010s, there were conservative Christian lifestyle movements involving homeschooling that were organized around churches, such as Boerne Christian Assembly outside of San Antonio, Texas. In 2014, there were 205 such churches in 41 states listed in the "Family-Integrated Church Directory."[87] There were also celebrities in this period performing the "Quiverfull" lifestyle on Reality TV, notably Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar and their show, which aired from 2008 to 2015 and attracted as many as 2.9 million viewers per episode.[88] Some parts of the broader movement continued to be just as radical and separatist as they were in that earlier era. Others have been more moderate.

Even more moderate homeschooling mothers still struggle with this tension of authenticity and self-realization, though. For example, Tricia Goyer, an evangelical homeschooler who has written Amish fiction series for several evangelical publishers, describes feeling guilt at not being devoted enough to her children. She started homeschooling in 1995, but also wanted to become a novelists, even though she was, as she puts it, "a young, homeschooling mom who hadn't even finished college." She decided to teach her three children in the morning and then write in the afternoon. She tried to protect her writing time. Her children inevitably needed her, though, and she would feel selfish and guilty if she rebuffed their pleas. "I was sure I was the worst homeschooling mother there was," Goyer recalls. The homeschooling ideal was held up as emotionally fulfilling and self-actualizing, but also self-sacrificing. For Goyer, the lived reality was a contradiction. Like more radical homeschooling mothers, however, Goyer found a way to reconcile the contradictions inherent in the imperative to authenticity. Where, for Pride, sacrifice was fulfilling, for Goyer, fulfillment was sacrifice. "Over time I began to see how following my dreams benefited my children in numerous ways," she writes. "I didn't need to teach my kids that we should follow God's dreams for us and

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[87] Family Integrated Church Directory, n.d., http://familyintegratedchurch.com.

[88] Sara Bibel, "Cable Top 25: 'Game of Thrones' Tops Cable Viewership for the Week Ending May 10, 2015," TV By the Numbers, May 12, 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20150527193854/http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2015/05/12/cable-top-25game-of-thrones-tops-cable-viewership-for-the-week-ending-may-10-2015/402441/.

work hard to share His truth with others. They saw that lived out on a daily basis. Being a servant of God was modeled."[89]

Not incidentally, Goyer shared this personal struggle on a group blog named "Not Quite Amish." On the website, Goyer and thirteen other women write about homeschooling, homemaking, mothering, their evangelical faith, their experiences in Amish tourism, and their writing careers. They are not promoting a radically separatist lifestyle. They are, nonetheless, trying to construct an alternative to modernity. They have conceptualized the modernity they want to reject through the imagination of the Amish. For them, the Amish represent an ideal of emotional fulfillment, but not without some internal tensions.

The Context of the Heritage of Lancaster County *Series*

The tension of the authentic imperative also sets the context of Beverly Lewis's trilogy, *The Shunning*, *The Confession*, and *The Reckoning*. Lewis was the mother of three adopted children, including developmentally disabled twins whom she homeschooled. She was also a piano teacher, teaching about 40 students per week. Despite her busy schedule, her husband David Lewis encouraged her to pursue her life-long dream of being a writer. "Dave felt I had something to say that the world needed to hear," Lewis recalled in 2007, "and he urged me to do everything I could to find out about marketing, how to approach a publisher and all the guidelines for submitting my work."[90]

She started with evangelical children's books, such as *The Double Dabble Surprise* and *The Chicken Pox Panic*, both published in 1995. The efforts were met with some success. But it wasn't easy. Lewis found it was only possible to be a homeschooling mom and an author because, as she put it, "all things are possible to those with a clock and a strict schedule." It required "steely determination to make the day fit into the allotted hours." She could allow herself to write, she said, "only when my family's needs were met."[91] She kept writing, though, and her imagination turned to the Amish. She had conflicting feelings about the Amish.

Lewis first experimented with an Amish character in in a young-adult mystery novel, *Whispers Down the Lane*. She then wrote her first adult fiction, a story based loosely on her grandmother's conversion experience.

Bethany House immediately recognized potential in *The Shunning*. Carol Johnson, the editorial director who had made a name for herself with *Love Comes Softly*, was captivated by the story.

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[89] Tricia Goyer, "Simple Homeschooling," Not Quite Amish, Feb. 25, 2013.

[90] Jennifer McClure, "Conversation: Beverly Lewis," Pentecostal Evangel, May 13, 2007, http://pentecostalevangel.ag.org/Conversations2007/4853_Lewis.cfm.

[91] C.J. Darlington, "Beverly Lewis Interview," TitleTrakk.com, n.d. http://www.titletrakk.com/author-interviews/beverly-lewis-interview.htm.

Based on a sample of the first-person prologue and the first few chapters, the evangelical publisher contracted Lewis for a trilogy.[92] Steve Oates, vice president of marketing, thought "we could maybe sell about 25,000 of that." It was a wild underestimate.[93]

The first installment of the *Heritage of Lancaster County* series was published in 1997. More than 150,000 copies sold that year. It was a phenomenon, launching Lewis into the ranks of the most-read evangelical women of the twentieth century. The second book was published the same year. The first printing of 75,000 copies sold out.[94] The final installment of the series was published the next year and sold more than 100,000 copies. There success was recognized in the industry, and soon other Amish romances were being written. Lewis's books began the massively successful genre of Amish romance novels.

As Valerie Weaver-Zercher has documented, the genre has grown exponentially in two decades. It now takes up substantial real estate on the shelves of Christian bookstores and its presence is also very visible at suburban Barnes & Nobles, big-box warehouse stores, and on online retail outlets.[95] It is one of the dominant genres of evangelical fiction, far more popular than some that have been more widely considered by scholars and cultural critics, such as apocalyptic fiction. Lewis herself has continued to be very successful, publishing seven additional series of Amish romances, as well as some stand-alone novels. A number of these have become bestsellers, with some selling more than 500,000 copies.

What readers find, when they read these novels, is a story of a woman who breaks free of her restrictive religious community and the identity it has imposed on her. She searches for her true self and finds it. She finds her biological identity, her religious identity and her romantic identity, in that order. This is not unusual for romance novels. The broad arc of the narrative is fairly standard. The ideal romance, according to Janice Radway's classic 1982 study of romance-novel readers, is the story a this kind of transformation. Radway found that among her survey group, the most popular romances start with the destruction or loss of the protagonist's social identity. The narrative begins with the "heroine's removal from a familiar, comfortable realm usually associated with her

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[92] C.J. Darlington, "Interview with Beverly Lewis," Novel Crossing, n.d., http://www.novelcrossing.com/news/interview-beverly-lewis-15489.

[93] Valerie Weaver-Zercher 45-46.

[94] Lynn S. Neal, *Romancing God: Evangelical Women and Inspirational Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006), 33.

[95] Valerie Weaver-Zercher 4-7, 96-98.

childhood and family."[96] By the end of the story, through a series of interactions with the hero, the heroine achieves a new identity.

Radway's reader don't have the same taste as the readers of Amish romances, but both groups agree on the importance of this narrative arc, from identity lost to identity regained. Lewis's novels sometimes focus on the psychological aspects of this transformation. Other times, the novels are not so introspective. The plot is constructed of major twists. The story is carried along by objects hidden where they will be found, hastily disguised identities, poorly executed cover-ups, generally ill-kept secrets, and sometimes incredible misunderstandings. This too is typical of romance novels, as Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan explain in their feminist celebration of the romance genre, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*. Wendell and Tan say these plot devices are hoary and cliched, but also some of the most beloved. "The key to satisfying romance," Wendell and Tan say, "is to layer the internal and external conflicts so that they compliment and contrast against one another."[97] Lewis's heroine experiences just this kind of external and internal conflict.

At the happy end she overcomes both personal and societal barriers to her emotional fulfillment. The arc to this conclusion has eight narrative steps, essential to the romance genre, according to Pamela Regis. Regis's definitive examination of the genre takes Jane Austen's novels as paradigmatic, but shows how popular, contemporary novels have maintained the form and the vitality of the romance genre.[98] Whether highbrow or low, the romance novel puts the heroine at the center and tells the story of how "she rejects various encumbrances imposed by the old society to arrive at a place where society stops hindering her."[99]

There are eight steps in this story: the initial, flawed state of society, in which the heroine is unfulfilled; the meeting of the heroine and the hero; the barrier to their union; the attraction that inspires the heroine to surmount the barrier; the hero's declaration of love; the point of ritual death, when the hoped for resolution is presented as impossible; the recognition, where the barrier to union is removed; and the final, joyous betrothal.[100] Lewis's trilogy fits this form exactly, and also appeals to evangelical readers by showing each step in the heroine's journey has a spiritual dimension. Lewis's fiction fulfilled the expectations of romance readers. And, it would seem, in many cases sur-

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[96] Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984), 134.

[97] Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 100.

[98] Regis 28.

[99] Regis 30.

[100] Regis 30-38.

passed them. Lewis spun a story of liberating transformation that appealed and continues to appeal to many, many readers.

They open the first page expecting to find and finding a woman in search of her true identity.

Katie Lapp's True Identity

Katie Lapp has been told her entire life she is Amish. Her identity has been given to her. All of her life confirms this identity. Society tells her she is Amish. Her friends are Amish, her family is Amish, the food she makes is Amish, her husband-to-be is a bishop of the Amish, her house, her horse, and the boy she would have married if he hadn't died in an accident are all Amish. In the truest possible sense of the term, Lapp lives in "Amish country." She has no reason to question this identity that envelops her. Yet she does. Dissent rises unbidden from within. She knows—in a deep way she cannot quite articulate—that she cannot just accept this imposition of who she is supposed to be. She feels she cannot just conform. She has to be true to herself.

Lewis alerts readers to this inner dissent from the first page. The novel opens with a first-person prologue narrated by the heroine. The first thing the heroine says is that there is a conflict between how she is supposed to be and who she really is.

"If the truth be known," Lapp announces, "I am more conniving than all three of my brothers put together. Hardheaded, too."[101]

She has attempted to behave as she is supposed to behave, but it has been a struggle. She was baptized, her "heart filled with good intentions."[102] She hoped that this would mark her and make her "an honest-to-goodness Amishwoman," like her mother and her friend Mary Stoltzfus.[103] Her mother and her friend, however, flourish in this life. Rebecca Lapp—"Dear *Mam*"—thrives in her given role. She is never as fully herself as when she is in the company of Amish women and they are doing Amish-women things. At "a quilting frolic or a canning bee," "snapping peas or husking corn," the elder Lapp tells stories that are heart-felt and funny. She tells the stories of her life among the Amish and the Amish women around her love them and hang on them. Katie Lapp notices, too, that the stories seem to come from deep within her mother. For as long as she can remember, whenever her mother has told a story, "her hazel eyes held all the light of heaven."[104]

Mary Stoltzfus also seems herself among the Amish. At the start of the novel, she has stopped attending school, where she "got the highest marks through all eight grades," to focus on beco-

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[101] Lewis 11.

[102] Lewis 11.

[103] Lewis 12-13.

[104] Lewis 12.

ming a wife and mother. This doesn't cause her any consternation, though. She greets her new life with joy.

Lapp, on the other hand, describes coming of age as turning her back on the things she loved. She can't live up to the community standards. She can't suppress who she truly is. Even though she doesn't want to, she fantasizes about other ways of life. The sight of a satin baby gown in the prologue awakens deep desires within her. "I was lost," Lapp narrates, holding the dress, "in a world of my vivid imagination—colorful silk, gleaming jewels, golden mirrors. Turning and swirling, I flew, light as a summer cloud, over the wooden floorboards. But with my dancing came the old struggles, my personal tug-of-war between plain and fancy. How I longed for beautiful things!"[105] For her, being Amish is not being herself. It isn't authentic. And because it's not authentic, she doesn't flourish and doesn't feel emotionally fulfilled.

When Lapp is emotionally fulfilled, she is singing. As imagined by Lewis, the Amish are very strict about music. Lapp's bishop (and fiancé) calls the guitar an instrument of evil.[106] He will only allow people to sing from the church-approved songbook. These songs are not from the heart. Lapp's songs, on the other hand, are. They come from within her, unbidden, pure expressions of who she is. Because of that, the music is not a choice, even when and where it is a choice. Music is a choice she has to make.

"Ever since I was little, being Plain has been burdensome to me," Lapp explains in one early scene. "It's the music—all those songs in my head. I can't make them go away."[107]

Pushed by her father and her bishop to confess this music as sin and conform to community standards, Lapp tries to suppress it. She stops singing the songs. She even stops humming. This doesn't make her feel good, though. She thinks the religious rules ought to have the same affect on her they have on her mother and her best friend, creating a context in which she can flourish and be fulfilled as an individual. But they're not having that affect on her. Instead of feeling restored to the community, Lapp feels estranged from herself. She feels trapped, "her heart imprisoned along with the forbidden songs."[108] Lapp is confused by this. She feels her feelings are wrong. The third-person narration, however, instructs readers of the truth. "The music had been a divine gift within Katie," Lewis writes. "God, the Creator of all things, had created her to make music. It wasn't Katie's doing at all."[109]

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[105] Lewis 17.

[106] Lewis 125.

[107] Lewis 31.

[108] Lewis 131.

[109] Lewis 78.

There is a similar dynamic at work when Lapp changes her name. She rejects the name she's been given—for her given name. She decides not to be called Katie Lapp. That is the only name she's known, but it is her Amish name. It has been assigned to her by her adopted parents without her knowledge. She comes to a point where she would also say it has been assigned to her against her will. This might not seem like a particular violation of her identity, since most people in most Western cultures are assigned names in this way. But Lapp experiences her name as a violation. The novel, further, presents the name as somehow, importantly false. The name is not her name, even though functionally it is. When her Amish mother and father sit Lapp down to tell her she is adopted, they tell her specifically that she is not Katie Lapp. There is no Katie Lapp. There are a lot of unstated assumptions, here, about what a name is, how a name works, and what it means to say that a name functions to name an object in the world. Lapp, however, just accepts her name is false. The name has been imposed on her, and with it an identity not her own. "If I'm not Katie Lapp … then who am I?" she asks. Rebecca Lapp answers, "You're Katherine Mayfield, Katie, that's who you really are."[110]

The novel imagines the inauthenticity of the name even undercuts the authenticity of other acts undertaken by Katie Lapp, making them false because they were done with a false name. Her baptism wasn't real, for example. "The kneeling baptism never happened to me," she says.[111] "I wasn't who I thought I was back then."[112] The act of will, the act of choice, by itself, is not enough to make her who she chooses to be. She didn't really get baptized. She can't really be Katie Lapp. That identity is false. Conversely, when she choses her real name, it's a choice but a choice she can't not choose. When she chooses to be called Katherine Mayfield, it's described as if it's a recognition of an existing reality. "*I'm* supposed *to be Katherine Mayfield,*" she thinks, "*whoever that is!*"[113]

Lapp initially tries to resist her real name. She tries to choose to be Katie Lapp. Even up to the moment she is preparing for her wedding to the bishop, a widower with children who need to be taken care of, Lapp is attempting to accept this identity. Alone with her mother upstairs, dressed in her white wedding apron and cape, Lapp says, "'I'm just Plain Katie, ain't?" The question is answered affirmatively by her adoptive mother, but not before the third-person narrator notes that "even now" the Amish bride is "thinking of the satin baby dress, resisting the thought of its splendid feel

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[110] Lewis 167.

[111] Lewis 218.

[112] Lewis 223.

[113] Lewis 181.

beneath her fingers."[114] There is a sense in which she isn't plain, which is to say a sense in which that plainness is chosen, and thus not authentic.

Lapp decides she can't do it. It's just impossible. Being Katie Lapp will never stop being a struggle, because this is not who she is. She stands up at the last moment and objects to her own wedding. Lapps flees from her wedding, from the Amish, and from the world that has told her she is Amish. In doing that, she exercises her will and self-actualizes, overcoming the classic Romantic-narrative barrier to affective individualism. It is at this moment the novel changes the heroine's name. "She turned and fled down the narrow aisle, through the crowd of relatives and friends," Lewis writes, "Katherine, called Katie, burst out the back door and ran from her childhood home."[115] This is a moment of agency, in which she becomes herself.

In a Romantic gesture, the protagonist then declares her identity literally to the heavens. "I'm Katherine now," she says to the sky. "My name is Katherine Mayfield."[116] Yet, here again, the choice is presented as not being a choice. The discarded name was an identity that she wore like clothes. The new name—the "true" name—is different. It is given. The new name is who she is underneath her skin. Shortly after she claims the name by an act of will and after she declares it to the sky, Mayfield explains to her brother that the name isn't chosen at all.

"Don't call me Katie anymore. My name is Katherine," she says.

"Since when?" he says.

"Since the day I was born."[117]

She has to be herself in the world of today.

Inherited Belief

Another way the Heritage of Lancaster County series stages the internal tensions of the imperative to authenticity is by presenting the heroine's true self as genetic. Even if she could stop singing, even if she could accept her inauthentic name, Katherine Mayfield would still have auburn hair. The protagonist's hair sets her apart. This is a standard for the Romance genre. As Wendell and Tan note, "Heroines—especially Old Skool heroines—are colorful, colorful creatures. Hair of titian, flax, honey, deepest auburn…no heroine ever has plain old brown hair."[118] Lewis's heroine, firmly in this

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[114] Lewis 186.

[115] Lewis 194.

[116] Lewis 203.

[117] Lewis 213.

[118] Wendell and Tan 54.

tradition, insists on describing her hair as auburn, though some might say it is red.[119] "Red," she insists, is "for worldly English barns and highway stop signs—not for the single most beautiful feature God had ever given a woman."[120] The special color is what first attracts the attention of the various suitors in the series. Mayfield thinks of her hair as her "crowning glory."[121] Her hair, however, also sets her apart in another way. It shows that she isn't Amish.

While it might be true that, as the bishop says, "lots of folks have red hair," his observant son is right when he counters, "not around here."[122]

Mayfield's hair is evidence she is unrelated to those around her, that she's adopted. It's not even necessary to do a genetic test. The truth is readily apparent to anyone who notices. "Katie Lapp" doesn't look like she has inherited a single gene from her mother or father. "Where was the broomstick hair and the hazel eyes—the family mark?" an aunt wonders. "Not even as far back as great-great-Grandmammi Yoder had there been a speck of red hair."[123] The Amish notably require Lapp to cover up her hair with a devotional kapp.[124] This is another way they force the heroine to deny who she truly is. She self-actualizes, at the end of the first novel, by taking off her head covering and showing her hair. She chooses to celebrate her hair.[125]

This idea of genetic belonging plays a major role in the plot of the second novel of the series, *The Confession*. Mayfield leaves Amish country in search of her biological mother. She finds Laura Mayfield Bennett at her wealthy estate in upstate New York. It's a few days before Christmas. Her long-lost mother is on her death bed, praying she might be reconnected with her daughter. By the time Mayfield reaches her mother, though, a fake "Katie Lapp" has already ensconced herself in the household, part of a conspiracy to take the dying woman's money. The imposter is a model hired by Bennett's husband, Dylan, the villain of the novel, who smokes cigars and thinks villainous things, such as, "*I will not be dethroned*."[126]

Mayfield takes a job as a maid. Finding her place as rightful heiress is occupied, she pretends to be looking for employment at the estate and is quickly hired. She is incorporated into the busy work of preparing for Christmas and the long-hoped-for reunion of mother and daughter. Soon the

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[119] Lewis, *The Confession* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 1997), 108.

[120] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 168.

[121] Lewis, *The Confession*, 86.

[122] Lewis, *The Confession*, 99.

[123] Lewis, *The Confession*, 101.

[124] Lewis, *The Confession*, 86.

[125] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 215.

[126] Lewis, *The Confession*, 47.

real daughter and fake daughter are side-by-side. The New York model pretends she is Amish and goes by the now doubly-fake name, "Katie Lapp." She is not very good at being Amish, though. Her hands are too soft.[127] Her accent doesn't seem quite right, even to those only casually acquainted with the dialect.[128] She wears silky, skimpy lingerie under her "Plain" costume.[129] She uses the telephone.[130]

It is not the woman's inauthentic imitation of the Amish that exposes her scam, however. It is genetics. As a maid notes, "Anyone could see that Katie Lapp was not the mistresses' daughter. Had not a single physical trait in common." Just as Mayfield had no biological connection to the Amish, the fake Amish woman has no physical resemblance to the woman she is pretending is her mother. "The young Amishwoman had not a speck of Laura Bennett in her!" one member of the household staff observes.[131]

By comparison, though Mayfield is in disguise, she has obvious physical traits in common with Bennett.[132] Mother and (true) daughter clearly belong together because they both have the same hair. "Not many people," says one character, an artist hired to paint a Christmas portrait, "have the privilege of wearing the rich colors of autumn all year long."[133] Of course, the model hired to pretend to be the daughter also has red hair. But it's not quite right. It's more a strawberry blond color. This is pointed out by the imposter herself. At a pivotal moment, she decides she can no longer stand to be a part of the deception. "I'm *not* your daughter, Mrs. Bennett," she says. As evidence, she takes off her head covering, pulls two hairpins, and shakes her tresses free. No further proof is needed.[134] The same is true with the true daughter's hair. Just a glimpse of it is evidence enough. One character comes up with the idea that the recently hired maid is actually the long-lost heiress in disguise just because he saw the color. The man is instantly convinced of what might seem a rather implausible or at least unusual scenario. But he has seen the hair.[135] Mayfield, for her part, attaches the same significance to her chief genetic trait.[136] When she confronts Dylan Bennett

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[127] Lewis, *The Confession*, 90-91.

[128] Lewis, *The Confession*, 117.

[129] Lewis, *The Confession*, 135.

[130] Lewis, *The Confession*, 159.

[131] Lewis, *The Confession*, 151.

[132] Lewis, *The Confession*, 170.

[133] Lewis, *The Confession*, 282.

[134] Lewis, *The Confession*, 233.

[135] Lewis, *The Confession*, 213.

[136] Lewis, *The Confession*, 158.

about his deception, he demands proof she is the true daughter. She says simply, "I have her hair."[137]

This understanding of genetic identity is critical to the plot. It also is critical, however, to how the novel imagines belief as the unconditional belonging that enables an individual to truly, fully be themselves, and flourish. The *Heritage of Lancaster County* stages belief as, in some sense, inherited. This is visible in how the Amish are depicted as an ethnic group.

It is not unusual for white ethnic groups to be defined religiously in the United States. Unlike Jews or Irish Catholics, however, the Amish have been historical characterized by their conviction that religious belonging cannot be inherited. The key distinctive of anabaptist theology is adult conversion and baptism. In these novels, though, belonging to this religious group is not imagined as a choice or an act of will. Lewis, instead, imagines Amishness as something acquired at birth. In these novels, even someone who is no longer part of an Amish church or community, who has nothing to do with the Amish way of life, who is not Amish by act of will, is Amish in the sense of having an Amish "heritage."[138]

Outside of the fiction, Lewis also talks about heritage this way. She regularly claims she is connected to the religion ethnically. When readers inquire if she was raised Amish, a frequently asked question on her website, Lewis responds by talking about how she is related to the religious beliefs on her mother's side, and knows the way of life from family reunions she went to as a child.[139] The front matter of many of her books mention "her mother's Plain family heritage." Partly, to to be sure, this works to assure readers she knows what she is writing about, but it also depicts belief as a matter of inherited belonging. This is how she imagines Amishness.

This is why the heroine, adopted into an Amish family, can't be Amish. Mayfield is not really Amish because she is "English by birth and Plain by adoption."[140] Her adoptive mother tries to insist that one can belong to the religion without being born to it. Rebecca Lapp says her adopted daughter is Amish "in every way, 'cept blood." But Mayfield rejects that. To be Amish "'cept blood" is inauthentic. To embrace this religion and its way of life is to be "turned into someone she is not."[141] The novels endorse this view of given belonging. Shortly after the heroine reaches this conclusion about the nature of Amishness, for example, it is echoed by an older woman. She is known to the community as the Wise Woman. The Wise Woman tells Mayfield she doesn't belong

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[137] Lewis, *The Confession*, 216.

[138] Lewis, *The Confession*, 200.

[139] Lewis, "Frequently Asked Questions," BeverlyLewis.com, n.d.

[140] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 167.

[141] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 204.

in the anabaptist community. This, however, is not a condemnation. Mayfield cannot believe among the Amish and cannot flourish there because she isn't authentically Amish. "I was born Amish, and I'll die the same," the Wise Woman explains. "The Plain life is the only life I'll ever know." By comparison, she tells the girl, "you seem out of place somehow" and "always have."[142] The older woman then helps the heroine find her birth mother. If living out one's belief is a matter of being yourself, then one's beliefs have to be given before they can be believed.

The revelation of true belonging has been important to the genre of Amish romance. As the genre has developed since Lewis's first novel, though, direction of the discovery has reversed. It is more common for the novels to feature modern American women discovering they are "really" Amish than the other way around. Heroines frequently discover "the Amish within," as the stories cater to the readers' "fantasy of discovering that one is of true Amish stock," according to Valerie Weaver-Zercher. And, "in each case, the protagonist finds that her previously disheveled life gathers into coherence and calm as she learns the truth of her essential Amishness."[143] This reversal leaves intact the key assumption that Amishness is inherited. True emotional fulfillment is presented as the product of being who you really are. That authentic identity is shown to be the end result of a self-actualizing quest, in which the heroine discovers the choice she can't not choose.

It isn't just Amish belief that is presented as an inheritance. Evangelicalism is also imagined in this way in The Heritage of Lancaster County. Laura Bennett is an evangelical Christian and longs to pass this on to her long-lost daughter. Her religious practices are very private and very intimate, consisting of quiet devotions, Bible study, and spontaneous, free prayer. She understands herself to have a personal relationship with God. In one scene, for example, she is left "alone with her thoughts," and she starts to pray. Without closing her eyes, or moving from where she sits at the window surveying the view from her New York mansion, she says, "Well, Lord, it's the two of us again."[144] Bennett earnestly prays for her reunion with her daughter, if it's God's will, that she might pass on her inheritance. That bequest includes the estate and riches, but also, importantly, religious beliefs.

Bennett shares her beliefs, first, with the imposter pretending to be her daughter, "Katie Lapp." Bennett makes it clear that her evangelicalism is important to her and it is her deep hope to impart this to her daughter. The woman pretending to be Lapp protests that she couldn't just "throw away my Amish beliefs." She is committed to those beliefs, though, specifically because of her familial connect to them. "My parents," she says, and then corrects herself, "my *adoptive* parents

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[142] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 243.

[143] Valerie Weaver-Zercher 214-215.

[144] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 256.

would be so hurt. And my brothers and sisters."[145] One can easily imagine a person having a deeper and stronger connection to her adoptive family than the biological mother who gave her up at birth, but Lewis presents this as evidence Lapp is an imposter. She is only interested in money. Bennett's true daughter, by comparison, wants the greater inheritance. Mayfield wants the religious inheritance. "She figured," Lewis writes, "that because of Laura Bennett's close connection with the Almighty, she, too, was somehow linked to righteousness."[146] When the two women are reunited in the final pages of *The Confession*, the very first thing Mayfield says is "I've missed you all my life" and "I've never been truly Amish, not through and through."[147] She is ready for her birthright, her true faith.

She still has to chose to believe and she does in the final novel, *The Reckoning*. But Mayfield is imagined as choosing it authentically. She choses to believe that Jesus died for her because she can't not chose it. She choses belief because that's who she truly, authentically is. When she hears the evangelical message of a personal God, it resonates with what is already inside her. Mayfield is shown going to church almost two-thirds of the way through the third novel. Lewis describes how the once-"Plain" woman who had always longed for fancy things takes in the sight of stained glass windows and thrills to the majestic organ. Then she hears the sermon. "She was captivated," Lewis writes, "by the message on the love of God … a *personal* heavenly Father who adored and cared for His children."[148]

The message is, importantly, not new to Mayfield. Rather, it comes to her with the emotional resonance of something she already knows. The minister's words give form to an unarticulated sense she already has, "shaping something life-giving inside her."[149] The message awaken a sense memory, much like a smell can transport one back to childhood. Mayfield hears the gospel message and has a feeling of "something she'd experienced as a child on several occasions but had had no idea what to do about."[150] Later, in the privacy of the mansion she has inherited, Mayfield studies the scripture the minister quoted. She looks up 1 John 3:1 in a leather-bound King James Bible, which she has also inherited from her biological mother. She reads the first part of the verse. "*Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of*

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[145] Lewis, *The Confession*, 168.

[146] Lewis, *The Confession*, 186.

[147] Lewis, *The Confession*, 256.

[148] Lewis, *The Reckoning* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 1998), 172.

[149] Lewis, *The Reckoning,* 172.

[150] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 173.

God," it says, speaking to the novels' theme of an unknown inheritance.[151] Mayfield feels incredibly moved. She converts. Yet, as she describes it, the conversion is not as much a decision to be different or change as it is a recognition and acceptance of what is true.

"I've felt it for months now," she says. "God *is* calling me."[152]

Then, immediately after praying the sinner's prayer, she thinks of her biological mother who connected her to this belief and how happy she must be in heaven. In this way, evangelical belief is present as being given. Like her hair and her name, belief is presented as a choice, but a very specific kind of choice.

Personal, Individual Flourishing

In the process of telling this story, Lewis ends up taking a curious position towards the Amish. To a certain extent, the *Heritage of Lancaster County* series condemns the Amish it imagines. In Lewis's fiction, the Amish are presented as dogmatic, authoritarian religionists standing in the way of human flourishing. They adhere to the man-made rules, the "*Ordnung*," which Lewis imagines as "unspoken list of church rules and regulations."*[153]* Evangelicalism, on the other hand, is a religion of the heart. They are not true Christians, because they don't have that conversion experience and a personal relationship with Jesus. Mayfield, after her conversion experience, articulates this. "Following the Ordnung isn't what matters," she says. "Don't you see, being a follower of *Jesus* is what counts?"[154]

The opposition is explained several times by Daniel Fisher, Mayfield's childhood love and the suitor she ends up with at series's end. More than any other character, he speaks as for evangelicalism, contrasting evangelical belief with the Amish he left behind. For the Amish, Fisher says, belief was a matter of taboos and traditions. It was all alien and (seemingly) arbitrary. "So much of what I knew about religion and God had been passed down to me," Fisher says, "from our parents—their parents before them."[155] Evangelicalism, on the other hand, is emotional and immediate. Fisher's narrative arc to conversion is only revealed in retrospective bits and pieces in the three novels and never with the depth or attention to emotional detail given Lapp/Mayfield's conversion. Readers learn only a little about Fisher's backstory. In the first novel, Fisher is presumed dead in a

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[151] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 175-176.

[152] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 244.

[153] Lewis, *The Confession*, 12.

[154] Lewis, *The Confession*, 104.

[155] Lewis, *The Confession*, 260.

tragic boating accident. By book's end, it is revealed he didn't die.[156] In the second book, it is explained he used the accident as cover to run away from home and become an evangelical. He comes back from his fake death to tell his family about Jesus.

In the third book, Fisher pursues the heroine. This is partly out of romantic interest, partly seeking forgiveness and, most importantly, to tell her about Jesus. Fisher thinks what happened to him is insignificant in comparison to what happened in him. "*Someday I hope you'll allow me to tell you the whole story, everything that happened*," Fisher writes Katherine. "*In the meantime, I have found a love I've never known … this I find in Jesus*." Finding Jesus means finding that one can be saved by grace, rather than works. It means being certain of one's salvation. Fisher's new faith is summed up by the idea that "*God's Word clearly states the way to redemption—through faith in Jesus, the Savior*." This is contrasted to the Amish, who are "*bound up in the rules and requirements of a church*."[157] They are burdened with guilt, since they can never know if they're good enough to earn God's favor.

Fisher does not simply say the Amish are not true Christians, though. He hedges on this point. He says, "I know a good many Plain folk who've experienced God's gift of salvation through grace same as I have."[158] And there are things about the Amish that Fisher admires. In an observation Albert Jay Nock might have made, for example, he notes the Amish don't need nursing homes or hospice care for their elderly.[159] He makes a point of saying he is not ashamed of what he calls his Amish "heritage," "not in the least."[160] Other characters, similarly, find things they like about the Amish. Many minor characters approach the Amish as tourists and they are not imagined, by the novels, to be wrong. They adore "traditional Amish quilting patterns," specifically "the popular Ninepatch" and "the Country Songbird."[161] They treat the quilts as art objects and quilting as a craft they can take up as a hobby. The religion is perceived as a lifestyle, which can then be consumed in modern, middle class leisure.

A notable character who takes this approach is Laura Bennett, who is enraptured by these "strangely ordinary people." Despite the specifics of her individual story, she is like a lot of tourists: She leaves the city, leaves behind what she thinks of as the modernity of factories and shopping malls, and goes to "Amish Country." Soon, the landscape opens up. The patchwork of fields looks

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[156] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 280.

[157] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 132.

[158] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 20.

[159] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 19.

[160] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 200.

[161] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 102.

like a quilt and there, "under the benign sun, farmers were busy working the land, using the simple tools of centuries past."[162] Bennett is strongly affected by what she sees. She is moved to tears watching Amish children pick strawberries, but doesn't know why. She describes herself as enchanted.[163] "Perhaps it was the way the ribbon of road dipped and curved past fertile fields on every hand," the narrator says. "Or the nostalgic sight of horse-drawn carriages. Or the gentle creaking of a covered bridge, flanked by groves of willows—their long fronds stirring in a lazy breeze."[164] Like so many tourists, Bennett cannot quite articulate her feelings, but is overwhelmed.

Lewis herself can seem similarly affected. She is moved by the Amish, even if her admiration for them is not without reservation. Sometimes she cannot help but wax rhapsodic about this alternative way of life. Often, this comes through in descriptive passages. Lewis can get momentarily distracted from the story she is telling by the thought of an Amish cellar. The third-person narrator describes the rows and rows of canning jars and piles and piles of home-grown produce, even while noting they are not relevant to the story.[165]

If any character was going to take an unambiguous position critiquing the Amish, it would be the heroine. Yet Mayfield, who has felt the oppressive force of Amish dogmatism personally, remains warmly disposed to the Old Order religionists. "I suppose it does seem strange," she says, when asked why she is "still drawn to Plain folk." "I really don't have any animosity towards my People. I don't dislike them … not at all."[166] Despite some sharp criticisms of the Amish, and the negative contrast with evangelical belief, these novels ultimately leave a lot of space for celebrating and appreciating the alternative lifestyle of the Amish.

Even the clearer condemnations are qualified. The *Heritage of Lancaster County* series ultimately, for example, takes an ambivalent position towards the practice of shunning. On the one hand, shunning is oppressive and cruel. Just the thought terrifies people. "Die Meinding, the shunning, was a frightful thing," Lewis writes. "The word itself stirred powerful emotions among the People. Feelings of rejection, abandonment … fear."[167] The practice is imagined as being in some ways worse than death. The shunned person is not only separated from loved ones, the loved ones must deny their love and not mourn the person or remember them in any formal, public way. In Ka-

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[162] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 258.

[163] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 269-270.

[164] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 258.

[165] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 57-58.

[166] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 190.

[167] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 132.

tie Lapp's case, her (adopted) family is even forbidden from saying her name.[168] On the other hand, as imagined by Lewis shunning is not bad in and of itself. Multiple characters note the shunning of Lapp/Mayfield was particularly harsh. Mary Stoltzfus comments that "it's much too harsh, seems to me."[169] Another character says, "Our bishop's mighty hard on the People, ya know. Doesn't bat an eye 'bout puttin' the Ban on someone who shows signs of arrogance."[170] Rebecca Lapp reflects that this particular shunning was the "harshest one she'd known in all these parts."[171] Even the bishop ends up agreeing he went too far. He publicly apologizes and eases off of the total ban of all contact with Mayfield.[172]

The particular exercise of the religious practice is imagined as bad, then, but the practice itself is insulated from critique. Shunning can be cruel, but is not necessarily cruel. "It's legitimate origins are found in the New Testament," Fisher says. "I'd have to say, though, that too often folks are shunned for mighty petty transgressions."[173] Lewis's fiction finally takes this ambivalent attitude towards the Amish way of life. When it is good, it's good. When it's bad, it's bad.

The difference, on closer examination, is based on the standard of personal authenticity. Amish religious practices are judged in the novels in terms of individual emotional fulfillment. When and where a particular aspect of the way of life is shown to help people be themselves, it is deemed good. If it is not good, that's because it denies the unique expressions of an individuality created by God. The restrictive rules about clothes, for example, are shown to be bad for Mayfield. When she is forced to conform to community standards, such as "the way they pulled their hair into tight buns at the back of their heads, the severe clothing, the devotional head covering," it "made her feel empty."[174] When she was adopted by the Amish as a baby, she was wearing satin. She has, in the years since, only worn Amish clothes, but she's never gotten used to them. The dresses still feel heavy; their colors still seem dull.[175] Her heart yearns for finer fabrics. When she leaves the Amish, the first thing Mayfield does is find clothes that feel right to her. "She loved the swishing

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[168] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 277.

[169] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 29.

[170] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 169.

[171] Lewis, *The Confession*, 146.

[172] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 143, 157.

[173] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 21.

[174] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 83-84.

[175] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 105.

song of the fabric," Lewis writes, "the silky feel of it against her skin. And, oh glory, the open neckline, free and unrestrictive."[176] The clothes make her feel good, and so are good.

For her friend Mary Stoltzfus, on the other hand, swishing, silky dresses have a different affect. They don't make her feel like herself. The don't help her express who she truly is. She recoils from fancy clothes, seeing that endless freedom of expression as a vortex of choices in which one would lose one's sense of self. She says, "They—those worldly moderns—keep changing and changing their clothes and themselves 'til they don't know which end's up. They don't know who they are or whatnot all!"[177] Stoltzfus choses for herself the conformity Mayfield rejects, exercising her agency through self-effacing submission of her will. For Stoltzfus, the religious stricture is good because it helps her be herself.

Unlike Helen Reimensnyder Martin and others who have imagined that "there is no way to be both Amish and self-actualized," Lewis takes this relativistic approach.[178] In the world that she imagines in The Heritage of Lancaster County, the Amish way of life is emotionally fulfilling for some and not for others, and individuals should choose what is right for them.

True religion is affective religion. It is emotionally fulfilling and individualistically expressive. The novels present evangelicalism in these terms. As an evangelical, it is important to Lewis that the Bible is the word of God and the *Ordnung* is not. Yet she explains this difference in terms of its affect. The Bible is the Bible because it gives life. The *Ordnung* is shown to be wrong because it makes people feel bad. It forbids them from expressing themselves, as in the case of music.[179] It is only a list of rules to control people.[180] It discourages and dismays people, making them feel like they don't measure up.[181] Mayfield reflects that the Ordnung "put a damper on my every word, deed, and oftentimes my thoughts, too."[182] The Bible is qualitatively different. The Bible speaks to the heart's desire. "*Read the book of John in the New Testament*," Fisher writes Mayfield. "*You'll find what your heart searches for.*"[183]

What her heart searches for, what humans are yearning for, according to this fiction, is the assurance of the love of a personal God. People want to know there is a God who cares about every

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[176] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 209.

[177] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 70.

[178] Valerie Weaver-Zercher 32.

[179] Lewis, *The Confession*, 259.

[180] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 131-132.

[181] Lewis, *The Confession*, 66.

[182] Lewis, *The Confession*, 12.

[183] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 132.

detail of their daily lives, not in a controlling way, but out of compassion.[184] As one Amish woman explains it, "We don't often hear that kinda thing about the Good Lord. It would be awful nice to know that what you say is true about almighty God bein' interested in every person's life."[185] When Mayfield goes to church, she hears a different message than she heard from the Amish. She hears passages from the Bible that she never knew existed and they say God cares for her personally. "She was captivated by the message of the love of God," Lewis writes, "a personal heavenly father who adored and cared for his children."[186] Her heart longs for this. God, in turn, longs to give her what her heart desires.[187] God wants to be found and God wants Mayfield to flourish and fully be who she is meant to be. Rather than correcting people or instructing them on how they are supposed to behave, the Bible helps people realize their true selves, and flourish. The Bible is shown to have affected Fisher so positively that "his face purely shown with a radiance."[188] This is taken as evidence of the truth of the Bible. Fisher reads the first half of 1 John 5:10 and all of verse 11 in the King James Version to make this point: "He that believeth in the Son of God hath the witness in himself … and this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son."[189] The evidence of an evangelicals' belief is inside them. It rises, unbidden, an authentic expression of who they truly are. In a personal relationship with Jesus, people can be themselves in the world of today.

The novels start with the heroine's declaration of the disjunction between how she is supposed to be and how she actually is. They end with the resolution of the struggle between the internal and external. The heroine is united with the hero and "past and present faded with his kisses, and her heart sang, responding with joy."[190] In the epilogue, Mayfield address the reader, reporting that she and Fisher got married "before God and the many witnesses—mostly Mennonites—who assembled at the Hickory Hollow meetinghouse."[191] She carried a white Bible with her wedding bouquet. At the wedding, Mayfield reconciled with her adoptive mother and told her she is praying for her and the Amish. She said, "My search is over, Mamma. All the scraps and pieces of my life are a

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[184] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 116.

[185] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 168.

[186] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 172.

[187] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 119.

[188] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 34.

[189] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 34-35.

[190] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 278.

[191] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 279.

God-ordered design … like one of your beautiful quilts." The design, Mayfield says, "is all right here" in the Bible.[192]

The *Heritage of Lancaster County* concludes with the couple living happily ever after, in accordance with the romance genre. They sing to each other. They share the love of Jesus. And they tell their children and grandchildren the story of how they sought and found themselves, and flourished.

Reading Beverly Lewis

More than one reader thrilled to the romance of the *Heritage of Lancaster County*. Sales numbers alone testify to the popularity of Lewis's work and the genre she started. Amish romances have grown popular enough to attract the attention of some cultural critics. One of the questions critics have routinely focused on is the genre's authenticity.

When scrutinized for factual veracity, the novels don't hold up too well. Critics have found numerous errors, ranging from small details about clothing and speech to preposterous plot elements. The fiction is not as mimetic as it presents itself. These errors are often quite minor. Lewis, for example, has been blamed for perpetuating the inaccurate information that the Amish don't have indoor plumbing.[193] Other errors are more major. *The Shunning*'s depiction of shunning is inaccurate in important ways.[194]

Perhaps most critically, Amish romances tell evangelical stories with evangelical heroines. This can seem, as religion writer Ann Neumann put it, like an "opportunistic appropriation of a heretofore sheltered subculture on a staggering scale."[195] Neumann accuses Lewis and the genre she started of being "singularly careless" about accuracy. Beth Graybill, former director of the Lancaster Mennonite Historical Society, is more generous when she suggests "many of these writers do try, in fact, to get their facts right."[196] Lewis has said she cares about these details. In *The Shunning*, the acknowledgements thank the Lancaster Historical Society, the Mennonite Information Center, the county's public library, and a private museum of Amish Life in Intercourse, Pennsylvania called the

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[192] Lewis, *The Reckoning*, 280.

[193] Beth Graybill, "Amish Women, Business Sense: Old Order Women Entrepenuers In the Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Tourist Marketplace," dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2009,173.

[194] Valerie Weaver-Zercher 206-209.

[195] Ann Neumann, "More Titilated than Thou: How the Amish Conquered the Evangelical Romance Market," The Baffler, http://thebaffler.com/salvos/titillated-thou.

[196] Beth Graybill, "Chasing the Bonnet: The Premise and Popularity of Writing Amish Women," Journal for the Center for Mennonite Writing 2, No. 4 (July 15, 2010), 1-6.

People's Place. The acknowledgements also thank "Amish friends and contacts, most of whom choose to remain anonymous."[197] The para-text also mention Lewis's anabaptist "heritage."

These claims to research lead some critics, including Neumann, to say the genre has "staked its reputation largely on its unvarnished authenticity," and failed to live up to that standard.[198] Authenticity, however, is presented in the *Heritage of Lancaster County* as something more important than the correct recording of facts. Authenticity is the truth of identity. It is the self discovery essential to self realization. The fiction focuses readers on this experience, above all else. It directs readers again and again to an authenticity that isn't accounted for in facts, but in a feeling spiritual fullness.

Readers, of course, read these texts in many ways. They are creative in their uses of fiction and the novels do not bind them to particular interpretations. Valerie Weaver-Zercher's study of the allure of Amish romance novels found many readers were interested in how the novels made them feel. She found they liked the imaginative alternative to their daily lives. One woman, a vice president of an international business, described reading of Amish romances as an extension of her thrice-yearly family trips from Philadelphia to Lancaster County.[199] Another woman reported reading fiction is better than touring Amish communities because the novels allow her to experience people's lives.

Steve Oates, who was in charge of marketing Lewis's first novels, called them "mini-vacations." The fiction might be classified as escapism, though "escape" is perhaps too judgmental a word. Weaver-Zercher suggests "transported." Readers desire to be moved out of their own modern lives in an "Amish country getaway." Like tourists, they leave their own worlds for a short time, hoping to return to them rested, revitalized, and maybe inspired.[200]

The stories of affective individualism, in this way, are read as a private practice of affective individualism. Readers pursue the same sort of authenticity that the characters pursue: the authenticity that calls them to individual, emotional fulfillment. The connection—or even conflation—of the characters' spiritual search and the readers' is not lost on the readers. In fact, it's frequently cited as the reason for reading. Discussions of these texts, Weaver-Zercher found, are frequently conversations about belief.

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[197] Lewis, *The Shunning*, 283.

[198] Neumann.

[199] Weaver-Zercher 129-130.

[200] Valerie Weaver-Zercher 127.

At a women's book club in Plano, Texas, for example, discussion of an Amish romance novel moved freely "between the content and characters of the book itself and the stuff of their own lives, especially faith. Always they return to faith."[201]

The text encourages this. As readers pick up these novels and imagine what it would be like to be Amish and what it would be like to go on a quest to find yourself, they imagine, too, what belief would be like if it were like authenticity. They imagine discovering the truth of who they are—really.

The Search for Authenticity

In some ways, the readers of Amish romances, who express themselves in their consumption of these novels, are different than the heroine of the *Heritage of Lancaster County*. They are not, for the most part, red-haired heiresses who were given away at birth. They have no personal experience with the Amish, and certainly weren't raised being told they were Amish. On the other hand, of course, readers really identify with Katie Lapp and Katherine Mayfield, and the story of how the former realizes she is really the latter. When they look at the cover and see a girl in a bonnet, they see something the recognize. They too long to be themselves in the world of today.

Conservative homeschooling women in 1980s and '90s, who were identified by their distinctive homemade dresses and denim jumpers, looked more like the Amish romance heroines. At least on the surface. The similarity can obscure the deeper difference. Katie Lapp feels her clothes hid who she truly is. In the homeschooling movement, by contrast, the clothes were understood to reveal true selves, the women's authentic identity as mothers. In that difference, however, the fictional Amish women and the real homeschooling mothers share a social imaginary. The unarticulated background, for both, is this imperative of personal, individual flourishing.

Belief, in each case, is conceived of as the realization of self, the fulfillment of the authentic imperative. Faced with the condition of secularity, where there are always choices and too many choices, and each one can feel fragile, one of the responses from evangelicals was to ask the question, "Who am I really?"

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[201] Valerie Weaver-Zercher 107.

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Imagining Liminal Belief

When Mackenzie Allen Phillips finds what he's looking for, he thinks he's going crazy.

The protagonist of *The Shack*, the bestselling evangelical novel of the start of the twenty-first century, is looking for the place where his daughter was murdered, the titular cabin in the woods. He finds it, and reality itself seems to buckle.

At first it is momentary, a wavering, where the abandoned cabin is also something else: "The shack itself looked dead and empty, but as he stared it seemed for a moment to transform into an evil face, twisted into in some demonic grimace."[1] Then the evil of the place is so overwhelming that Phillips feels like he should kill himself. He feels "the emptiness of the place invading his soul."[2] He doesn't do it, though part of him wants to, but instead sits down in the shack. This is where his daughter was killed. He sees a bloodstain. He sees what she must have seen, in her horrible last moments. Phillips dozes off, for probably only a few minutes, and then gets up to leave. He walks away—and as he does he sees everything change.

Winter becomes spring.

Snow becomes flowers and birds are singing.

The run-down shack becomes something sturdy and beautiful, a well-constructed, well-maintained cabin by a lake in a flower-filled glade.

He thinks he must be going crazy. Phillips feels "as if he had opened Pandora's box and was being swept away into the center of madness."[3]

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[1] William Paul Young, *The Shack* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007), 76.

[2] Young 78. All italics and ellipses in all quotations are original.

[3] Young 80.

He goes back to the cabin door. Before he can reach the handle, God answers. God is not what he expected.

"It was all so impossible," Phillips thinks, "but here he was, or was he really here at all?"[4]

The Shack was published in 2008, and has since sold more than ten million copies. The novel tells the story of a weekend encounter with God. It tells the story of how a man who was angry at God because of the evil that had happened to him and the tragedy in his life nonetheless comes to trust God and believe in God.

In *The Shack*, belief is imagined as the embrace of ambiguity. Like the bestselling evangelical fiction of the end of the previous century, the central theme of the novel's narrative is the struggle to believe in a secular age, in the secular condition. Unlike some evangelical fiction, such as the bestselling *Left Behind* series, however, *The Shack* invites readers to imagine belief happens in the struggle with doubt, that belief doesn't settle what has been unsettled or finally resolve all uncertainty, but arises out of that condition. Ambiguity and indeterminate in-betweeness are presented as important for true Christian belief. The novel invites readers to imagine that uncertainty, in fact, is the necessary condition of belief.

The Uncertainty of Secularity

Uncertainty is a dominant aspect of secularity. In one sense, it is a simple byproduct of a pluralistic society. There are historical reasons for this, which can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution and before that the Enlightenment. But even just the bare demographic reality of cultural diversity and global exchanges creates the condition where a choice to believe is made in the context of other possible choices. There are always other people who have made other choices and believe other things. In that context, philosopher Charles Taylor writes, "faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[5] However confident one might be in a particular choice, the presence of other options produces a sense of tension. Any choice, in that context, is a little bit fragile, a little bit vulnerable. In a more homogeneous society, a belief might be a default option. It might not even be experienced as a choice. God could be taken for granted, perhaps in the way that gravity or germs are taken for granted at the start of the twenty-first century. It is possible to not believe in gravity today, of course, but almost incomprehensible. Such a belief would be so at odds with common assumptions, so anti-social, that that kind of dissent would be commonly perceived as

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[4] Young 87.

[5] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 3.

crazy, sick, or otherwise deviant. It's not a live option for most people. Relatedly, even as people mentally assent to the idea of gravity, they don't experience it as act of choice. It's a default. Religious beliefs do not have that status. Religious belief in the secular condition is an individual act, done in a cultural context where any such act will be contested, at least implicitly. Believers each individually bear the burden of proof, even if only for themselves. As Catholic writer Paul Elie put it, for the modern believer, "there is no one true faith, evident at all times and places. Every religion is one among many."[6] The sociologist Peter Berger offers a similar diagnosis of the secular condition."The modern individual," he writes, "is faced not just with the opportunity but with the necessity to make choices as to his belief."[7] Part of the experience of believing is the experience of knowing there are other options.

Taylor, in his 2007 tome, *A Secular Age*, argues that Western thought has undergone a 500-year transformation. In 1500, not believing in God was almost inconceivable. In 2000, many take it to be the default option. People persist in believing, but they experience their beliefs as being always contested. There are good reasons to be skeptical of Taylor's historical account, as discussed in chapter three. Regardless of whether there ever was an era of truly naïve belief in Western history, however, his description of the secular condition of contestability is critical for understanding how some evangelicals have imagined belief.

Contestability can make belief harder for people, "fragilizing" belief. A belief not shared by the surrounding society is deviant knowledge, sociologically speaking. With the highest levels of social affirmation, implicit cultural confirmation allows particular knowledge to be taken for granted. More moderate social affirmation makes a belief appear reasonable and acceptable, although it is not obvious or universally agreed upon. When a belief isn't socially affirmed, it's perceived as not being credible. "The plausibility, in the sense of what people actually find credible, of views of reality depends upon the social support these receive," Berger writes.[8] "The plausibility of 'knowledge' that is not socially shared, that is challenged by our fellow men, is imperiled, not just in our dealings with others but much more importantly in our own minds."[9] A common example of this, which Taylor uses, is the culture shock an atheist from New York or San Francisco can feel in mov-

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[6] Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003), 427.

[7] Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979), 28.

[8] Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (1969; repr., Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1971), 50.

[9] Berger, *Rumour*, 19.

ing to the American Bible Belt, or an evangelical Christian going in the opposite direction. Berger gives the example of a social scientist among witch doctors or a witch doctor among social scientists. Things that were once taken for granted might start to waver. Things that were once plausible might begin to appear less so. One becomes a "cognitive minority," and "the status of a cognitive minority is invariably an uncomfortable one."[10] Of course, there are atheists in Alabama and evangelicals in Manhattan. This pressure does not make believing impossible; it may actually make belief a more powerful marker of social identity and increase the intensity with which beliefs are held. The secular condition more directly affects how people believe than whether they believe. James K.A. Smith explains that "faith endures in our secular age," but it has some peculiar characteristics. "Faith is fraught," he writes. "Confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We don't believe instead of doubting; we believe while doubting."[11] The co-existence of a lot of different beliefs means belief cannot be naïve. Each is always understood in terms of its difference from others. It is always relationally situated, one option in between others.

This idea of the secular condition has also been described as "the postmodern condition." The phrase can mean a lot of different things, but Jean-François Lyotard famously defined it as "incredulity toward metanarratives."[12] This is notably not the same as simple disenchantment. It is not a claim that people have given up on metanarratives. It is a claim, rather, that people live with a sense of liminality or in-betweenness. People in the postmodern condition are perpetually between metanarratives. They live in the intersections, Lyotard says. They occupy an intermediate, interstructural, interstitial situation, which, according to Lyotard, "refines our sense of differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable."[13] In postmodernity, then, one shouldn't expect to find broad disenchantment or secularization, but rather to see people with an acute sense of the multiplicity of options and, perhaps, a wide acceptance of in-betweenness. The secularization thesis argued that this kind pluralization would result in the sunset of belief. Postmodern theory claims that, instead, people find ways to cope with and manage the existence of multiple metanarratives.

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[10] Berger, *Rumour*, 19.

[11] James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 4. Emphasis original.

[12] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester, UK: Manchester University, 1989), xxiv.

[13] Lyotard xxv.

One widely discussed "postmodern" response to the secular condition is irony and sarcasm. People develop ways to believe while distancing themselves from belief.[14] Another response to the secular situation is fundamentalism. People maintain their beliefs by taking a more aggressive, counter-cultural stance. They believe "in the teeth of a cognitively antagonistic world," as Berger puts it, "the world (literally or otherwise) be damned."[15] A lot of people in twenty-first century America, however, find ways to tolerate and live with and in the multiple metanarratives. A large number of Americans understand their own religious beliefs in terms of intersections and liminal spaces. This can be seen in the high rates of conversion: about 40 percent of Americans change religious identification at least once, and some change many times.[16] They choose to believe, but other options remain viable options for them. It can also be seen in the widespread prevalence of what Robert Wuthnow and, after him, Wade Clark Roof have called the spirituality of seeking. Many people put more value on spiritual journeys than destinations.[17]

The Shack imagines belief in these terms. This bestselling evangelical novel stages belief in the secular condition of uncertainty. With the fictional narrative, readers are invited to embrace uncertainty and cross pressures and liminal in-betweenness. They are invited to imagine belief is stronger, clearer, and realer in these conditions. The story suggests the secular struggle for belief is not a threat to belief but makes real belief possible. "Faith," God says in *The Shack*, "does not grow in the house of certainty."[18] It is found, instead, in the in-between space of a religious experience of a shack in the woods.

This chapter considers how some evangelicals imagined belief in the context of uncertainty. Looking at several distinct cultural phenomena, the chapter shows how some didn't see secularity as a problem, but as the condition for real belief. In contrast with the idea of compelled belief, as imagined in *Left Behind*, or the necessary conflict of belief, as imagined in *This Present Darkness*, or the realization of an authentic self, as imagined in *The Heritage of Lancaster County* series, there were evangelicals in the first decade of the twenty-first century who thought of belief as uncertain

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[14] See Slavoj Žižek, *The Pupped and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2003), 6-8.

[15] Berger, *Rumour*, 31.

[16] Darren E. Sherkat, *Changing Faith: The Dynamics and Consequences of Americans' Shifting Religious Identitites* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 50, 59.

[17] See Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journey of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Franciso, CA: Harper, 1994) and *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

[18] Young 206.

and open-ended. This chapter first looks at an important American tradition of religious experiences in liminal, wilderness spaces. It will then turn to a lose movement of evangelicals who have been self-consciously postmodern. These emergent or emerging Christians attempted to create a liminal space on the margins of evangelicalism, conceiving of their belief as both inside and outside at the same time. Finally, this chapter turns to the bestselling evangelical novel *The Shack*, considering how it also stages these themes of the secular struggle of belief.

Liminal Religious Experience

The Shack is actually part of a long American tradition of religious experiences in the woods. Discussions of secularity and postmodernity often assume pervasive doubt is a new phenomenon. Religious liminality has, however, always had a prominent place in American imaginations.

One famous literary example is Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown." In that story, first published in 1835, the title character ventures forth from Salem, Massachusetts on an indeterminate errand. He exits his house, "but put his head back, after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife," Faith.[19] Then he leaves the town as the day turns into night, enters the forest where civilization turns to wilderness, and sees things that may or may not be real. In every way, Goodman Brown is in-between.

This makes everything uncertain. The character encounters a person who may be "the devil himself." He follows an uncertain glimpse of a woman who may be his wife to a gathering that may be a witches' sabbath. As the semi-secret religious ceremony commences, he thinks he recognizes "a score of the church-members of Salem Village famous for their especial sanctity," including Faith, who is going forward in a conversion ritual to dedicate herself to evil.[20] Young Goodman Brown cries out and, it would seem, wakes up. The reality of what he saw—or what he thought he saw—is shown to be uncertain. The character is deeply affected by all this ambiguity and is left in a crisis of doubt. He loses his faith, just as, in the woods with what seemed to be witches, he lost his wife, Faith.

Readers themselves are also left in doubt. They are left with a choice that cannot ever be uncontested. "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamt a wild dream of a

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[19] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Young Goodman Brown and Other Short Stories* (New York: Dover, 1992), 24.

[20] Hawthorne 30-31.

witch-meeting?" Hawthorn writes. "Be it so if you will."[21] The truth of the matter is not only unknown, but unknowable. It can't be resolved, and readers are suspended in a moment of indecision.

This was not only a literary trick. As religious historian Amanda Porterfield has shown, there was an emphasis on structural uncertainty in early American religious experiences. "Religious institutions grew as much to manage mistrustful doubt as to relieve it," she writes. "Individuals celebrated for maintaining their religious edge went back and forth between doubt and trust, each tendency renewing intensity in the other."[22] Porterfield cites several model converts, upheld by American preachers at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. They were praised for their belief, but especially for the way they continued to doubt the veracity of their belief even as they believed. The kept themselves is a space of heightened religious tension.
Evangelical conversions are characterized by these liminal tensions. For those unsatisfied by a formal, creedal, "churchly Christianity," conversion narratives became an essential element of belief. In these narratives, the conversion is imagined as the threshold between mortality and eternity. Conversion stories frequently emphasize the specific, historic moment of the conversion, with exact dates and times, while also depicting its timelessness, as the convert is caught up in an expansive, eternal present, losing all track of time. The narratives are also situated simultaneously as a personal and universal story.[23] The model of the narrative and the model converts in the narratives are critically in between: in between belief and unbelief, and in between seeking and finding, in between sin and salvation, in between time and eternity, in between wilderness and civilization.

This liminal experience is a recurring motif in evangelical narratives, from Jonathan Edwards's personal narrative to Billy Graham's autobiography.[24] One famous model covert to have a religious experience in a liminal space is Charles Finney. The famed nineteenth-century revivalist—famed especially for creating the conditions for people's conversions—experienced his own conversion in a New York forest. "I turned and bent my course towards the woods," Finney recalled in his memoir, "feeling that I must be alone, and away from all human eyes and ears, so that I could pour

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[21] Hawthorne 33-34.

[22] Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics int he New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012), 2.

[23] Roger M. Payne, *The Self and the Sacred: Conversion and Autobiography in Early American Protestantism* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1998), 68-72.

[24] Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," in *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 16, Letters and Personal Writing*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1998), 790-804; Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 139-139.

out my prayer to God."[25] He went over a hill and about a quarter of a mile into the wilderness. There, just like Young Goodman Brown and Mackenzie Allen Phillips, he was overcome with a sense of evil.

He prayed and prayed until he felt something break inside. Finney wrote, "This passage of Scripture seemed to drop into my mind with a flood of light: 'Then shall ye go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. Then shall ye seek me and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.' I instantly seized hold of this with my heart." In that moment, he passed over from doubt to belief. "I knew it was God's word," he wrote, "and God's voice, as it were, that spoke to me."[26]

For Finney, the important part of the story is the breakthrough. Belief is the certainty that comes with the resolution of the ambiguity of the liminal space. The story nonetheless ascribes a specialness to that liminality. It valorizes the anxiety of the in-betweenness, calling attention to it, recommending it, and promoting it.

Finney was always attuned to the religious power of liminal spaces. His first revivals were held on the frontier, in Evans Mills and Antwerp, New York, villages on the banks of Lake Erie, near the Canadian border, the edge burgeoning young republic.[27] In his revivals, he instituted the use of the "anxious bench," a place for those interested in converting but not yet ready. He also didn't preach from the customary elevated pulpit but stood in the front of the church in the center aisle, emphasizing the threshold of the altar.[28] Even when his revivals were not on the frontier, Finney found ways to symbolically mark the revival site as a space for transitions. He and supporters turned a New York City theater into a church in 1832. Such a conversion was unheard of at the time, but the location was deemed suitable for revivals in part because it was only accessible through a single archway and a garden. "Finney's invitation to sinners to leave their 'wicked ways' and enter the spiritual seclusion of God's love was reinforced," writes religious historian Bradley Wright Griffin "by the chapel's literal seclusion from the city."[29] Revivals themselves, of course, in

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[25] Charles Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A.G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 19.

[26] Finney 20.

[27] Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe,*Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 36.

[28] Bradley Wright Griffin, "A Faith Performed: A Performative Analysis of the Religious Revivals Conducted by Charles Grandison Finney at the Chatham Street Chapel, 1832-1836, (doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2005), 84.

[29] Griffin 73.

Finney's theology, were imagined as spaces of awakening, in between the sleep of sin and the light of the life of Christ. Finney never intended people to stay in such spaces, but he thought that places of in-betweenness were very, very special.

When Mackenzie Allen Phillips feels compelled to go to the shack, he's following a well-trod path. More than a few of *The Shack*'s readers could be expected to recognize the narrative form of a religious experience in the woods. Hawthorn's stories are widely taught in American schools. "Young Goodman Brown" is one of the most-assigned short stories in college English classes, ranking tenth in a corpus of 300,000 college syllabi, above even such classics as *The Great Gatsby* and *Huckleberry Finn*.[30] Finney's conversion narrative would be familiar to evangelical readers as well. His sermons are a staple for evangelical publishers and widely available in evangelical bookstores and church libraries. At least eight publishers have packaged and sold Finney's sermons on prayer and revival, with several publishing more than a half dozen Finney titles at the turn of the twenty-first century.[31] There are a number of popular biographies available, and multiple editions of his autobiography. Bethany House published a condensed version of the autobiography in 1977 and re-released it in 2006. Zondervan put out a 784-page scholarly edition with the restored, original text in 1989 and published a paperback version stripped of scholarly commentary that same year. Zondervan re-released *The Original Memoirs of Charles G. Finney* in 2002 and came out with a Kindle edition in 2010. Finney's story was widely known when the protagonist of *The Shack* felt he too had to be away from all human eyes and ears and bend his course to the woods. The theme of a religious experience in that liminal space was familiar. The issue of structural uncertainty—of being in a place where it felt impossible not to doubt—was not new to readers. The question of the interrelationship of belief and doubt—how the vulnerability of doubt seemed like the necessary condition of the experience of faith—was one that many felt.

Evangelicals Embrace Doubt

Liminality was an especially pressing issue for a number of American evangelicals in the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the 2000s, emergent Christians, also called emerging Christians and

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[30] Open Syllabus Project, http://opensyllabusproject.org/people/. The OSP database contains about 2.1 million syllabi from U.S. colleges. About 300,000 are from English courses.

[31] For an overview of the books commonly carried in evangelical bookstores, see www.ChristianBook.com. Whitaker House, a Charismatic evangelical press in New Kennsington, PA, has printed many Finney titles, such as *How to Experience Revival*, published in 1984 and continuously in print since then. Bethany House released a series of ten books of Finney sermons in the 1980s and has kept his *Systematic Theology* in print since the 1990s.

emergence Christians, tried to put forward a postmodern evangelicalism. This was a loose network of people using the same or similar branding for a theological project. Emergent Christianity is generally described as a movement, but emergent Christians themselves more often characterized it as a conversation. They were very resistant to fixed definitions of what they were doing, in part because the "new kind of Christianity" they claimed to be talking about was an evangelicalism that would thrive in the anxious space of Finney's woods or the ambiguities of the multiplicities of Lyotad's metanarratives. They wanted to live in the intersections, as Lyotard would say. Against evangelical elders who were worried about cultural cross pressures and the fragilization of faith, they sought to embrace uncertainty. They worked to enact an evangelical Christianity that was purer because it was perpetually contested and show that faith was truer when it was vulnerable to cross pressures.

Emergent Christianity came out of the Leadership Network, a church-growth think tank founded by Bob Buford, a wealthy cable-TV magnate in Dallas, Texas. The Leadership Network was the behind-the-scenes research-and-development engine of the megachurch movement in the 1990s.[32] Buford sought out successful leaders, including Rick Warren of Sattleback and Bill Hybels of Willow Creek as well as corporate management experts, and brought them together to talk about what worked, and created church models that could be replicated across the country. The Leadership Network had an extensive influence though the group's programs, conferences, and retreats.[33] Megachurches, however, despite massive growth, didn't reach twenty-somethings. The Leadership Network was increasingly concerned about the missing 18-to-35 demographic, which was termed the "dropout hole."[34] The Leadership Network convened a study of the problem in 1996. It formed a special research group of younger evangelicals.[35] The group was headed by Doug Pagitt, a 30-year-old youth pastor of a Minneapolis megachurch. He was supported by Chris Seay,

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[32] Ed Stetzer, "A Catalyst that Fostered a Movement: Thoughts on Bob Buford and Leader Network," *Christianity Today*, April 9, 2014, http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/april/catalyst-that-fostered-movement.html.

[33] Charles Trueheart, "Welcome to the Next Church," The Atlantic Monthly, 278, no. 2 (1996), 37-58; Douglas B. Sosnik, Matthew J. Dowd, and Ron Fournier, *Applebee's America: How Successful Political, Business and Religious Leaders Connect with the New American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 118-119; Stephen P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* (Oxford: Oxford, 2014), 104-105.

[34] Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 10. See also Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating New Worship Gatherings for Emerging Generations* (El Cajon, CA: emergentYS, 2004), xi.

[35] Adam Sweatman, "A Generous Heterodoxy: Emergent Village and the Emerging Milleau" (presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, GA, Nov. 21-24, 2015). See also, Ed Stetzer, "The Emerging/Emergent Church: A Missiological Perspective," The Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry 5:2 (2008), 63-97.

25, a third-generation Texas pastor who had successfully started a church among the disaffected evangelical students of Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and Mark Driscoll, 26, who had founded a self-consciously postmodern church in Seattle, Washington.[36] These were supposed to be the next celebrity pastors. They could reach a new generation.

At a Christian conference center operated by the Navigators in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 1997, however, this group became convinced it was necessary for evangelicalism to take a postmodern turn. Brad Cecil, a youth pastor from Fort Worth, Texas, had read some contemporary philosophy and argued to the group that their real problem was philosophical. This was more than a generational disconnect, he said. They couldn't just market the church to a new generation the way Warren and Hybels had, finding new targeting techniques for a new demographic. It wasn't a marketing problem.[37] It was "primarily a shift in epistemology—the way people process information and view the world."[38] Driscoll had also been reading some contemporary philosophy. He had studied the modernism of Rene Descartes in college and knew the work of the philosopher John Caputo, the foremost proponent of deconstruction in the U.S. at the time.[39] Driscoll declared himself "glad to see the end of modernity." He encouraged the group to think of themselves as missionaries to "emerging and postmodern cultures."[40] The idea of a complete new paradigm electrified the young evangelicals.

A seminarian interning at a Denver megachurch recalled the meeting was the first time he had heard the word "postmodern." But it immediately made sense. "For the first time," Tim Keel later wrote, "I heard people describing out loud an expression of the Christian faith in a language that was native to me, that named the tensions I was holding within myself related to the church, our culture, and the gospel."[41]

In the next few years, with the sponsorship of the Leadership Network, the group began to develop new religious practices and rhetoric to bring evangelical Christianity to postmodernity.

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[36] Tony Jones, *New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 43.

[37] Tony Jones, *New Christians*, 43.

[38] Brad Cecil, "Minister in the Emerging Postmodern World," PowerPoint presentation, 1999, http://www.slideshare.net/knightopia/ministry-in-the-emerging-postmodern-world/

[39] Driscoll, *Confessions*, foot note 10, 203-205. Tony Jones credits Cecil with introducing emergent Christians to John Caputo (Jones, *New Christians*, 41). Cecil, however, says he was introduced to Caputo's work by Mark Driscoll (Cecil, "The Politics of Love," Axxess.org, Nov. 19, 2008, http://axxess.org/?p=51).

[40] Driscoll, *Confessions*, 22.

[41] Tim Keel, *Intuitive Leadership: Embracing a Paradigm of Narrative, Metaphor, and Chaos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 33.

There were conferences, speaking tours, and books they subsidized and promoted, including *A New Kind of Christian*, by Brian McLaren, a landmark work of the emergent movement.

There was not a clear consensus on what it meant to be postmodern. Postmodern philosophy is notoriously difficult to understand, and few of these men had more than a secondhand knowledge of major theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. For some of these young evangelicals, it seemed like they were really talking about new, more culturally savvy style. There was not real agreement here, either, though. Driscoll, for example, whose church quickly grew from hundreds to thousands, offended some with his swearing. He was invited to be a guest preacher at a church in Texas, but told he couldn't use the same foul language he did at his hip Seattle church, Mars Hill. Driscoll said "fuck" in his first sentence from the pulpit.[42] Some in the group were worried about being known as the "young assholes of evangelicalism," as emergent theologian Tony Jones recalled.[43] Others embraced the identity.[44]

Even when it wasn't that aggressive, the postmodern rhetoric and style could create problems for these young evangelicals. There was increasing dissonance between the younger pastors and their sponsors. The Leadership Network wanted to "platform innovators." It was looking to develop strategic plans, organize training retreats, and franchise new church-growth programs. The younger pastors resisted. They wanted to do more philosophy and theology. They wanted to develop thoroughgoing critiques of existing models of church. When one of the youth pastors involved in the group came out with a book on "postmodern youth ministry," it opened with a disavowal of exactly the kind of thing the Leadership Network thought it was financing. "This book will *not* give you a model for your youth ministry," it said. "Instead of promoting a new paradigm, we must deconstruct the old paradigms and then propose a series of reflections on culture, the church, and the state of youth ministry."[45] The younger pastors thought they were challenging the corporate mindset of platforming and franchising, and their sponsors did feel challenged. They were uncomfortable

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[42] Jones, *New Christians*, 48. See also Brad Cecil, "The Politics of Love," Axxess.com, Nov. 19, 2008, http://axxess.org/?p=51 and "In Defense of Driscoll," Axxess.com, March 15, 2009, http://axxess.org/?p=80.

[43] Tony Jones, "Some Thoughts About Mark Driscoll," Theoblogy, Sept. 4, 2014, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tonyjones/2014/09/04/some-thoughts-about-mark-driscoll/.

[44] There were also substantive disagreements, which illustrate how vague "postmodern" was to these young evangelicals. Driscoll alienated his peers by his insistence on the importance of the doctrine that women could not hold positions of authority in the church. He thought defending traditional gender roles was non-negotiable. The group was mostly men. They mostly worked in churches with exclusive male leadership. They did not all agree with that, however, and were not comfortable with the importance Driscoll put on the issue. Within a few years, Driscoll had publicly distanced himself from the movement. See Driscoll, *Confessions*, 22; and Jones, *New Christians*, 48.

[45] Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialities, 2001), 12.

with the rhetoric of "deconstruction" and unhappy with the attacks on existing evangelical programs (many of which had been developed with the financial support of the Leadership Network).

It seemed the younger men were starting a movement of "ecclesial discontent."[46] By 2000, according to Jones, "the wheels were coming off the relationship."[47]

There was an attempt at rebranding and re-directing in April 2001. Brad Smith, president of the Leadership Network, announced the think tank had identified a cohort more interested in construction than "deconstruction." They were a "groundbreaking group of innovators," Smith said, "a new breed, with a new calling, new tone and new priorities." They would "spend more time experimenting with new creations than critiquing past assumptions."[48] With that goal, the think tank backed McLaren's 2001 book. The Leadership Network released *A New Kind of Christian* with the publisher Jossey-Bass, a secular San Francisco press, as part of a line of titles promising to help church leaders "multiply their own dynamic Kingdom-building initiatives."[49] The book was promoted by Phyllis Tickle, the religion editor of Publishers' Weekly. Tickle, not an evangelical herself, praised the book to mainstream journalists covering the Christian Bookseller Association.[50] *A New Kind of Christian* sparked a public conversation about something different happening in American evangelicalism.[51] The rebranding effort didn't fix the problem, though. The Leadership Network had to postpone a 2001 conference. The new "positive and pragmatic" group, tasked to "move toward more creation and less critique," wouldn't accept a traditional format of speakers and workshops, but also had not come up with an alternative.[52] In May 2001, some of the younger pastors decided they still wanted to pursue theological and philosophical critique. They decided to label their project "emergent." They founded Emergent Village as an umbrella-group for ongoing conver-

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[46] Ed Stetzer, "The Emerging/Emergent Church," 74.

[47] Jones, *New Christians*, 49.

[48] Brad Smith, "What's Next with the Terra Nova Project," YoungLeaders.com, April 19, 2001, http://web.archive.org/web/20010419192307/http://www.youngleader.org/WhatsNext.htm.

[49] Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 246.

[50] Jones, *New Christians*, 48. See also Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 164.

[51] Jones, *New Christians*, 50. James S. Beilo reports that in his ethnographic work on emergent Christians, *A New Kind of Christian* is "a canonical Emerging Church book, and one of the most often-cited by my consultants" (*Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity*, New York: New York University, 2011, 38).

[52] Smith.

sations. The relationship with the Leadership Network ended the next month. Funding stopped and the research group was disbanded.[53]

The movement was thus born in a marginal space. It was from the megachurch movement, but also sharply critical of and opposed to that movement. It existed in this in-betweenness, which was captured in the name, "emergent." In important ways, the movement (or conversation) was sustained by the institutional matrix of evangelical publishing discussed in chapter two. Early emergent conferences were sponsored by Youth Services, a California-based evangelical youth group resource and training company.[54] These were held in conjunction with the National Pastor's Convention, which was jointly organized by Youth Specialities, Zondervan, and *Christianity Today*. To some observers, the only difference between the Emergent Gathering and the National Pastor's Convention was that one was for evangelical pastors under 35, the other for evangelical pastors over 35.[55] Youth Services and Zondervan also partnered to release a line of emergent books with a special imprint, emergentYS.[56] Baker had its own line of emergent books.[57] It was called the Emergent Village Resources for Communities of Faith series, produced in cooperation with the Emergent Village.[58] From a certain perspective, the movement could look like a marketing ploy to push evangelical books to younger readers.

Many of these books, however, were about critiquing past assumptions. Emergent Christians targeted and opposed evangelicalism as they had experienced it, even while themselves being a part of it, in some ways. There was an attempt to be inside and outside evangelicalism at the same time.

The tension of this liminal position was apparent in one of the very first books to identify emergent Christianity by name, as a movement. Dan Kimball published *The Emerging Church* with Zondervan in 2003. The book had two forewords. The first was by Rick Warren, the country's most famous megachurch pastor. Warren explicitly endorsed the emergent project, connecting it to the "purpose-driven" "seeker-sensitive" ideas of church growth that had made him an evangelical celebrity. "While my book *The Purpose-Driven Church* explained what the church is called to do,"

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[53] Sweatman.

[54] Stetzer, "A Catalyst."

[55] Katherine T. Phan, "National Pastor's Convention Mingles with emergentYS," Christian Post, May 20, 2004.

[56] James Ruark, *House of Zondervan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 200.

[57] Doug Pagitt, "Emergent Enters Publishing Partnership with Baker Books," emergent-us, June 22, 2005, http://emergent-us.typepad.com/emergentus/2005/06/emergent_enters.html.

[58] "Emergent Village Resources For Communities of Faith Series," Baker Publishing Group, n.d., http://bakerpublishinggroup.com/series/emersion-emergent-village-resources-for-communities-of-faith.

Warren wrote, "Dan's book explains how to do it with the cultural creatives who think and feel in postmodern terms."[59] The second forward was by Brian McLaren. McLaren's endorsement of the book opened with an attack on megachurches and the kind of programs identified with Warren. "Too often in recent years, church leaders have acted as if being sensitive to seekers means sliding into a one-size-fits-all, franchise, clone, mimic-the-model mentality," McLaren wrote. These churches have been "gimmick-prone and thoughtlessly (sometimes desperately) pragmatic." Emergent churches, in McLaren's account, were the antidote to what was wrong with contemporary evangelicalism.[60] The book does not go on resolve the tension between these two positions. Both things are true.

Emergent Christianity grew rapidly from 2001 to 2008.[61] As it grew, emergent ideas were adopted and adapted by different people, in different contexts. There were a variety of practices and techniques developed under the name "emergent." There were new sermon styles, which were more conversational, story-based, and open-ended. There were new worship practices, often incorporating Catholic rituals or spiritual exercises that participants identified with esoteric, pre-modern sources, such as "Celtic Christianity," into a postmodern pastiche. There were experimental new approaches to evangelism, congregational structure, and congregational life.[62] These were all, in some way, "deconstructive," as Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel explain in their study, *The Deconstructed Church*. "It appears that ambiguity is a necessary and strategic aspect of Emerging Christians' religious orientation," they write. Emergent Chrisitans wanted to embody "a willingness to live with tension, ambiguity, and gray areas."[63] None of these new practices, however, became a defining characteristic of emergent Christianity. This was celebrated.

"You can't box-in the emerging church," wrote Dan Kimball. "Instead of one emerging-church model, there are hundreds and thousands of models of emerging churches. Modernity may

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[59] Rick Warren, "Foreward," in Dan Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 7-8, here 7.

[60] Brian McLaren, "Foreward," in Dan Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 9-10, here 9.

[61] In 2008, internal disagreements among identified leaders appear to have taken a toll. (See Sweatman; and Brandon O'Brien, "Emergent's Divergence," Christianity Today, 53.1 (2009), 13). There was also an increase in disputes over the terminology at that time, and some intense debates about the significance of the difference between slight variations of the name (See Tony Jones, "'Emerging' v. 'Emergent,'" Patheos, April 15, 2008, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tonyjones/2008/04/15/emerging-vs-emergent/). After 2008, there was declining interest in the label. After 2013, there was no significant discourse network identified with the term emergent or emerging Christian.

[62] James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: New York University, 2011); Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emergent Christianity* (Oxord: Oxford, 2014).

[63] Marti and Ganiel 108, 99.

have taught us look for a clean model to imitate. But in today's postmodern context, it's not that simple."[64]

In all that diversity, though, there were common characteristics. However polyvocal the movement was, emergent Christians were unified by how they defined themselves in critical relationship to evangelicalism. They were unified by rhetorical practices.

The ethnographer James Bielo points this out in his study of emergent Christians in Michigan and Ohio. He did three years of field work, interviewing ninety emergent Christians and studying forty emergent communities from 2007 to 2010. He found his informants defined themselves and explained themselves in narratives of deconversion. "Invariably," Bielo writes, "when asked to tell their Christian story Emerging Evangelicals posit a distance between their sense of self and the conservative Evangelical subculture. They explain various elements of Evangelicalism that they no longer accept, how their distastes became realized, and how the details of their current life respond to those perceived shortcomings."[65] Not all of these deconversion narratives were identical, but they shared the same form. Each was a personal story about being an outsider within evangelicalism.

One woman told Bielo she was alienated by the rigidity of gender roles at the major evangelical seminary where her husband was studying for ordination. She "did not fit the mold," she said, explaining: "I don't want to make lace covers for Bibles."[66] Another woman's criticism focused on evangelical worship practices. She felt the churches were not creative enough, or open enough in developing ways for people to encounter God.[67] A man told Bielo he disagreed with evangelical institutional formations, which he felt promoted "tribalism." He said evangelical churches were structured to protect people from their pluralistic societies.[68] Another man was less focused on the ecclesiology of evangelical churches than their location in suburbia. He told Bielo he was especially critical of "the close coupling of suburbia, consumerism, and the conservative Evangelical megachurch."[69] A third man described a persistent but vague incredulity. From his evangelical youth, to his Christian college, to his first job on the pastoral staff at a church, to his next church, where he

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[64] Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 14.

[65] Bielo 29.

[66] Bielo 32.

[67] Bielo 42.

[68] Bielo 39-40.

[69] Bielo 37.

lead a Bible study in his home, he always struggled because he could never "fully buy into the conservative Evangelical worldview."[70] He always felt like an outsider.

He was not exactly an outsider, though. Bielo's informant felt like an outsider, while also being an insider. The deconversion narratives all emphasize this. The emergent identity exists in that space of tension. Emergent Christians were who they were, in the stories they told Bielo, because they were in (critical) relation with evangelicalism. Like Finney, they called attention to thresholds and the specialness of in-between spaces. Bielo's informations relied on evangelical culture to construct their identity, making frequent reference to megachurches such as Saddleback and Willowcreek, but also consumer objects, such as WWJD bracelets and punning Christian tee shirts.[71] They frequently talked about the bestselling *Left Behind* series and how they disagreed with it.[72] Buying these objects can, of course, be a way of constructing an evangelical identity. Criticizing them can serve the same purpose. Emergent Christians' practices of critique positioned them, in their own understanding, on the margins of evangelicalism, on the liminal edge, living in the productive vulnerability of that space.

McLaren's landmark emergent book sought to valorize the tension of that in-between space. *A New Kind of Christian* suggested that many people within American evangelicalism were having this kind of crisis of in-betweenness. It made the case that that feeling of liminal tension was not wrong. It should, rather, be embraced.

The book stages a dialogue between two characters talking through a crisis of belief. Daniel Poole is an evangelical minister, considering leaving the ministry. He is, he says, "running out of gas" after fourteen years. "I feel like I'm losing my faith," Poole says. "Well, not exactly that, but I feel that I'm losing the whole framework for my faith."[73] The other character is a former minister, who now teaches high school science. Neil Edward Oliver, "Neo," explains how this isn't a crisis of belief, or doesn't have to be. It can be an evolution, a transition to a new paradigm, an open-ended adventure. "You're suffering from an immigration problem," he says. "You have a modern faith, a faith you developed in your homeland of modernity. But you're immigrating to a new land, a postmodern world. You feel like you don't fit in either world. You can't decide whether to settle in a litt-

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[70] Bielo 43-44.

[71] Bielo 53, 55.

[72] Bielo 143.

[73] McLaren 18.

le ghetto or to move out into the new land."[74] Poole should greet the demise of his old framework gladly, and welcome the new era, open to what it might bring.

In the introduction, McLaren connects this to his own biography. He writes that in 1994, at the age of 38, he was sick of being an evangelical pastor and was going through a personal crisis. He felt disillusioned. He felt "disembedded" from contemporary evangelicalism. He went into the mountains of Pennsylvania and from a cabin overlooking a valley, acknowledged the thought he had been avoiding: he was going to leave the ministry. He compares the thought to thoughts of suicide. He couldn't live with the internal conflict anymore, and wanted to end it.[75] As he had that thought, though, another broke through. "What if God is actually behind these disillusionments and disembeddings?" McLaren asked. "What if the experience of frustration that feels so bad and destructive is actually a good thing, a needed thing, a constructive thing in God's unfolding adventure with us?"[76] He had been trying to avoid the feeling of internal conflict. He had been afraid of the risk of ambiguity. Now he wanted to embrace those things.

These themes resonated with a lot of people in a lot of different situations. There were many people who were not associated with the emergent movement in any way who, nonetheless, made the same or similar moves, to create or find a liminal space on the margins of evangelicalism. Younger evangelicals, in particular, seemed to want to reclaim doubt and embrace a more fragile faith at the start of the twenty-first century. For example, Barnabas Piper, the eldest son of the conservative evangelical pastor John Piper, has hewed pretty closely to his father's Calvinist theology. Writing about his experience as a celebrity pastor's son, however, he emphasized his struggle with doubt. "Often the church is not a safe place to have doubts, or at least it doesn't feel safe," Piper wrote.[77] With his second book, Piper went so far as to make the case that belief without doubt isn't belief. "Christians who don't know the tension of 'I believe; help my unbelief,'" wrote Piper, quoting Mark 9:24, "might not be Christians at all, or at least they might be very infantile ones. Our faith is one of brutal tensions."[78]

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[74] McLaren 19.

[75] McLaren xiii-xiv.

[76] McLaren xvii.

[77] Barnabas Piper, *The Pastor's Kid: Finding Your Own Faith and Identity* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2014), 40.

[78] Barnabas Piper, *Help My Unbelief: Why Doubt is Not the Enemy of Faith* (Colorado Sprints, CO: David C. Cook, 2015), 28. Piper quotes the English Standard Version of the Bible.

Similarly, memoirist Addie Zierman, writing about her evangelical childhood and her struggle to "redefine her faith one cliche at a time," talked a lot about that "brutal tension." She describes realizing one could be an outsider within American evangelicalism. She was listening to the Contemporary Christian Music star Amy Grant, when her mother told her some evangelicals were upset Grant had gone "mainstream" with her 1991 crossover success, "Baby Baby." Recalling that moment, Zierman addressed her younger self: "You were born into a world within a world, and suddenly, you could see the marked boundaries. You could see that there was *in here* and there was *out there* and between them, there was a yawning chasm. You could see that it was big enough swallow you whole."[79] Zierman doesn't characterize herself as emergent or emerging. In her memoir, though, she describes how, as she becomes an adult, she learned to be more open, more vulnerable, and less scared of the space between "in here" and "out there."

Neither Zierman nor Piper think of themselves as "postmodern" or talk about postmodernity. They nonetheless narrate a struggle for social space in which to be incredulous towards metanarratives and explain how they aspire to learn to live in between incommensurables. The idea of belief as liminality resonated widely.

The history of The Shack

William Paul Young also had a conflicted relationship with evangelicalism. He is not connected with the emergent Christian movement in anyway. His personal story, however, is about moving from a defensive and certain belief to a belief that accepts gray areas and tolerates tensions.

Young was raised evangelical, a pastor's kid and a missionary kid. As he described it in a 2010 interview, however, for most of his life his evangelicalism was "a thin layer of perfectionist performance that covered up an ocean of shame. And shame and lies are what keep this whole thing together. And then bad doctrine keeps it all locked up on the inside."[80] His belief was "in the teeth" of his own feelings and questions. It worked to make him invulnerable, and protect him against the risk of real relationships.

Young's father was a minister in the Christian and Missionary Alliance. The family moved from Grand Prairie, Alberta, Canada to the highlands of Netherlands New Guinea when Young was 10 months old. His father and mother were missionaries to the Dani tribe, an animist people. Young

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[79] Addie Zierman, *When We Were on Fire: A Memoir of Consuming Faith, Tangled Love, and Starting Over* (New York: Convergent, 2013), 20.

[80] David Kyle Foster, "Wm Paul Young - Pt 1 - Sexually Abused Missionary Kid," Pure Passion TV, April 4, 2010, https://vimeo.com/14678902.

was raised as one of the tribe. Starting at age 4, he also was routinely sexually abused by the Dani. "It's a devastating thing, for a child," Young recalled. "It breaks a child into pieces."[81] At 6, Young was sent away to a boarding school for missionary kids. There was abuse there too.[82] Older children abused younger, weaker children. Young kept all this secret. He felt deep shame and covered it up with religious belief. He tried to become a perfect Christian who lived up to all the ideals and followed all the rules and did all the things he was supposed to do.

"A religious performer," Young said. "I was working hard to create a religious persona that people would admire and approve and have affection for."[83] This was Young's experience with evangelicalism. This what belief meant in his life.

His performance failed him in 1993 or 1994, at the age of 38, when his wife Kim caught him having an affair with one of her close friends. She confronted him. The crisis forced Young, now a church-going adult living in Oregon with children of his own, to face his problems. "I was spewing my crap on everything I thought was wonderful or good," he said. "This was life or death for me. I mean, there was no other place anymore."[84] He contemplated suicide, going so far, he said, as to plan a trip to Mexico where he could kill himself and leave his body where his wife and children wouldn't have to deal with it. He turned instead to counseling. He decided he needed healing. He decided his theology was sick and he needed to find a new way to live, a new way to be Christian. He had to get rid of all his secrets and his need for protective certainty. He had to risk being open and vulnerable. He embraced the slow and open-ended process of getting better. After eleven years of healing, Young's wife asked him to write something for their six children explaining how he had dealt with the pain and suffering in his life and how he had come to understand his relationship with God. She expected him to write a few pages. Instead, he wrote the first draft of *The Shack*.

He wrote it in four months. Young had no dreams of sharing his work with the wider world. It was for his family. He made fifteen copies at Office Depot and gave them to those closest to him for Christmas in 2005.[85] He also emailed a copy to Wayne Jacobsen, a former pentecostal pastor

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[81] William Paul Young, "Paul Young Shares His Story," Mariner's Church, Irvine, CA, July 1, 2008, https://youtu.be/G-BB2ylI8EU

[82] See Katelyn Beaty, "A Badly Broken Boarding School," Christianity Today, 55.4 (2010), 25.

[83] David Kyle Foster, "Wm Paul Young - Pt 2 - Pastor Commits Adultery," PurePassion TV, April 11, 2010, https://vimeo.com/14660000

[84] Foster, "Pt 2."

[85] Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Aim at 'Spiritually Interested' Sparks 'The Shack' Sales," USA Today, May 1, 2008, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2008-04-30-shack_N.htm.

whose writing on God's love had been influential on him. Jacobsen liked the novel. He shared it with another former pastor, Brad Cummings. The two men co-hosted a popular evangelical podcast called "The God Journey" and the book spoke to the themes of many of their discussions. Jacobsen and Cummings decided they wanted to revise the book and get it to a larger audience.[86]

More than twenty publishers declined the manuscript. According to Young, Jacobsen, and Cummings, the book was too religious for secular publishers, but too "edgy" for evangelical publishers. It was either too evangelical or not evangelical enough. They couldn't find home for the manuscript. The three men then started their own publishing company with a pooled investment of $15,000 and called it Windblown Media. Jacobsen and Cummings advertized the book on their podcast and got about 1,000 pre-orders. They printed a first-run of 10,000 copies in May 2007.[87] They sold out in four months. A second print-run of 22,000 sold in two months and a third-run of 33,000 sold in a month.[88]

By the end of the year, Windblown had sold 88,000 copies. The novel had still not made it past the gatekeepers of American evangelicalism or the publishers of America's thriving market of spiritual-but-not-religious literature. But the changes in the book market in the twenty-first century meant there were other ways to distribute books. *The Shack* took these alternative routes to readers. Most early copies were sold through the Windblown website. Amazon.com also started selling *The Shack*, purchasing the book by the thousands and listing it on the website as a mystery/thriller. Barnes & Noble's—one eye on their online competition—started selling *The Shack* in their suburban stores in November. They stocked the book cautiously at first and saw it fly off the shelves.[89] By May 2008, 880,000 copies had sold.[90]

Orders came in so fast, the men struggled to keep up. The books were packaged and shipped out of Cummings' Southern California garage and a nearby storage center. They then made a deal

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[86] Hachette Book Group vs. Windblown Media, June 3, 2010, http://ia600302.us.archive.org/0/items/gov.uscourts.cacd.472377/gov.uscourts.cacd.472377.14.0.pdf.

[87] Lauren Streib, "Paul Young's Publishing Miracle," Forbes.com, June 4, 2009, http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2009/0622/celebrity-09-shack-religious-thriller-paul-young-publishing-miracle.html.

[88] Jordan E. Rosenfeld, "William P. Young's Cinderella Story," Writer's Digest, Jan. 13, 2009, http://www.writersdigest.com/writing-articles/by-writing-level/published-author/william-p-young.

[89] Motoko Rich, "Christian Novel is Surprise Best Seller," New York Times, June 24, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/24/books/24shack.html?_r=0.

[90] Grossman.

with the multinational media company Hachette.[91] Based in France, the corporation had recently acquired Time Warner Book Group and its imprints. Hachette had the highest rate of titles-to-hits of any publisher at the time, according to Forbes magazine.[92] It did a robust business in religious titles. One of the conglomerate's four U.S. locations was in Nashville, Tennessee, and focused specifically on evangelical books. While the New York and Boston offices handled literary stars such as Sherman Alexie, David Foster Wallace, and J.D. Salinger, the Nashville offices sold evangelical stars such as Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen. The Nashville offices took on Young. They began moving large volumes of *The Shack* through big box retailers and traditional booksellers. The New York Times reported people were buying the book ten-at-a-time from suburban retail chains.[93] Hachette sold 6 million copies in six months.[94]

The Shack was popular enough, even early on, to be recognized beyond the borders of the evangelical subculture, even though it was seen as an evangelical book. Jay Leno used the title as the set-up to a joke about sub-prime mortgages on his late-night talk show in 2008, trusting enough of his middle-America audience would be familiar with *The Shack* for the joke to work.[95] Oprah Winfrey mentioned the title on her show the same year while talking to Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com, about the company's new e-reader, the Kindle. Winfrey hadn't read *The Shack*, but knew it was a top-selling Kindle title that fall. Some audience members cheered just at the mention of the name of the book.[96] By the end of 2009, Hachette sold 10 million copies.[97] Four years after Young made photocopies of his novel, he had personally earned more than $10 million from book sales. In one three-month period in 2010, profits from *The Shack* totaled $990,182.[98] *The Shack* held the top spot on the New York Times bestseller list for 50 weeks, and was on the list for 177 weeks.[99]

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[91] Hachette Book Group v. Windblown Media, US District Court Central District of California, Western Division, 2010, http://ia600302.us.archive.org/0/items/gov.uscourts.cacd.472377/gov.uscourts.cacd.472377.14.0.pdf, 6.

[92] Streib.

[93] Rich.

[94] Hachette Book Group v. Windblown Media 8.

[95] Jay Leno, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, NBC, May 23, 2008.

[96] Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show,* ABC, October 24, 2008.

[97] Christian Book Expo, "Gold / Platinum / Diamond Book Award Winners," christianbookexpo.com, n.d., http://christianbookexpo.com/salesawards/

[98] Hachette Book Group v. Windblown Media 7.

[99] "Shack Author Signs for New Book with Hachette," Publishers Weekly, Aug. 22, 2011; Marcia Z. Nelson, "Howard Books Signs 'Shack' Author to New Deal," Publishers Weekly, Oct. 2, 2014.

The book also succeeded in evangelical distribution channels. Evangelical publishers hadn't believed there would be substantial evangelical interest, but they were wrong. Dwight Baker, chairman of the Evangelical Christian Publishers' Association and president of Baker Publishing, said evangelical publishers were "humiliated" by the success of *The Shack*. "For all the analytics, all the tools we have, you still get humiliated on such a regular basis," Baker said. "God's saying, 'There's a guy with a message and he has a big job to do and you publishers can't catch on, so I'll get that message to readers in my own way."[100] Christian bookstores started selling the book to compete with everyone else and sold massive numbers of copies. *The Shack* stayed at the top of ECPA's list of best-selling fiction for nearly two years. It fell to number 10 only in March 2011.[101]

The novel was a triumph for evangelical publishing, comparable to the commercial juggernaut of *Left Behind*. The response of a number of conservative evangelical leaders was to attack the book. They tried to disassociate the book from evangelicalism and keep *The Shack* out of evangelical hands and homes. These would-be gatekeepers focused criticism specifically on issues of ambiguity. Correct Christian theology, they said, could not allow *The Shack*'s both/and, open-ended depictions of God. Chuck Colson, a prominent figure on the religious right, said the book was wrong to say there are "many equally valid ways in which God reveals Himself." The book wasn't all bad, Colson told his Christian radio audience of millions, but, "sadly, the author fails to show that the relationship with God must be built on the truth of who He really is, not on our reaction to a sunset or a painting."[102] Others were less conciliatory. Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, called the book "sub-biblical and dangerous." He suggested *The Shack* was a referendum on evangelicalism's commitment to true Christian doctrine. "The Christian church has struggled for centuries," Mohler said, "to come to a faithful understanding of the Trinity in order to

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[100] Andy Butcher, "Where is Christian Publishing Heading? ECPA Chairman Dwight Baker Discusses the Current Publishing Landscape, Trends, and Future," CBA Retailers & Resources, Jan 2016, 20-24, here 24.

[101] Christian Book Expo, "ECPA Christian Bestsellers Archives," Nov. 2015, http://christianbookexpo.com/bestseller/archives.php.

[102] Chuck Colson, "Stay Out of the Shack," BreakPoint.org, May 5, 2008 http://www.christianheadlines.-com/news/stay-out-of-the-shack-11575218.html

avoid just this kind of confusion."[103] The book, evangelicals were warned, was subversive. It sought to dismantle readers' belief.[104]

The novel presents a different vision of evangelical Christianity. It assumes confusion is an unavoidable condition—if not of human life, then at least of contemporary life. The novel imagines, further, that this might not be a bad thing. It invites readers to be open to confusion and conflict, and to imagine belief is really belief in these conditions. Belief, in *The Shack*, happens in searching and being uncertain and open. Belief is contested and vulnerable. It dwells in the tension between inside and outside. It's not something you can take for granted of should take for granted, because belief is belief in the in-between spaces.

Uncertain Belief

The book starts by addressing readers in their own liminal space in between belief and doubt. "Who wouldn't be skeptical," the opening line asks, "when a man claims to have spent an entire weekend with God, in a shack no less?"[105] There are good reasons to be dubious about this supernatural story of a religious experience in the woods, according to the first-person narrator who addresses readers. The narrator says, "It is a little, well … no, it is a lot on the fantastic side."[106]

The narrator has doubts himself. In an introduction, he describes how those doubts persist, but he believes even though he doubts and has come to think that is OK. The narrator is the protagonist's neighbor. He has known Mackenzie Allen Phillips for "a bit more than twenty years."[107] The two men are close. They go to the same church. They get coffee and talk. But even though they're intimates and narrator can vouch for his friend's good character, he cannot just assume Phillips' story of his experience with God is true, naïvely taking it for granted. "I desperately want everything Mack has told me to be true," he tells readers. "Most days I am right there with him, but on others—when the visible world of concrete and computers seems to be the *real* world—I lose touch and have my doubts."[108] However much he believes, he can always not believe. He can choo-

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[103] R. Albert Mohler, "The Shack — The Missing Art of Evangelical Discernment," AlMohler.com, Jan. 27, 2010 http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/01/27/the-shack-the-missing-art-of-evangelical-discernment/; see also Albert Mohler, "A Look at 'The Shack,'" The Albert Mohler Program, April 11, 2008 http://www.albertmohler.com/2008/05/26/a-look-at-the-shack-2/.

[104] Tim Challies,"A Readers Review of the Shack," Challies.com, May 2008, http://www.challies.com/sites/all/files/files/The_Shack.pdf).

[105] Young xi.

[106] Young xvii.

[107] Young xi.

[108] Young xviii.

se to believe, but he's always aware this choice is a choice, only one option, and a somewhat implausible one. It's fragile. He can see why readers might not make this choice to believe this story.

The narrator models a specific sort of belief, though. He doesn't try to resolve the uncertainty or reject the way in which the belief is contested. Instead, he embraces a broader, more generous sense of how something can be "true." "While some things may not be scientifically provable, they can still be true nonetheless," he tells the reader at the start.[109] He returns for an afterword to make the same point: "Do I think it's true?" he asks. "I want all of it to be true. Perhaps if some of it is not actually true in one sense, it is still true nonetheless—if you know what I mean."[110]

This sort of belief, of course, is familiar to fiction readers. The claim is basic to fiction: that something that is untrue in one way can be importantly true in another. A fictional story that doesn't correspond to real events in real life is not simply a lie. It isn't just false, but rather false for the sake of showing something true. In made-up characters and made-up situations, readers seek out moments of recognition, where they can nod and say, "that's right." They agree to pretend something is true, and act like it is true even though they know they are pretending, because the untruth communicates a truth. The untruth and its truth might be rationally incommensurable, but this poses no real problem to fiction readers. They can believe a story while also freely admitting they don't believe it. Literary critic James Wood says this is how religious belief and literary belief are different.[111] The narrator of *The Shack*, on the other hand, suggests religious belief and literary belief can be the same. Believers can be skeptical, and continually aware they can always "close the book, go outside, and kick a stone."[112] The narrator of *The Shack* positions himself in this in-between space, and addresses readers at the start of the novel to affirm their doubts. He reassures them that their doubts do not preclude belief. He advocates for ambiguity.

Readers, the narrator says, should accept the narrative's open-endedness, be OK with tensions, and value the journey.

If there were any question this novel would not simply resolve all ambiguities for readers, the first-person forward is signed, "Willie." Since this is a diminutive form of William, the signature could be taken by readers as identifying the narrator as the author, William Paul Young. Supporting that, the narrator identifies himself as the writer of the story. He says the protagonist needed a

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[109] Young xviii.

[110] Young 273.

[111] James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Picador, 2010), xxi.

[112] Wood xxi; Young xviii

ghostwriter because he "is not comfortable with his writing skills."[113] The identification of character of the author inside the text with the author outside of the text, however, is complicated by the fact that on the cover of every English-language edition of *The Shack*, the author's first name is abbreviated as "Wm." Further, while promoting the book, Young told people he doesn't use his first name. He goes by his middle name, Paul. While it's possible the narrator's name might still be best understood as a reference to the real-world author, there are several degrees of separation between Willie, William, Wm, and Paul. The signature signals that the link between the text and the world is at best tenuous.

There is also some question about the book's authorship in the real world. Even if Willie is Young, Young might not simply be "the author." The version of the book published by Hachette identifies *The Shack* as "A novel by Wm. Paul Young," but adds: "In collaboration with Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings."

Collaboration can mean many things. The respective parties' role in the production of the final text is not clear. It has been reported Jacobsen and Cummings just made suggestions that guided Young in revisions. Alternatively, it is sometimes reported Jacobsen and Cummings "reworked" Young's novel.[114] Young has acknowledged but downplayed that reworking in some interviews, estimating that Jacobsen and Cummings only "augmented the storyline about 20 percent."[115] In others, however, he has given them more credit. At one point Young called the revisions "a highly collaborative process."[116] The book's acknowledgements say that Jacobsen and Cummings "bore the lion's share" of the revision process "that brought this story to its final form." Jacobsen and Cummings, for their part, have claimed a large role for themselves. In a legal fight over the division of royalties in 2010, they demanded to be named co-authors.[117] They told the court Young's original manuscript was "cumbersome, laden with agenda, and devoid of a clear storyline." They said they suggested revisions but "it was clear that Young lacked the ability to make the signification changes" necessary for publication.[118] They alleged they did multiple major re-writes over a period

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[113] Young xvii

[114] Streib.

[115] C.J. Darlington, Miriam Parker, Deena Peterson, and Melissa J. Carswell, "William P. Young Interview," TitleTrakk.com, n.d., http://www.titletrakk.com/author-interviews/william-paul-young-interview.htm.

[116] Rosenfeld.

[117] *Hachette* 2.

[118] Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings v. William Paul Young, First Amended Complaint for Declaratory Relief and Breach of Contract, Document 17, CV10- 3246 JFW (C.D. Calif. 2010), http://ia600500.us.archive.org/11/items/gov.uscourts.cacd.471401/gov.uscourts.cacd.471401.17.0.pdf, 3, 4.

of eleven months. In the re-writes, according to documents filed in the lawsuit, Jacobsen and Cummings rearranged the narrative, changed dialogue, added dialogue, and made-up more plot. These were not minor edits. Jacobsen and Cummings calculated the re-writing made up about 60 percent of the final product.[119]

Young's lawyers countered the two former pastors were trying "to take credit for a book they didn't write." Whatever role they may have had in revisions, the lawyer told the Los Angeles Times, they weren't co-authors. "They agreed in a written contract that Young was the sole author," he said. "Before the work was known to be a bestseller, both parties filed a copyright notice indicating that Young was the sole author."[120] The case was settled out of court in 2011. The terms were confidential.[121] The question of who-wrote-what was left undecided.

Even if readers weren't aware of this, the novel itself encourages questions about the stability of the identity of the author. Willie, who may or may not be Young, who in turn may or may not also be Jacobsen and Cummings, raises the problem of the identity of authors. Speaking in the first person, the narrator warns readers that he appears in the text in the third person.[122] As the ghostwriter, he says, he describes himself from the protagonist's perspective, possibly unreliably. The narrator is extradiegetic, in literary terms, in part to warn the reader that he is intradiegetic, and that there is an unstable relationship between the ways the narrator is inside and outside the story.

This problematization of the identity of the author is rare in popular fiction and practically unheard of in evangelical fiction. But it is a familiar issue to postmodernism. Postmodern theorists, starting with Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" in 1967, have sought to deconstruct the idea of the author. Barthes argues a writer becomes a writer in the act of writing, but also, through writing, relinquishes any claim of special, authorial access to the true meaning of the text. The writer is constructed in the disjunction between author and text. "Writing begins," according to Barthes, when "this disjunction occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death."[123] Texts, because they can be read, are open to being read and re-read, understood and re-understood. The true meaning can always be contested, and any interpretation is always only one

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[119] *Jacobsen* 5.

[120] Sarah Weinman, "The Flack Over 'The Shack,'" Los Angeles Times, July 13, 2010, http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jul/13/entertainment/la-et-the-shack-20100713.

[121] Christine D. Johnson, "'The Shack' lawsuit settled," Christian Retailing, Aug. 19, 2011, http://www.christianretailing.com/index.php/newsletter/latest/23425-the-shack-lawsuit-settled.

[122] Young xviii

[123] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," Aspen, 5+6 (1967), http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/index.html.

option among many. The condition of the text is this openness. Postmodernists have described this as the author's necessary absence. "The mark of the writer," as Michel Foucault explained, "is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing."[124] There is no author, in the sense of someone who can authoritatively announce what a text means, so it can just be taken for granted forever after. Authors are liminal, being between presence and absence. Texts are liminal, always between different interpretations.

Postmodern novelists have taken this theoretical idea and incorporated it into their fiction. They have tried to write stories that call readers' attention to the way fiction is open ended by calling attention to the instability of the identity of the author.

David Foster Wallace, for example, has done this multiple times. In one of Wallace's short stories, the first-person narrator is obsessed with the paradoxical relationship of fraudulence and authenticity. If readers fall into the familiar trap of thinking the speaker is the author, the end of the story contains a surprise. The speaker imagines how his suicide will be imagined in the distant future by a high school classmate, Dave Wallace.[125] If that Dave Wallace is thought of as the author, of course, then the story is the author imagining a character imagining the author imagining the character, *ad infinitum*. In Wallace's posthumously published novel, *The Pale King*, the narrator of one chapter self-identifies as "the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract narrative persona," "David Wallace, age forty, SS no. 957-04-2012."[126] This David Wallace both is and isn't David Wallace the person-in-the-world, though. In turn, he also is and isn't the novel's fictional character by the same name. The fictional character, notably, gets further mistaken in a bureaucratic error for another character also named David Wallace.[127] The text thus signals to readers

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[124] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York: Random House, 1984), 101-120, here 103.

[125] David Foster Wallace, "Good Old Neon," in *Oblivion* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), 141-181, here 180-181. For an analysis of how Wallace's fiction works to overcome the dilemma of postmodern suspicion and irony and move himself and readers to credulity and sincerity, see Lee Konstantinou, "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief," in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*, ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou, (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2012), 83-112.

[126] Wallace, *The Pale King* (London: Penguin, 2011), 68. This is most likely not Wallace's actual Social Security Number. The first three digits of the SSN identify the region where the number was issued. If Wallace's number was issued in New York, where he was born, the first three digits would have been between 050-134. If issued in Illinois, where he grew up, the numbers would have been between 318-361 (Jerry Crow and Barbara Bennett, "Structure of Social Security Numbers," Electronic Frontier Foundation, n.d., https://www.eff.org/pages/structure-social-security-numbers). In fact, the IRS issues no Social Security Numbers starting with 9, reserving those for Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers, issued to people who are required to pay U.S. taxes but ineligible for Social Security (IRS, "General ITIN Information," irs.org, Oct. 27, 2015, https://www.irs.gov/individuals/general-itin-information).

[127] Wallace, *The Pale King, 297*.

that all identifications of David Wallaces are suspect, and their relationships to each other are not simple one-to-one identities. The text alerts readers that they need to be open to a certain structural ambiguities.

The narrator of *The Shack* is part of this postmodern tradition of problematization and destablization. Willie goes out of his way to call attention to the contestability of the claims of his narrative, how even his identity is not certain, and how everything has been mediated. Even before the reader gets to the narrative, the novel is making an argument about making peace with ambiguity. The novel is inviting readers to believe in this alternative way. The narrator then recedes to the background. The story unfolds, describing how the main character learns to be this kind of believer, who believes in a postmodern way, embracing the uncertainties of the secular condition.

Coming to Terms with God

The Shack is the story of Mackenzie Allen Phillips coming to terms with God. The novel puts the problem of the existence of evil at the center of Phillips's struggle to believe. For him, the problem is not that there's not enough evidence for God. What he wants is the certainty imagined in *Love Comes Softly*, examined in chapter one, where the protagonist is reassured that God will work everything out to her benefit, and that God guarantees believers an abundant life in the here-and-now. Phillips, in the world imagined by *The Shack*, can have no such guarantee. He has to find a belief that isn't ever so certain.

The story starts as a crime story. Phillips's young daughter Missy is kidnapped during a family camping trip in the Oregon woods. The police were called. The FBI came. The FBI thought the girl was the fifth victim of a serial killer they had been trying to catch for five years across nine states. They noted the serial killer preferred young girls, under the age of 10. He hunted in camping grounds around state parks, disappearing each time into the wilderness and reappearing in a state further west to snatch another girl.

"We have good reason," an FBI agent said to Phillips, "to believe that none of the girls have survived."[128]

Investigating Missy's abduction with Phillips in tow, law enforcement officers found the killer's car abandoned in the woods off a narrow mountain road. Further in, they found the site of the child's brutal death. It is the shack of the title. The narrator describes it as "a run-down little shack" in a hidden valley near a lake. "A century or so earlier," he speculates, "it had probably been a sett-

[128] Young 47.

ler's home. It had two good-sized rooms, enough to house a small family. Since that time, it had most likely served as an occasional hunter's or poacher's cabin."[129] Then it became something worse. Phillips only glimpsed through the door. He saw an old table, a sofa, and, on the floor by the fireplace, his daughter's ripped and bloody dress.

The tragedy leaves Phillips feeling "numb, adrift in a suddenly meaningless world that felt as if it would be forever gray."[130] He is overcome by depression, which he calls "The Great Sadness." He cannot be comforted. Religion especially seems useless in the face of his suffering "Sunday prayers and hymns weren't cutting it anymore, if they ever really had," for Phillips. "He was sick of God and God's religion, sick of all the little religious social clubs that didn't seem to make any real difference or effect any real change."[131] He is then invited back to the shack by God. He gets a note in the mail during a snowstorm—apparently supernaturally signed by God. He goes to the liminal space of the woods looking for the shack and for God, and is surprised, doubly, when he finds what he's looking for.

More than then other bestselling evangelical novel considered in this study, *The Shack* focuses on the object of Christian belief. The novel explores the question of what belief is like in part by asking the properly theological question of what God is like. *The Shack*'s answer is that belief is uncertain, contestable, vulnerable, and open-ended, because God is beyond human categorization. God, as imagined by *The Shack*, dwells in liminality.

Even before his daughter's death, Phillips is conflicted about God. His first religious experience was at the abusive hands of his father, a violent alcoholic and strict church elder. Both the drinking and the praying were abusive. According to the narrator, young Phillips was "beaten with a belt and Bible verses."[132] If that wasn't enough to turn him against God, at age 13 Phillips reported the abuse to a church elder while confessing his sins at a youth revival, only to have the elder inform his father of the betrayal and get brutally punished for it. His father tied him to a tree for two days and beat him badly. This makes it hard for Phillips to relate to God as a father.[133] The concept of a loving paternal figure is difficult for him.

When he thinks about God, he suspects God is "brooding, distant, and aloof."[134]

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[129] Young 58.

[130] Young 49.

[131] Young 63.

[132] Young xii.

[133] Young 92, 94.

[134] Young xv.

At the same time, Phillips is not entirely alienated from belief. He still attends church as an adult with some regularly. He belongs to a pew-and-pulpit Bible church, as it's described in the novel, a non-denominational institution that the narrator jokes could be called "the Fifty-fifth Independent Assembly of Saint John the Baptist."[135] Phillips is uncomfortable at church. He feels more spiritual "surrounded by nature and under the stars."[136] He nonetheless attends frequently enough to be an established member of the congregation.

His wife is more religious than he is, but he doesn't use this fact to dismiss or diminish belief as unmanly. He respects his wife's faith. He envies it, actually.[137] Nannettee Samuelson Phillips had a good relationship with her father and has such a personal, intimate relationship with God that she calls God "Papa." She is a chaplain who specializes in working with terminal oncology patients and "thinks about God differently than most folks."[138]

The Phillips children have learned their religion from their mother. But Phillips is not uninvolved. In one early scene, he prays with his children before bed.[139] In another, he explains the relationship between God the Father and God the Son in the crucifixion. His daughter Missy is troubled by the idea that a father would make his child die. Phillips explains that God the Father didn't make Jesus die; Jesus chose his death out of love.[140] Where someone else might have stumbled at the question, or struggled with the thornier problems of Christ's atonement, Phillips has an answer. Despite a passing protest that he doesn't know how to respond to his daughter, he seems adequately prepared to explain tough theological issues. Perhaps this is because of his years in church or because Phillips has some seminary education.[141] Readers are told very little about this education, but it's mentioned several times. Phillips is alienated from his faith, but also is a church-going father who raises his children in the faith and a seminary-educated spouse who supports his wife's Christian ministry. He's a committed, practicing Christian. Religion is important in his life and he's deeply interested in theological questions. And yet, he's uncomfortable at church and skeptical of Christian leaders who have said any modern experience of God has to be mediated through church and the Bible. "Nobody wanted God in a box," Phillips notes sarcastically, "just in a book. Espe-

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[135] Young xv.

[136] Young 20.

[137] Young 63.

[138] Young 29-30.

[139] Young 31.

[140] Young 22.

[141] Young xiii, 91.

cially an expensive one bound in leather with gilt edges, or was that guilt edges?"[142] According the narrator, Phillips "seems to have a love/hate relationship with religion" and conflicted feelings about God.[143]

He has several different ideas of God. These are somewhat traditional, at the start, but none of them are firmly fixed in his mind and he hasn't clearly reconciled them with each other, either. When he thinks about addressing God, he hesitates. Should he call him "Father"? Should he say "Almighty One"? Maybe "Mr. God"?[144] Partly he thinks of God as a father, which is problematic for him. Partly he pictures him as an idealized grandfather, even though he knows that's problematic for different reasons. He also has a more abstract conception of God, the conception expressed in the ontological formula familiar to evangelical worship songs, all mighty and all loving. He doesn't wholly buy any of these pictures. "I don't know," Phillips says. "Maybe he's a really bright light, or a burning bush. I've always sort of pictured him as a really big grandpa with a long white flowing beard, sort of like Gandalf in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings.*"[145] For Phillips, each image is tinged with the thought that it's wrong. That conflicted feeling may be the strongest feeling Phillips associates with God.

The real problem, however, is not belief in the existence of God, as such. He is too angry at God not to believe God exists. He blames God for his daughter's death. God, in some ways, is even imagined as being the killer. When Phillips gets a note in the mail from God summoning him to the shack where the murder happened, he considers the possibility the note is actually from the serial killer. As he considers it, the distinction between the child murderer and Almighty God disappears. It's a distinction without a difference: "Whether it was God or the killer or some prankster, what did it matter?"[146]

The real problem for Phillips is the problem of evil. How can he believe in God, whether God is thought of as a father or an all-mighty and all-loving being, when bad things happen? How can he tolerate the ambiguities and uncertainties of a violent, evil world?

The theodicy problem, critically, is grounded in the traditional monotheistic conception of God. The problem is a problem because the object of evangelical belief is thought of as all powerful, all knowing, all present, and all good. If God is thus ontologically perfect, the horrible things

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[142] Young 63.

[143] Young xv.

[144] Young 81.

[145] Young 71.

[146] Young 63.

that happen to people have to be ultimately attributed God. God could have stopped the serial killer and didn't. God is culpable. Of course, if God were not all powerful, evil could be explained through divine weakness. A good but weak God might be imagined as wanting to stop evil but not being able to. Similarly, if God were not all knowing, evil could be explained through divine ignorance. If God were not all present, evil could be explained by divine absence. If God is omnipotent, though, and omniscient, and omnipresent, and didn't prevent a serial killer from killing Phillips's small daughter, then the actions of the killer have to be attributed finally to God. It is difficult to reconcile that with the idea God is all good.

Phillips struggles with the idea of God's goodness in particular. If God is not good, of course, the problem of theodicy goes away. A malevolent deity could allow evil without any internal contradiction of character.[147] Yet Phillips does not abandon the idea that God is good. He hangs on to his conception of a good God even as he doubts it. He thinks God betrayed him. He thinks, at the very least, God isn't trustworthy.[148] He thinks that while God may be good in some abstract or official sense, God doesn't care for and love him personally, perhaps because he doesn't deserve it.[149] At the same time, he confesses that "part of me would like to believe that God would care enough about me to send a note" inviting him to a shack in the woods.[150] He takes this idea seriously enough to accept the invitation. He remains open to the possibility that God is good, really wanting that to be true even when the old ontological definition of divinity is incredibly difficult for him to believe. He remains open to the idea that God is like a loving father, even though he has to strain at the concept. Phillips goes to the shack with this hodgepodge of conflicting conceptions.

God confounds his expectations. God appears in the novel neither as an ontological formula nor an idealized father or grandfather. God appears as a rejection of categories, insistent on unsettling expectations.

As Phillips is wondering whether to call God "Mr. God" or "Father," he's met at the door of the shack by a large black woman. She rushes out and hugs him. She greets him "with the ardor of someone seeing a long-lost and deeply loved relative."[151] She shouts his full name and then calls

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[147] The existence of such a maltheistic deity would, however, be accidental rather than necessary, according to the terms of the ontological argument. The goodness of God is key to the logically necessary existence of God. See Anslem, "Reply to Guanilo," in *Anselm of Canterbury the Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford, 1998), 111-122.

[148] Young 132.

[149] Young 151.

[150] Young 69.

[151] Young 82.

him the short version familiar to friends and family, Mack. "Mack, look at you!" she says. "My, my, my, how I do love you."[152] This is God the Father.

Phillips is confused. He stands there "with his mouth indeed open and an expression of bewilderment on his face." He says, "Am I going crazy? Am I supposed to believe that God is a big black woman with a questionable sense of humor?"[153] God doesn't present herself or himself to Phillips as an imperative, however. Phillips isn't "supposed" to do anything. God, as Phillips is told by God, isn't interested in obligating him to do anything and doesn't value anything done out of obligation. He should respond to God how he wants to respond to God. He is free to believe or disbelieve, to be open or closed, to accept what he sees or not. God is not trying to move Phillips to a conversion, but rather to effect a kind of deconversion.

"You're asking me to believe you're God, and I just don't see …," Phillips says, not completing the sentence. God disagrees: "I'm not asking you to believe anything, but I will tell you that you're going to find this day a lot easier if you simply accept what is, instead of trying to fit it into your preconceived notions."[154]

According to God, Phillips's expectations and pre-conceptions about God, his "religious stereotypes," are wrong.[155] God presents herself in a way that reveals this. God, first of all, is not white. Phillips is surprised by this but also surprised that he is surprised. He never consciously attributed a racial identification to God the Father. Nonetheless, he had assumed God the Father would be white.[156] Seeing God appear as black calls attention to his false assumption and helps him realize that God does not rightly fit into his racial categories. He had assumed other things, too, without actually articulating them. He had assumed, for example, that God the Father would be "churchy." Without really thinking about it, he had imagined God, for example, would prefer the music of George Beverly Shea, the musical mainstay of Billy Graham's evangelistic crusades. Instead, Phillips finds God the Father listening to music he's never heard before—or even heard of. When he goes into the shack, God is listening to some "West Coast Juice." According to God, it's "like Eurasian funk and blues with a message, and a great beat," from a group called "Diatribe," made up of boys who haven't been born yet. Phillips finds the whole thing disorienting.

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[152] Young 82.

[153] Young 89.

[154] Young 124.

[155] Young 94.

[156] Young 87.

Seminary, he notes, was not helpful here.[157]

More disorienting than the unexpected music or skin color, however, is God the Father's gender. Phillips finds it disturbing that God is wearing a dress.[158] He didn't expect God the Father to be feminine. He didn't expect to find her referred to as "her" and "she." He finds it upsetting that even though she presents as female and identifies as female, she is still God the Father.

Some conservative Christian critics have found *The Shack*'s depiction of God as a woman to be particularly offensive. Mark Driscoll attacked the book on this point. "It's Goddess worship," Driscoll told his Seattle congregation in 2008. "If God the father is really God our mother, that changes everything. That means when Jesus prayed 'Our Father in heaven,' he should have prayed 'Our Mother in the shack.' Right?"[159] That isn't right, though. Or at least it's not the point the novel is making with the feminine depiction of God the Father. In the book, God is not more properly identified as female than male. God is not "really" one way or the other. God, rather, rejects the either/or of gender as she rejects all the oversimple categories of human classification. God is genderqueer. "I am who I am," God says. "I'm not trying to fit anyone's bill."[160] She is upsetting the binary of gender. She is expressed in the liminal space between male and female and is both male and female. Her preferred pronoun in "she" but her name is the masculine "Papa."

Phillips tells God it is "a bit of a stretch" to call her Papa when she appears as a woman. She asks him why. "I'm not trying to make this harder for either of us," she says. "But this is a good place to start."[161]

He reflects that "in his head, at least," he didn't believe God was male. And yet, he did believe that. He didn't believe it in the sense of making a mental assent to the proposition, "God is male," but that's how he imagined God. "All his visuals for God," in fact, "were very white and very male."[162] According to God, this thinking is wrong—not just the content of it, but the structure. If God had been merely misidentified, correcting Phillips's understanding would be a simple matter of replacing one identity ("our Father in heaven") with another ("our Mother in the shack"). The

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[157] Young 91.

[158] Young 93.

[159] Mark Driscoll, "The Shack," YouTube.com, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pK65Jfny70Y. See also Bob Hyatt, "The Shack - Reviewed. At Length," bobhyatt.typepad.com, August 4, 2008, http://bobhyatt.typepad.com/bobblog/2008/08/i-was-interviewed-alongside-paul-young-recently-on-public-radio-at-one-point-a-woman-whose-hobby-was-apparently-sniffing-out.html.

[160] Young 124.

[161] Young 94.

[162] Young 94.

novel suggests, though, that God is postmodern in Lyotard's sense. In God, there is a tolerance of incommensurables. God deconstructs the two identities, male and female, showing how each relies on the other and is defined by the difference from the other. Each is constituted in part, by the other. The idea of "male" includes the idea of "not female," which involves the idea of "female," and the idea of "female" likewise includes the idea of "not male" and thus "male." As Jacques Derrida put it, "difference cannot be thought without the trace."[163] The opposition that creates the respective identities collapses. It's an unstable opposition, which God exposes by expressing herself deconstructively in the liminality of gender.

Phillips has constrained his ideas of God within human categories. He has imagined, like so many have imagined, that belief would come with the resolution of ambiguity and ambivalence. God, however, wants him to embrace in-betweenness, not try to escape it. God can deliver Phillips by confounding these categories. As she explains it, "for me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me 'Papa' is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning."[164]

God appears to Phillips in such a way to disturb his too-human images of divinity, but God also intends to upset the more abstract definitions, as well. "Many folks," God tells Phillips, "try to grasp some sense of who I am by taking the best version of themselves, projecting that to the nth degree, factoring in all the goodness they can perceive, which often isn't much, and then calling that God." But that is not God. "I am far more than that," God says, "above and beyond all that you can ask or think … By nature I am completely unlimited, without bounds."[165] Even the ontological formulations of a God who is absolute and great in every way are critically wrong. They are too limited and limiting.

The other two persons of the Trinity are not so confounding, but they also unsettle the categories Phillips has used to understand the world. Jesus unsettles the opposition between God and man, between sacred and profane. He is first seen in jeans and a plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He's wearing a tool belt and carries work gloves.[166] He looks Arabic, but tells Phillips he is "a

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[163] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976), 61.

[164] Young 94.

[165] Young 100.

[166] Young 84.

stepbrother of that great family," a "Hebrew," "from the house of Judah."[167] He jokes about his Jewish nose.[168] He goes by the name Jesus, but also Yeshua, Joshua and Jesse.

Jesus pretty much matches Phillips's expectations, except Phillips thought Jesus would be more handsome than he is. Phillips feels more immediately comfortable with Jesus than he did with Papa. Jesus attributes this to their shared humanity. There are moments, though, when Phillips focuses on the fact this human is also God and is struck by the strangeness of that. Laying on the dock in the lake by the shack, watching the stars with Jesus, Phillips wonders how Jesus can be inspired to awe by the sight and also, at the same time, be the stars' creator. Jesus explains that when he created the stars he was the pre-incarnate Word but now he sees them as the incarnate Word, as God who is fully human.[169] He is God and man. Jesus uses the incarnation, how God became man, to talk to Phillips about how his own spirituality is limited when he accepts the false division between natural and supernatural realities, not recognizing the sacred in the profane, and the spiritual in his own carnality. Jesus heals humans by unsettling this opposition.

"The human," Jesus says, "formed out of the physical material of creation, can once more be fully indwelt by spiritual life, my life."[170]

Phillips pronounces this almost unbelievable. Almost, but not quite. He is then "struck anew by the absurdity" of the claim. "Here I am," he says, "lying next to God Almighty, and you really sound so …." Jesus finishes his sentence, "human," and then jokes, "but ugly." The two share a good laugh.[171] Even at his most unsettling, Jesus is comforting and friendly.

The Holy Spirt also messes up Phillips's categories. The Holy Spirit appears in the narrative as "a small, distinctively Asian woman."[172] Her name is Sarayu, though Jesus suggests she has others as well.[173] This word is a masculine Sanskrit word-stem meaning "wind" and it is the name of a tributary to the Ganges. Sarayu herself is gendered female. The text does not call attention to her indeterminate gender, however, but to her indeterminate appearance. Phillips thinks she looks Chi-

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[167] Young 87.

[168] Young 115.

[169] Young 112.

[170] Young 116.

[171] Young 117.

[172] Young 83.

[173] Young 113.

nese, "or Nepalese or even Mongolian," but she shimmers like a mirage.[174] She is there and not there at the same time, present and absent, liminal to sight.

"Her nature was rather ethereal," he notes. "She obviously is not a being who is predictable."[175]

Where Phillips cooked in the kitchen with God the Father and went stargazing with God the Son, he gardens with God the Holy Spirit. Sarayu takes Phillips to a garden. He thought God's garden would be "perfectly manicured," but instead sees "blatant disregard for certainty."[176] Everything seems to be everywhere. There's no order, no reason. Except there is. He just can't see it. Phillips is surprised to learn that the garden is laid out in a fractal pattern, a never-ending series of patterns repeating within patterns that looks, from a distance, simple and perfectly, intricately designed.[177] It doesn't look like that up close. It looks beautiful, but appears without order. "Looks like a mess to me," Phillips says, and Sarayu is thrilled by the comment.[178]

For her, the order is not contradicted by the chaos, nor the chaos by the order, since the two are interrelated. Both things are true. This is the moral of the garden. "This garden is your soul," the Holy Spirit explains. "And it is wild and beautiful and perfectly in process. To you it seems like a mess, but I see a perfect pattern emerging and growing and alive—a living fractal."[179] God is working in the liminal space between order and chaos. Phillips's life is both/and, where he had assumed it had to be either/or. His categories for understanding his own life, like his categories for understanding God, were falsely fixed and certain. In truth they are unstable. In truth, everything is caught up in the "verdant wildness" that keeps Phillips just a little off balance.[180]

God tells Phillips disorientation is part of the point of the weekend at the shack. God wants to show Phillips his images of God were wrong. More than that, though, God wants him to let go of the conflicted feeling he associated with God. God wants Phillips to believe in a new way: embracing ambiguity and living in the tension. Phillips doesn't need to comprehend God or correctly categorize God. He doesn't need some way to reconcile his different conceptions of divinity or the apparent contradictions that characterize those respective ideas. God disorients Phillips to show him

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[174] Young 84-85.

[175] Young 134.

[176] Young 135.

[177] Young 135.

[178] Young 135.

[179] Young 146.

[180] Young 136.

his "religious stereotypes" were wrong but also, importantly, God doesn't replace those fixed images with other, better depictions. God just wants to get the "head issues" out of the way.

"I realize," Phillips says towards the end of the weekend, "how few answers I have … to anything."[181]

Papa agrees, but says answers aren't actually that important. What's important is a relationship with God. "All I want from you," Jesus says, "is to trust me with what little you can and grow in loving people around you with the same love."[182]

If Phillips gives up on dogma, on the quest for certain knowledge and the need for the right answers, he can enter into the open-ended (and thus always ambiguous) activity of "sharing life."[183]

A Personal, Open-Ended Belief

This alternative way of relating to God is modeled by God. The Trinity, as imagined in The Shack, is a mutually affirming relationship between the three persons, characterized by love and open-ended trust. Phillips at first wonders which one of the three persons is "really God." The three answer in unison: I am.[184] God exists in between singular and plural.

God, however, is less interested in explaining Trinitarian theology than in revealing the picture of the relationship of the persons of the Trinity, the interrelationship of God with God. "What's important is this," God the Father says, "if I were simply one God and only one person, then you would find yourself in this creation without something wonderful, without something essential even." Humans would be without true, open relationships. "All love and relationship is possible for you only because it already exists within me, within God myself," Papa says.[185]

Phillips accepts as mystery that three are one and one is three, but still assumes there must be a hierarchy in the Godhead.

"Isn't one of you more the boss than the other two?" he asks.[186]

No. There is no hierarchy in the Godhead.

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[181] Young 216.

[182] Young 196.

[183] Young 216.

[184] Young 87.

[185] Young 103.

[186] Young 126.

"Once you have hierarchy," Jesus explains, "you need rules to protect and administer it, and then you need law and the enforcement of the rules, and you end up with some kind of chain of command or a system of order that destroys relationship rather than promotes it."[187]

The key characteristic of the Trinity, as imagined in *The Shack*, is that God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit relate to each other differently, without needing a chain of command or a final authority. The relationship is not structured by power. They are in a "circle of relationship." They regard each others' interest as important as their own, and trust that the others each regard their interests in the same way, and avoid the conflicts that create the need for control. They trust each other. They don't try to contain each other, either in definitions or with other forms of control. They are thus truly free because they are totally vulnerable. This image of God is so critical, God believes, because it liberates people. It can free them from the need for control. "You were made in our image," Jesus says, "unencumbered by structure and free to simply 'be' in relationship with me and with one another."[188]

For evangelicals, of course, one way of talking about belief has always been as having a personal relationship with God. *The Shack*, here, is staging a conception of belief that is notably similar to how belief was imagined in *Love Comes Softly*, the novel considered in chapter two. Belief in that bestseller was conceived as submission, as trust that God wants only what is best for you and will work things out for your good in your life. What *The Shack* adds is a note about how uncertain and open-ended that trust must be.

This, ultimately, is the novel's solution to the problem of theodicy. Phillips has to believe. This, in *The Shack*, is imagined to mean he has to embrace ambiguity, uncertainty, and learn to love the liminal spaces. In the end, Phillips embraces exactly the sort of pluralism of perspectives that Charles Taylor says results in the fragilization of belief. He becomes postmodern, and accommodates multiple metanarratives. Phillips sees that evil can also be seen as good. He sees that doubt can also be seen as belief. He sees that God wants to deconstruct his categories. He sees that trust is not rightly thought of as certainty, but rather an open-ended and ongoing. He learns to accept that things do not have to be either/or. They can be both/and.

When Phillips leaves the cabin in the woods, it goes through the same radical and sudden transformation it did at the start, when he approached it and reality seemed to waver, and buckle. Now, however, he accepts it. At the beginning, the sudden change in perspective made him feel like

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[187] Young 128.

[188] Young 129.

he was being "swept away into the center of madness."[189] Now he can accept both perspectives, unperturbed. The cabin is, in some sense, dead and empty. It is, in some sense, like an evil face, a demonic grimace. This is where his daughter died. There's a blood stain by the fireplace. But also it is the place where he met God. It's the place where he came to belief, and experience healing, and went on amazing spiritual journey. All these things are true. The shack exists in incommensurable terms, pluralistically, contestably, always in-between, and the protagonist of *The Shack* grows and changes so he can accept this, and even embrace it.

Phillips leaves the shack a man who believes. And belief, as it's imagined here, means dwelling in the indeterminacies. That's the novel's resolution.

The Shack, however, cannot leave things settled and successfully make the point that people should value the journey over the destination and appreciate the process of being unsettled. It has to problematize the resolution. In the last fourteen pages, the novel therefore calls the reality of the experience into question in multiple ways and challenges readers to adopt the protagonists' way of believing. First, Phillips wakes up. He falls asleep without meaning to, as he prepares to leave. Then he wakes up, not knowing how much time has passed. The shack is once again a decrepit, decaying building. His daughter's blood has left a stain on the floor. It's winter again, and cold. As he crosses this threshold, however, and his sense of reality is contested, Phillips makes a conscious choice to believe what he experienced. He knows he could make a different choice, and that the one he's making might not be the most plausible one. He's fine with this.

"He was back in the real world," the narrator says. "Then he smiled to himself. It was more likely he was back in the unreal world."[190]

Phillips then drives away and is immediately caught in a car wreck. When he wakes up in the hospital, he doesn't know how much time has passed. He has only vague memories of what happened, and what he does remember is uncertain. "He wasn't sure," readers are told, "if they were real or hallucinations conjured up by collisions between some damaged or otherwise wayward neurons and the drugs coursing through his veins."[191] Then he does remember, and the reality of the experience seems settled. In the fictional reality of the novel, the weekend with God in the liminal space really did happen.

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[189] Young 80.

[190] Young 261.

[191] Young 265.

Then it's unsettled again. Phillips is told he has been in the hospital the whole time. He never made it to the shack. The car accident happened on Friday. The weekend never happened, even though he experienced it.

The protagonist makes a decision, at this point, to believe what he believes anyway. Perhaps the facts do not all fit and some of the things he believes don't fit, exactly, with other things he believes. He can live in that tension. At the conclusion the narrator says Phillips has become someone who "lives life with such simplicity and joy." At the same time, "he embraces even the darker shades of life."[192]

The narrator notes that Phillips is, here at the conclusion, someone readers can relate to. He doesn't have it all figured out. He is on a spiritual journey. "He's a human being who continues through a process of change," Willie says, "like the rest of us."[193] He doesn't have some special access to certain truth. He doesn't live above or beyond the ambiguities. Phillips is just someone who knows he can go back to the wilderness, back to the liminal space, back to the shack, "just to see if … well, you know …."[194]

If You're Into Soul Searching

Many did know. A lot of readers resonated with Phillips' story about coming to terms with God. In his very specific story, they found something of their own experience. They identified with the uncertainty and internal conflicts, and the arc of the character, as he learned to live in the tensions of the secular condition, the postmodern situation. They felt like they too had a religious experience in the liminal space of *The Shack*.

The novel remained in print and widely available even seven and eight years after it was first released, along with Young's bestselling follow-ups, *Cross Roads* and *Eve*. In August 2015, for example, booksellers reported selling 6,913 copies.[195] The next month, *The Shack* sold another 6,530 copies, grossing $78,114 in just that one month.[196] The next spring saw similar sales num-

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[192] Young 274.

[193] Young 273.

[194] Young 275.

[195] Jim Milliot and Steven Zeitchik, "BookScan: Acceptance, and Questions, Grow," *Publishers Weekly*, Jan. 12, 2004, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/print/20040112/23078-bookscan-acceptance-and-questions-grow.html.

[196] The Neilsen Company, Nielsen BookScan Report, Aug. 2015; The Neilsen Company, Nielsen BookScan Report, Sept. 2015.

bers: in February 2016, the $15 version of the paperback was the sixth best-selling evangelical novel. The $9 version was the thirteenth best-selling evangelical novel.[197]

Readers didn't universally love the book, of course. In one representative week in 2016, twenty-three people reviewed the book on the social cataloguing site GoodReads. Three gave *The Shack* a bad review. One called the book racist, another complained about the writing, and a third wrote simply, "Ugh."[198]

More than half of the online reviews, however, gave *The Shack* five out of five stars. More than eight years after the book was released, people were still raving about it. "Wow Wow WOW!" wrote one woman from New York. "I loved this book!"[199] Another woman from Arizona posted that "this was about the 4th or 5th time" she'd read the book.

"It always brings me closer to God in a 'real' way," she explained. "There are lessons that I need to learn over and over again, and they are knit into the fabric of this beautiful and fantastical story."[200]

A Minneapolis woman similarly found herself incredibly moved while reading. "This book make me bawl my eyes out," she wrote. "I highly recommend this book if you're into soul searching."[201]

A lot of people were into soul searching at the start of the twenty-first century.

Many Americans identified with a spirituality of searching, and talked about valuing the journey over the destination, and being open to the process of personal progress and discovery. A lot of people found they didn't identify with one specific religious group. Even when they did, they thought of their beliefs in relationship to other beliefs, as one of the options to choose from. They believed, but in the secular condition, not being able to take a belief for granted but always knowing

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[197] "Christian Fiction Bestsellers," Evangelical Christian Publishing Association, Feb. 2016, http://christianbookexpo.com/bestseller/fiction.php?id=0216.

[198] Heather, "Heather's Reviews," GoodReads, Jan. 1, 2015, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1491009722?book_show_action=false; Denisa, Denisa's Reviews, GoodReads, Jan. 6, 2016, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1498191471?book_show_action=false; Julie, Julie's Reviews, GoodReads, Jan. 3, 2016, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1493387249?book_show_action=false.

[199] Nancy Mure, "Nancy Mure's Reviews," GoodReads, Jan. 4, 2016, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1493750475?book_show_action=false.

[200] Pam Whitman, "Pam Whitman's Reviews," GoodReads, Jan. 6, 2016, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1498134584?book_show_action=false.

[201] Vue, "Vue's Reviews," GoodReads, Jan. 5, 2016, https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/1497418254?book_show_action=false.

it as a choice. For some people, that made beliefs seem fragile. Everything was always contested, at least in the believers' own minds, and that made belief seem threatened.

But what if that wasn't a bad thing?

The emergent Christian movement, through practices of critique, tried to create and cultivate that sense of contestability. They positioned themselves as outsiders inside evangelicalism, feeling belief was better and purer in that kind of marginal, in-between spaces. *The Shack* spoke to those same themes. Drawing from a long American history of stories of religious experiences in the woods, the novel invited readers to acknowledge their own doubts and admit their skepticism, but find ways to believe anyway. "Faith," God says in *The Shack*, "does not grow in the house of certainty."[202] Readers who could suspend their disbelief followed the main protagonist as his ideas were unsettled and unsettled again and as he learned to do without easy resolutions. A bestseller for years on end, the novel invited readers to imagine belief happens, when it happens, in liminal spaces like *The Shack*.

[202] Young 206.

Conclusion

Steve Laube has a nondescript office in a strip mall in Phoenix. On the one side there's a UPS store. On the other, a Chinese restaurant. There, in his office, he gets email after email after email. Three people, five people, sometimes seven people write him every day.

"I've written a novel," they say. "God called me to write this novel."[1]

Laube is a literary agent who specializes in representing evangelical authors. He started his career managing a Berean Christian Bookstore in Phoenix. He was good at it. In one year in the mid 1980s, his store did $1 million in sales. By the start of the 1990s, annual revenue was up to $1.9 million. Laube rose to be a book-buyer for the fifteen-store chain and later joined Bethany House, where he edited thirty to fifty evangelical titles per year.[2]

Now he runs a literary agency he named for himself, The Steve Laube Agency. Its slogan is "Changing the World … Word by Word." Laube has three agents working under him, each with their own history in the business of evangelical print culture. One, Dan Balow, led the *Left Behind* marketing team at Tyndale. Another, Tamela Hancock Murray, has written more than twenty evangelical romances. The third, Karen Ball, has worked with four different evangelical publishers, over the years, heading up their respective fiction departments. Ball has also authored multiple works of fiction herself, including a bestselling novel about a troubled marriage restored by faith, *The Breaking Point*. Between them, they estimate they have more than 100 years experience in evangelical publishing.[3] They are veterans in the industry.

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[1] Steve Laube, "God Gave Me This Blog Post," The Steve Laube Agency, April 5, 2010, http://www.stevelaube.com/god-gave-me-this-blog-post/.

[2] Steve Laube, "Complete Resume," The Steve Laube Agency, n.d., http://www.stevelaube.com/about/steve-laube-resume/.

[3] The Steve Laube Agency, "Frequently Asked Questions," The Steve Laube Agency, http://www.stevelaube.com/faq/.

The agency represents more than 130 evangelical novelists, as well as non-fiction authors, and has negotiated more than 800 contracts with publishers. In 2010, the agency signed a new contract, on average, every ten days.[4] A successful novel, by the agency's standards, sells around 12,000 copies in the first few months. A break-out success sells between 30,000 and 35,000 in the first year. A real blockbuster—and the small Phoenix office has had a few—sells more than 100,000.[5]

Fictions of Belief focuses on bestselling evangelical novels, and particularly the bestsellers that defined a field or a genre and captured widespread attention. The five bestsellers examined in this study are works of fiction that were, each in their own right, literary phenomena. This study argues these novels reveal the variety of ways evangelicals have imagined belief at the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first. They are evidence of an evangelical social imaginary, of the critical "sphere of discourse and dreaming" that historian Molly Worthen wrote about.[6] These bestsellers were read by millions. They staged themes of belief for millions, inviting their readers to imagine the world, and what belief is like, and what it should be like. It is worthwhile to study these bestsellers because, as German Americanist Winifred Fluck explains, they "open up the possibility to articulate something that is otherwise inaccessible and unrepresentable to us."[7]

The phenomenal bestsellers, however, are just the tiniest fraction of evangelical print culture. There are just the most successful product of an industry that produces thousands and thousands of fiction titles. For each evangelical novel that makes a bestseller list, there are many, many more that are written, published, shipped to distribution warehouses around the country, and sold from the shelves of evangelical bookstores, big box retailers, and the websites of online booksellers. Every day, thousands of people pick up novels like Deb Kastner's *A Daddy For Her Triplets*, Valerie Hansen's *Small Town Justice*, Scarlet Dunn's *Promises Kept*, and Wanda E. Brunstetter's *The Restoration*.[8] They take them home. They read them. They engage these fictions, put themselves in the positions of diverse characters, and image what belief is like when it's in an immanent frame, or part of a conflict over public space, or compelled, or authentic, or liminal. More than a few of these readers

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[4] Chuck Sambuchino, "Agent Advice: Steve Laube of the The Steve Laube Agency," Writer's Digest, Jan. 26, 2010, http://www.writersdigest.com/editor-blogs/guide-to-literary-agents/agent-advice-steve-laube-of-the-steve-laube-agency.

[5] Karen Ball, "You Guys Are Keeping Me Busy!" A Christian Worldview of Fiction, May 29, 2007, https://rebeccaluellamiller.wordpress.com/2007/05/28/open-letter-karen-ball/comment-page-1/.

[6] Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 264.

[7] Winifred Fluck, *Romance with America?* (Heidelberg: Universitätverlag Gmbh Heidelberg, 2009), 114.

[8] Deb Kastner, *A Daddy For Her Triplets* (New York: Love Inspired, 2016); Valerie Hansen, *Small Town Justice* (New York: Love Inspired, 2016); Scarlett Dunn, *Promises Kept* (New York: Zebra, 2015); Wanda Brunstetter, *The Restoration* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour Books, 2016).

are so engaged, imagining these things, that they feel compelled to imagine their own stories. They write their own evangelical novels. And then they email Steve Laube, at his office in Phoenix to say they've written a novel.

According to Laube, he and his agents get proposals for fifteen to thirty new works of evangelical fiction every week. In a year, they see around 1,000 emails from people who say they've written a story and they would like an agent to represent them, to sell their fiction to an evangelical publisher. If the aspiring authors have correctly followed the agency's instructions, they send a short synopsis of their novel, as well as a longer one, and the first several chapters. They frequently also write to explain how the novel is connected to their personal belief in Jesus. They explain how writing the novel was an act of devotion and belief, how this is something they believe God wanted them to do.

To get a sense of the scale of the industry that produces work after work of evangelical imagination, one can look at the output from Steve Laube's office. One can also look at the many, many authors that Laube turns away.

The Steve Laube Agency rejects more than 99 percent of book proposals.

Some are just not written to Laube's standards. "The story is weak," he says. "Poor writing. Flat clichéd characters." Other times, the story is underdeveloped and maybe needs more work. Occasionally the manuscript is fine, but the agents just don't think they can sell this particular story. In 2005 and 2006, for example, the agency received so many plots about terrorism and terrorists, they didn't think the market could handle them all. Allegories in the tradition of *Pilgrim's Progress* are also popular with would-be authors, but don't typically sell well. Sometimes the reasons are more nebulous. "You may love a book that I was bored with and vice versa," Laube tells writers. "This is the subjective nature of the business."[9]

Pay-to-Publish

Some writers, rejected by an evangelical literary agent, give up. Others try another agency or spend some time revising their novel, perhaps going to a writing group or attending fiction workshops, reworking the story before sending it out again. Still others decided to go around the gatekeepers of evangelical print culture. They have their novels self-published. Enough people choose this last option to support a booming pay-to-publish business.

In 2009, *Writer's Digest* put together a directory of self-publishing companies. There were sixty-six, at the time, with six of those identifying as evangelical businesses. New Book Publishing, in Florida, charged a minimum of $788 for authors to see their books in print and ebook format. A

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[9] Steve Laube, "Interview," The Steve Laube Agency, http://www.stevelaube.com/interview/.

listing on Amazon.com cost extra. Xlibirs, a Pennsylvania self-publisher, offered arrangements costing between $499 and the "platinum" deal for $12,999. Destiny 11, in Virginia, Innovo Publishing, in Tennessee, and Pleasant World, in Washington, all offered similar packages.[10] The list was not complete, though. Many more have also started since then. The total size of the self-publishing market in the United States, measured by output, has grown more than 300 percent since 2009.[11]

WestBow, the self-publishing arm of Thomas Nelson, started in 2009. The company does a lot of bussiness. WestBow employs more than sixty people and publishes about 1,000 titles per year.[12] In its first six years, WestBow published more than 160 evangelical romances and nearly the same amount of historical fiction. Charging authors between $1,099 and $17,999, the company has published forty-seven works of evangelical science fiction, more than thirty suspense novels, five war novels, seven Westerns, and one alternate history.[13]

WinePress Publishing, one of the oldest evangelical self-publishers until it shut down amid scandal in 2013, published 35 to 50 evangelical novels per year.[14] Xulon, the largest evangelical self-publishing company, charges $999 for the basic options. The "Best Seller Package" costs $2,223, and includes press release service, two book-marketing webinars, and cover art. More than 800 people have signed up for these services to see their evangelical novels printed.[15]

There are reasons to be skeptical of the ethics of the economic model of self-publishing. For these authors, though, spending this money is an act of belief.

Keith Ogorek, WestBow's senior vice president of marketing, explained this in an interview with *Publishers Weekly*. "Most people who write in the Christian and inspirational space really believe they have a message, that they think can impact the lives of others," he said.[16]

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[10] "Directory of Self-Publishing Companies," Writer's Digest, Jan. 29, 2009, http://www.writersdigest.com/writing-articles/by-writing-goal/get-published-sell-my-work/directory-of-self-publishing-companies.

[11] Bowker, "Self-Publishing in the United States, 2008-2013," Bowker, http://media.bowker.com/documents/bowker_selfpublishing_report2013.pdf.

[12] Lynn Garrett, "Keeping the Faith and Opening Doors," Publishers Weekly, Nov. 4, 2013, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/pw-select/article/59841-keeping-faith-with-authors.html.

[13] WestBow Press, http://www.westbowpress.com.

[14] Ann Byle, "Self-Publishing: Changing Model, Getting Respect," Publishers Weekly, Aug. 16, 2010, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/pw-select/article/59841-keeping-faith-with-authors.html; Lynn Garrett and Ann Byle, "Self-Publisher WinePress Goes Out of Business," Publishers Weekly, Jan. 22, 2014, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/religion/article/60734-self-publisher-winepress-closes.html.

[15] Xulon Press, http://www.xulonpress.com.

[16] Andy Butcher, "Christian Self-Publishers Finally Get Some Respect," Publishers Weekly, March 29, 2013, http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/pw-select/article/56606-christian-self-publishers-finally-get-some-respect.html.

The self-published evangelical novels, like the bestsellers examined in *Fictions of Belief*, imagine belief in the conditions of secularity. They stage their own stories, with their own characters and sets and scripts. But the themes are the same. The self-published evangelical fiction also reveals not just what evangelicals believe and say they believe, but the unarticulated and generally vague background understanding of what it means to believe, and what belief is like. The secular social imaginary can be seen here too.

Self-Published Fictions of Belief

Consider three self-published evangelical novels:

The Secret Path of Destiny, by M.B. Tosi, tells the story of a nineteenth century German-American girl who was born with the disability of a club foot. When he father dies, she and her mother leave New York for the German-immigrant settlement of Fredericksburg, Texas. In the first chapter, the first-person narrator, Isolde Bachmann, explains how she will be sustained by the belief handed down to her. "My parents believed there was no place on earth that God was not," she says, "and I found myself relying on that assurance more and more as I journeyed into the unknown."[17] In Fredericksburg, the disable girl and her mother are taken in as housekeepers by a man who mistreats them. The old man attempts to force the girl into marriage, but she flees, and is captured by the Comanche tribe. Isolde falls in love with one warrior and tames him with her love. Isolde learns to live with the Comanche and realizes she belongs there. They come to accept her, even though she is a white woman who walks with a limp.

The Fredericksburg settlers attempt to rescue Isolde, but end up shooting her in the process. In a near-death experience, she sees her father, who tells her that her time has not yet come. Her destiny is not yet fulfilled. He sends her soul back to her body with instructions. "Realize God is with you no matter where you are, and don't give in to discouragement or self-pity," he says. "Tell about this glorious place called Heaven to help others have faith. Commit yourself in love to your Comanche Indian and his people to show them the path of peace is always the better path."[18]

At the end of the novel, Isolde teaches her band of Comanche to accept the white settlers and adapt peaceably to white society. Her Comanche husband stops being a warrior and becomes a peace chief and a successful businessman. Despite her disability, Isolde runs a school teaching Comanche children English and has four children of her own.

"With God," she tells the reader, "there are no disabilities, only possibilities."[19]

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[17] M.B. Tosi, *The Secret Path of Destiny* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2012), 4.

[18] Tosi 91.

[19] Tosi 206.

Like *Love Comes Softly*, Tosi's novel imagines belief as the realization that God has a wonderful plan for each individual, to be realized in their immanent, day-to-day life. Her abundant life is not in heaven—at least not yet—but with her husband and her children and the people around her. If the protagonist's story is more exotic and more adventurous than readers', they can nonetheless imagine what it would be like to be faced with difficult circumstances and resist discouragement and self-pity. They can find themselves imaginatively engaged with the idea of God's love and care.

Similar themes are staged in the self-published crime-and-romance novel *Splashdown*. The protagonist of Linda K. Rodante's fiction is an accomplished, modern woman. She wears designer jeans and carries a Gucci handbag. She drives a Lexus and works as an administrative assistant for a Florida congressman. She's also an evangelical Christian. Lynn Stapleton is socially active, working with the congressman to try to end sex trafficking and with her evangelical church to provide shelter for homeless women. When one of the homeless women the church is trying to help is murdered, Lynn teams up with a blue-eyed detective named Rich Richards to solve the murder. The pair's conversations soon turn to questions of belief.

The detective believes there is a God and God has a purpose, a plan, and he had a conversion experience as a child. His faith has grown cold, though, and he doesn't trust churches, because he's seen some church-goers involved in horrible crimes. He has been psychically wounded. In one of their initial conversations, Lynn explains to him him how he can trust Jesus, even if not everyone who claims to love Jesus can be trusted. "Not all that go to church are believers or are following Him," she says. Besides, "trusting what Jesus did to remove our sins doesn't make us perfect."[20] She too, in fact, struggles with belief, specifically the belief that God will bring her a husband to share her life with.

A secondary plot involves Lynn's pastor and pastor's wife, continuing a storyline from a previously self-published novel. The pastor flies to Indonesia, bringing people aid after a natural disaster. The pastor's wife stays behind, ministering to the homeless people the church cares for. While her husband is away, a local doctor tries to seduce her. She resists, and he brutally assaults her.

Lynn and the detective, meanwhile, have a strong attraction for each other and Rich attempts to have sex with Lynn, but she resists him. "I don't hook up," she says, "toss salad, or give benefits to anyone."[21] She is saving herself for marriage. She is trying to stay true to her belief, though she acknowledges this is not always easy and she has failed to remain pure in the past.

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[20] Linda K. Rodante, *Splashdown* (Amarillo, TX: Lone Mesa Publishing,), Kindle Loc. 879.

[21] Rodante, Kindle Loc. 2005. "Tossing salad" is slang for oral-anal sex.

When she realizes how much this man wants her, Lynn starts to think maybe God has brought him into her life. Rich has similar thoughts. He realizes his attraction, however, is also spiritual. "Her faith challenged him," Rodante writes. "She appeared to live it."[22] He realizes he's starting to trust people again, and that this is God working in his life, healing him.

As the plot unfolds, Lynn and the Rich discover the homeless woman who was murdered was actually a private detective, undercover, investigating sex trafficking. The doctor reappears, and attempts to kill the pastor's wife. He is, it turns out, a pedophile deeply involved in sex trafficking. He killed the undercover private detective because she was on to him and attempted to seduce the pastor's wife to find out what she knew. He flees the city and there's a car chase and Rich arrests the man.

In this process, Lynn learns to be less worried about her appearance and material things. She learns to trust God more, to be stronger in her belief. The detective renews his commitment to evangelical Christianity and proposes to Lynn. "I'm no model Christian as you know, but I'm willing to work on that," Rich says. "Still want to marry me?"[23] She accepts.

Belief, in the novel, is imagined to provide solace and strength, and moral character, which can have a great influence. It is imagined to result in a happy denouement—solving a crime, healing a psychic wound, and bringing a hero and heroine together to live happily ever after.

A third novel, *The Gathering*, by Gail D. Prentice, imagines belief differently. This novel is about spiritual warfare, in the tradition of Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*, and the End Times, in the tradition of *Left Behind*. It opens on a small Texas town, where, "in the depths of the city hall," a demon warrior is speaking.

"We have very effectively driven out of this community all of the preachers that boldly declared the Word of the God of Heaven," says Supreme Commander Goth. "We have many strongholds in the United States, but we cannot be satisfied with that. We are going to widen our grasp to the surrounding areas here in the United States."[24]

The human manifestation of this is a political conspiracy. In Washington D.C., liberal U.S. Senators are plotting the final take-over of America. They only need to smear Tom Pearson, the Conservative Christian Party's presidential candidate, to win a total victory for "our Lord Satan."[25] Person, a pastor, is so moral, honest, and full of integrity, Prentice writes, that he makes "all other

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[22] Rodante, Kindle Loc. 3141.

[23] Rodante, Kindle Loc. 3680.

[24] Gail D. Prentice, *The Gathering* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2016), Kindle Loc. 90.

[25] Prentice, Kindle Loc. 201.

candidates look like Nixon, the Clintons, and Obama."[26] The demons and the politicians nevertheless plant false stories he has secretly used money from the church for political purposes, in violation of tax law. The pastor spends a good portion of the novel in jail, falsely accused.

The plot toggles back and forth between the unfolding political campaign and the IRS investigation, on the one hand, and the supernatural battles, on the other. In many scenes, the heavenly and earthly characters actually mingle, as when, at the Democratic National Convention, the vice president introduces a popular entertainer to preform for the crowds. In the midst of the party faithful, Supreme Commander Goth moves unseen, taking his place in the upper reaches of the convention center, where he can survey the whole scene.[27] The political conflict is thus imagined as being also simultaneously a spiritual conflict.

For a political novel, though, *The Gathering* spends very little time on political issues. The characters don't devote much energy to outlining a platform or arguing for policy. Pearson spends significantly more time praying and talking to people about their need for Jesus than he does campaigning in any traditional sense.

The one significant political issue the novel does stage is the issue of religion in politics. It presents secular public space as necessarily and inevitably contested. There is no neutral space, no common ground, because belief affects everything. The Christian Conservative Party's vice presidential candidates explains that non-believers do not have a reliable perception of reality. "Without Jesus as Lord and Savior, Satan and his demons have the opportunity to manipulate and even control those who are not Christian," he says. "When a person accepts Jesus as their Lord and Savior, Satan no longer has power of them. He will attack them, but that is all he can do. He can no longer have demons possess them."[28] Belief entails basic epistemological conflict.

When Pearson converts one of his political rivals, the Republican Speaker of the House, it is political and spiritual both. The man commits himself to God, and then feels compelled to switch his party affiliation, joining the Christian Conservative Party even if that effectively means giving up his career.

The novel ends when Pearson goes to debate the Democratic candidate who supported by the Satanic and Senatorial conspiracies. As he approaches the front door, the rapture happens. "The sky rolled back like a scroll," Prentice writes, "and the Lord Jesus stood in the Heavens. He shouted with the sound of a mighty thunder, and a trumpet sounded distinctively clear and tremendously

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[26] Prentice, Kindle Loc. 256.

[27] Prentice, Kindle Loc. 2738.

[28] Prentice, Kindle Loc. 1014-1017.

loud. The earth reeled and trembled at his presence."[29] All the true Christians are gone from the earth. The people who remain, like the main characters in *Left Behind*, are either compelled to belief or completely blind.

Each of these authors have appended a note to their novels, which explains why they wrote this fiction and why they paid to have it published. Each says something about belief. Tosi writes directly to the reader, suggesting they take her fictional protagonist as a faithful example. "Although Isolde's life takes place in a different century, her story could happen today," Tosi expalins. "She's a quiet hero like many of you, always trying to do what is right and following a path of peace and love."[30] Rodante puts hers in the form of a prayer. She thanks God for shaping her and forming her, and asks that her fiction may have that same affect on others. Prentice notes that his novel is fiction, except the parts that are the "Truth of God's Word." He hopes readers will suspend disbelief in a such a way that they will be moved to belief. "If you have never asked Jesus to be your personal Lord and Savior, please do so right now," he writes. "It has been prophesied for years and years that Jesus is coming to take His saints away. Don't take time for granted and think it won't be anytime soon."[31]

Few people appear to have read these self-published books, however. On the social cataloguing site GoodReads, no one has rated or reviewed *The Gathering*. Frank Peretti's first novel, by comparison, has more than 66,000 ratings, while *Left Behind* has nearly 150,000. It is about as far from a literary phenomenon as one can imagine. Tosi's novel, *The Secret Path to Destiny*, appears to have a few more readers. There are eight reviews on GoodReads and three ratings, two of which are positive. Rodante's *Splashdown* is slightly more popular, with twenty ratings and ten reviews. Half the reviews mention the readers were given free, promotional copies, in exchange for reader reviews. Each of these gives the book five stars.

Self-published novels, however, are also part of the larger field of evangelical fiction. And they too stage belief in the secular condition. They share in the "sphere of discourse and dreaming" that defines the industry's bestsellers and motivate evangelicals around the country to imagine new stories of belief, and then email Steve Laube week after week after year.

The Evangelical Imagination in a Secular Age

Evangelicals live in a secular age. They imagine belief in the conditions of secularity.

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[29] Prentice, Kindle Loc. 6253.

[30] Tosi "Dedication."

[31] Prentice, Kindle Loc. 6393-6394.

Studying these novels reveals an evangelical cultural imaginary. It makes the implicit terms and conditions of the evangelical worldview more apparent. American evangelicals can of course be usefully defined by what they believe, their conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism. But it is also worth looking at the variety of ways in which they believe, how they understand believing, and what they imagine belief to be like. At the turn of the millennium, they were very actively engaged in this work of imagination, and they can be understood by the examination of that imagination. This is a major thing that evangelical did at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. They produced and distributed and consumed thousands upon thousands of fictions of belief.

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