

GOD’S PEOPLE, GOD’S BLESSINGS: RHETORICS OF RELIGION, PATRIOTISM AND
CAPITALISM IN AMERICAN PROSPERITY

by

BETHANY LYNN KEELEY-JONKER

(Under the Direction of Thomas Lessl)

ABSTRACT

While scholars have long been interested in the ways American Protestant Christianity interacts with Patriotism and Economic structures separately, few have taken these two relationships into account together. In this dissertation, I seek to understand how Americans build connections between their understanding of religion, national identity, and work success. I do this primarily through examining three best-selling middlebrow books from different time periods: *The Man Nobody Knows*, *The Power of Positive Thinking* and *Your Best Life Now*. Alongside these major texts, I look at public speeches, legal discourse and news coverage to understand how they interact with “common sense” notions of the time. I argue these three ideology/institutions become articulated into a hegemony, in a logic similar to that described by Ernesto Laclau. Some scholars criticize Laclau for not detailing how these hegemonies come into being beyond crediting it to “rhetoric.” Through my case studies, I make the case that theories and methods from the rhetorical tradition can account for how and why that takes place, although the breadth of rhetorical tradition suggests it takes place in a variety of ways. The study also helps us understand an American tradition of understanding economic virtues and religious virtues together, and that both elements influence the cultural understanding of what it means to live a

good life. Each of my texts presents an example of an American Christian wrestling with the relation his faith might have to success in business and other arenas. In all cases, they seem to be simultaneously making the case for a particular kind of Christian living, and for the relevance of the Bible and Christian Theology to the contemporary American. This tradition explains why so much of today's political debates around American identity and economic crisis are so closely tied to religious beliefs, affiliations and identities.

INDEX WORDS: hegemony, Christianity, popular books, Laclau, civil religion

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DEDICATION

To Justin, with love.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In December 2009 the cover article of *The Atlantic* had the provocative title “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?” The *Atlantic* article examines the messages of what many call “prosperity preachers” who focus on God’s desire to give the blessings of wealth. Author Hanna Rosin focuses on a particular church in Virginia dominated by Mexican immigrants, including its pastor, Fernando Garay, but also mentions other similar churches and suggests a national trend. In the article, Rosin argues that prosperity preachers like Garay lead followers to expect financial windfalls as signs of faith, leading to large purchases like houses and cars as signifiers of Christian faith. Meanwhile, predatory lenders take advantage of these beliefs by offering variable rate mortgages to those who cannot afford to pay them. Rosin calls this “a shift in the American conception of divine Providence and its relationship to wealth.”¹ This raises the question, What manner of shift? The *Atlantic* article connects the specific beliefs of Garay’s church with events like the mortgage crisis, but does not explain what might be different about a popular prosperity message today from those of other periods. This dissertation seeks to address the nature of such a shift, if it has indeed occurred.

To pursue this question, I examine the ways ideologies and institutions are connected discursively in three periods of American history, through bestselling middlebrow books as well as other texts. The time periods I will focus on are the 1920s, the 1950s and the pre-crash 2000s. Though there are important differences among these three time periods, I have selected them in particular because some important aspects are analogous. All three are periods of financial

¹ Hanna Rosin, "Did Christianity Cause the Crash?," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 2009 2009.

prosperity where the articulations I am interested in are overt in discourses such as best selling books, popular evangelists' sermons and legislative changes. Each period also follows a traumatic violent event that challenged Americans' assumption that they were safe from external attack: two world wars and the terrorist attacks of 2001. Understanding how conceptions of divine providence, prosperity and American identity have shifted (or not) across these time periods requires an examination of a variety of rhetorics that create, reinforce, and disclose how these ideologies are related.

The relations among these institutions and ideographs—patriotism, Christianity, economy, the state, churches, corporations—are rhetorical. They are built, negotiated, expressed, enforced and detected through symbolic messages. In this sense, the project of answering the title question “Did Christianity Cause the Crash?” is a uniquely rhetorical one. Rosin’s exploration of the question does engage in rhetorical analysis, though I doubt she would name it in that way. She uses quotations from interviews and sermons to suggest that churches like the one she spent time with develop a rhetorical connection between God’s favor and signs of prosperity like a nice car or home, leading to the very irresponsible borrowing that some argue led to the mortgage crisis in 2007. I propose that a scholarly discussion of these articulations in the 2000s and in earlier periods of American History might allow for a more complex understanding of how these rhetorics developed and how those might have led to the kinds of values and behaviors that brought the current economic recession. This perspective may not explain what *caused* the crash, perhaps a question best left to economists, but it will provide more understanding of how attitudes about economic life and American identity may have developed, how those attitudes might lead to particular kinds of actions on a social scale, and what if anything religion has to do

with such problems. This knowledge could also help us to understand how to promote different actions in the future, which might lead to different or better economic or social outcomes.

In order to move toward addressing these questions, this project takes a diachronic approach that traces similar articulations in three snapshots during a century of U.S. history. Any selection necessarily leaves things out. By choosing to compare a set of disparate yet similar time periods, I gain a sense of scope and change. This selection of course leaves out other elements, including alternative views being promoted simultaneously through other rhetors and other institutions (and sometimes the same institutions) as well as alternative discourses that gained more cultural cache at other time periods. However, selecting texts in this manner allows me to focus on two problems, one general and one specific. It allows me to ask how any particular hegemonic articulation might adapt itself to changing cultural and material conditions, and it allows me to trace this particular articulation: a sense of the good life in America that connects Christian scriptures to new economic roles. I believe this particular case is worthy of study by virtue of its content, which has a dramatic effect on the political-rhetorical atmosphere in American politics as well as the lives of individuals using this rhetoric among others to make their way in the world.

Articulation and Hegemony

Naming the differences between these eras as differences in the mechanism of *articulation* presupposes a theory drawn from the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in cultural studies. In these theories, articulation is a way that hegemonies are formed. Both of these concepts are important for my project because my goal is to trace and describe hegemonic articulations at particular times. Conceived in this way, it fits in a trajectory of rhetorical

scholarship theorizing a concept of hegemony inherited from Gramsci through applied cases.

Though scholars read Gramsci differently, definitions of hegemony share the idea of a prevailing cultural system or understanding that interpellates and inculcates those who are oppressed by it.

For instance, Dana Cloud defines it as “the process by which a social order remains stable by generating consent to its parameters through the production and distribution of ideological texts that define social reality for the majority of the people.”² Celeste Condit argues that our contemporary mixed economic system means that hegemony is more complex than elite capitalists oppressing labor, and is best understood as a concordance that is provisionally negotiated among a number of interests: “In this context, a small capitalist elite does not oppress a majority, but rather an interlocking set of minimally and moderately well to do groups amalgamated with capitalists oppress a minority.”³ Laclau and Mouffe also push the concept of hegemony beyond class relations: “the hegemonic subject is a class subject only in the sense that, on the basis of class positions, a certain hegemonic formation is *practically* articulated....”⁴ For Condit hegemony is the provisional concord among competing interests, “demands” in Laclau’s terms. In his *On Populist Reason*, hegemonic terms are “something on the order of an *empty* signifier, its own particularity embodying an unachievable fullness.”⁵ For my project, I will examine how bestselling books function as part of larger discursive hegemonic trends to articulate Christianity with particular versions of good capitalist citizenship. In all cases, but

² Dana L. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance: The Rhetoric of Tokenism in Oprah Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996). P. 117

³ Celeste M Condit, "Hegemony in a Mass-Mediated Society: Concordance About Reproductive Technologies," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 11, no. 3 (1994). P. 208

⁴ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*, Second ed. (New York: Verso, 1985). P. 65

⁵ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005). P. 71

increasingly, this discourse is linked through rhetorical forms to discourses about American identity and patriotic behaviors.

Understanding these linkages as articulations highlights that these associations are real but also time-bound. As Kevin Deluca explains, “The linking of elements into a temporary unity is not necessary, but rather is contingent and particular and is the result of political and historical struggle.”⁶ It is this *temporary* and *contingent* aspect of articulation that makes hegemony a more dynamic concept. Rather than imagining a particular hegemony as a necessary and crucial aspect of class relations, it becomes an articulation that is contingent and takes place through discursive practices.⁷ Grossberg also emphasizes that articulations are made and unmade across time,

Articulation is the construction of one set of relations out of another; it often involves delinking or disarticulating connections in order to link or rearticulate others. Articulation is a continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces, to redefine the possibilities of life by redefining the field of relations – the context – within which a practice is located.⁸

Hence, a project investigating the ways that Christianity is associated with the American economic system necessarily understands these relations as articulated, because of the ways that they change across time. That project is rhetorical because these articulations happen through symbolic systems and their deployment at particular times.

⁶ Kevin Deluca, "Articulation Theory: A Discursive Grounding for Rhetorical Practice," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 32, no. 4 (1999). P. 335

⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Toward a Radical Democratic Politics*. P. 65

⁸ Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get out of This Place : Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992). P. 54

Rhetoric's function as an articulatory practice is especially useful given its ability to constitute identities. In *On Populist Reason* Laclau more closely examines this aspect of the symbolic as both expressing and constituting social articulation:

“...the popular symbol or identity, being a surface of inscription, does not *passively express* what is inscribed in it, but actually *constitutes* what it expresses through the very process of its expression. In other words: the popular subject position does not simply *express* a unity of demands constituted outside and before itself, but is the decisive moment in establishing that unity. That is why I said that this unifying element is not a neutral or transparent medium”⁹

For Laclau, importantly, rhetoric is what forms and sustains hegemonic articulations. He writes that rhetoric is inherently catechresis: using tropological language for that which has no literal name, and that “the hegemonic operation will be catecristical through and through.”¹⁰ Therefore, the construction of hegemonic articulations is constituted in rhetoric. In light of this, the purpose of this project is to identify the rhetorical constitution of particular hegemonic articulations at three particular times in American History, and the rhetorical methods by which those articulations take place.

By taking on this project in the context of Laclau's theory, I have important points of agreement and departure from Michael Kaplan's critique in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. Kaplan argues that Laclau's theory of hegemony leaves out a theory of rhetoric that is “capable of explaining the conduct and outcomes of concrete political struggles.”¹¹ I agree that Laclau's theory points to the role of the rhetorical struggle in determining which signifier becomes the floating signifier and to how particular demands are articulated to each other but it does not

⁹ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*. P. 99

¹⁰ Ibid. p 72

¹¹ Michael Kaplan, "The Rhetoric of Hegemony: Laclau, Radical Democracy, and the Rule of Tropes," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 43, no. 3 (2010). P. 255.

describe or attempt to explain how this struggle plays out or what determines the outcome. I disagree with Kaplan, however, when he claims that “Laclau’s approach confines him to a tropological conception of rhetoric derived from structuralist poetics.”¹² Instead, I believe that Laclau’s theory is intentionally ambiguous on the nature of these rhetorical struggles because they are incidental to his project of describing how populist movements become politically powerful. Scholars grounded in the rhetorical tradition, then, are uniquely prepared to address this lacuna in Laclau’s theory by asking our own theories the question: why do some signifiers become empty, and how do hegemonic articulations take place? This project attempts to pursue this question diachronically through similar hegemonic articulations among American Christianity, economic roles and patriotic identities.

In other words, it is my assumption that Laclau’s theory of populist reason does not account for how rhetorical struggles create the particular articulations they do, but traditional rhetorical theories are sufficient to the task. Therefore, this project draws on a variety of concepts from rhetorical theory as well as close reading of texts to understand how individual texts construct and repeat the articulation in which I am interested.

Religion and the State

This argument simultaneously draws on and adds to existing literature about the relations between religion and the state. Concepts like “civil religion” and “civic piety” have been important in a variety of scholarly undertakings, including those focused on the role of religion in U. S. society but also others focused on presidential rhetoric and the rhetoric of social change. My perspective amplifies Roderick Hart’s claim that civic piety is not a religion itself but a

¹² Ibid.

particular relationship or contract between established religion and the state.¹³ My use of articulation theory allows me to argue that the tenets of Hart's "contract" were likely true at one point in time, but that this relationship or contract is re-articulated in different ways.

Sociologists of religion have long argued that religious constructs are a stabilizing and legitimizing force for societies. Regardless of the cosmic truth-value that religious beliefs may have for the faithful, they serve an important role in social structures, a crucial and functional one as portrayed in the foundational work of Emile Durkheim. He claimed that religion is "the system of symbols by means of which society becomes conscious of itself... the characteristic way of thinking of collective existence."¹⁴ This was the foundation upon which Peter Berger built his similar claim that, "religion legitimates so effectively because it relates the precarious reality constructions of empirical societies with ultimate reality."¹⁵ Religion, this is to say, functions to ground *nomos* or social and cultural norms in *cosmos* or transcendent reality. Lessl extends Berger's argument to suggest that religion is discursively recognized wherever such linkages are being formed and that its symbolic patterns thus infuse secular ideologies as well traditional religious messages.¹⁶

The precise way that religion functions to ground other values or policies in a culture has been approached in a number of different ways. Bellah has argued, following Rousseau's use of the term, that American civil religion is a religion itself, separate from particular churches and

¹³ Roderick P. Hart, *The Political Pulpit* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1977).

¹⁴ Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. J. A. Spaulding and G. Simpson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951). P. 312.

¹⁵ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy; Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1967). P. 32

¹⁶ Thomas M. Lessl, "The Innate Religiosity of Public Life: An *a Fortiori* Argument," *Journal of Communication & Religion* 32 (2009).

performed in civic rituals.¹⁷ Many sociologists following Bellah have taken American Civil Religion as just such a religion to be studied like other religions.

In contrast to Bellah's view, Roderick P. Hart aligns himself with John Wilson's assertion that Bellah's civil religion unnecessarily distorts the concept of religion because, unlike traditionally defined religions, it does not offer specific requirements for membership, doctrines or behaviors. Instead, Hart argues that "Bellah discovered not 'religion' but interesting rhetorical assertions."¹⁸ I agree with Hart that Bellah's construction of civil religion as a distinct religion is heuristically useful but limited because it cannot account for the complex relations among the state, civil religion, and formal religions in the U. S. Bellah's view also minimizes civil religion's historical associations with Protestant Christianity—to suggest that American civil religion is wholly separate from Protestantism is on my view an incorrect reading of the discourse. In response to this problem, Hart re-interprets what he calls "civic piety" rather than "civil religion," as a relation, which he describes as a *contract*. Hart's contract posits that American Government and American religion have forged a mutually beneficial agreement whereby they support each other without becoming overtly involved in questions outside their own realm.

Other scholars agree with Hart that religion and American politics are in a relationship but disagree with his apparent belief that this is a relationship merely of mutual convenience. For example, Martin Medhurst argues that "religion is democracy's greatest bulwark" because the concept of the value of individual humans rests on a religious notion of human value as the

¹⁷ Robert N Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *Robert Bellah Reader*, ed. Robert N Bellah and Steven M. Tipton (Durham: Duke UP, 2006).

¹⁸ Roderick P. Hart, Roderick P. Hart, and John Lester Pauley, *The Political Pulpit Revisited* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2005). P. 39

image of God.¹⁹ Similarly, Ronald Lee writes, “many of our prominent political discourses are explainable only by reference to the transcendent.”²⁰

My view of civic piety accepts Hart’s contention that it is a relation, constructed rhetorically, between religious and state discourse. In contrast to Hart, I replace the “contract” metaphor with a concept of articulation. Articulation theory allows us to understand these relationships as real, rhetorically constructed, and contingent while a contract implies an overt, long-term agreement. The contract metaphor emphasizes the mutual benefits for the institutions of church and state but also suggests a kind of intentionality or plan on the part of some kind of person in charge. In contrast, articulation implies a robust theory of hegemony, which balances consent of those governed by a hegemonic logic with an understanding that rhetoric has the power to make some narratives, identities and metaphors easier to perform and access than others. While the interests of particular individuals and organizations are certainly a factor in which articulations become hegemonic and which signifiers come to represent them, it would be a mistake to imagine a smoky room where major players agree to a literal contract and proceed based on its rules even when another strategy or articulation might be more advantageous. The more flexible notion of articulation also points to the role that factors besides cool calculation enter into rhetorical ideological choices, including elements that might be considered under the banner of affect, such as conscience, sincere belief, and emotion.

¹⁹ Martin J. Medhurst, "Mitt Romney, "Faith in America," And the Dance of Religion and Politics in American Culture," in *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* (Michigan State University Press, 2009). P. 213-214

²⁰ Ronald Lee, "The Force of Religion in the Public Sphere," in *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, ed. Roderick P. Hart and John Lester Pauley (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2005).

A view of civic piety driven by articulation also expands the locations and institutions where articulation may occur. Many rhetorical discussions on civic piety have found their evidence primarily in presidential speeches.²¹ Indeed, Bellah's analysis of civil religion focuses on presidential inaugurals, and Hart's argument also draws primarily on presidential speech for evidence. Though presidents play an important role in integrating American religion into American government, other individuals and institutions do as well. Broadening the scope of research in examining the relation between church and state will result in a more thorough understanding of how these relations fill an important role in our national fabric. I therefore build upon Hart's notion that civic piety enacts a relationship between churches and the state by taking into account discourses from prominent representatives of both institutions which constitute this relation. I am not the first to suggest that this approach is important; Kristy Maddux enacts it by reviewing both political and theological works together on questions of the role of faith in political citizenship.²² Relatedly, Medhurst argues that thinking of "organized religion" as only an institution is insufficient, as it does not account for deeply held beliefs that motivate individual citizens to action and opinion.²³

Further, an articulatory view presupposes that other discourses beyond church and state may be relevant in articulations of American civic piety. As my case studies show, American capitalism is frequently and strongly articulated to an American conception of democracy, and to

²¹ Keith V. Erickson, "Jimmy Carter: The Rhetoric of Private and Civic Piety," *Western Journal of Speech Communication: WJSC* 44, no. 3 (1980), Ned O'Gorman, "Eisenhower and the American Sublime," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 94, no. 1 (2008), Nneka Ifeoma Ofulue, "President Clinton and the White House Prayer Breakfast," in *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, ed. Roderick Hart and John L. Pauley (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2005).

²² Kristy Maddux, "Faithful Political Rhetoric," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 11, no. 1 (2008).

²³ Martin J. Medhurst, "Forging a Civil-Religious Contract for the 21st Century: Should Hart's 'Contract' Be Renewed?," *Journal of Communication & Religion* 25, no. 86-101 (2002).

an American conception of Christianity. As my next section describes, the relations between Christianity and capitalism are well trod in literature, but my project extends this work, first by understanding it in relation to civil religion, and second by looking particularly at the mechanisms for articulation that operate rhetorically in different periods.

My understanding of the relationship between American monotheism and capitalism builds on and departs from Marxian notions of the role of ideology in economic systems. Marx argued that that “each class that puts itself in the place of one ruling before it is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to present its interest as the common interest of all the members of society...it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and present them as the only rational and universally valid ones.”²⁴ From Marx’s perspective, ideologies like religion and patriotism are created by the ruling class to validate and support their rule to the exclusion of alternatives. Therefore, religion and other ideologies do not allow a conception of a “good person” who is not complicit in the economic system. I share Marx’s fundamental assumption on this point, but I depart from him, in accordance with more recent conceptions of hegemony, in seeing this relationship as a dynamic relationship between rhetorical moves and material conditions rather than a direct relationship from one to the other. In other words, articulation allows me to think about the hegemonic relationship of support among dominant conceptions of Christianity and a capitalist economic system as something that is real but also something that necessarily changes in response to material as well as cultural conditions. It does not deny more traditional the Marxist explanations; rather it complicates them.

Max Weber’s thesis about the way Protestant theology enabled capitalism meshes in many respects with a Marxian view of this relationship. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of*

²⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998). P. 68

Capitalism, Weber argues that the Protestant conception of a secular “calling” in combination with the doctrine of predestination led to a form of Christian virtue that was evidenced by hard work and commercial success. As he explains, “the effect of the Reformation as such was only that, as compared with the Catholic attitude, the moral emphasis on and the religious sanction of, organized worldly labour in a calling was mightily increased.”²⁵ Beyond that, traditions of modesty prohibited believers from spending their wealth on luxuries: “wealth is thus bad ethically only in so far as it is a temptation to idleness and sinful enjoyment of life, and its acquisition is bad only when it is with the purpose of later living merrily without care.”²⁶ Therefore, the Protestant ethic provided an impulse to accumulate wealth as well as an impulse to avoid spending it on leisure. These two impulses allowed capital to accumulate for investment, especially given a less friendly attitude toward alms-giving as it removes the opportunity for the beggars to engage in the moral act of work. In many of the texts I will examine for my dissertation, these tendencies of Protestant Christianity are either explicit or implicit. My study does not contradict Weber’s hypothesis, but it does demonstrate how these notions of moral work can be applied flexibly to the particular economic mode of the time, often in explicit ways that are linked to American patriotism.

Since Weber’s writing, scholars have tested, extended and taken issue with his thesis. For example, Delacroix and Nielson use quantitative evidence to argue that there is little empirical support for the idea that capitalism developed more strongly in nations with a higher

²⁵ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Counterpoint, 1930). P. 83

²⁶ Ibid. p. 163

proportion of Protestants.²⁷ Other scholars, historians especially, have taken up Weber's idea and examined relationships between groups of Protestant Christians and the US Economy at different times.²⁸ They have also articulated Weber's insights to other relevant issues, such as the development of particular industries or to environmental concerns.²⁹ My dissertation adds to this literature by specifically looking at these issues in terms of their development *rhetorically*. This rhetorical perspective allows me to consider how particular texts demonstrate ways of thinking and speaking about what it means to be a Christian or an American, and how these rhetorics construct economic and social realities in U. S. History. My project especially attends to the language of lay people and institutions – church and state – to see how these realities develop, change and are reinforced discursively.

Book Culture and Text Selection

Each of the following case-study chapters centers on a best-selling book that addresses both Protestant Christianity and specific roles in a changing economy. Each book is read alongside other texts that demonstrate how the book fits within larger cultural discourses that form, I believe, a larger hegemonic articulation. The additional texts come from a variety of institutions and media, including speeches by ministers, business leaders, and political leaders.

²⁷ Jacques Delacroix and Francois Nielsen, "The Beloved Myth: Protestantism and the Rise of Industrial Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *Social Forces* 80, no. 2 (2001).

²⁸ P Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Mark A. Noll, ed., *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money and the Market, 1790-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Paul Henry Heidebrecht, *Faith and Economic Practice : Protestant Businessmen in Chicago, 1900-1920*, Garland Studies in Entrepreneurship (New York: Garland, 1989).

²⁹ Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, 1st ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997).

While these texts are scattered across a large discursive field, they are chosen for their ability to demonstrate other dominant discourses from the period of the book to form a picture, if partial, of a hegemonic articulation that held together at a particular time. These texts were chosen, then, for their points of contact with the books which can be compared more directly because of their similar role in culture as middlebrow bestsellers. By necessity they could not represent all the available perspectives at the time. During all of these periods other rhetors were making strenuous arguments for alternative ways to understand material politics, religious theology and American identity. Nonetheless, the bestseller status of each of these books signals that the articulation they participate in was compelling to a large segment of Americans at the time of their publication.

Focusing on books as a centerpiece across three distinct timeframes provides the benefit of historical scope but also creates significant challenges. In some sense, the familiarity of the book form is one common element in the turbulent and distinct media landscapes of the 1920s, 1950s and 2000s. In each period, new forms of mass media were becoming commonplace and in some cases challenging the dominance of the book (respectively, radio, television and internet). By focusing on books and speeches, forms that existed in each era, and not other media forms, I avoid the problem of trying to compare works across inherently different media that construct their own unique relationships with readers. Instead, the choice to focus on books creates a different problem of media: wrestling with the place of books and reading in culture as it changes across time.

Perhaps further complicating things, observant Protestant Christians are in some ways different from mainstream modern people because their religion focuses on reading a book as a central form of devotion. Hence the reading and interpretation of written work is a part of the

habit of Christian practice, making a transition to reading about the implications of faith in addition to reading the Bible perhaps more natural than it might otherwise be.³⁰

All three books included in my case studies were possible as bestsellers because of the development of middlebrow book culture which developed early in the 20th century. Ted Striphas explains, “What distinguished middlebrow goods from other cultural goods was their unique blend of commerce and culture, their linking of mass-produced consumer goods to possibilities for learning and social advancement—hitherto the provenance of high cultural forms and institutions.”³¹ Striphas also observes that the considerable growth in higher education following the second world war led to a significantly larger audience for this kind of reading. The growth of education, literacy and access to a range of reading material in the US over the last 100 years may account, in part, for the way the books I discuss moved down the corporate food chain with its anecdotes and its apparent audience, from CEOs to middle management to consumers.

Given this history, I want to repeat Striphas’ twin assertions that books retain an important place in American culture and ideology, but they also function differently because they are enmeshed in a landscape with a variety of other media, and this landscape has changed dramatically across time.³² It is therefore reasonable to compare books across these time periods but also important to bear in mind their place within a broader mediated culture.

³⁰ I point to this feature of Christianity not because I believe it unique to the religion, but because of its central place therein. The Jewish tradition also has an important tradition of textual engagement and interpretation, for example.

³¹ Ted Striphas, *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). P. 57

³² See Ibid. p. 3.

Chapter Preview

In each chapter, I focus on one or two rhetorical strategies I believe form an important part of the rhetorical construction and maintenance of hegemonic articulations among economic roles, religious beliefs and patriotic identities. The goal, then, for each chapter, is to discover *how* an articulation is formed and how those articulations adapt themselves to different contexts.

Chapter two brings us back nearly a hundred years, to the 1920s. The 20's are a curious analogue to the recent pre-crash period, especially as the contemporary "great recession" gets compared frequently to the Great Depression which began in 1929. The 1920's also shared other features with the early 2000's: it was a period of unprecedented prosperity and change in the work patterns and professional occupations of many Americans that occurred as the U.S. shifted from a mostly agrarian society to a commercial one. It was also a period in which the traumatic international specter of World War I hung in this culture's air, creating significant anxiety about evil in the world and concern about the role of Americans in new international politics. In this context, Bruce Barton's book *The Man Nobody Knows* re-conceptualizes Jesus in a way that addresses the anxieties of his time and tries to make Jesus' wisdom relevant to a new economic reality.

Barton's identity as an advertising executive leads him to pose Jesus as the ideal example of his own profession: the founder of modern business: a man able to gather a group of dedicated followers and begin an organization that continued well after his own death. Barton emphasizes the way that Jesus displays many of the characteristics that lead to success in a modern business context, such as magnetic leadership, clear messages and hard work. Barton also casts Jesus' qualities as a kind of new masculinity, both reflecting aspects of masculinity in a traditional sense, and integrating new ones, based on changes in the roles afforded men and women in the

beginning of the 20th century. I argue in this chapter that Barton's book, in context with other pieces of rhetoric, works to articulate a kind of Christianity to new roles in a new economy, business success, and to ideals of American masculinity. Further, I argue that these articulations take place primarily through metonymic parallelism in the narrative element of character, in the context of the stories about the life of Christ, and anecdotes about business and political leaders.

Chapter three focuses on the 1950s, a period of new prosperity in the wake of the great depression and World War II and the invention of the atom bomb. In this period, I argue, the identity of Americans in contrast to communists became central to articulations of capitalism, Christianity and patriotism. While this articulation already exists, the discourse during this time allowed Soviet communists to become the perfect anti-American, constructing an ideal identification by division (as Burke describes around this same time). Soviets were framed quite clearly in opposition to American values, as their laws and economic system are atheist and communist, thus allowing American identity as Christian (mostly) and capitalist to become linked. American religiosity and capitalism were both seen as part of the fight against communist enemies.

Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* fits into this articulation, by writing the American dream onto Christian virtues. In Peale's book, the other through whom identification takes place is not so much communists, although they do appear in the background, but those who do not exhibit virtues like loyalty, hard work, and a good attitude. These virtues tie in closely with the 'In God We Trust' capitalism that was being promoted in the state and in culture, but it is also an updated version of Barton's Christian ideals for a more massive corporate structure. The ideal Christian also starts out lower on the totem pole. While Barton's

anecdotes focus on leaders, CEOs and presidents, Peale's include company VPs and managers. Rather than justify the newly rich, it appeals to the aspirations of the middle class.

America in the time between September 2001 and the economic crash of 2007 had some cultural elements in common with the earlier periods. The 1990s had been a sustained period of economic growth, and uncertainty. Meanwhile, the weight of economic activity took place not in manufacturing or management, but in consumer spending.

In this economic context, it is perhaps unsurprising that the economic narrative constructed in Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now* focuses on what God wants Christians to *have* more than how God wants them to *be* as a worker or a leader. I argue in this chapter that a narcissistic audience is constructed through the use of the second persona, demanding a particular type of relationship to the body politic and to one's individual circumstances. The intense focus on the intimate public sphere in Osteen's book reflects the rhetoric viewed in the culture more broadly especially in political rhetoric, focusing prescriptions for improvement on individual people and families rather than communities and systems.

Across these three case studies, some elements are consistent: each author attempts to harmonize Christian theology with the pressures and virtues of their own economic context, but also finds points of friction that prevent a perspective which only serves the capitalist view. Toward the end of each book, the author returns to concepts of love and generosity that defy capitalist logics. Over time, we see a movement of expansion: Barton's book is aimed primarily at executives, Peale's at middle class people, and Osteen's at consumers. This expansion is reflected in the types of evidence and examples provided. Other cultural movements become apparent as well, such as the movement from valorizing public leaders to valorizing home life.

Conclusion

By drawing on a variety of cultural texts, my dissertation seeks to describe the ways in which (Protestant) Christianity, patriotism and capitalism were articulated at three specific periods in the last 100 years. Understanding these articulations as a relationship among three nodes of institutions and ideologies deepens existing literature, which tends to focus on one or another relationship instead of how they function together. Conceptualizing this articulation as a rhetorical relation that is made and unmade over time is a more useful way to understand these relations, as opposed to a perspective which seeks to define a unique and free-standing ideology.

This is especially the case when considering this work as a foundation for advocating social change. These relations are fundamentally conservative, and a perspective which views them as static or unchanging does not allow much hope for new and different relations in the future. In contrast, examining how these relations are formed, how they change, and why they hold so much cultural power provides useful insight into understanding how they might be reformed in an effort to better our society in the future. In a previous article, I argued that Hart was wrong to dismiss Martin Luther King Jr.'s use of civil religious rhetoric for progressive ends as a "curious exception."³³ This broader perspective, though it examines conservative rhetorics, better contextualizes my earlier argument. If these articulations take place rhetorically and through public arguments and assumptions, then King's clever re-articulation of those same rhetorics in his public arguments is a key part of his success, and clear evidence that the power of these ideologies and institutions can be leveraged toward change.

Also, by organizing this project around bestselling books targeted at folks interested in living a "Christian Life," I make an implicit argument for the importance of middlebrow culture

³³ Bethany Keeley, "'I May Not Get There with You': I've Been to the Mountaintop as Epic Discourse," *Southern Communication Journal* 73, no. 4 (2008).

for politics. I believe these books and the assumptions they deploy play an important role in the ways that American individuals and groups understand what it means to be a good American, and what their role is in the American body politic and the American economy. In turn, those understandings feed into economic trends and realities that dramatically influence economic systems, political culture, and patriotic expectations.

In any case, the rhetorics in my case studies, and their similarities across so many decades, demonstrate the conservative power these articulations hold. My examination of these articulations, and the mechanisms by which they are formed and maintained at different times will provide insight into what makes them so powerful in our culture, and reappear so persistently.

CHAPTER TWO

JESUS: THE FOUNDER OF MODERN BUSINESS

Histories of the religious right often begin in earnest in the 1950s and 1960s, by pointing to the rise of Protestant and evangelical leaders like Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale and the growth of American conservatism as we understand it today. This period certainly marked a shift in the manner and intensity of a Protestant Christian association and engagement with politics, as reflected in the unique impact of “values voters” and coalitional politics in the late 20th century. Because my goal is to understand the relation between American Christianity and corporate/consumer culture, I choose to begin with the 1920s which marked the onset of a kind of consumer economy that created an exigence for talking about work and money differently. The ‘20s share enough in common with these later periods to provide a useful baseline of comparison, while also extending the discussion of religious values in public political economy back into an earlier period.

Like the latter periods, the 1920s were a time of unprecedented prosperity following upon a moment of national trauma (here the first World War), and one manifesting changes in ideology that impacted public morality. New media were causing serious changes in public life as well, with the growing availability of telephones and radio, and the expanding influence of the film industry, just as television and the internet would do in later decades. Historian Barry Hankins argues that the struggles of this period are more than an analogue to contemporary culture wars. The “religiously fueled culture wars of the 1920s were a prologue to the time when religion was culturally central, participating fully in politics, media, stardom, social life and

scandal.”³⁴ As I will also argue, the way that religionists then began to apply their values to the changing social and mediated landscape in the 1920s has persisted in their response to the similar cultural antagonisms of the present.

My understanding of articulation theory leads me to bring particular questions to the texts I have chosen from this period. How are Christian ethics and Christian theology articulated to understandings of economic success and power? What rhetorical or tropological forms construct this articulation, and how do those forms shape cultural understanding of these articulations? What other cultural constructions, such as gender or patriotism, become important in this articulation?

In each case study, I bring these questions to a best-selling book that explicitly addresses business, success or money and Christian theology or values. This chapter will focus on Bruce Barton’s book, *The Man Nobody Knows*. A close textual analysis leads me to several observations about the particular articulations that appear in *The Man Nobody Knows* which I will describe in more detail later in this chapter. In the book, Barton seems to be shaping both an image of leadership that is inspired in part by Christ, and also an adjustment to new types of leadership made possible or necessary by recent economic changes. For example, Barton spends a lot of effort connecting Christ’s rugged masculinity to his leadership skills, potentially because he is adapting to a changing definition of masculinity and masculine power in a white collar economy. The book relies frequently on metonymic equivalence through parallel narratives to draw comparisons between Christ and American political and business leaders. What functions as metonym in *The Man Nobody Knows* shifts toward metaphor in other texts from the period, and this pattern suggests that metonymic comparison can build a larger cultural articulation.

³⁴ Barry Hankins, *Jesus and Gin: Evangelicalism, the Roaring Twenties and Today's Culture Wars* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Metonymic relations and Hegemony

Metonymy and metaphor are central concepts to Laclau's conception of populist reason. For Laclau, populisms take place as different demands are articulated to each other through a process where "'contiguity' shades into 'analogy', 'metonymy' to 'metaphor'."³⁵ Hegemony takes place as a relationship moves from a contingent articulation to a hegemonic identity. In an example he delivers in "Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor" as well as elsewhere, a Trade Union is the only force capable of taking on the racist violence in a neighborhood. As time passes, and the Trade Union continues to take up this role, only as a result of the constellation of forces in that time and place, it becomes for those people a natural part of what Trade Unions do. The repeated articulation causes a relationship based in metonymy to become based in metaphor. In the metonymic situation, the Union and anti-violence measures are related because of their adjacent circumstance. After repeated metonymic patterning, though, the relationship becomes one of metaphor: trade unions *are* anti-violence measures.

Using the same example in *On Populist Reason*, he explains further:

"This rhetorical displacement involves three main changes. First, despite the differential particularism of the initial two kinds of struggles and demands, a certain equivalential homogeneity between them is being created. Second, the nature of the trade unions changes in this process: they cease to be the pure expression of sectorial interests at a given moment, and become more – if a variety of equivalential articulations develops—a nodal point in the constitution of a 'people'... Third, the term 'trade union' becomes the name of a *singularity*, in the sense defined above: it no longer designates the name of an *abstract* universality..."³⁶

My case studies are not cases of demands articulating into a populism but of institutions and ideographs articulating into a hegemonic national identity. While Laclau's project is to

³⁵ Ernesto Laclau, "Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor," in *A Time for the Humanities*, ed. James J. Bono, Tim Dean, and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek (Fordham University Press, 2008).

³⁶ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*. 109

understand how populism works, I argue here that the process he describes functions to create other types of articulations as well. In particular, these hegemonies are not populist because they are not constructed from democratic demands. Nonetheless, they follow the logic of populist reason of articulation moving toward equivalence. In each of my case studies, this movement takes place through different rhetorical mechanisms. In the various texts I review from the 1920s, and especially *The Man Nobody Knows*, this becomes most clear through implied and direct analogies between characters and anecdotes from the realms of religiosity (Christ himself) business (famous leaders, CEOs and business owners) and American history (presidents).

The way Laclau uses the metonymy trope differs from other rhetorical scholars. For instance, Kenneth Burke uses metonymy to understand how displacement of meaning functions from either a concrete term to an abstract concept or from one thing or group to another. While that displacement is important to my analysis as well, it is insufficient to understand the movement I am trying to comprehend. In the articulation I identify, the displacement happens in both directions. Christianity becomes so integrated with notions of the American Dream and Capitalist Prosperity that it becomes difficult to speak of any one of these already complex signifiers without the influence of the others. In Laclau's model, one empty signifier stands in for all the articulated demands. In some of my case studies, that may be so. For instance, in the discourse about "In God We Trust" on U.S. money, it becomes quite clear that belief in God begins to stand in for belief in America and capitalism. In *The Man Nobody Knows*, that struggle for hegemony is taking place. At some points, it seems Christ comes to stand for "modern business" quite clearly. Other times Christ's values are held out separately. In *Your Best Life Now*, one might argue that the American Dream has become a stand-in for abundant religious joy.

In this chapter, I point to several ways I believe a metonymic association is being made through side-by-side discussion of important figures in religion, business and politics. In the context of populist reason, these are metonymic because they are creating an association between these elements because of their proximity or similarity in particular, contingent senses, and building an argument that they should in fact be related metaphorically-- that the similarities are inherent rather than coincidental. These examples also function as metonyms because individual leaders (Christ, Lincoln, Ford) stand in for values and ideologies that they represent. By comparing Lincoln and Christ, I argue, Barton is in fact comparing American values and Christian ones, and building toward a relation of equivalence, where those values are indistinguishable.

Historical Context

To understand how these discourses function, it is useful to see them within their broader context of social and political change. The 1920s marked the end of the progressive era in the U.S., an era which brought significant changes to American social structure and culture. In addition to women's right to vote, which arrived in 1920, changing gender roles during this period and anxiety over those changes is often visualized by the short-haired, short-skirted flapper. Historian William Leuchtenburg writes, "sexual independence was merely the most sensational aspect of the generally altered status of women."³⁷ He cites the social and legal acceptability of women smoking in public, taking secretarial and other jobs, and owning property. During World War I women also took manufacturing jobs because of the labor shortage (though these jobs are less discussed today than those taken during World War II). By

³⁷ William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity 1914-32*, ed. Daniel Boorstin, *The Chicago History of American Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). 159

the end of the 1920s, several women had seats in Congress.³⁸ Beyond having to deal with women moving into the traditionally male arenas of labor and politics, and behaving in traditionally male ways by drinking and smoking, economic change also meant that more men now worked in white collar jobs and could no longer define their masculinity by referencing the physical rigors of farm or industrial labor. As earlier distinctions between gender roles were undermined and redefined, the notion of masculinity approached a crisis. These changes provide an exigence for explicit talk about manliness. *The Man Nobody Knows* contains examples of this explicit discussion, and it bears similarities and differences to other perspectives, such as the “muscular Christianity” typified in this period by evangelist Billy Sunday. Early 20th century “muscular Christianity” focused on an athletic and aggressive masculinity; I offer a more detailed description of these features later in this chapter.

In addition to women’s rights, the progressive era marked important steps for other groups as well. Also relevant for this analysis are the labor movement and changing laws designed to protect laborers that developed in the early 20th century. These changes for women marked significant changes in the economic structure, as well as attitudes toward wealth and business ownership. Trust-busting and changes in the federal income tax laws managed to limit the wealth and power of the most well-off. The labor movements of the progressive era strove to rhetorically figure business owners, managers and bosses as robber barons, cruel slave-masters, and greedy profiteers. Consequently, in the prosperous era that arose as progressivism was fading, business owners, executives and those invested in right living needed new ways to think about ethics and morals in relation to business leadership.

³⁸ Ibid. 160

Industry in the U.S. also changed significantly. Leuchtenburg explains that the productive capacity of the American Economy grew at an unprecedented rate during this time and that “the real earnings of workers—what their income actually would buy at the store—shot up at an astonishing rate in the 1920’s.”³⁹ New consumer products abounded in the 1920’s as well, and workers had more money to spend on innovations like automobiles, cellophane, radios, and telephones. Distribution of these new products also grew in importance, as “the advertising man and the public relations expert came into their own.”⁴⁰ Consumer debt also lost its stigma for the first time. “Three out of every four radios were purchased on the installment plan,” as well as “60 per cent of all automobiles and furniture.”⁴¹ All of these changes meant the development of a new kind of consumer culture--one that reached new heights in the later periods I will examine--and also a new kind of class inequality and morality of prosperity. That is to say, that the new prosperity and consumer culture presented itself as a kind of cultural problem in the sense that it needed to be integrated into those moral and cultural codes that signified the good person and the good life for Americans.

The Problem of Prosperity

The need was felt by the directors of the League for Industrial Democracy as well, a socialist group interested in organizing labor--though their interests were quite different from those of the wealthy businessmen whose speeches and writing I will discuss later. In their 1927 meeting, they produced a book with the title *Prosperity?* raising questions about the uneven

³⁹ Ibid.178

⁴⁰ Ibid.198

⁴¹ Ibid.200

distribution of wealth, how to maintain prosperity, and how it affected education and rights of laborers. The book's introductory remarks are a telling statement of the problem:

In recent years, it would seem that it has become almost an article of faith with the orthodox hundred percent American that he is a citizen of a prosperous country. He believes in prosperity somewhat as he believes in the Constitution. Even when he is worrying where he will get the money to pay the next installment on his radio, our good citizen still thinks he is prosperous or, if not, that his is an individual and unusual case and that with energy and a little luck he may find a way out of his difficulties.⁴²

This paragraph explains both the problem as these writers see it—overwhelming prosperity that is not evenly distributed—and highlights the language of the cultural association I am concerned with here. The opening two sentences effectively describe prosperity as a kind of religious belief; it is “an article of faith” for the “orthodox hundred percent American.” Not only was this belief pseudo-religious, it was also tied, at least by analogy, to belief in the Constitution. While the writers of *Prosperity?* were critical of this belief, the language they used to describe it reflects cultural articulations that were already in place. Faith in America was analogous to religious faith, and its orthodoxy demanded a belief in prosperity, its goodness, and its accessibility to all.

Perhaps it also reflects what they believe is a problem with the attitude toward prosperity in their culture: that the belief that one is prosperous has no relationship to economic indicators, such as income, property or opportunity. Prosperity, instead, functions as an “article of faith.” It is a belief in a reality that is perhaps unrelated to individual circumstances. In this sense, the metaphor the authors use, “article of faith” might have more explanatory power than they intend, that the very same faithfulness that brought American citizens through a variety of difficulties also allows them to believe their nation is prosperous regardless of their particular situation.

⁴² Harry W Laidler and Norman Thomas, eds., *Prosperity?* (New York: Vanguard Press/ League for industrial Democracy, 1927). iii

Faith in God had trained Americans in faithfulness, so that they could apply those same character traits to faith in their country and its economy.

A 1921 speech by steel magnate Charles Schwab to students at Princeton University reflects a cultural ambivalence about wealth from the alternate perspective of one who has wealth but does not understand himself as chasing or overvaluing it. The period volume in which the speech appears describes the speech as “a direct and informal talk from a leading capitalist to an audience of boys just facing the responsibilities of life.” Schwab simultaneously reinforces the idea that money is a reward of success even as he reinforces the idea that it is not a primary motivation. For instance, he states, “I know that it is very difficult to convince the great majority of people that men who are in active pursuit of life have any object in view than the making of money.”⁴³ This kind of complex, nearly-contradictory thinking reflects the understanding that Max Weber identified: Christians believe hard work is virtuous, and often results in accumulating money, but ostentatious spending of that money is a vice. Therefore, having money and property signifies success and therefore virtue, but giving money to others should be done only as an incentive for promoting virtues in them. Generosity for its own sake is closely linked to indulgence and ostentatious philanthropy for self-promotion.

Schwab later elaborates, “Money is often a matter of chance or good fortune, and is not the mark of a successful life.”⁴⁴ These declaratives occur early in his speech, but later in the speech he makes more radical claims, that money is not just a matter of luck, but impedes the good life. In one anecdote, he says that he ordered his secretary to list his large properties in a ledger under “liabilities” instead of “assets” because “As I grow older I find I want to have the

⁴³ Charles Schwab, “How to Succeed,” in *America Speaks!*, ed. Basil Gordon Bryon and Frederic Rene Coudert (New York: Modern Eloquence Corporation, 1929). 395.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 395.

simpler things about me, the truest of my old friends.”⁴⁵ Schwab portrays his views on money through personal anecdotes about his experience with money and possessions, as well as the experience of others he knew. He holds up Andrew Carnegie’s daughter as an example, who is also a student at Princeton. “With all of her wealth and everything that she might have that the imagination might devise, I saw her living in the simplest of cottages in the simplest and most unostentatious style and the happiest young woman it has been my privilege to meet for many years.”⁴⁶ The implication of Ms. Carnegie’s situation is that she is happy because of, not in spite of, her choice to live simply.

Schwab’s anecdotes demonstrate a complex cultural attitude about money that still persists. He affirms that money is used to reward good work and defends an example of a manager who works for him and is rewarded by a high wage that some had criticized. At the same time, he argues that money does not necessarily lead to the good life. Schwab’s discussion of success reflects the values described by Weber as well—earning is considered a mark of virtuous hard work, but spending is a type of vice. It is interesting to hear these same values voiced by a man whose holdings were so vast, because it demonstrates the wide spread of these beliefs, especially during this time period. Though Schwab has significant property as a result of his financial success, he dismisses its value and repeatedly makes statements like “oh to be your age again,” implying that he would make different choices given another chance.

In his speech, Schwab worked toward an understanding of the good life and success that was not based solely in income or possessions, but his vigorous refutation of the simpler perspective that money is happiness suggests that some in his audience might believe it. His

⁴⁵ Ibid.404.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 404.

refutational effort also suggests that, like others in American culture, Schwab wants to understand success and the good life as something more complicated and qualitative than mere wealth, while not wanting to dismiss the power of money to motivate hard work and to indicate that such work has occurred. Schwab does not provide the simple solution of saving or investing that Weber suggests is the result of this ideology. Nevertheless, the complexity of his discussion of this issue suggests it was an important concept for Americans at the time.

As I will argue, *The Man Nobody Knows* provides a sustained example of an American executive struggling with questions about success, the good life, Christian morality and American identity. He articulates these issues in such a way that affirms the virtue of his profession, the usefulness of Christianity for businessmen, and the virtue and uniqueness of American identity in particular.

The Man Nobody Knows

Bruce Barton was a successful ad executive who wrote a religious book after a personal epiphany, which he describes in his introduction. The book was published in 1925 and became a bestseller despite being panned by literary and theological critics. The book remains in print and is considered a classic in some Christian circles even today, demonstrating the lasting appeal of its core assumptions. The book is challenging to interpret because it seems to have a dual purpose: it sometimes reads as an argument for Jesus as an admirable, relatable hero from the perspective of a modern American businessman (implying that executives who hold 20th century values should follow Christ), and at other times as a leadership manual with Jesus as the primary example. This complexity indicates that Barton's book is one that struggles to understand Christian values in a modern time, especially in the context of unprecedented prosperity.

Because of this dual goal, the book is an ideal example of an articulation that works in both directions, whether its rhetor intended it to or not.

An important premise of *The Man Nobody Knows* is the author's claim that he has brought a fresh perspective to the life of Christ by reading the Bible himself and by ignoring traditional teachings or theology. Barton writes that when he read the Bible himself, he encountered a Jesus that was drastically different from the character represented to him in church. This perspective leads to dramatic statements about forgetting or ignoring existing ideas about Jesus or the Bible. For instance, in the introduction he writes, "Let us forget all creed for the time being, and take the story just as the simple narratives give it... Stripped of all dogma this is the grandest achievement story of all!"⁴⁷

This perspective resonates with two key elements of Protestant doctrine: the priesthood of all believers which held that the individual Christians should be able to access and interpret scripture through the help of the Holy Spirit without the need for any priestly intermediary, and the idea of *sola scriptura*, that the Bible is all one needs to understand faith. George Marsden points out that for Protestants these doctrines go hand in hand with the perspicuity of scripture, the necessary claim that "even simple Christians could understand scripture on their own."⁴⁸ The fact that these doctrines emerged in step with the Enlightenment, are reflected in its similar doctrines of "private revelation." In contrast with medieval Catholic thought, which synthesized a more dialogic and thus communal notion of inquiry from its classical inheritance, Enlightenment views elevated knowledge achieved through individual thought. As Thomas Lessl

⁴⁷ Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows* (Brooklyn NY: Braunworth & co, 1924). P.8.

⁴⁸ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925*, 2 ed. (New York: Oxford university Press, USA, 1982/2006). P. 110.

writes, “the culture of modernism has inculcated the idea that knowledge is self-contained,” expanding into the secular realm the idealized image of the Protestant believer as one reading the plain text of scripture on its own terms.⁴⁹ It has been known for some time that the anti-intellectualism that emerged in concert with American fundamentalism, was cut from the same cloth.⁵⁰ Cultural pressures contributed to the way these attitudes toward knowledge related to anti-intellectualism in the 1920s as modernist philosophy challenged some ideas about God and conflicts about Darwinian evolution grew more public. The Scopes trial, which took place in 1925, the same year *The Man Nobody Knows* was published, was one effect of these pressures. In other words, both Protestant intellectual tradition and particular ideological and intellectual conflicts in the 1920s are reflected in Barton’s assumption that he can access a more real or true Jesus when he ignores the work of biblical scholars. Rather than viewing commentary or tradition as illuminating, Barton views it as a distraction from the pure story presented in the Bible. Ironically, the Protestant tradition of biblical interpretation that Barton distances himself from is the very ideology that enables his assertion that the Bible is best read without reference to contexts or scholarly interpretation. Hence, Barton’s reading is quintessentially Protestant, but also strongly influenced by the assumptions and preoccupations of his time, because he has intentionally excluded other potential influencing factors.

These traditions and patterns account for the epistemology Barton brings to his understanding of Jesus. As subsequent analysis will suggest, these presuppositions also allow Barton to import cultural assumptions and articulations uncritically and to project them into his

⁴⁹ Thomas M. Lessl, "Scientific Rhetoric as Religious Advocacy: Origins in the Public Schools," *Journal of Communication & Religion* 26 (2003). P. 5.

⁵⁰ See for example, Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925*. Randall J. Stephens and Karl W. Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

accounts of Christ and other historical figures. Reading his work nearly a century after its writing makes some of these assumptions easier to distinguish because they differ so clearly from what a person might write today. His discussion of gender, which I will address later in this chapter, is a prime example. His assumptions about masculinity and femininity are more overt and direct than would be culturally acceptable today. Barton's reliance on cultural sensibilities of his own time is especially stark because he does not reference interpretations from other times or from Christians with different values or assumptions. This particular approach means that Barton is an especially useful source to disclose an array of symptoms reflecting the cultural assumptions that influenced how new articulations were formed between notions of American success and prosperity and notions of Christian morality. This theological and intellectual atmosphere is a condition of possibility for articulation between Christianity and American cultural values, such as patriotism, capitalist success, and appropriate gender performances.

Jesus, Business Leader

The dominant comparison in Barton's book is between Jesus and business leaders. As the title of one chapter expresses, Barton presents Jesus as "The Founder of Modern Business." To this end, the book deploys narratives that show Jesus and modern business leaders demonstrating and advocating similar virtues. This comparison is made sometimes through metonymic relationship, by placing anecdotes about or quotations from religious and business leaders alongside each other, and other times through more direct comparison.

After Barton's discussion of Jesus' masculinity in the second chapter of his book, he compares Jesus strategies to those of salesmen, advertisers (like Barton himself) and CEOs. "Surely no one will consider us lacking in reverence," he says quite explicitly, "if we say that

every one of the ‘principles of modern salesmanship’ on which businessmen so much pride themselves, are brilliantly exemplified in Jesus’ talk and work.”⁵¹ His evidence for Jesus’ business acumen comes in two forms. He points to Jesus’ success in attracting others and starting an organization that continued to grow after his death, and he compares Jesus’ values to values espoused by successful American businessmen.

Barton describes Jesus’ philosophy as a “business plan” with a focus on service, personal commitment, and hard work (the “extra mile”). To emphasize how these well-known ethical principles are in fact practical advice, he restates them as principles for success from the mouths of successful American business people. For instance, he writes of Jesus’ statement that you save your life by losing it by paralleling that claim with comments George W. Perkins, a vice president of New York Life Insurance and a partner in J.P. Morgan and Co., had made about ambition. Perkins claimed that he gained his high position and salary by focusing on his work and not his salary or title. Barton parallels this position of achieving wealth and status by connecting it to Jesus’ statement that “If you’re forever thinking about saving your life, you’ll lose it; but the man who loses his life shall find it.”⁵² Barton’s interpretation of both quotations is this:

“Because he said it and he was a religious teacher, because it’s printed in the Bible, the world has dismissed it as high minded ethics but not hard headed sense. But look again! What did Perkins mean if it wasn’t that he and his friends buried themselves in their great undertaking, literally lost their lives in it? And when they found their lives again they were all of them bigger and richer than they had ever supposed they would be.”⁵³

⁵¹ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*. 104

⁵² Ibid. 167, Matthew 10:39

⁵³ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*. 167

Similarly, he quotes Henry Ford saying, “Have you ever noticed that the man who starts out in life with a determination to make money, never makes very much?”⁵⁴ In both these cases, he suggests Jesus’ message about selflessness translates into a single-minded dedication to business and to (customer) service. While Jesus’ advice arguably applies to a higher principle than professional success, Barton’s argument does not make this distinction, and instead emphasizes the parallel logic as wisdom that is applicable to everyday life.

Barton’s comparison of Jesus’ ethics to principles of good business becomes emphatic when he calls them the “main points of his (Jesus’) business philosophy.”⁵⁵ This is symptomatic of the equivalence he draws between religious work and capitalist work. As he puts it, “Great progress will be made in the world when we rid ourselves of the idea that there is a difference between *work* and *religious work*.”⁵⁶ Barton’s claim that all work is God’s work is consistent with the Protestant work ethic described by Weber six years later. Weber describes a notion of “moral work”—that moral behavior is expressed in hard work, and the end is not as important as the work itself.⁵⁷

Barton’s last chapter and his discussion of Jesus’ death, on the other hand, undermines a reading that suggests that wealth is always the reward for following Jesus’ principles. In the end, he seems to abandon his previous suggestion that success necessarily leads to riches or fame, pointing to Jesus’ claims to the contrary and Jesus’ ultimate abandonment and death. He relates the story of Jesus feeding five thousand people who then try to make him king and how this

⁵⁴ Ibid. 168

⁵⁵ Ibid. 177

⁵⁶ Ibid. 179

⁵⁷ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

prompted him to slip away before they can find him,⁵⁸ and he also mentions the Gospel parable about a man who hoards wealth only to die before he could enjoy it.⁵⁹ In both these stories, Barton highlights Jesus' rejection of wealth and power. In this turn, the book transitions from upholding Jesus as the consummate businessman toward a more traditional Protestant theology which admires Jesus as a suffering servant, one who, despite his ability to win over others and gain power and success, rejects the very earthly markers of success that Barton celebrates earlier in the book. But in light of Weber's classic insights into the Protestant psyche, we must recognize that this is the exception that proves the rule: it is Barton's way of reiterating a traditional notion that it is not profit itself valorizes spiritually so much as the work that is done to gain it. It is not profit that makes businessmen virtuous, then, but its presence marks the virtue of their hard work--which Protestants take to be spiritual labor.

Though the book seems to imply that following Jesus' example will lead to riches and power, the last few chapters depict Jesus continually rejecting power and the accumulation of wealth, and the last chapter details his abandonment and the doubts of his friends and followers in the last few weeks of his life. Barton celebrates Jesus' continued virtue in these moments, and he no longer compares Jesus to leaders of American business or politics. Instead, Jesus' example of sacrifice and abandonment becomes singular and spiritually instructive.

In these final chapters, he also redefines success as distinct from making money or gaining recognition. He uses several examples of religious and secular "great men" to defend this idea, including Thomas Jefferson and the six men H.G. Wells named as the "greatest" in history, which included Jesus. He references in particular Jefferson's epitaph, which mentions his

⁵⁸ John 6:1-15

⁵⁹ Luke 12:13-15

accomplishments but not his high positions in the U.S. Government.⁶⁰ With a move toward venerating Christ's selflessness, Barton makes clear his goal to convert the reader to Christianity, rather than validate white-collar careerism through Christian morality. Even while it makes a choice, this decision emphasizes its own tension, because it avoids a number of questions that the conclusion of the book might raise about earlier segments. In some ways, the last few chapters of *The Man Nobody Knows* deconstruct the assumptions at work in the earlier chapters. Early chapters valorize captains of industry who make much of their money from the labor of others and the savvy decisions that leave them as winners and others as losers. However, even as Barton's last chapters emphasize humility and self-sacrifice even when these do not result in earthly rewards, he does not address the apparent love of money or lack of compassion that many of the men he previously compared to Christ approvingly demonstrated in their careers. If a narrative about Christianity as a program for career success can be harmonized with a more traditional gospel message of spiritual salvation and forgiveness, Barton makes that connection only implicitly by presenting both positions in his book, and not by explaining how these two messages connect to each other.

Presidents and Patriots

While business leaders dominate the narratives Barton tells in parallel with ones about Jesus, American presidents and founders, and Lincoln especially, also make frequent appearances. In fact, the first numbered chapter of the book opens with parallel stories featuring Jesus and Abraham Lincoln, and the Lincoln story leads.

When Lincoln is confronted by an insolent general who challenges his conduct of the Civil War in Barton's story, he responds calmly and resists the temptation to retaliate afforded

⁶⁰ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*. 176

him by his rank. Barton parallels this story closely with one in which Jesus, despite the outrage of his disciples against a town that has refused to welcome them, quietly moves on to the next village. In both anecdotes, Barton's characters share vivid qualities of patience, wisdom, and unselfishness in contrast to the angry disciples and general.

In each story, a challenge to the hero's authority is greeted by a calm response, much to the surprise of those present. Barton artfully parallels these stories, both in terms of content and style that —careful even to deploy physical details that suggest both power and weariness. Of Jesus, Barton says “The lips of Jesus tightened; his fine features showed the strain of the preceding weeks, and in his eyes there was a foreshadowing of the more bitter weeks to come. . . . Quietly he gathered up his garments and started on, his outraged companions following.”⁶¹ Of Lincoln, he writes “The President rose slowly from the desk, stretching his long frame to its full height, and regarding the wrath of the other with a quizzical glance... Abraham Lincoln turned quietly to his desk and went on with his work.”⁶² The similar structure and stylistic elements of these narratives draw attention to the human qualities that Barton wishes to align, but they also align the identities and characteristics of the men in question. While the primary purpose of these stories may be to emphasize the importance of the virtue of forbearance, they also serve to draw a connection between the virtues of Christ and those of Lincoln, and therefore the virtues of Christianity and those of America.

Barton's identification of Jesus' virtue with that of American Presidents serves his goal of figuring Jesus in a way that is sensible and appealing to his early 20th century American audience. Presenting a president who is already admired as demonstrating the character virtues

⁶¹ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*. 3-4

⁶² Ibid. 5-6

also exemplified by Jesus is both appealing and intuitive. Observers of civil religion have often noted that the president figures himself as a kind of “high priest” of civil religion.⁶³ In Barton’s deployment of Lincoln and other presidents, this is not in the role of ceremonial leader, but in many ways this imaging of Lincoln functions similarly for an evangelical Protestant tradition that eschews ceremony. Lincoln is not the performer of ritual here but rather the Imitator-of-Christ-in-chief. Lincoln’s actions, presented by Barton as closely emulating those of Christ, underscore both the value of Christ’s example, and Lincoln’s Christian *bona fides*. By adapting a familiar formula from civil religion, Barton simultaneously appeals to his audience’s affection for presidents (and Lincoln in particular) and invokes a familiar model for relating Christian ideals and American identity.

Barry Schwartz’ analysis of the figure of Lincoln in particular during this time further illuminates what Lincoln meant culturally to Barton and his original readers. Schwartz explains that in the time since his assassination, Lincoln grew to be an epic-sized president, often depicted and imagined alongside Washington. “By 1922, the year of the Lincoln Memorial's dedication, he had become America's most prominent historical figure.”⁶⁴ Especially in the progressive era, Lincoln’s complex history and behavior provided admirable stories that lent themselves to promoting a variety of ideological and social ideals. Schwartz explains,

Stories about Lincoln provided listeners with a pattern for their own lives and articulated, in ways everyone could understand, the nature of a new political and economic order. The stories communicated to the average American what it meant morally to live in an expanding industrial democracy. Most of the Lincoln

⁶³ See for instance, Hart, Hart, and Pauley, *The Political Pulpit Revisited*.

⁶⁴ Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). 109.

stories had a basis in fact but were stretched in one direction or another in order to fit the situation of their teller.⁶⁵

That is to say, Lincoln began to serve as an example of both morality and American identity, deployed to support a number of ideas about what those ideals meant.

Schwartz also notes that “Lincoln’s moral superiority was also celebrated in stories about his writing and oratorical skills,” and we see this in *The Man Nobody Knows* when Lincoln’s eloquence stands alongside examples from Jesus and the Psalms.⁶⁶ These stories demonstrate both Lincoln’s intelligence and hard work as he, according to legend, made great effort to access books on the frontier. His plain, unpretentious style also demonstrated his democratic commitments, and “saved himself from his own genius,” according to Schwarz.⁶⁷

Indeed, it is the principle of economy that Barton uses to compare Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address with the Twenty-third Psalm and the Lords Prayer in a chapter titled “His Advertisements.”⁶⁸ He puts the first line of each of these works forward side-by-side to demonstrate their simplicity. Praising Lincoln’s style alongside examples from the Christian canon makes a point about how effective leaders speak and write – simply and efficiently. In addition to that purpose, it serves to reinforce the already-occurring cultural canonization of Lincoln. As in the previous example, the metonymic association of Lincoln’s style with Jesus’ and the Psalmist’s suggests a canonical position for Lincoln’s address. These specific examples alone do not necessarily establish that equivalence, but they support a growing association among American heroes and Biblical heroes as equally virtuous and inspirational. The rest of the

⁶⁵ Ibid. 163

⁶⁶ Ibid. 167

⁶⁷ Ibid. 167

⁶⁸ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*. 150.

chapter supports this interpretation with the other figures. In addition to several of Jesus' parables, Barton invokes Benjamin Franklin's process of style acquisition ("The first great American 'success story'"⁶⁹) as well as using an example from Garfield's campaign speech of effective repetition.⁷⁰

In these examples Barton's dual secular and sacred purposes become apparent. He introduces his discussion of style axioms with this claim: "Every advertising man ought to study the parables of Jesus in the same fashion, schooling himself in their language and learning these four big elements of their power."⁷¹ This implies that Jesus is useful, just as these figures in American history are useful, as examples of powerful advertising. But other statements from the book, especially in its closing, suggest that Barton's goal is not only to use Jesus as a source of business advice, but also to bring souls toward conversion. These dual goals contribute to the ambiguous nature of the metonymic relationship he constructs between Jesus, other biblical heroes and American patriotic heroes; in the immediate context, the similarity is about style or strategy, but in the broader context, style and strategy are tools Barton is using to persuade his audience, and therefore implies that the same elements that make Jesus admirable are shared by American political leaders.

Executive Masculinity

The metonymic associations linking Jesus to business and political leaders built an understanding of leadership and virtue that, at least in part, responded to economic and social changes that were taking place in the decades leading up to his writing. Changes in the kinds of

⁶⁹ Ibid. 146

⁷⁰ Ibid. 154

⁷¹ Ibid. 146

virtues thought to lead to economic stability and social value also needed to accommodate changing relationships between different groups of people in American culture. This is reflected when Barton's depictions of the ideal leader are also closely tied to concerns about masculinity and gender roles. Especially in the chapter titled "The Outdoor Man," Barton presents a masculine executive whose power comes from persuasion, but who also maintains traditional masculine characteristics. This emphasis in the text may be a result of several pressures: a movement away from another reaction, the "muscular Christianity" exemplified by Billy Sunday and other brash, athletic preachers, and a defense of Christianity as appropriately masculine in a culture where piety was considered a feminine virtue.⁷²

Sunday was a former baseball star whose preaching was physical, loud and confrontational. He would hold up his fists, yell and sputter about beating the devil.⁷³ Sunday's bombastic style drew audiences and in some ways resembled the characteristics Barton assigns to Jesus and other heroes in his book. Indeed, the rough-and-tumble childhood Barton assigns to Jesus (suggesting he was asked to walk next to a donkey and collect fuel as a toddler, for instance)⁷⁴ resembles the actual childhood of figures like Sunday who went from poverty to fame.

However, by the 1920s Sunday was waning in popularity, possibly because his version of masculine virtue was less adaptable to new economic structures in the way that Barton's version was. Barton's masculine characters are also shrewd businessmen. Sunday "promoted tirelessly

⁷² See for example Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966).

⁷³ Roger A. Bruns, *Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big Time American Evangelism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

⁷⁴ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*. 38.

the tenets of free market capitalism,” but he also scolded Americans for their materialism.⁷⁵

Biographer Bruns names the changing moral standards, including consumerism as well as other kinds of behavior, as reasons for Sunday’s decline.⁷⁶ Additionally, while Sunday’s style was loud and bombastic, Barton also celebrated the power of silence. In fact, the first two anecdotes in *The Man Nobody Knows* feature Jesus and Abraham Lincoln responding to a challenge with quiet and patience. A form of power that is more about persuasion, leadership and intellectual work is more consistent with the demands of a new economy than Sunday’s energetic athleticism. Though Barton also celebrates physical strength and vigor, an emphasis on more white collar forms of power serves the new economy of the 1920s better than it would have in an agrarian or manufacturing economy.

Barton emphasizes Jesus’ masculinity in a few ways, by emphasizing Jesus traditionally masculine traits, and by implying that his true power was distinct from physical strength or fitness. Barton’s descriptions of Jesus often imagine him having a tanned physique and engaged in vigorous activity. This is brought into sharp relief with similarly imaginative descriptions of Pontius Pilate as indulgent, lazy, fat and colorless--traits not stated or implied in the Gospels, but this contrasts effectively with his portrayal of Jesus. He writes that Jesus must have been muscular, because he gained the affection of so many women and “weakness does not appeal to them.”⁷⁷ A few pages later he expands on this idea, writing that “since the world began no power has fastened the affection of women upon a man like manliness. The men who have been

⁷⁵ Hankins, *Jesus and Gin: Evangelicalism, the Roaring Twenties and Today's Culture Wars*. 47

⁷⁶ Bruns, *Preacher: Billy Sunday and Big Time American Evangelism*. 263. The misbehavior of Sunday’s own children was also taxing on him and his public image.

⁷⁷ Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows*. P. 43.

women's men in the finest sense, have been the vital, conquering figures of history.”⁷⁸ In these examples, Barton invokes traditional notions of masculinity and masculine appeal. However, physical strength and appeal are not ends in themselves; rather, he implies as he closes the chapter, Jesus' inner strength is an emotional power that arises from the physical: “He was the type of outdoor man whom our modern thought most admires; and the vigorous activities of his days gave his nerves the strength of steel.”⁷⁹

This shift toward a masculine interior strength functions to help construct an adaptive masculinity that unites Christian understandings of virtue with changing political and economic demands on workers. For the purpose of making Jesus appeal to a modern executive audience, Barton simultaneously argues that Jesus was vigorous and manly but also that his manliness had an appeal that was beyond mere brutishness. It had something to offer the white collar worker whose work did not make him the kind of “outdoor man” the chapter celebrates. This notion of gendered virtue will provide a clear contrast with my other case studies, where leadership or success are not so clearly denoted as masculine.

In terms of a cultural understanding of how Christian virtues relate to business and patriotism, Barton's emphasis on gender suggests his strong desire to harmonize religious virtues with cultural demands for his particular subject position. This led to innovative readings of the Bible as well as of common exemplars of leadership and success to promote a complex understanding of business success that adapted itself to changing roles for some workers in the American economy. The explicit focus on masculinity addressed fears about both religion and white-collar employment appealing only to men who are weak or effeminate.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 48-9.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 52

Explicit work to rehabilitate Christianity as masculine has continued into the present, as the work of other communication scholars has shown. Many scholars examined the definitions of Christian masculinity put forward in the Promise Keepers movement in the 1990s, for instance.⁸⁰ In many of these rhetorics, the “provider” role has been an important aspect of masculinity. In *The Man Nobody Knows* the combination of physical strength and outdoor exercise are highlighted alongside much longer discussions of persuasive appeal. I have taken this to be a transition toward an “executive masculinity” that economic shifts in the earlier 20th century required.

Barton’s discussion of masculinity marks a clear difference between this text and the later books in this study. The silence of the later books may reflect predominant assumptions about masculinity, family and leadership that have won out since the 1920s. One reason for this difference might be that in Barton’s time masculinity was still considered an essential characteristic of leadership, while later authors believed women could show leadership qualities as well, and more feminine traits could benefit a leader. Barton was therefore invested in demonstrating Jesus’ manly leadership qualities to help his (male) executive audience relate to and respect Jesus’ alleged business genius. In contrast, Peale and Osteen explicitly include women in their audience, and therefore do not emphasize a need for manliness for those following their advice.

Conclusion

My analysis of Bruce Barton’s *The Man Nobody Knows* presents one believer, deeply influenced by the culture of early 20th century America, wrestling with the relationship between

⁸⁰ See for example John P. Bartkowski, *The Promise Keepers : Servants, Soldiers, and Godly Men* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004), Dane S. Claussen, *The Promise Keepers : Essays on Masculinity and Christianity* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000).

industrial executive attributes and Christian virtue. Barton's way of bridging these worlds must have resonated, as thousands of Americans in his time purchased the book. Moreover, it remains available in print and considered a classic still today. *The Man Nobody Knows* serves as a useful example of American Christians attempting to make sense of modern life in terms of the Christian tradition, and to make sense of the Bible in terms of modern life.

This process takes place primarily through the use of metonymic narratives. As the preceding examples show, anecdotes serve as Barton's primary mode of evidence. The way he draws parallels between these anecdotes and the primary characters in them is what allows him to promote a metonymic relationship among Christ, business leaders, and American heroes and therefore among Christianity, capitalism, and the United States as a culture and as a nation. This takes place explicitly as he identifies commonalities among these characters and makes claims like "Jesus is the founder of modern business." It also takes place formally in examples from the lives of Christ, Lincoln, and Henry Ford, all which are presented similarly and sometimes in parallel to each other.

This metonymic relation functions as one aspect of a larger social pattern that constructs a hegemonic identification among Christianity, patriotism and capitalist practices. This pattern is markedly similar to the hegemonic development described in populist social movements by Ernesto Laclau. Indeed, an assertion like "Jesus is the Founder of Modern Business" moves beyond the metonym toward metaphoric equivalence. More clear equivalences appeared elsewhere in culture relatively soon after this book was published: at a national Kiwanis club meeting in 1929 Rev. Preston Bradley took the proposition that Christianity and Business in America relied on each other as his central thesis. The speech can be taken as somewhat representative and admired because it was included in a 1930 anthology titled *Contemporary*

Speeches, though no explanation or justification of its importance was provided in the volume.

Bradley makes the explicit claim that business has a strong interest in the spiritual and national development of Americans:

Therefore it has become the *religion of business* in a very definite sense to interest itself in the particular advancement and promulgation of all these characters that go to make up fine *citizenship*, intellectual integrity, *spiritual* personality, and all the rest that makes for a high quality and fine nobility of life.⁸¹

He ties this notion of spiritual good to the prosperity of the nation through historical comparison as well. After listing empires of the past he states as principle that “No nation has ever lived, and no nation can live in the future of the race that does not use its physical and its material power as the great opportunity for conserving and assisting and maintaining spiritual and moral ideality.”⁸² Bradley’s argument that the needs of business are inextricably linked to the success of national ideology and religion is, in the end, more strident than the one Barton forged in *The Man Nobody Knows*. It articulates a closer version of a similar relationship. While Barton noted shared virtues, Bradley declares shared and intertwined interests.

The relation between Barton’s book and Bradley’s speech suggests an abiding association between Christianity and American capitalism in the 1920s, though the strength and character of that association vary. My next case study examines how the character of that association changed in a later period of American prosperity and economic change, the 1950s. While the texts included in this chapter rely heavily on exemplary characters, such as Christ, business leaders and presidents, to represent virtues in action, later texts use other types of anecdotes, less focused

⁸¹ Preston Bradley, “The Business of Religion and the Religion of Business,” in *Contemporary Speeches*, ed. James M O’Neill and Floyd K. Riley (New York and London: The Century Co, 1930). 483. Emphasis mine.

⁸² Ibid. 484.

on famous examples. The 1950s also saw the introduction of Soviet communists as an ideal foil for American capitalist, especially in their hostility to religion.

CHAPTER THREE IN GOD (AND CAPITALISM) WE TRUST

Post-war America saw dramatic changes in politics, the economy and foreign relations. An economic boom and increasingly efficient production enlarged American consumption. The threat of global communism and the communist threat within made patriotism their antidote. Meanwhile, religious identification was up, with the vast majority of Americans identifying themselves as Protestant, Catholic or Jewish. Against this backdrop, a number of discourses and material changes emerged that articulated religious language and patriotism in support of capitalism. During the middle 1950s, Congress passed two bills that codified God-talk into official state discourse: the addition of the motto “In God We Trust” to all currency and the insertion of the phrase “Under God” to the pledge of allegiance. It was also during this period that Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* emerged to promote a linkage between religious morality and economic gain. Meanwhile, political rhetors were careful to delineate the moral, religious Americans from communist atheists.

In this chapter, I focus on the ways that identification creates a heightened sense of American identity as Christian and Christian identity as capitalist, through contrast to communists as well as through other forms of identification. In *The Power of Positive Thinking* Christian values and principles are applied directly to work contexts, and this implies that Christian virtue leads to capitalist virtue and is frequently rewarded with capitalist success. In state discourse supporting the addition of “In God We Trust” to all money and “Under God” to the pledge of allegiance, the identity of Americans as Christian, in contrast with irreligious communists, becomes the most important aspect of that identity. When read in concert with

popular Christian discourse about capitalist virtues, it becomes clear that these discourses together collapse a number of ideological, political and economic assumptions under the umbrella of American Christianity.

Cold War Anxieties

To understand how religious language functioned in the 1950s, it is important to understand the acute needs of the national psyche during that period. Several national and international events conspired to construct an exigence inviting the entry of religious symbolism into public life: the threat of nuclear weapons, the threat of communism, and the interest in protecting the prosperity that followed the Great Depression.

After World War II, Americans were intensely aware of the destructive power of war, and social debates and defensive practices at the time kept that anxiety salient. As Americans contemplated the devastation that conventional warfare had unleashed upon Europe, they were also anticipating a new degree of devastation made possible by nuclear weapons. This situation gave rise to significant debates among politicians, intellectuals and religious leaders about the ethics of war. Meanwhile, civil defense programs led to fallout shelters and drills to respond to a potential nuclear attack, making an awareness of nuclear threat an element of everyday life.

Secondly, the growing influence of communism threatened American ideology and global influence. Reflected in Joseph McCarthy's senate hearings in 1953 and the trial and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as suspected communists was a binary logic that opposed "Godly Americans" to "Godless Communists." Historian William Inboden argues that this rhetoric gave voice to the sincere beliefs of political elites; "Many American political leaders

believed that their nation had a divine calling to oppose the Soviet Union, and to reshape the world according to the divine design.”⁸³

Economics were also a concern for Americans in the 1950s. For those in other parts of the world, the Great Depression had raised doubts about the superiority of the American economic system. However, this anxiety was ameliorated by the economic boom that was taking place. But the changing demands of the U.S. economy presented a need for consumer Americans who were more eager to spend money on products that were not strictly necessary, and this clashed with the thrifty and sacrificing self-image that Americans had internalized in the 30s and 40s.

The U. S. strategy against communism in the post-war era relied on economic growth within a capitalist system as proof of the superiority of democracy. The Marshall Plan is one example of this strategy. Hence, the growth of the American economy was especially important to the international reputation of the American ideology. Therefore, the interests of business were important to political leaders in and of themselves but also as an indication of the success of the nation’s philosophy of governance. American religiosity served to legitimize these economic goals and encourage citizens to support and strengthen capitalism both through political support and consumer behavior.

The Shape of American Religion in the 1950s

The particular nature of the religious talk that was prevalent in the 1950s reflects the religious affiliations of the American people at this time. In his 1955 book, *Protestant, Christian Jew*, sociologist Will Herberg describes this as a period marked, paradoxically, by “pervasive

⁸³ William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960 : The Soul of Containment* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). p. 4

secularism amid mounting religiosity.”⁸⁴ Indeed, the period after World War II saw rising Bible sales, church attendance and affirmations of statements like “the Bible is the revealed word of God.” But only half of the same survey respondents could name one of the four gospels. When asked to list important events in history, Americans ranked the birth of Christ 14th, “tied with the discovery of X-rays and the Wright brothers first plane flight.”⁸⁵ One explanation for these trends offered by Herberg was a pattern of assimilation for immigrant groups that were now searching for belonging and identification through religion rather than through ethnicity. He writes that the question “what are they?” in the past might be answered ethnically (they are Irish, Polish or Italian) but had moved toward a description of religion (they are Catholic, Protestant or Jewish).⁸⁶ Religious identification therefore became somewhat compulsory because it maintained identities that made sense to others. “The mere fact that in order to be ‘something’ one must be either a Protestant, a Catholic or a Jew means that one begins to think of oneself as religiously identified and affiliated.”⁸⁷ That is, an identity that makes sense to others during this period included a religious affiliation. Herberg also suggests that the growth of religious identification was a result of rising uncertainty in a world with nuclear weaponry.

At the same time, American Protestant identity was also changing. As Inboden describes, “Traditional denominational distinctions— Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian— became less and less meaningful as religion in America fractured, not along denominational

⁸⁴ Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew; an Essay in American Religious Sociology*, [1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.,: Doubleday, 1955). P. 14

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 14

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 49

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 70.

lines, but across them.”⁸⁸ Protestant denominations were uniting politically, thus causing tensions between liberal and conservative wings within each denomination.⁸⁹ Given these shifts in allegiance, what it meant to call oneself a Protestant Christian became at once contested and more homogeneous, as popular preachers like Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale became its face for large groups of Christians from a variety of traditions.

Anxieties about the communist threat increased the importance of religious identification, and greater fluidity between those identifications created new conditions of possibility for a particular iteration of American civil religion. Political and economic exigencies created the need to promote and legitimize American capitalism. Meanwhile, the growth in religious identification provided a useful source of invention to produce that legitimation. Identifying as sufficiently religious was replacing ethnic identity as a way for Americans to “be something,” and sincere religious fervor could be identified with the equally intense fear of violence that was emerging in the Cold War.

Kenneth Burke and Identification

As in other case studies, specific concepts for rhetorical criticism become important in describing the ways that articulations are formed, expressed and reinforced in the text under consideration. In *The Man Nobody Knows* and related texts, metonymic association was an important part of how Christianity, capitalism and American identity were articulated to each other. In *The Power of Positive Thinking* and other texts from the mid-1950s, the strategy of

⁸⁸ Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960 : The Soul of Containment*. P. 63.

⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 63-4

identification stands out as a dominant technique, and one that is more common here than in the other examples included in my study.

Identification leads us logically to Kenneth Burke, Burke describes his purpose in *A Rhetoric of Motives* this way: “The *Rhetoric*... considers the ways in which individuals are at odds with one another, or become identified with groups more or less at odds with one another.”⁹⁰ As this quotation suggests, identification with a group always occurs in contrast to some other – that is, through division. Or in his words, “to begin with ‘identification’ is, by the same token, though roundabout, to confront the implications of *division*.”⁹¹ His understanding of this interplay is not so simple as a construction of an “us” and a “them” by one group. It takes place through conflict and cooperation, “For even antagonistic terms, confronting each other as parry and thrust, can be said to ‘cooperate’ in the building of an over-all form.”⁹²

Identification is a rhetorical action similar to articulation, but it takes place at a different discursive level. In the case of the rhetorical articulation of the Christian-patriot-capitalist, it might be said that the relevant articulation is actually a series of identifications, linked to each other. Laclau describes this series as a chain of equivalence.⁹³ To describe an identification, then, a critic can point to a specific sentence or metaphor in one text. Articulation, on the other hand, takes place at a cultural level, across multiple texts.

A book like *The Power of Positive Thinking* does not contain the articulation in itself, but contains identifications and other rhetorical strategies that serve to build a growing articulation or provide evidence that it is already hegemonic in the surrounding culture. As I will argue, one

⁹⁰ *ibid* p. 22

⁹¹ *ibid* p. 22

⁹² *ibid* p. 23

⁹³ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*. (New York: Verso, 2005)

way this articulation took place in 1950s American culture was through a stark division:

Americans vs Communists. Because, from the American perspective, Soviet Russia presented a clear and decidedly inferior triumvirate of enemy-atheist-communist, the perception that a good American was obviously patriotic, Christian and capitalist is self-reinforcing, from the rhetorical constructions of opposites that are regularly reinforced. As a result, if even one of these three identifications are taken as a given, in their frequent association through positive example and negative contrast with Soviets, the others are naturalized as a part of that same identification. In other words, because of the way hegemonic articulations function, and because of the particular features of this articulation, to be Christian and American was necessarily to love and support capitalism. These concepts became inextricably linked – articulated to each other—in a way that had staying power in American culture, though it is neither necessary nor permanent.

This element of contrast and division adds a new element that is different from the metonymic associations dominant in the discourses of the 1920s. As we shall see, the strategies of anecdote, parallel and analogy that were common in those texts also occur here. One important difference in those strategies, however, is the emphasis on normal individuals carrying out rules or commands, rather than the comparison of stories about great American men and the life of Christ.

Articulating American Capitalism and Religiosity in the 1950s

Differences between *The Power of Positive Thinking* and *The Man Nobody Knows* demonstrate differences in public thought about prosperity, business and Christianity in the times they were published. While both books use businessmen as prime examples, the assumptions underneath these choices change, as well as the theses they support. Both books take the Bible

and its principles as universally applicable, especially in support of the good life or the American dream. Barton focuses primarily on narratives about Jesus as exemplars that lead to generalizations. Peale's sources within the Bible are broader. For Peale as a clergyman, the values of Christianity are clearer and don't require the explication and evidence that Barton provides. While Barton's extensive deployment of biblical narrative and explication of that narrative implies that the Bible requires interpretation, Peale appeals more often to commands and theological principles without justifying their inclusion as frequently with references to Biblical narratives.

The assumption that the meaning of the Bible and therefore Christianity is clear and commensurable with (and even inseparable from) American identity is also present in the discussion of legal changes in civil religion. The fact that a law putting the slogan "In God We Trust" on currency passed with very little protest or discussion is evidence of these assumptions. In the rest of this chapter, I will look more closely *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and explore how identification and division function in these texts to perform an articulation that is ideologically similar to what I described in the 1920s, but has important differences.

Norman Vincent Peale's Prosperity Gospel

Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* was published in 1952 and stayed on the *New York Times* Bestseller list for 186 weeks.⁹⁴ Peale describes it as a book that "teaches applied Christianity; a simple yet scientific system of practical techniques of successful living that works."⁹⁵ As an example of the emerging self-help genre, *The Power of Positive*

⁹⁴ Ron Alexander, "Chronicle," *New York Times*, Tuesday, May 31, 1994.

⁹⁵ Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. P. xi

Thinking provides instructions for successful living through psychological strategies and spiritual principles. Chapters have titles such as “Believe in Yourself,” “Try Prayer Power,” and “How to Create your Own Happiness.” They feature principles of Peale’s Positive Thinking philosophy, and anecdotes of those principles at work. His advice also enacts a conflation of a 1950’s conception of the “good Christian” with the period’s conceptions of the “good worker” or “good consumer.” This is enacted in explicit statements, as well as in the narrative elements of his anecdotes. Peale serves, then, as an exemplar of ways that religious Americans were associating a particular kind of capitalist behavior with Christianity and God’s good favor.

Peale’s particular version of Christian teachings about loyalty and humility, for example, promotes the idea that company loyalty and perseverance in bad work situations will lead to reward. In one anecdote, a man was passed over for a promotion in favor of an outside worker. Rather than respond angrily and quit, he and his wife were persuaded by Peale that he should try to work with the new president and continue to be a good worker in his company. After a few years, the new president was offered a job elsewhere, and the man was promoted to president. Peale reports the man saying “We have solved a problem according to well-defined spiritually scientific principles. I shudder to think... of the terrible mistake we would have made had we not gone at this problem according to the formula contained in the teachings of Jesus.”⁹⁶ This attitude of service does indeed align with traditional Christian teachings, but it also functions to the advantage of corporations by providing workers who do not complain or threaten to leave or strike when they are subjected to bad or unjust treatment. Theorists like Nietzsche and Marx have made similar observations about how Christianity serves a “slave morality” and retains capitalist power. What makes Peale’s particular instantiation of this connection interesting,

⁹⁶ Ibid. P. 159.

though, is its explicitness. Peale applies these ideas directly to the work context, and explicitly promotes the very relation Marxists and others have criticized—patient, loyal workers demonstrate Christian virtues, and also benefit profit margins—therefore en masse bolstering the American economy. The anecdote also demonstrates how the concept of loyalty to a company is considered an outgrowth of loyalty or faithfulness in general, such as loyalty to a community or to God, a concept that contemporary critics would not take for granted.

Peale also suggests that sincere Christian faith will lead to financial success in the marketplace. For example, he tells a story about Maurice Flint, who was doing poorly in his job and falling into debt. In an attempt to better understand the idea of “mustard seed faith” presented in the Bible, he found a way to encase a mustard seed in plastic so he could carry one around with him. This idea developed into his successful marketing of selling mustard seed jewelry in department stores. As Peale closes the story, he writes,

Curious, isn't it—a failure goes to church and hears a text out of the Bible and creates a great business. Perhaps you had better listen more intently to the reading of the Bible and the sermon next time you go to church. Perhaps you, too, will get an idea that will rebuild not only your life but your business as well.⁹⁷

The common thread between these two stories is an economic reward for behavior that reflects a Christian worldview, linking God's approval with financial reward. Of course, this linkage works both ways. Peale's particular instantiation of this morality also creates the implication that those who are successful financially likely got that way through their good moral behavior, not, say, through the exploitation of others. Thus, his ideology promotes successful capitalists not just as economically successful, but also as morally righteous.

Other narratives underscore this idea that successful business people demonstrate spiritual success as well. Peale writes that “One of my most inspiring friends was the late

⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 168.

Harlowe B. Andrews of Syracuse, New York, one of the best businessmen and competent spiritual experts I ever knew.”⁹⁸ In another example, he talks to a physician about a man who “works from morning until night without interruption, but always seems able to assume new obligations.” This ability is credited to his religiosity, because “From his religion he has learned how to avoid drainage of power.”⁹⁹ Again, financial success and being a good worker are tied to religious success. This reinforces the same implications: spiritual righteousness will lead to the kinds of virtues that are rewarded by capitalism, and those who succeed do so because of their spiritual virtue.

As these examples suggest, Peale uses anecdotes from business people to illustrate principles, just as Barton does. However, while Barton’s examples focused on character (and most importantly on the character of Jesus) the particular characters in Peale’s stories are interchangeable. While Barton compares Jesus to other men he considers admirable, Peale’s stories subordinate the identities of their protagonists to their actions and beliefs. These characters are meant to be examples that could stand in for any reader. While Barton compares Jesus to successful executives, the virtues Peale focuses on are those of the successful worker. His characters are often anonymous, either named as “a man” or “a friend” or their names are used, but these people are not famous or well known. For Peale, the practices of the virtuous Christian/worker/American are apparent in the Bible and in culture, and do not depend on an exceptional person to accomplish them. While Barton emphasizes emulating remarkable people, Peale emphasizes principles that are accessible to anyone, regardless of their goals or their level of achievement.

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 7

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 37

This shift signals that identification functions differently for Peale than for Barton. In *The Power of Positive Thinking* the virtuous workers in Peale's anecdotes function as the kind of person his reader should also be. The audience is asked to identify with Peale's exemplars and therefore to act in the same ways. The call to action for Barton is less clear, in part because the mechanism of identification is more aspirational. Like *The Man Nobody Knows* though, Peale's articulation between Christianity and capitalist culture can work from either direction. Audience members who are committed to Christianity can read Peale's instruction as a call to enact their Christianity as better workers; audience members who wish to perform better economically could read the book as an argument for the benefits of Christian virtues.

Peale also employs the terminology of business or consumer products to depict Christianity, further suggesting that these two realms share a common substance. Like the products and appliances that were taking off in the burgeoning market of the 1950s, Peale talks about Christianity with words like "scientific" and "up to date." For example, in the modern and polished office of one man Peale admires there is also "an old battered copy of the bible." and its occupant holds that this is because "That book is the most up-to-date thing in this plant... so far ahead of us that it never goes out of date."¹⁰⁰ For another man who undermined himself with negative thoughts, Peale found "the solution to this problem in the simple techniques of faith taught in the Bible. These principles are scientific and sound and can heal any personality of the pain of inferiority feelings."¹⁰¹ Prayer is a technique that benefits from breakthrough findings, Peale elsewhere claims, because "New and fresh spiritual techniques are being constantly discovered by men and women of spiritual genius. It is advisable to experiment with prayer

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 202

¹⁰¹ Ibid. p. 16

power according to such methods as prove sound and effective.”¹⁰² In all of these cases, religion is also “modern” and “scientific” much like engineering and production methods. It seems odd to use such terms for something so ancient, but Peale compensates for this tension by explaining that eternal biblical truth, “never goes out of date” and is thus perennially “up-to-date.” In the prayer example, however, Peale equivocates by suggesting that new and better techniques of prayer are constantly being developed. He simultaneously frames Christianity as something proven that he has just discovered but also as something that, like modern consumer goods, is forever being improved. This contradiction reveals Peale’s attempt to adapt elements of historical Christianity to a popular culture overwhelmed by and also obsessed with the superiority of the new.

In sum, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, as an example of popular discourses of Christianity in the 1950s, articulates Christianity to capitalist goals and discourses in three related ways: by morally congratulating good workers who do not complain about unjust treatment, by suggesting that success derives from moral behavior, and by articulating the language of Christianity to the language of consumer capitalism. This linkage, I suggest, functions as part of a broader pattern that was working to tie the interests of Christian religion, particularly a type of mainstreamed evangelical Protestantism that Peale represents, to the interests of capitalism in the U. S. In other discourses, these interests are related to national security and national identity, but in the case of Peale’s book Christian principles and values are explicitly connected to capitalist virtues and capitalist rewards.

¹⁰² Ibid. p. 53

God-talk and the State

What Peale was doing at a personal level, newspaper and congressional discourses of the same era were doing at a public level, most notably through two laws that passed through Congress in the mid-1950s that intensified and justified this convergence by adding the phrase “under God” to the pledge of allegiance and “In God We Trust” to all U. S. Currency.

Both bills passed through Congress with unanimous support from lawmakers and with unusual speed.¹⁰³ The public and congressional discussion of the Pledge is more voluminous than that surrounding the addition of the motto to currency. While the change in the Pledge faced some debate, the addition of the motto was almost entirely uncontroversial as suggested by the bland memo that Eisenhower has left us on the currency change, “my general feeling is that it would be rather nice to have this done.”¹⁰⁴ The Senate Banking committee announced the change saying it “presents an excellent opportunity to correct an oversight.”¹⁰⁵ There are several possible reasons for this discrepancy in the levels of controversy. For one, currency had borne this motto since the 1860s, though not all its denominations and designs. This therefore represented a change of scope rather than the introduction of something new. For another, the change in the pledge had implications for the education of children--always a controversial topic. In the context of understanding the relationship of civil religion and capitalism, however, the lack of resistance to codifying the use of God’s name on all U. S. currency remains important.

¹⁰³ In fact, one Newsweek article from May 31, 1954 claims the Pledge bill “swept capital Hill” and “sped through the House.”

¹⁰⁴ Eisenhower, Dwight D. Memorandum To Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller, 5 March 1955. In *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, ed. L. Galambos and D. van Ee, doc. 1330. World Wide Web facsimile by The Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial Commission of the print edition; Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, <http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org/presidential-papers/first-term/documents/1330.cfm>

¹⁰⁵ “Inscription for All U.S. Money” *New York Times*, July 12, 1955. Pg. 52.

Though the change in currency supplies a clearer connection to capitalism, both sets of discourses demonstrate a motivation to differentiate observant Americans from atheist communists—to identify through division. Religiosity is foregrounded as a defining difference between Americans and Soviets in these justifications, while other differences between American values and communism are not mentioned.

Most of the arguments supporting the change to the Pledge of Allegiance claimed that religious faith was something that distinguished Americans. These arguments formed a direct identification with American citizenship based on statements or claims others would not or could not make, because of their dedication to atheism. Many articles pointed to Dr. George Docherty's Flag Day 1954 sermon, which allegedly inspired this addition. Docherty's argument was "that communists substituting 'Russia' for 'the United States of America' could recite the pledge without compunction. But they couldn't pledge allegiance to a country 'under God.'"¹⁰⁶ Representative Rabaut of Michigan echoed this in his support of amending the pledge when he averred that the "one fundamental issue which is the unbridgeable gap between America and Communist Russia is belief in Almighty God."¹⁰⁷ In both cases, the speakers emphasized religion rather than economic or political philosophy as the key difference between Americans and communists. While it would not be surprising to hear such claims in a church, in Congress they were made even more emphatically. While Rev. Docherty only argued that communists would be unwilling to pledge to a nation "under God," Rep. Rabaut claimed that belief in God was "the one fundamental issue" that differentiates the U. S. from Russia. If we are to take the

¹⁰⁶ Dole, Kenneth. "Dr. Docherty Originated 'Under God' in Flag Pledge" *Washington Post and Times Herald*, March 12, 1955. pg. 10.

¹⁰⁷ Rep. Rabaut on the floor of the house on Amend the Pledge of Allegiance to Flag to Include the Phrase "Under God." 83rd cong., 2d ses., *Cong. Rec.* (May 5, 1954), p. 6079.

Representative at his word, other differences between democracy and communism, like economic philosophy or political values, are therefore bridgeable and non-fundamental. Whether or not this was Rabaut's true position, this hyperbolic rhetoric demonstrates the ways that emphasizing the religious differences between Americans and Communists works to the exclusion of economic differences. Not only, as the quotations I cited demonstrate, was the religious difference hyperbolically cited as "fundamental" or "only" but other differences were not mentioned at all. While those differences might have been discussed in other contexts, the discourses about these religiously-based changes are silent about other political and economic differences reduced to religious difference.

Reports about the history of the motto "In God We Trust" on currency revived a similar question of American identity in the 1860s. According to a 1956 *New York Times* article, the minister who suggested its original addition to coins wrote the Secretary of the Treasury to express his concerns about how America might be understood by posterity: "Would not the antiquaries of succeeding centuries reason from our past that we were a heathen nation?"¹⁰⁸ For Rev. M. R. Watkinson, the identity of Americans as Christian was a key part of the national identity, one that he wanted printed on artifacts that would last longer than individuals.

Some justification for expanding the use of the phrase in the 1950s emphasized the importance of returning to belief in God in uncertain times. Rep Bennett of Florida made this statement on the floor of the senate:

In these days when imperialistic and materialistic communism seeks to attack and to destroy freedom, it is proper for us to seek continuously for ways to strengthen the foundations of our freedom. At the base of our freedom is our faith in God and

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth M. Fowler "In God We Trust: Biography of an old American Motto" *New York Times*, July 28, 1956. Pg 21.

the desire of Americans to live by His will and by His guidance. As long as this country trusts in God, it will prevail.¹⁰⁹

In this example, the representative explicitly ties the need for religiosity to various threats facing the nation, and functions under the assumption that religious piety and American-ness are one and the same. Again, “the foundations of our freedom” might be something like respect for each other, free and open elections, or a free market, but instead Bennett locates the basic source of American ideals in religious faith and God’s will. As in the previous examples, religiosity is presented as the primary difference between Americans and communists, even though communism’s logical opposite would seem to be capitalism.

While this legislative discourse signals the deployment of religious language to defend and bolster the state, it does not make the link to capitalism explicit. However, explicit defenses of the importance of capitalism as a social system were also taking place that invoked the language of both religion and liberalism. In a speech by Dr. Ruth Alexander, explicit pro-capitalism coincides with an anti-communist message. Dr. Alexander was an economist, columnist and lecturer, and delivered this speech at the Associated Industries of Kentucky Annual convention in November 1953. Alexander’s speech was included in the periodical *Vital Speeches of the Day*.

Alexander’s speech sets up the relevant binary in its opening paragraph: “Throughout the world there is a drift away from the sacred society of individualism toward the profane society of collectivism.”¹¹⁰ The clear distinction between individualism and collectivism is paralleled by sacred and profane binary so that from the very outset of her speech, what sets capitalism off

¹⁰⁹ Rep. Bennett on the floor of the house on Putting “In God We Trust” on our Currency. 84th cong., 2d ses, *Cong. Rec.* (April 13, 1955) p. 4384.

¹¹⁰ Ruth Alexander, "A Formula for Freedom: Attack Subversives Wherever Found," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 1953. P.150a

from communism is framed in moral and religious terms. While Alexander may not mean these terms literally, their deployment suggests the hegemonic force of the association between religious piety and capitalism in the U.S. However, her rhetoric differs from the other texts I have discussed in this essay because she articulates these differences in three areas, which she calls “points of cleavage,” economic, political and psychological, “between a Capitalist Republic and a Peoples Democracy.”¹¹¹ Building on the polarity of the operant term “cleavage,” Alexander uses parallel structure to sort out these economic differences:

Capitalism creates maximum wealth, thus steadily reducing the poverty it inherited from previous systems; socialism diffuses minimum wealth, thus spreading poverty thin. Capitalism aims at equality of wealth through the powerful propulsion of profit and production for profit is determined by production for use. Socialism aims at, and accomplishes, equality of poverty through the powerful propulsion of terror.¹¹²

Alexander’s speech, then, fits in with the general pattern of black and white rhetoric of this period in drawing this contrast between capitalism and communism. Her discussion makes explicit claims about economic differences that are made invisible by those other rhetorics that emphasize religious differences. However Alexander’s speech also suggests that these economic distinctions are contentious. She claims that there is plenty of American sympathy for communist economic ideals, saying “Concomitant with extreme collectivism, there is a trend in the free countries toward allegedly greater democratization by socialization.”¹¹³ Alexander’s belief that her claims come against larger trends suggests that arguments about economic differences may meet with debate, whereas religious distinctions may be more clear-cut, and preempt discussion about economic philosophy. She believes that Americans have been fooled by

¹¹¹ Ibid. p. 150b

¹¹² Ibid. p. 150b

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 150a

communism in disguise, and therefore “we must evolve a Formula for Freedom and use it ceaselessly, relentlessly and unanimously.”¹¹⁴ She claims that one problem in the past is that “We have treated communism as a mere difference of opinion to be tolerated in keeping with our great traditions instead of as the most extensive and diabolical conspiracy in history.”¹¹⁵ This, too, indicates that though most Americans found the totalitarian atheism of the USSR government distasteful, they may not have been so stalwart in their rejection of its economic philosophy.

Alexander’s response to ambivalence about communist economic policy was to attempt to persuade Americans that economic and political differences were at the heart of the communist threat. The tack taken in other areas, it seems, was to de-emphasize differences of economic philosophy, and instead attach capitalist values to religious moral systems. For elected representatives this strategy may have been politically advantageous, especially so close on the heels of Joseph McCarthy’s embarrassment. Supporting civil religious laws like the ones discussed in this chapter offers an opportunity for representatives to identify themselves and their districts with patriotic zeal without looking for communists in their midst.

Conclusion

The insertions of God language into official state discourse served a number of purposes for the leaders that enacted the changes and for the rhetors that supported them. For one, it allowed religious believers to feel that their beliefs were an important part of national identity, affirming the popularity of mainstream Christian leaders like Peale and Graham. Secondly, it

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p. 151a

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 152a

placed a signifier of growing religious excitement in a patriotic context, metonymically linking enthusiasm for God with enthusiasm for the state. The ease of the decision to require the phrase “In God We Trust” on coins demonstrates a connection that already existed between American commerce and civil religion, a connection that is literally imprinted on our currency. This connection was so deeply embedded that no one objected to this legislation on any grounds, and instead spoke of it as “an opportunity to correct an oversight” or something that would be “nice to do.”

When read in conjunction with the rhetoric of Norman Vincent Peale, the discourse supporting these federal changes suggests a general intensification of the relationship between the interests of a capitalist democratic government, business interests, and American religion. This served to promote a stylization of Christianity that portrays economic success as evidence of God’s blessing, a small but distinct change from the Christianity presented by Bruce Barton in the 1920s. In Barton’s book, Jesus shares virtues with executives, but also demonstrates humility and simplicity Barton is careful not to promise that riches always follow virtue. In Peale’s version, however, the implication is more apparent. One way this rhetoric served during the Cold War was to construct an American identity in sharp contrast to the ideology of communism, an outcome that served the goal of patriotic unity and gave the idea that Christian virtues were the same as capitalist ones extra resonance. Finally, it promoted a kind of dedicated labor and entrepreneurship as evidence of moral religious living. All of these outcomes served the interests of American elites who were frequently the subjects speaking these connections.

Alexander’s speech also offers a contrast in tone with the speech promoting the codification of civil religion. In Alexander’s description of the “cleavages” between capitalism and communism, many Americans are identified as not sufficiently patriotic. In civil religion,

patriotism is easy to perform, and linked to the religious performance that is already part of many American's lives. In other words, civil religion makes identification with patriotism easy and naturalized. Alexander's version of patriotism is harder to identify with because it demands analysis of complex economic systems, rather than an affective affiliation. By promoting patriotism without inviting a debate about the merits of various economic systems, representatives could demonstrate their anti-communist enthusiasm on a more universally agreeable point.

An exploration of Norman Vincent Peale's bestseller *The Power of Positive Thinking* alongside other texts from the 1950s reveals similarities to rhetorics from the 1920s and important differences. For instance, in both periods assertions about the special identity of Americans are commonplace, and that commonality continues into the more contemporary period. Both bestselling books use anecdotes as a major form of evidence, but the ways those anecdotes function is different. As the examples I explicated in this chapter demonstrate, in the mid-century book, stories seem less likely to demonstrate truths about a particular type of character (the executive) and function instead as a cipher for identification. The characters in Barton's stories are exceptional historical figures, famous for their leadership qualities, like Henry Ford and Abraham Lincoln. Peale's characters, on the other hand, are sometimes named but rarely famous. His very point seems to be that they are not exceptional. They are examples that any audience member could identify with. The mix of gender, age and social class presented in Peale's stories supports this interpretation. While Barton's examples are all men who succeed in business and/or politics, Peale's examples include men like that, but also women whose goals might be public, like a job or personal, like a husband. As we move forward in time toward the

2000s, another move toward the personal will take place, as the subject of most of Joel Osteen's discussion is not Abraham Lincoln, or "a man" but "you."

Rather than offering third person ciphers for identification, Osteen directs his claims directly to the audience, or the individual reader. While Osteen also includes stories about himself and others for his readers to identify with or mimic the virtues described, he more frequently uses a strategy that we see less often in Peale and not at all in Barton: the direct application to the audience or reader "you." For Peale, these kinds of applications frequently appear in a moralizing segment toward the end of a story, suggesting "you" could do the same as the man described. For Osteen, the primary characters of the book are Osteen, God and "you."

I have argued that the mechanism of identification through division, as described by Kenneth Burke, is the dominant rhetorical form that articulates the three identities I'm concerned with in this dissertation: Christianity, American patriotism, and capitalist virtue. As in other chapters, I do not mean to argue that identification through division is the only rhetorical strategy that functions to produce and sustain hegemonic articulations. However, my analysis suggests that in this case identification helps to explain how this articulation was united, sustained and expressed in these texts and at this time. It is perhaps unsurprising that Burke became interested in this strategy during a time when its use was so dominant in the variety of contexts I have examined.

Though these various discourses work together toward promoting a certain type of capitalism and a certain type of religiosity in the mid-50s, there are also contradictions and points of cleavage. In official state discourses, ambiguous monotheism was important. As Eisenhower famously quipped, the country needed a religion "and I don't care what it is." Non-specific references to God, then, fit the bill. In contrast, Peale's Christianity is a very particular view of

Protestantism, as was the Protestantism then being promoted in Graham's revivals. This distinction between state religion and popular evangelical Christianity became tense at the close of the decade with John F. Kennedy's campaign for the presidency. A group of Protestants, led by Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, challenged the tolerance of government religion with their concerns about Kennedy's Catholicism.¹¹⁶ Though commentary in the mid-50s suggested that the laws might better represent a Christian viewpoint if we claim to trust in God, Protestants in 1960 feared a Catholic viewpoint having too much impact on the government. A mere six years after bills securing the name of God within official state discourse passed with little protest, a candidate for president delivered a famous speech stating his religion was a personal matter, separate from his policy decisions or role as a public representative. This cleavage between a private, consumer understanding of Christian behavior and a state religiosity is evident in these discourses from the mid-50s though they function together during this period. The presence of Kennedy as a presidential candidate highlighted the differences between protestant and catholic religiosity, for instance, leading to his insistence that faith be private, rather than emphasizing the unifying role of belief generally (an alternative strategy used by Mitt Romney in 2008). It is interesting, then, that in the same decade that belief generally becomes a unifying force in American politics, its implications in Joel Osteen's best-selling book are so decidedly personal.

¹¹⁶ "Protestant Group's Statements," *New York Times*, September 9, 1960.

CHAPTER FOUR

GOD WANTS YOU TO BE RICH: THE CONSUMER CHRISTIAN

A great many elements of the U.S. cultural landscape changed between the end of the 50's and the dawn of the new millennium, but the two periods are also analogous to each other and to the 1920s in a few important ways. As I will explain further, the 1990s and early 2000s represent a period of economic growth, prosperity, and improved standards of living for many Americans. Following the events of September 11, 2001, this also became a period of insecurity as the face of the national enemy changed from soldier to terrorist, and the possibility of perennial attacks felt immanent. Systemic changes like urban sprawl, advertising and digital media likewise contributed to the increased isolation of the individual and the deterioration of the nuclear family.

Against this backdrop, a number of celebrity pastors emerged within Christian pop culture. Among them, Joel Osteen soon came to stand in for a trend many call "the prosperity gospel." While others share a similar message, Osteen is singular in his popularity and influence. According to his Amazon.com biography, Osteen's first book *Your Best Life Now* debuted in 2004 at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list, remained on the list for more than 2 years and sold more than 4 million copies. *Church Report Magazine* named him the Most Influential Christian of 2006. Every week he preaches to a 16,000 seat auditorium in Houston TX. In addition to his books and large church, Osteen has aired his church services on television and appeared across the country as a motivational speaker and preacher. Given his immense

popularity, especially in the first half of the 2000s, it follows that something about Osteen's ideology and delivery style resonates strongly with American religious culture at this time.

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the contextual changes that make the discursive field in 2003, the year Joel Osteen's *Your Best Life Now* was released, different from and similar to the time periods addressed in earlier case studies. I will then argue that the text of Osteen's bestseller constructs a particular type of identity for its audience that articulates Christianity to larger attitudes of individualism, narcissism and the privatization of ideology. Through his authorial style and tone as well as the content of his anecdotes and his particular interpretation of the Bible, Osteen's book promotes a kind of intimate, individualistic theology that articulates to a consumer-oriented, narcissistic culture to give it theological meaning.

The hegemonic chain of equivalence articulated in this period, then, links cultural logics of individual importance or specialness with the Christian idea of a loving God and consumer culture's imperative that a person's value is expressed in his or her purchases. Meanwhile, presidential rhetoric attaches those same consumerist values to patriotism: commanding citizens to demonstrate their patriotism through buying.

As in previous cases, Osteen's book is an attempt to make sense of Christian values and promises within the economic landscape of the 21st century. Like Barton and Peale, Osteen is presenting a Christianity he sees as relevant to the concerns and desires of his contemporaries. The clear differences, then, demonstrate how these perceived concerns and desires have changed. More than ever before, *Your Best Life Now* highlights the consumer dreams of Americans to demonstrate their success through large homes and new cars. Importantly, much of the success and the tales in Osteen's book take place in the home, rather than the workplace. This re-orientation of success, I argue, echoes a larger movement toward what Lauren Berlant describes

as the intimate public sphere. In a similar movement, explicit connections to national pride or patriotism within the religious discourse I discuss is absent (though those connections are present elsewhere in the culture, in expressions of patriotism and presidential speeches). One explanation for this change may be the collapse of patriotic behavior into consumerism, as is suggested by President George W. Bush's speech after the 9-11 attacks.

America in the Bush Years

As is the case in the previous time periods, the mid-2000s was a period of uncertainty. Instead of following a major world war, this period followed an unexpected moment of violent terrorism on American soil. It may seem surprising to compare this event to the total wars of the previous century, since the death toll of the 9-11-2001 terrorist attacks pales in comparison. However, the insecurity that it brought to the national psyche justifies its inclusion alongside events like the brutal trench warfare of World War I and the unprecedented destructive power of the atom bomb. The specter of terrorism as a force that could destroy American lives so unexpectedly held a similar place in an American culture attempting to balance its safety, identity and risk-taking. *Time* magazine described the attacks as “the defining moment of the decade . . . which redefined global politics for at least a generation and caused us to question the continental security we had until then rarely worried about.”¹¹⁷

The aftermath of these terrorist attacks led once again to a renewed fervor of patriotism with a particularly civil-religious accent, something witnessed almost immediately as lawmakers

¹¹⁷ Andy Serwer and Beth Kowitt, "The Decade from Hell ... And How the Next One Can Be Better. (Cover Story)," *Time* 174, no. 22 (2009).

gathered in the capital to sing “God Bless America”.¹¹⁸ Following the decision to send troops into Afghanistan and Iraq, a veritable cottage industry sprang up selling patriotic items, including popular yellow car ribbons to “support the troops” some with cross-shaped openings reading “pray for the troops.”

The 9/11 attacks themselves invited articulation to American Capitalism. The World Trade Center was a main target and certainly the most visible element of the day’s terrorist attacks. While the Pentagon in Washington DC was also targeted and another plane went down in rural Pennsylvania after passengers seized the helm from the terrorists, the dominant image from the day in news media and memorializing has been the smoking towers of the World Trade Center. The building’s name itself reveals the sort of work that dominated inside, and almost immediately commentators speculated that the building was chosen by the terrorist attackers because of its symbolic and practical role in American business and trade.

In his speech to a joint session of Congress on September 20, President Bush listed several actions in response to the question “Americans are asking: What is expected of us?” He begins with continuing the American way of life “live your lives, hug your children.” In the next paragraph, he enjoins listeners to do three things: to cooperate with enhanced security and investigating officials, to participate in the economy, and to pray. The close proximity of economic participation and prayer are notable for my purposes in this chapter, but the centered element of the economy stands out. “I ask your continued participation and confidence in the American economy. Terrorists attacked a symbol of American prosperity.”¹¹⁹ Though some

¹¹⁸ Kathy Kiley and William M. Welch, "Democrats, Gop Unite 'Shoulder to Shoulder'," *USA Today*, September 12, 2001.

¹¹⁹ Bush, George W. “Address to Joint Session of Congress Following 9/11 Attacks” September 20, 2001. Transcript from American Rhetoric, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911jointsessionspeech.htm>

commentators were skeptical of these requests even at the time, many Americans took all three requests to heart.¹²⁰ Scholar Dana Heller references a Wired News article about eBay transactions as an example of American consumers purchasing items related to the World Trade Center, and viewing the exchange itself as an act of patriotism, unrelated to the content of the item.¹²¹ *Wired* reports:

Michael Boyd, another eBay trader, said he purchased a World Trade Center postcard as a kind of sign of American patriotism. "I began to think that that is what America is all about, free trade," he said. "And that is what these people lost their lives over. Not only their lives but those who have fought for freedom in the past and those who will lose their lives in the future."¹²²

As this example suggests, the attacks were viewed as targeted toward American capitalism, and therefore consumer spending in support of that very capitalism was a way of fighting back or standing strong. As Jennifer Scanlon has put it in an essay focused on Wal-Mart, "patriotism was recast as consumerism."¹²³ Shopping, especially shopping at iconic American stores for items carrying icons of America like flags and eagles, was understood as an act of patriotism and defiance.

Part of the reason the urging to sustain the economy was translated as engaging in consumer spending was that the US economy had increasingly become consumer driven. Before

¹²⁰ for example, Daniel Schorr, "A 'Normal' Day in New America," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 28, 2001, Robert B. Reich, "How Did Spending Become Our Patriotic Duty?," *The Washington Post*, September 23, 2001.

¹²¹ Dana Heller, "Introduction," in *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity*, ed. Dana Heller (New York: Palgrave, 2005). 9.

¹²² "Auction Site Pulls Tower Items," *Wired*, September 11, 2001.
<http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/news/2001/09/46736> (retrieved April 18, 2011)

¹²³ Jennifer Scanlon, "'Your Flag Decal Won't Get You into Heaven Anymore': U.S. Consumers, Wal-Mart and the Commodification of Patriotism," in *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity*, ed. Dana Heller (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

the market crash in 2007, 70 percent of the US GDP was from consumer spending.¹²⁴ Beginning in the 1980s, consumer spending increased to the degree that many Americans were spending beyond their income, in part due to the availability of cheap credit. Economists report that by 2007, “the personal savings rate in the United States had dropped to zero.”¹²⁵ This rise of consumer debt as a force in the economy had several effects: the general conception of “normal” spending continued to grow, especially in the real estate sector, where the perennial search for bigger homes sank the average American into deeper debt. Also, the economy relied on spending to grow, but began to deteriorate as revolving debt carried by consumers increased, leading in part to the economic recession that began the same year.¹²⁶ In comparison to the other periods I have discussed, this means that the appearance of prosperity and available consumer goods was more intense than ever before. Unlike the 1920s and 1950s, though, consumer income was not increasing at equal rates. Therefore, consumers were more frequently faced with the appearance that others had more than them, when in fact many Americans were spending more than they earned. This is a different kind of rhetorical problem than the one encountered by rhetors in the 1920s or 50s. In the 20s, most Americans were faced with greater prosperity than they had known in the past, both due to new technology and the changes in labor laws brought by the progressive era. The end of the Great Depression and the Second World War presented the mid-century U.S. with infrastructure from the New Deal and a newly productive labor force aimed at innovation. In the 2000s, Americans faced a culture where wealth seemed like an expectation rather than a surprise. Despite such expectations, the reality of income inequality and global

¹²⁴ Robert P Yerex, "The Consumer-Driven Economy at a Crossroads," *Business Economics* 46, no. 1 (2011).

¹²⁵ Ibid. 39.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 40.

poverty now appears starker than ever, especially as global business and media make the plight of poor workers in other countries easier to see and learn about.

American Religion Entering the 21st Century

While political and economic changes clearly intersected with religious and civil religious culture in the U.S., the culture of religiosity itself was also changing. Sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell describe a shift in American religious conflict from the 1950s to the 2000s as moving from a conflict between religious groups (i.e. Catholics vs Protestants) to a conflict between the very religious and the irreligious. They describe this change by comparing two candidates for president who were Catholic Democrats from Massachusetts: John Kennedy and John Kerry. While Kennedy carried the Catholic vote despite his disagreement with some church opinions, Kerry split it, and the split reflected frequency of church attendance: frequent church attendees voted against Kerry, likely for ideological reasons such as his stance on abortion.¹²⁷

This change reflects the growing pluralism of the U.S. religious landscape in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and the related shift from social divides between religious groups, to divides between the less religious and more religious. In a 2006 survey, for instance, 17% of Americans identified themselves as belonging to no religious tradition.¹²⁸ While a large percentage of the U.S. population still identified itself as Protestant, Catholic or Jewish, unlike the 1950s a significant portion of the population claimed no faith, or minority faiths including Mormonism, Islam, Hinduism and others. Political fractures tended to take place within these

¹²⁷ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010). 3.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 17.

traditions rather than between them, leading to identification across faiths as “liberal” or “conservative” as was already happening within Protestantism in the 1950s. Evidence for this includes the popularity of devout Mormons such as Mitt Romney and Glenn Beck among conservative evangelical Protestants, even though historically evangelicals have considered Mormonism a cult.

Family Values

The voice of the Religious Right, including primarily evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, but also sometimes Catholic and Mormon conservatives, had grown since the 1960s into a large political voting block, contributing to the coalition that elected Ronald Reagan and perhaps culminating with the election of explicitly evangelical president George W. Bush in 2000. Historian Frank Lambert describes the definitive issues of the Religious Right as “focused primarily on family, education and sexuality.”¹²⁹ Kenneth D. Wald points to three paradigmatic controversies in the late 70s that “paved the way” for the identity of the Christian Right. These included a textbook controversy in West Virginia, a referendum on a gay rights ordinance in Dade County Florida, and the national debate around the Equal Rights Amendment.¹³⁰ Jerry Falwell’s “Christian Bill of Rights,” issued in the 1980s, “stressed opposition to abortion, support for voluntary prayer and Bible reading in public schools, the responsibility of

¹²⁹ Frank Lambert, *Religion in American Politics: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹³⁰ Kenneth D. Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 4 ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003). 206

government to encourage the ‘traditional family unit,’ maintenance of tax exemption for churches, and noninterference by the authorities with Christian schools.”¹³¹

While the Religious Right was an important influence on national politics for decades, it is important to note that it never represented all American Christians. As Wald writes “The evangelical community as a whole has been surprisingly resistant to the appeals of many organizations campaigning in its name. In the early years of the movement, surveys reveal, many evangelicals (however defined) were unfamiliar with the Christian Right and disagreed with its positions on a number of core issues.”¹³² A religious left continued to exist with a range of prominence and connections with mainstream politics.

The emphasis on the “traditional family unit” in evangelical political action is especially relevant to my reading of Joel Osteen’s vision of the good life. In comparison to the earlier bestsellers, Osteen’s book includes and emphasizes family life in a way that would likely seem foreign to the earlier writers. This emphasis on family life, as I will demonstrate, creates a sense of intimacy and familiarity that supports an individualistic understanding of faith and the good life. I believe this is partially a result of the emphasis on family values and private life that was inculcated by the Religious Right in the late 20th century.

The centrality of personal family life to public life is one outgrowth of the “family values” culture of the late 20th and early 21st century. Liesbet van Zoonen and coauthors analyze online deliberation around the appearance of 2004 presidential candidates on the Dr Phil show.¹³³

¹³¹ Ibid. 210

¹³² Ibid. 228

¹³³ Liesbet van Zoonen et al., "Dr. Phil Meets the Candidates: How Family Life and Personal Experience Produce Political Discussions," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 4 (2007).

While the authors' primary goal is to understand how deliberation takes place around a media text in a new media format, their objects of analysis also demonstrate how family life is emphasized in public life. In the Dr Phil interviews, both candidates and their wives talked, not about policy positions, but about their family lives "and how they combined family life and career."¹³⁴ The discussion postings the authors analyze are divided about the importance of the candidate's family life to a voting decision, but they also emphasize their own family experience, especially in relation to the military and religion, in justifying their own votes. As I will demonstrate, this growing rhetoric of the family constructs one stark difference between Osteen's book and similar examples from earlier decades. Osteen makes his family an important part of his narrative, while personal lives and families are absent from the earlier examples. The larger structure that Osteen is articulating Christianity to has made this shift in a variety of ways: in addition to the movement toward "family values" in politics and religion that I am describing here, the late 20th century has been described as having a "consumer economy." Between these two trends, notions of the "good life" moved more intensely toward the home.

This movement underscores both the expansion of the audience for these books as I move forward in time, and also the privatization of virtue. In *The Man Nobody Knows*, only public or professional acts of leadership were mentioned. In fact, family life is only referenced as something valuable twice in the entire book. In contrast, many of Peale's examples in *The Power of Positive Thinking* feature couples discussing their financial situation or the man's job together. Husband and wife are often featured as a de-facto team. However, in these cases the problem addressed is still often related to the man's job outside the home, and not a problem within the

¹³⁴ Ibid.

home. As I will detail, Osteen's book features stories about his interactions with his parents, his wife, and his children more than any other kind of story.

Lauren Berlant argues that the new dominance of the private in cultural politics constitutes an "intimate public sphere" where the nuclear family becomes the dominant space for social action:

In contrast (to Habermas' formulation), the intimate public sphere of the U. S. present tense renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere... In the new, nostalgia-based fantasy nation of the 'American way of life,' the residential enclave where 'the family' lives usurps the modernist premise of the culturally vital, multiethnic city; in the new, utopian America, mass-mediated political identifications can only be rooted in traditional notions of home, family, and community.¹³⁵

This kind of public sphere is reflected in the ways that family relationships and family life are foregrounded in the work of a public figure. For Osteen, I will argue, family stories function as a ground for his credibility but also as a strategy of emotional management that helps the reader to feel connected to Osteen's somewhat glamorous life.

As Berlant argues, this kind of thinking curtails a political engagement that thinks primarily in terms of publics and systems and instead views family life as the appropriate scene for ideological action and virtue. As other scholars have noted, this shift explains the attention of lawmakers to private matters such as the definition of marriage and the moral impact of various methods for avoiding pregnancy. For my purposes, this shift contributes to an explanation of how a religion like Christianity that was traditionally so identified with community life might be translated as primarily relevant for the individual or family, and not address the systemic, communal and social aspects of our shared culture.

¹³⁵ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press, 1997). 5.

Cultural Narcissism

A related pattern in discourses and attitudes in the beginning of the 21st century is cultural narcissism: a pattern of values and beliefs similar to the psychological trait, but visible at the social level. Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell use psychological data to argue that trait narcissism has risen in the U.S. in the last 20 years, and they attribute it to various social causes that lead to both individual and social consequences such as the recent mortgage crisis. Twenge and Campbell define the term this way, “changes in behavior and attitudes that reflect narcissistic cultural values, whether the individuals themselves are narcissistic or simply caught up in a societal trend.”¹³⁶ They locate the cause for this trend in four more concrete cultural changes: self-esteem parenting, celebrity culture, social media and easy credit.

However, they explain, “No single event initiated the narcissism epidemic; instead, Americans’ core cultural ideas slowly became more focused on self-admiration and self-expression. At the same time, Americans’ faith in the power of collective action or the government was lost.”¹³⁷ Perhaps, in the language of articulation, they might even say that these specific causes have worked together with other social trends to form a social articulation that looks like cultural narcissism. Though as psychologists they don’t use rhetorical terminology, it becomes clear that ideology shared through rhetoric is an important component of both how this cultural narcissism is diagnosed and spread. This is especially apparent when they contrast the current social atmosphere with earlier periods. They contrast the current American ethic with an older ethic of hard work. “Americans were famous for their ‘can-do’ attitude and their

¹³⁶ Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Free Press, 2009). 5

¹³⁷ Ibid. 69.

persistence in chasing innovation. The current ethic of self-admiration, in contrast, declares that it is not necessary to do anything to be special or to like yourself.”¹³⁸ My reading of Joel Osteen’s book in contrast to Norman Vincent Peale’s similar work underscores this difference, and its impact on American economics and popular theology. A rhetorical perspective also allows us to understand aspects of a cultural shift in values that psychological data cannot access. It is my belief that, as other rhetors in the past articulated religion and economics with masculinity or patriotism, the narcissistic mode allows contemporary readers to see their own prosperity (or their desire for prosperity) as a result of their faith in a way that is consistent with existing cultural logic. Instead of success or blessings coming as a result of effective performance of masculine leadership or patient hard work, it is in response to a person’s assertion of specialness. Osteen’s theological narcissism relies not on living out a set of values or an ideal character, but entitlement based on inherent specialness, something that is not earned, just deserved. While there is some theological basis for this idea, what marks it as narcissistic is its comparative quality. Not only does Osteen encourage readers to value themselves for themselves as God does, but to assert that they are more special and different from other people, the norm or the average. Rather than rest on the value and dignity of the individual human generally, it suggests that that value and dignity should be rewarded with “special treatment.”

The connection of Osteen’s ideas with the narcissism epidemic is not lost on Twenge and Campbell, and they use a quotation from him (“God didn’t create you to be average”) as the subtitle to their chapter on narcissism and religion. They note, as I do, that Osteen’s appeal to anti-narcissistic values like kindness and generosity tempers the fundamentally narcissistic slant to some of his statements (such as his insistence that Christians should reject “averageness” and

¹³⁸ Ibid. 59.

expect “special treatment”). Despite this softening, he provides a fascinating example of an attempt to address Christian values to the narcissistic mood of the early 21st century. A rhetorical analysis of Osteen’s rhetoric of narcissism helps add texture to what Twenge and Campbell intuit. In the context of my larger project, we can understand Osteen’s rhetoric in comparison to earlier iterations with similar ideas, specifically Peale and Barton.

Your Best Life Now: Joel Osteen, Emotions and Narcissism

Joel Osteen took over his father’s large nondenominational church after the elder Osteen’s death in 1999. At the time, Osteen had preached only once before. He has never attended seminary, and he took classes at Oral Roberts University but did not graduate. Osteen’s swift rise to leadership and subsequent national notoriety are again a testament to American Protestantism’s dedication to the priesthood of all believers. Unlike Bruce Barton, Osteen does not put forth his lack of religious education as a qualification or strategy. Certainly, his unfamiliarity with the academic establishment is reflected in his style. The book is light on citations, and moves in a more vernacular style, stringing together personal anecdotes and slogans rather than building claims and referencing other thinkers. To many of his readers, though, this style is not necessarily indicative of a lack of education, because it is common to many books in the best-selling Christian/inspirational genre. Barton’s claims that ignoring scholarly or traditional perspectives leads to a more authentic understanding is a fairly standard assumption in the Christian evangelical tradition, and therefore not something many in Osteen’s audience would challenge or even notice.

As I will demonstrate, Osteen’s book differs significantly from the earlier examples I analyzed in how it manages and talks about emotion in the foregrounding of intimate family life

and through a cultural logic of narcissism. One way that Osteen navigates the emotional relationship between himself and the reader is by constructing a sense of intimacy with his readers. I believe these strategies emerge from and participate in a consumer economy that depends upon buyers as much as it does upon laborers and producers. The narcissistic mode and rhetoric of intimacy produced by Osteen's book sustains and sanctifies the cultural assumption that meaningful activity takes place in the home and in the consumer sphere. Quality relationships and meaningful work find their expression in the home (and the bigger and nicer that home is, the better).

The Second Persona and Constituted Audiences

In previous chapters, I argued that rhetorical elements like narrative and identification reinforce articulations between economic needs or business culture and Christianity. In the example of *Your Best Life Now* I believe this articulation occurs in the construction of an ideal consumer, through what Edwin Black called "the second persona."

In his foundational essay, Black argued that rhetorical texts construct a "second persona implied by a discourse, and that persona is its implied auditor."¹³⁹ Brenden Kendall rephrases this idea as "a self-image for audiences and audience members."¹⁴⁰ Kendell's work with the

¹³⁹ Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl R. Burghardt (State College, PA: Strata, 1970).89

¹⁴⁰ Maurice Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Quebecois," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 73, no. 2 (1987), Brenden E Kendall, "Personae and Natural Capitalism: Negotiating Politics and Constituencies in a Rhetoric of Sustainability," *Environmental Communication* 2, no. 1 (2008). 62.

concept focuses on the relationships between identities of the rhetor (first persona) and the second persona (audience) and third (marginalized audience).¹⁴¹

Black later called the construction of the assumed audience within the text a “beckoning archetype.”¹⁴² This “beckoning” is similar to what Charland would later describe as the “constituting” of an audience.¹⁴³ Charland extends Black’s conception of an implied audience to an audience that is created through the rhetorical act. In other words, both theorists believe the audience is “called forth” in the text, but Charland’s explanation is more clear that the text creates the audience it calls – it constitutes them by naming them. For my purposes here, these ideas help us to understand how the implied audience that I will describe is both “beckoned” or invited to the text, and created through the text itself. I will argue that in addition to constructing an identity for the imagined audience the text itself constructs relationships with the author and with others that allow particular concerns and identities to outweigh others, especially with regard to material wealth and the idea of a good life.

Intimacy

One way Osteen builds an intimate relationship between himself and his audience is through his use of intimate language. He figures his reader as someone with an intimate relationship with him through frequent references to family life and by his casual deployment of first names and diminutives. The design of the paperback edition of the book illustrates this

¹⁴¹ Philip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Communication Journal* 35 (1984).

¹⁴² Black, "The Second Persona." 96

¹⁴³ Charland, "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Quebecois."

strategy at work: the back cover features a page-width photo of both Joel and Victoria Osteen, although only Joel is listed as “author.”

The back photo is not the only place where Victoria is included as a part of the book. Many of the stories in the book come from Osteen’s own life, and his wife figures prominently in those tales. The first anecdote from Osteen’s own life begins on page 7 of the book, the second anecdote early in the book about owning large homes. In the story, Osteen and his wife looked around a newly built house early in their marriage. Victoria says “one day we will live in a beautiful house like that.” Osteen doesn’t believe her at first, but eventually comes around and they eventually build a house “just like the one we had viewed.”¹⁴⁴ This is only the first of many stories in which Victoria and the rest of the Osteen family are prominent players. Stories take place in the family home, the family vacation home, and the church, which is largely a family affair. While Osteen draws general conclusions from his experience that he applies directly to the second-person reader, those conclusions are in many ways imminently personal. He relies heavily on his personal and family life to draw an inductive view of a generous God, and that view is applied directly to another individual’s personal life, rarely leaving the realm of the individual and the family.

One of the last pages of the book features a direct appeal for the reader to become a Christian. It concludes with a personal, relational appeal, “Victoria and I love you, and we’ll be praying for you. We’re believing for God’s best for you, that you will see your dreams come to pass. We’d love to hear from you!” The page ends with a website and a PO box address where you can reach “Joel and Victoria Osteen.” While it initially struck me as odd that one might write a man and his wife in response to a book ostensibly written only by the husband, including both

¹⁴⁴ Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (Brentwood, TN: Faithworks, 2004). 8.

names in the address constructs a personal relationship. When a person writes the Osteens, it is framed as a personal correspondence, to Joel and Victoria, rather than a fan letter to a celebrity minister one does not know. Using first names makes that correspondence personal, and since Osteen's philosophy of Christianity is so personal, it supports that position to make correspondence about it more like personal correspondence, addressed to a couple like one would address a wedding invitation or a Christmas card, rather than professional, addressed to "Pastor Joel Osteen" or to his organization.

Beyond identifying himself strongly as a member of a couple, Osteen also brings up his family life frequently. He tells stories about his son Jonathan, his parents and his church. In one such anecdote, Osteen shares a scene in the family car, looking for a parking space in a packed park:

I was having a good time, cutting a bit with my family, so I said to everybody in the car, "you watch Daddy. I'm going to get a front-row parking spot. I can feel it. I've got the favor of God all over me." ... Victoria just rolled her eyes. I turned around to our little boy and said "Come on, Jonathan, touch Daddy, you need to get some of this favor. Just get it." He looked at me and said "Daddy, you are really strange."¹⁴⁵

Anecdotes like this one build a sense of familiarity for the reader by revealing everyday parts of the Osteen family life, and by referencing the characters by their first names and using the diminutive "daddy." It allows the reader into a private space—the family car—and also shows the author acting so silly that his own son tells him he's weird. This response is endearing as it is relatable, and adds to the feeling of intimacy since Osteen exposes the audience to his own silliness and his children's (fairly typical) skepticism of their father. He uses the same term almost exclusively to reference his father, John Osteen. He writes, for instance, "When daddy

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 42.

passed away in 1999,”¹⁴⁶ although he references him as “my dad, John Osteen” elsewhere, “daddy” seems to be his default, almost inviting the reader to think of John Osteen as their own daddy as well.

That interpersonal intimacy is also encouraged in the way Osteen uses names throughout the book. For instance, when he suspects the reader might take issue with what he says, he plays out a conversation within the text, assigning it to a hypothetical critic or directly to the reader. In an instance of both, he references a previous anecdote and applies it to the reader. “Like Todd, you may be thinking *I’ll just work for this same job, in this same position, for the rest of my life. After all, this is all I know how to do.* No, quit limiting God.”¹⁴⁷ Here, Osteen manufactures a conversation between himself and the reader, voicing a potential position and denying it.

In other cases, especially when rehearsing a conversation with an objecting character, the critical voice addresses a question or objection to Osteen by his first name. “One fellow told me, ‘Joel, if God wants to bless me, then He’ll bless me. After all, he’s God...’”¹⁴⁸ By addressing the objection to himself in this way, Osteen invites the reader into a dialogue with the book, and into a first-name-basis relationship with its author.

The way this intimate relationship is constructed between Osteen and his reader serves two of my broader arguments about the work. First, it sets up the reader, or the second persona, in an individualist frame. Osteen is talking, in a very personal mode, to “you.” This is different from a book which might regularly reference the breadth of its audience, or even the same Osteen rhetoric in a different medium, such as television, where the local audience is visible.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 25.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 22.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 33.

Because of the first names and one-on-one language of the book, the reader begins with the default assumption that the interaction is personal rather than communal.

Secondly, it highlights the functioning of the intimate public sphere, as described by Berlant. Since these discussions are personal and intimate, in the context of the intimate public sphere, that makes them more relevant, more important and more applicable than a discussion that would address the public sphere more broadly. The rhetorical tone and person of the pronouns match the scope of the message: this is about individuals and families, not communities, nations, or perhaps even congregations.

Individualism and Narcissism

I have described symbolic patterns that Osteen deploys in his book to develop a tone of intimacy. While one might think this intimacy would lead to a sense of communal achievement or responsibility; instead it exists alongside a strong assumption of individualism that counter-intuitively invests in family, but not in responsibility to others, especially non-relatives. In some sense, the intimate mode reinforces the individualist assumptions of the text. As Berlant describes in her analysis of the intimate public sphere, the intimate sphere demands that ideas and values be applied at the level of the individual and the family, rather than the community or the system. I believe this extreme focus on the individual is related to the cultural narcissism described by Twenge and Campbell. As I will show, Osteen displays an individualistic reading of scripture that supports an individualist mode of understanding the world rather than a systemic one. From this individualism “special treatment” is a sign of God’s favor rather than injustice to others or a random event.

The book functions in an individualist mode in a number of ways that encourage the application at the level of the individual reader, and disinterest in the implications of those same ideas on a social level. This happens at several levels in the text and at a micro level in the author's use of personal pronouns. The book is written mostly in the second person, directed at “you” the reader and applied in “your” particular life. Indeed, when the book is not directly addressed to “you” it is often written in the first person, with examples and stories from Osteen’s particular life instead. As a result, readers are encouraged to think about its assertions primarily and only as applied to them and not in a general sense or in relation to other people. This is an especially easy rhetorical invitation to accept, given the expectation that a self-help book will address readers this way, and the audience’s preexisting tendency toward and acceptance of the narcissism that Twenge and Campbell document.

This individualism is also demonstrated when Osteen applies Bible passages that in their original context had a communal or spiritual meaning to personal and often material situations. For instance, Osteen writes

The scripture says, “When you’ve done everything you know how to do, just keep on standing firm.” You may be in a situation today where you have done your best. You’ve prayed. You’ve believed. You’ve placed your faith firmly in the truth of God’s Word. But it just doesn’t look like anything is happening... Don’t give up! Keep standing. Keep praying; keep believing; keep hoping in faith. “Don’t cast away your confidence, one translation of the Bible says, ‘for payday is coming.’”¹⁴⁹

The footnotes attached to these quotations reference Ephesians 6:13 and Hebrews 10:35. In the New International Version (2010) the Ephesians verse reads “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you

¹⁴⁹ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. 188-189.

have done everything, to stand.”¹⁵⁰ This verse stands in the middle of a well-known passage using an extended warfare metaphor to delineate aspects of the spiritual life. The Christians in Ephesus are enjoined to “put on the full armor of God” including pieces like the belt of truth and the shield of faith. While the “standing your ground” referenced in this Bible passage may have something to do with standing firm under adversity, it seems disingenuous to apply it to something like a bad job situation.

Similarly, the Hebrews passage references Christians suffering persecution. Here is the NIV 2010 translation including the previous verse: “You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.”¹⁵¹ While one translation may describe the reward referenced at the end of the verse as “payday” the context of the previous verse suggests that the payday the Hebrews author refers to is not in the form of a check or cash.¹⁵² In the context of the passage, the letter’s recipients are being praised for functioning outside the economic logic of the world, forgoing riches and social acceptance in the world *not* because they hoped to be rewarded in kind at some later time, but because they believe the spiritual reward of living the Christian life transcends such earthly rewards.

Using this individualistic mode of interpretation, Osteen is both performing ideological work by interpreting the biblical text in a particular way and forming his audience to think individualistically. These individualistic messages encourage the audience, or the second

¹⁵⁰ Ephesians 6:13 New International Version 2010.

¹⁵¹ Hebrews 10: 34-35 New International Version 2010.

¹⁵² While I do not accuse Osteen of inventing this translation, I was unable to find it using online bible resources. Most translations use the language of “rich reward.”

persona, to imagine themselves as individuals in a relationship with God, rather than members of a faith community or a national community. The audience is not a unified group with shared interests, but a set of individuals, looking for meaning and guidance for their own lives.

Finally, many of Osteens claims operate explicitly in the narcissistic mode, telling the reader that he or she is more special than other people. Osteen repeatedly claims that God does not want you to be average, at one point also setting the assertion in a pullout, “God didn’t make you to be Average.”¹⁵³ When considering the word ‘average’ in a statistical sense, the statement becomes absurd. If God didn’t create anyone to be average, meaning in the middle of the population, then why is it the average? Taking the statement literally suggests that half of the population, who would be definitionally below average, are not living up to God’s standards. One might read Osteen generously to say that he is using “average” here to mean plain or unremarkable but his repeated use of the term adds to the cultural notion that one must be better than average to be special, and that the good life is comparative in an earthly sense. One implication of this perspective is that the existence of the good life as it is defined requires that it not be accessible to everyone. One person’s good life requires others' exclusion from it, not just, as Marxists would be quick to point out, because capital is achieved at the cost of labor, but also because the concept of good living itself is a reflection of an ideal compared to the average or the rest.

Similarly, Osteen offers at another point in the book two stories of special treatment during air travel. In one story, he was selected to be bumped to first class, and in another he was given an exception to the carry on policy to take his expensive video equipment onboard. Both events are a kind of “singling out” and can’t apply to hundreds on a plane – if everyone was

¹⁵³ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. 84.

given an exception to the carry-on policy, there wouldn't be enough space for all the stuff, and there was only one open seat in first class. Nonetheless, Osteen interprets these events this way: "That was God giving me special advantages, giving me preferential treatment, not because I was a preacher's kid or even a distinguished pastor's son, but because I am His child! God wants to do similar things in your life."¹⁵⁴ Again, Osteen reflects the statistically challenged ways of the narcissist. The implication of Osteen's special treatment in these anecdotes is that nobody else on those flights was as special or favored as he. While he claims that this "preferential treatment" as a child of God is available to everyone, one wonders if every other passenger on the plane is not also God's child in Osteen's theology.

A more generous explanation for this language should take into account an assertion in another part of the book that one shouldn't compare oneself to others at all. Osteen seems aware that the view of success or blessings as relative to others is always a losing proposition for some, but he cannot seem to escape using comparative language of winning, special and better. For instance, Osteen elaborates by applying this thinking to himself, "I'm not in a contest; I'm not comparing myself with anyone else. As far as I'm concerned, I'm number one!"¹⁵⁵ He supports this idea with a reference to Galatians 6:4, "let each one examine his own work, they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else." To interpret this verse to mean "As far as I'm concerned, I'm number one!" however, seems inconsistent with the verse immediately before his citation, Galatians 6:3: "If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves."¹⁵⁶ Given this context, it seems a stretch that Paul is

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 47

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 95

¹⁵⁶ Galatians 6:3 NIV 2010

encouraging the Christians of Galatia to all consider themselves winners. Instead, the larger passage reads as a call to humility, not self-esteem.

Osteen's justification for generosity also reflects the narcissistic, individualistic mode. The idea of giving to or helping others does not appear in the book until chapter 25 "The Joy of Giving." Osteen claims early in the chapter that it is necessary to avoid a selfish, narcissistic attitude in our relationships. His reason for this is not to build a better world, to share God's love with others, or to pass on God's blessings. Instead, generosity is necessary because of its benefits for the giver. For instance, he writes, "Ironically, this selfish attitude condemns them to living shallow, unrewarding lives. No matter how much they acquire for themselves, they are never satisfied."¹⁵⁷ While orthodox Christianity supports the idea that virtue rewards the virtuous, Osteen's view is impoverished because it leaves out other potential motivations for generosity or virtue, such as gratitude or a desire to live in a more merciful society. The late appearance of generosity as an element of the good life, in part 6 of a fairly substantial volume, suggests it is more of an afterthought than a central element of living joyously.

Ultimately, Osteen views generosity as an investment, as "planting seeds" for future blessings. This is clear from how he extrapolates from the New Testament story of Cornelius. Cornelius was the first gentile to be baptized into the Christian church. God told Cornelius through an angel that God has seen his devotion and prayer and his gifts to the poor, and he should send for the apostle Peter and hear what he has to say. Meanwhile, God gave Peter a vision to affirm that associating with Gentiles was now acceptable and Peter told Cornelius and his friends about the life and resurrection of Christ upon his arrival, and they received the Holy Spirit and were baptized. Osteen sees Cornelius' acceptance into the church as a blessing in

¹⁵⁷ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. 221.

response to his giving, and tells his readers that if they want something like a promotion they should feed the poor like Cornelius did.¹⁵⁸ On my reading of the story, Corenlius' reward was entirely spiritual. The story makes no mention of Cornelius' job, possessions or social standing, except to note that he was a Centurion. Nonetheless, Osteen writes, "Maybe today you are believing for your marriage to be restored or some other relationship to be improved. Perhaps you are hoping to buy a new home or to get out of debt. Sow a special seed that relates to your specific need. We can't buy God's goodness, but like Cornelius we can exercise our faith through our giving."¹⁵⁹ Osteen explicitly denies a one-to-one relationship, that generous behavior guarantees a specific reward from God, but his underlying logic implies that giving is a mark of faith not for its own sake but to get God's attention to reward our faithfulness. It functions in much the same way as vague belief or "expanding your expectations" earlier in the book, with statements like "God is limited only by your lack of faith."¹⁶⁰ When discussing generosity, he claims "God is keeping a record of every good deed you've ever done. He is keeping a record of every seed you've ever sown. You may think it went unnoticed, but God saw it."¹⁶¹ While this description is remarkably reminiscent of Santa Claus, it does have some biblical backing, such as in Jesus' statement that "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."¹⁶² What separates Osteen's interpretation of this theological point from more typical Christian understandings is that his acts of generosity lead to material blessings. For Osteen, at least a part of a person's motivation for giving is selfish, a down-payment on

¹⁵⁸ Acts 10, paraphrased.

¹⁵⁹ Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*. 264.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 24.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 262.

¹⁶² Matthew 25:40 NIV 2010

expected gifts back from God. In contrast, most Christian theology sees gifts or service as a response to God's infinite blessings already given. Generosity for Osteen is less about responding to God's love and generosity with the same for others, but demonstrating faith in order to receive more things in the long run. From this perspective, generosity is not so much a gift as an investment.

Both the individualist themes and the intimacy strategies in *Your Best Life Now* relate to the individual-focused theology of American Evangelical Christianity. As many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians will happily report, their faith focuses on a "personal relationship with Christ."¹⁶³ It is that "personal relationship" element that makes an individualist focus on the Bible or religion make sense. If one starts out believing that the Bible is a personal book, one written to help you come to know God personally and individually, then a sensible reading of scripture is that it most likely applies to the individual in his or her current situation. It also reflects an extreme move to one edge of a spectrum within Christian belief, between the personal and social application of scripture. Since all of Osteen's examples take place within the private sphere—family, an individual's job (not what the company does) family leadership of a church—the implication is that the application of the Bible is fully private or personal, and not at all social. This position is visible as well in Osteen's media appearances and his hesitance to say anything about gay rights or other hot-button political topics. Unlike other actors in the intimate public sphere, Osteen's view of Christianity does not cause him to take political positions, and only applies to the individual.

¹⁶³ Marsden locates this primarily in fundamentalism, but my suspicion is it is dominant in both. See George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991). 114.

In other words, Osteen's fairly traditional Protestant belief: that Christian faith is primarily *personal*, finds unique expression in the context of 21st century narcissistic consumer culture. This language of faith as located in the person and the family easily articulates to cultural notions of morality and success also being located in the person and the family. Therefore, interactions beyond the family, be they political or economic, are incidental to the value of the family itself. While Osteen's religious rhetoric is one example of this logic, other scholars have identified plenty of others.¹⁶⁴

Of course, Protestant Christianity isn't the only cultural influence that is friendly to individualism. It has been the common strain in American identity across our history, and implicit in myths of American success and strength, observed early on by Toqueville and subsequently by countless others. In many ways, American culture vacillates between an extreme individualism and a concern for the common good.¹⁶⁵ Individualism alone does not separate the advice found in *Your Best Life Now* from the advice in *The Power of Positive Thinking* or *The Man Nobody Knows* either. Instead, the difference is in the narcissistic character of the individualism found in the latest example that is less present in the earlier ones. While Barton and Peale give advice regarding how one can have greater success as a worker, producing good

¹⁶⁴ See for example, Jamie Landau, "Straightening out (the Politics of) Same-Sex Parenting: Representing Gay Families in Us Print News Stories and Photographs," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 1 (2009), Bonnie J. Dow, "Fmininity and Feminism in Murphy Brown," *Southern Communication Journal* 57, no. 2 (1992), Kristen Hoerl and Casey Ryan Kelly, "The Post-Nuclear Family and the Depoliticization of Unplanned Pregnancy in *Knocked up*, *Juno* and *Waitress*," *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies* 7, no. 4 (2010), Dana L. Cloud, "The Rhetoric of <Family Values>: Scapegoating, Utopia, and the Privatization of Social Responsibility," *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 4 (1998).

¹⁶⁵ President Obama's speech on the budget delivered April 13, 2011 makes a similar observation. He said, "From our first days as a nation, we have put our faith in free markets and free enterprise as the engine of America's wealth and prosperity. More than citizens of any other country, we are rugged individualists, a self-reliant people with a healthy skepticism of too much government."

work and leading others, Osteen's book expects rewards with less emphasis on hard work, patience or endurance. While in all cases Christian virtues are rewarded with financial prosperity, *Your Best Life Now* adds the implication that those rewards will be handed over by other people simply because of the specialness of those who have God's favor. In Peale and Barton's books that specialness is achieved through virtues like patience, positive affect and hard work.

In the Context of Patriotism

Your Best Life Now is also part of a larger articulation that includes political and state rhetorics. Though Osteen himself avoids state politics fastidiously, read in context with other timely discourses about the meaning of patriotism, Osteen's expression of Christianity in a consumer mode fits nicely in line with the consumer and sometimes religious expressions of patriotism that are readily available to the American public at the same time. Osteen's theology articulates easily to the vision of patriotic action that presidential rhetoric, for example, offered to Americans after 9-11. Much of the home front rhetoric around the second gulf war centered on the concept of "supporting the troops." This (a)political position's primary mode of demonstration is the purchase of yellow ribbon merchandise and a lack of dissent.¹⁶⁶ In some instances expression of wartime patriotism or support took a particularly religious tenor. For instance, one common design for yellow ribbon magnets featured the words "pray for our troops." The song "God Bless America" was added to the seventh-inning-stretch tradition in baseball stadiums across the country.

¹⁶⁶ For a detailed analysis of "support the troops" rhetoric and a historically situated reading of the yellow ribbon, see Roger Stahl, "Why We 'Support the Troops': Rhetorical Evolutions," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 12, no. 4 (2009).

Similarly, in his speech after the 9-11 attacks, Bush's injunction to support the American economy was delivered right before his request for prayer: "Prayer has comforted us in sorrow, and will help strengthen us for the journey ahead."¹⁶⁷ In Bush's speech the two activities are merely adjacent: buy, pray. But in other texts they are more closely united, in part through the bond of patriotism that this speech links both activities to. Similarly, this Bush speech concludes in a way he closed many of his speeches, with an appeal to God's blessings. While most speeches closed with "God Bless America" this one supplied more detail, and perhaps a rhetorical flourish: "In all that lies before us, may God grant us wisdom, and may He watch over the United States of America."¹⁶⁸

In some sense, the proximity of assertions that God will bless the United States and assertions that capitalism and trade are at the core of our identity is merely moving the assumptions presented in Osteen's book to the national scale. If God's blessings for an individual means a large house, a happy and prosperous family, a promotion at work, then God's blessings for a nation might be a high GDP. Not only that, but the direct relationship between those two measures is important. The more individual consumers buy custom homes and nice suits, the higher the GDP becomes.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that in the example of Joel Osteen's bestseller *Your Best Life Now* the hegemonic articulation of Christianity and capitalist economics takes place through its own

¹⁶⁷ Bush, George W. "Address to Joint Session"

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.*

chain of equivalence, which includes a narcissistic mode of American individualism, a particular style of evangelical Protestantism, and an economy centered around consumption rather than labor. This chain is disclosed and constructed through the text in particular rhetorical strategies. These strategies coalesce especially around the construction of an identity for the audience, and are aided by linguistic and narrative strategies of intimacy.

This articulation has particular benefits, especially for some aspects of American society. If the “good life” is measured comparatively and through debt-purchased items like houses, then the audience is motivated to drive the consumer-based economy further through mortgages and credit card debt, to demonstrate their faith. Income inequality is viewed not systemically, but from the individual perspective of specialness. A higher income than someone else (or potentially at someone else’s expense) is often considered a blessing but never a sign of potential injustice. In other words, this perspective takes a fundamental problem with capitalism: economic inequality and makes it an illustration of God’s goodness. The fact that some have more than others is evidence of God’s love and blessings on them, and those blessings, according to Osteen, are available to the have-nots for the small price of belief. Those who benefit from other’s labor, often by coincidence of birth, are not positioned thus because of their own work, then, but because of God’s favor and their faith. This perspective allows the privileged and those hoping for privilege to see inequality not as a problematic system, but as the result of blessings.

The articulation illustrated by *Your Best Life Now* shows stark differences from earlier bestsellers, but also builds on them. When examining these books in this way, they appear to represent a series of subtle shifts, articulating Christian virtues like faithfulness, generosity and gratitude to the newest elements of American economic activity. In *Your Best Life Now* that element is a debt-driven economy resting on consumer purchases. Hence, his illustrations include

ideas like professional success or job promotion as the earlier books do, but makes a considerably greater effort to champion household successes: children, marriage, a nice house, a nice car. Indeed, the dominance of marriage and children as types of success increase across these books. In *The Man Nobody Knows* marriage never comes up. In *The Power of Positive Thinking* it is one goal among many that the people in the anecdotes achieve, especially women. In *Your Best Life Now* it is a frequently mentioned goal, and the Osteens' marriage functions in part to illustrate their own success. One potential explanation for this specific change is that divorce became increasingly common since the 1920s. The idea of a marriage failing in the 1920s was much less salient than it is now, in part because of women's economic empowerment.

The way Osteen's rhetoric foregrounds the home life also suggests a shift in the kinds of expressions of masculinity that a similar rhetorical situation demands. When Barton makes a case for the value of religious models of good living for an executive, he emphasizes its masculine qualities. Osteen's style, on the other hand, might be considered markedly feminine, in its emphasis on the home and its reliance on stories.¹⁶⁹ It seems the primary masculine role for Osteen is that of *father*. Father-son relationships emerge again and again as important for communicating values and leadership. For instance, Osteen's son appears frequently in his book by name, but his younger daughter is rarely mentioned. The role of fatherhood and paternal leadership in the home is not addressed explicitly but certainly modeled in the family dynamics Osteen describes. While none of the authors I have examined do anything to defy or undermine cultural roles of gender in their times, it is interesting that the role of the masculine is so prominent in Barton's book and never addressed in Peale or Osteen. This may suggest a broader

¹⁶⁹ Indeed, it has many of the qualities of "feminine" presidential campaign rhetoric identified by Shawn and Trevor Parry-Giles, including its reliance on other masculine elements. See Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, "Gendered Politics and Presidential Image Construction: A Reassessment of The "Feminine Style"," *Communication Monographs* 63 (1996).

imagined audience including both genders, or a change in the cultural understanding of what “success” and “virtue” mean as related to gender.

It also has important commonalities with the earlier examples. In all three books, we witness an attempt to understand the values presented in an ancient text as relevant to a dramatically different modern America. For all three authors the books try to make sense of dramatic changes in standards of living and in some cases extreme class differences. Osteen’s book, in particular, reveals the odd situation in the 2000s of unprecedented alienation from the production of wealth. Though none of the 20th century authors were particularly concerned with the kind of labor that directly produces goods and services, as the white collar sector of the American economy continues to grow, the earlier writers still emphasized hard work, leadership, and working with others. The very vagueness of Osteen’s references to work suggests an economic reality where income and lifestyle do seem dissociated from the production of valuable labor. This might be explained through at least two changes: first, easy access to credit means items can be purchased without laboring at all, at least in the short run. Second, complex financial market products do appear to create money from nothing, or from other money, rather than from selling goods or services.

Nonetheless, I believe it is a mistake to blame Osteen and ministers like him alone for creating these attitudes in American society. While I have no doubt that his book and other works reflect assumptions and logics about money and the American way of life in our time, he is in many ways responding creatively to exigencies and cultural logics that already existed before this message. On the other hand, Osteen and his ilk are not blameless either. By repeating these logics and articulating them to concepts of the love of God, he strengthens them and reifies

them. This articulation is built on a number of cooperating rhetorics, of which Osteen's is one, but not the only one.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Coda

In July 2011, celebrity personal finance expert Dave Ramsey launched thegreatrecovery.com, a website directing users to his popular materials to help families get out of debt and build wealth for retirement or their children's education. The website claims that "the truth is that the government can't fix this economy. It'll be restored one family at a time, as each of us takes a stand to return to God's and grandma's way of handling money."¹⁷⁰ In a speech promoting the plan, reported in Religion Dispatches,¹⁷¹ Ramsey explicitly makes the claim that individual economic wealth is the way to national recovery, and that God does not desire national attempts to improve people's situation or even a progressive tax code.

Ramsey's programs, such as *Financial Peace University*, had been popular in Christian churches for a number of years. His first book, *Financial Peace* was published in 1997. His program involves starting a budget, paying off debts progressively in a "snowball" and investing for the future. Aside from the "snowball" plan, which differs from other plans which encourage debtors to pay their highest interest rate loans first, most of Ramsey's consumer financial advice is fairly standard. What sets him apart from others such as Suze Orman is his frequent invocation of religious values and "God's way" to manage money.

¹⁷⁰ Ramsey, Dave. Thegreatrecovery.com accessed 28 March 2012.

¹⁷¹ Harvey, Paul. "Fix the Economy GOD'S WAY: Dave Ramsey's Great Christian Recovery" *Religion Dispatches*. July 25, 2011, retrieved May 28, 2012
http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/4905/fix_the_economy_god%E2%80%99%24_way%3A_dave_ramsey%E2%80%99s_great_christian_recovery_/

If I had not been in the midst of my research for this project when I encountered Ramsey's plan for the current economic recession, I would be perplexed. Why would this public figure so uncritically unite a Christian approach with one that ignored systemic injustice and lack of opportunity and instead focused on consumer debt, arguably only a small portion of the current crisis? The long history of Christians associating their patriotic duty with the assumptions of capitalism and their religious beliefs, especially in the 21st century, underscores why Ramsey's claims are so intuitive for many. All the books I discuss in this dissertation focus on individual virtues that lead to individual financial success, whether those virtues be faith in God's provision, patience, hard work, or leadership. This view of the relation between faith and finances is thought to promote success in the workplace; its limits become clear in Ramsey's proposal for national financial recovery, in addition to how he applies those concepts to the problem of the national debt.

I would not be so bold as to claim that Ramsey's conservative solution to the U.S. financial crisis is a direct effect of the force of the historical hegemony described here. But certainly the logic at work in these books, especially in Joel Osteen's individualist view of "blessings," contributes to a culture where Ramsey's proposal makes sense. The sustained rhetorical work of all of these works (and, for that matter, Ramsey's career) supports the unquestioned assumption that "How does God want me to manage my debt" and "how does God want our country to manage its debt" are sensible questions.

Conclusion

This study has sought to accomplish two main goals. First, it described how the articulation of Christian religiosity to American patriotism and capitalist practices has been made and sustained at different times in history. Second, it demonstrated that existing tools for

rhetorical criticism can explain how some symbolic structures emerge from the “rhetorical struggle” Laclau describes as hegemonic. These are among the implications of the study. In addition to implications for rhetorical criticism and academic thought about the place of religion in American society, this study has implications relevant to today’s political culture, including partisan politics on economic questions and religious approaches to national culture, national identity, and work.

Rhetorical Theory and Criticism

My project represents a potential answer to critiques of Laclau’s theory of populist reason that contend that it is not specific about how particular symbols emerge victorious from a rhetorical struggle as empty signifiers that unite a hegemonic articulation. While the articulation that I am examining doesn’t always coalesce around empty signifiers like the populist movements Laclau focuses on, it does demonstrate that tools already exist for understanding how that rhetorical struggle takes place, why and how particular hegemonies are formed, and how they adapt over time. Those tools are found in the tradition of rhetorical criticism, which was already concerned with questions about why cultural associations take place and how to find those associations in particular important texts.

This project also illustrates the difficulty of managing theories of cultural change with the critical tools of close reading. While Laclau’s theory of articulation is an exciting way to consider how cultural movements build and take place, when attempting to apply those ideas to long-standing hegemonies in American culture through individual texts, additional concepts may be needed. Rhetorical concepts such as metonym, identification and narrative have always functioned to help a critic move from a particular instance to a larger pattern. They therefore

serve as useful intermediaries between specific texts and more general theories of cultural change that are necessarily larger than a single text or group of texts.

From the perspective of criticism, these texts demonstrate how styles of proof necessary to relate Christianity to economic life have changed over time. *The Man Nobody Knows* relied on the lives of exemplary people to support generalizations about virtue and wisdom. Anecdotes about and statements from men like Jesus Christ, Henry Ford, and Abraham Lincoln built an argument about virtue, its sources, and its rewards. *The Power of Positive Thinking* and *Your Best Life Now* also feature anecdotes about virtues and their rewards, but the subjects of these anecdotes were almost always typical people like those in the audience, rather than those famous for their success. The majority of Osteen's stories are about his personal life experience, and Peale's focus on personal acquaintances rather than famous people. While Barton focuses on the narrative aspects of the New Testament almost without exception, the later texts draw significantly from commands and edicts, rather than stories. This suggests an expansion of who might be considered important or successful, from only the elite, to the middle class, to nearly everyone. This tracks with a growing standard of living for Americans generally, even as the wealth gap expands.

In some sense the variety and complexity of the rhetorical strategies in each of these case studies functions to defend Laclau's vagueness on the topic. A general theory of the logic of political change and political movements cannot account for the variety and contingency of the rhetorical strategies at work within those movements. As the work of so many of my colleagues in rhetorical studies has regularly demonstrated, the rhetorical struggles that lead to and sustain hegemonic articulations follow some patterns, but resist easy generalization.

Concerns about Civic Piety

This project has several implications for how academics might think about the role of civil religion in society. First, the concept of articulation is a useful way to extend Hart's assertion that civic piety is best approached, not as a religion or value system in itself, but instead as a relation among institutions and value systems. Hart's conceptualization of civil piety allows scholars to understand points of contact between the religious and political as elements of a "contractual" relationship rather than aspects of a unique culture separate from those contributors. However, the "contract" metaphor creates problems for understanding new relations as they develop. Articulation, in contrast, highlights how relationships change over time and also how their formation may be a mixture of overt and accidental forces. Hegemony, in contrast to a contract, conceptualizes consent as frequently covert and implied rather than overt and conscious. While the relation between religion and politics in the United States provides many opportunities that may benefit both religious and political institutions, it also leads to potential conflicts and forecloses certain ways to be either religious or political. Indeed, as Medhurst has argued, the contract Hart describes has been broken in manifold ways since his writing.¹⁷²

In addition to providing a more flexible framework that accounts for changes and adaptations over time, a critical perspective grounded in articulation theory can also accommodate the influence of additional party interests that affect an articulatory structure. While concepts of civic piety and civil religion help us to think through how the church and the state relate to each other, they ignore what may be the most powerful institution in American society: the corporation. While other work, especially in the Marxist tradition, has examined both

¹⁷² Medhurst, "Forging a Civil-Religious Contract for the 21st Century: Should Hart's "Contract" Be Renewed?."

the relationship of the state and capitalist corporate life as well as of American Christianity with Capitalism, very little work has examined all three of these elements at the same time. As I have argued concerning the texts examined here, these three elements frequently co-occur and inter-relate.

The articulation of these three institutions also functions to construct a unified vision of the virtuous life. In contrast with the assumption that religious values, work success and patriotic values might occasionally come into conflict, the articulations I observed in this dissertation suggest that those conflicts are rare or even non-existent. Such as state of relations is useful for those who wish to protect the authority of each of these institutions, but troubling when this conglomerate citizenry/workforce/congregation faces these conflicts with few resources to negotiate priorities or ethical decisions. Recent debates about the federal budget, religious freedom and healthcare and the religious beliefs of presidential candidates all reveal the impoverished language available to make arguments about how to balance these sometimes conflicting values. Take, for example, the healthcare debate that is raging as I write this conclusion: some actors claim that employers should have the power to prevent their their employees from using their health insurance to pay for hormonal contraceptives if the employer is against their use. A mandate in a larger health care plan from the Obama administration says contraception must be covered for everyone except those involved “directly in ministry.” This is a case where concepts of employee rights and religious freedom conflict directly with the alleged religious freedom of employers, and the state is called upon to mediate. Because religious values have been continually aligned with the values of the state and the capitalist (increasingly corporate) economic system, the expectation that the state will support the particular interpretations of religious values and religious freedom, not only of individuals but also of

institutions, is intuitive to some and objectionable to others, but our society lacks the language to frame the debate in terms that make sense to both sides.

Concerns of the Church

This study excluded discourses from within the Christian church that mark resistance against the assumptions highlighted in its chapters. But in each of these periods there has been a strong theological and intellectual reaction against the bestselling books of the kind I have critiqued. It would be naïve to imagine that Christians do not already know that this articulation highlights some ways of being Christian at the expense of others, and sometimes invokes conflicts between religious concerns for the poor and pop theologies of hard work and success through virtue. Recent works highlight that this close association of Christian belief, especially within Republican Party politics, creates problems both for faithful religiosity and for political parties.

For example, in his latest book the theologian Miroslav Volf highlights the danger of this direction of public Christianity in America and elsewhere. Regarding how Christian faith is conceived and practiced, his thesis is that “more we reduce faith to vague religiosity that serves primarily to energize, heal, and give meaning to the business of life whose course is shaped by factors other than faith (such as national or economic interests), the worse off we will be.”¹⁷³ He goes on to claim that the kind of “thin” religiosity this represents brings a serious risk of violence.

Similarly, in a 2012 article in *Foreign Affairs* Campbell and Putnam argue that the close identification of religion and politics hurts both the Republican candidates and the churches who

¹⁷³ Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011). 40.

promote such alliances. Not only do culture warrior candidates rarely win in general elections, but many, millennials especially, find the combination so distasteful, they cease identifying with religious groups at all and at a higher rate than any other generation of the last century.¹⁷⁴ They also note that though the Tea Party is often described as a non-partisan group responding to recession economics and taxes, the single greatest predictor that a person would become a member of the Tea Party was a desire to see religion and politics more closely associated. “Tea Partiers are more likely than other Republicans to say that U.S. laws and policies would be better if the country had more ‘deeply religious’ elected officials, that it is appropriate for religious leaders to engage in political persuasion, and that religion should be brought into public debates over political issues.”¹⁷⁵ The historical perspective taken in my research may provide some insight into why this might be the case. To many Americans, a particular affiliation with thrift, and a belief that monetary wealth is a blessing from God has been closely associated with their religious beliefs across many decades. While that belief does not necessarily lead to resentment about taxes, it does explain why people would find coherent a constellation of demands that include a desire for political leaders to be deeply religious and to hold particular fiscal viewpoints. Logics associating religious belief with professional, especially financial, success have been adapting themselves to the cultural and economic exigencies of the United States for a long time.

Understanding how these articulations take place and why they are so powerful may help those who are attempting to construct new, different hegemonic understandings of how the state and the church relate to each other. In many ways, these texts are symptomatic of the various

¹⁷⁴ David E. Campbell and Robert D. Putnam, "God and Caesar in America," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2012).

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

ways that Christians wrestle with how Christianity should interact with culture. In each case, they could be read as statements in favor of some particular position supposing that Christian theology is relevant to contemporary concerns and offers specific instructions for how to live successfully. Peale's discussion of the Bible as "scientific advice," for example, makes one such argument explicit.

These books could also be read as examples of thinkers who had not considered alternative ways religious meaning and values might play a role in culture. Richard Niebuhr's well-known book *Christ and Culture* proposes five different potential relationships between Christ and Culture in Christian theology.¹⁷⁶ Niebuhr has a clear preference for his last option, "Christ Transforming Culture" which views the interaction of religious faith with cultural knowledge and products as irrevocably transformative. Culture is changed by an encounter with Christ. While there are hints of his perspective the books included in this study might better be described as examples of the assumptions of "Christ in Culture" which sees the influence of Christ through the wisdom of culture and the arts, and "Christ above Culture" which claims that Christian beliefs contradict culture and are superior to it. The authors take some cultural assumptions for granted (business success is good, hard work is good, successful entrepreneurs are admirable) but battle against others, or hold up Christian values as the answer to cultural problems. One lesson that I learned from the older texts, is that it is hard for Americans to be self-critical about which areas of thought, or logic, or common sense are the product of a Christian tradition and which are the product of cultural assumptions. It is easy to find Barton's assertions about the nature of masculinity jarring and even silly, but it is harder to distance oneself from the contemporary cultural assumptions portrayed in *Your Best Life Now*.

¹⁷⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 1st ed. (New York,: Harper, 1951).

This study also demonstrates that reducing economic discussions to the personal is itself a political move. While I doubt that any of these actors imagine their work as political—in fact, they might see themselves as eschewing politics—nonetheless, their insistence that success is located in the relationship between the individual and God, and not anywhere else, is a political demand that excludes other ways of understanding the structural oppression of some people to the advantage of others, and structural reasons why sometimes virtue doesn't mean success. As the Dave Ramsey example shows, this mode of thinking leads to very specific political opinions invite actors to blame the poor for their own inability to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and seems to ignore some of the more obdurate causes of unemployment. In some sense, the emergence of policy claims like Ramsey's in conjunction with related claims of the Tea Party, as discussed by Campbell and Putnam, suggest that the hegemony I described in my chapters may indeed be developing toward a populist logic that articulates the desire that specific Christian values should have an influence in national policy, alongside an economic plan focused almost entirely on the responsibility of individual families—to the exclusion of systemic challenges or problems.

Additional research is necessary to consider how those interested in disrupting this logic might do so. A weakness of studies that only examine the hegemonic and how its power is gained is the exclusion of messages that disrupt or offer alternatives to that hegemonic line of thought. However other existing research might point the way. As I argued in an earlier article on the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr., one strategy may be to emphasize elements of the traditions involved that demonstrate a contradiction with a policy the rhetor finds unjust. In this case, as some political actors are already doing, a tradition of economic opportunity and mobility, Christian care for the poor and an American emphasis on fairness.

This is indeed challenging rhetorical work. As my analysis implies and my experience reading and enjoying these popular books attests, the worldviews they support affirm comfortable and flattering ways of understanding the world and the reader's own potential for success and reward. A view of the world that emphasizes unfairness and a lack of opportunity may be more accurate than Joel Osteen's assertion that you are entitled to a nice house and a promotion, but it is not more comfortable. Perhaps the best route for rhetoricians and political actors is to begin forming ideas of "the good life" and virtue that emphasize other ways to imagine success and happiness, rather than emphasize economic inequality. Other Christian writers are already working in this direction. Though Shane Claiborne, author of *The Irresistable Revolution: Living as Ordinary Radicals*, is less popular than Joel Osteen, he is well-known among evangelical Christians, and promotes a theology of pacifism and simple living. Though this perspective does emphasize sacrifice, it functions to offer an alternative viewpoint, rather than merely critique the failings of what may be the hegemonic view.

Finally, while I am critical of these perspectives and the potential consequences of their views, I do not want to appear too cynical. I believe that each of the books I focused on in this project represent sincere people wrestling with a truly difficult question: what wisdom does my religion offer for my professional and personal life? What could the life of Christ and the Bible have to say to people in a modern economic context, so different from the one in which the Bible was written? Though my analysis keys in on some of the more dangerous and sometimes preposterous aspects of the texts I examine, they also contain moments of insight, wisdom and thoughtfulness that justify their continued popularity. Nonetheless, I hope this examination can contribute to efforts of other scholars and Christians to think carefully and earnestly about these intersections and how to navigate them with virtue, wisdom and faithfulness.

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