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SEARCHING FOR TRUTH(INESS): MAPPING THE RELIGIO-POLITICAL
LANDSCAPE AND IDENTITY OF CHRISTIAN EMERGING ADULTS THROUGH
A RECEPTION STUDY OF *THE COLBERT REPORT*

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the University of Denver

and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD Program

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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August 2012

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Title: Searching for Truth(iness): Mapping the Religio-Political Landscape and Identity of Christian Emerging Adults through a Reception Study of *The Colbert Report*

Advisor: Lynn Schofield Clark

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing textual analysis and in-depth interviews of self-identified Christian participants ages 18-35 (n=20), this paper explores the way Comedy Central's *The Colbert Report* portrays Christianity, how young Christian viewers negotiate their religio-political identity in relation to the show, and what this negotiation says about the religio-political landscape of Christian emerging adults (19-29) (Arnett, 2004) in the United States. I conclude that *The Colbert Report* provides a contextual occasion for critical religio-political reflection, and that Christian emerging adults of myriad Christian subcultures negotiate their religio-political identity in relation to *The Colbert Report* to varying degrees as they select differing reference points within the show as a means of shaping and strengthening previous and ongoing identity markers.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“Anyone can read the news to you. I promise to feel the news at you,” exclaimed Stephen Colbert (2005) during the pilot episode of Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report* as he laid the groundwork for the premise of his show, that of parodying those in society who gain knowledge based on their gut feelings rather than through scientific data or books. The show serves as a critical reflection on society’s partisan politics as Colbert’s persona, a parody of unwavering and overly emotional conservative punditry, constantly challenges status quo sentimentalities and attempts to engender progressive social change and resistance. This critical reflection subsequently leaves room for negotiation between *The Colbert Report* and identity formation. Since its pilot on October 17, 2005, the show has been highly successful among young or “emerging” adults (18-29) (Arnett, 2004). For many of these young adults, as this dissertation will discuss, the program has become a source of cultural currency and capital among this particular age demographic.

Although a great deal of research has focused on the political effects of political comedy on its viewers (Baumgartner & Morris, 2008a, 2008b; Cao & Brewer, 2008; LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2008; Moy, 2005, 2006) there has been little research dedicated to the way in which these shows portray religion, or how viewers understand their religio-political identity in relation to various forms of political entertainment. Because of the nature of *The Colbert Report*, Christianity, then, has become the object of much parody and deconstruction, raising the question of how Christian emerging adults

negotiate their religio-political identity in relation to this particular program. Therefore, this dissertation will explore the way *The Colbert Report* portrays Christianity, how young Christian viewers negotiate their religio-political identity in relation to the show, and what this negotiation says about the religio-political landscape of Christian emerging adults in the United States. This dissertation suggests that Christian emerging adults of myriad Christian subcultures negotiate their religio-political identity in relation to *The Colbert Report* to varying degrees as they select differing reference points within the show as a means of shaping and strengthening previous and ongoing identity markers. This dissertation will look for patterns within participants' responses, considering how they echo a shift in the Christian religio-political landscape.

Defining Religio-Political

For young adults, formation of political and religious identity often happens simultaneously, which often leads to an overlap of religious and political convictions as well as a struggle to align the two. Therefore, in this study, the identity that young adults negotiate is religio-political. In other words, in the context of this study, the use of religio-political suggests an ongoing and simultaneous negotiation between religious and political identity, and therefore, *The Colbert Report* as a political comedy with religious references makes for an interesting focus in a study of how young people negotiate religious and political identities. This dissertation will use a political marker such as conservative, liberal, or moderate, to describe a participant's political leanings, not his or her theological leanings.

Significance of Research

In recent years, young adults have paid less attention to traditional news sources. A Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2010) survey found that 21 percent of young adults (18-24) received their political news during the 2004 presidential campaign from comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show*. Simultaneously, young adults attend religious services less frequently than older Americans, and many claim that religion is not an important part of their daily lives. These two trends may be attributed to young adults' general distrust in traditional authoritative structures and institutions (Beaudoin, 1998). Consequently, young adults look for ways to make meaning through other outlets.

Celebrities often play a role in supplementing or replacing orthodox forms of religious and political authority. For example, U2's Bono has a certain amount of political and religious clout among young people, as his messages often speak to a lack of trust in current systems and a desire for social action (Dierberg & Clark, 2010). In a similar vein, Stephen Colbert has become an authority figure on both religion and politics (Clark, 2011). His rhetoric and persona consistently challenges the misuse of religious symbols and texts for purposes of political gain. Furthermore, as a practicing Catholic, he is able to gain respect from Christian young adults viewers, as his messages prove he has a significant amount of social capital concerning matters of faith (Clark, 2011; Dierberg & Clark, 2012). It is clear, then, why young adults and church workers alike have gravitated toward Colbert's religio-political messages and have assisted in elevating him as an authority on religion and politics. As this dissertation will discuss, many young people and church leaders recognize and affirm Colbert's authority as they often

share his clips with their friends, families, parishioners, and online social networks.

While many people use television and other media as a way to share humor, the sharing of Colbert clips goes much deeper than this. Whereas a person might share a clip of *Saturday Night Live* with his or her friends and family on Facebook, many people share Colbert clips because a serious message lies within the humor itself. For example, many church workers often share Colbert clips because they believe his message speaks to their own passions and beliefs. In other words, they see Colbert as a prophetic voice they can utilize to bolster their own messages. Therefore, the decision to use *The Colbert Report* in this dissertation is obvious. His unique platform as both a comedian and a person of faith attracts a diverse young Christian population, and subsequently, young viewers resonate positively with his messages and affirm his religious authority.

Only recently have researchers looked at the coalescence of media and religion, and scholars have discovered the ongoing importance of this relationship and importance of this type of research (Hoover & Clark, 2002). This study, then, is significant, as it looks at the ways Christian young adults negotiate their religio-political identities at a time when religious and political authority has shifted and decentralized. The dissertation will offer something to both the field of media studies as well as the sociology of religion. First, it will further the discussion about the way viewers negotiate media texts in relation to their own contexts. Second, it will provide important research on young adult religio-political identity and the various tools emerging adults use to shape said identity (Arnett, 2004; Dierberg & Clark; 2010; Wuthnow, 2007).

Finally, as this dissertation looks at the changing roles of religious authority and the myriad tools people use to shape religious beliefs and practices, it will also contribute

to the ongoing discussion within the sociology of religion and media studies about secularization and the mediatization of religion (Hjarvard, 2008). As Demerath (2003) suggests:

Far from eradicating religion, the oscillation of secularization and sacralization tends to irrigate, prune, and cross-fertilize religion in a way that produces not only new varieties but new vigor. Those who deny secularization and focus only on the sacred vestiges of the past tend to be oblivious to emerging sacred forms of the future (p. 211).

In this vein, this study seeks to demonstrate that rather than relying solely on religious institutions and figures as sources of religious authority and meaning making, young adults consider their religious identities in relation to occasions such as the appearance of religious topics and issues in popular cultural forms like *The Colbert Report*. Thus, this study bolsters theories that suggest that institutionalized religion plays a less prominent role in articulating and enforcing religious dogmas; rather, media texts have become paramount in shaping religious narratives and imaginations (Demerath, 2003; Hjarvard, 2006). Furthermore, this paper provides support for the argument within cultural sociology that the meanings of cultural products such as *The Colbert Report* rest as much with their audiences as with their producers and that, ultimately, cultural products are collective, not individual, creations (Griswold, 2004).

Shaping Identity through Negotiated Viewing Positions

Scholars have taken myriad approaches to audience studies. During the turn away from a concern for the direct effect media have on individuals and the turn toward the way audiences interpret texts, many scholars were interested in testing and utilizing Stuart Hall's approach to audience reception. Stuart Hall (1993b) mentions three different viewing positions that one may have as he or she receives a given media text (In this

case, television, and more specifically *The Colbert Report*, would be the media text). The dominant/hegemonic reading suggests that the receiver or viewer agrees with the intended produced message or merely passively consumes the particular show. The negotiated position suggests that the receiver accepts some but not all of the intended messages, yet still enjoys the show. The third position is an oppositional reading. This position suggests that the reader will deny the dominant/hegemonic reading in favor of his or her own decoded message, which is often in complete disagreement with the intended message.

Since Hall's theory emerged, various scholars were interested in the way audiences from various cultural and contextual locations interpret media texts (H. Jenkins, 2000, Liebes & Katz, 1993; Morley, 1981). As audience studies theory matured, however, recent scholars challenged Hall's viewing positions, suggesting that there may be more than one preferred reading (Wren-Lewis, 1983). For example, in the case of *The Colbert Report* and other contemporary television programs that employ satire and parody, the viewing positions become somewhat problematic, as it is unclear what the intended message might be. Furthermore, because of the satire, the reader must consistently negotiate the messages in order to make sense of the narrative. Therefore, it becomes difficult to passively watch *The Colbert Report*.

An additional critique of Hall's viewing position suggest that the relationship between media texts and the viewer are not two-dimensional, rather, myriad factors, mostly involving a person's context, come into play when considering the way one interprets media. Other contemporary studies, consequently, have approached audience reception with the assumption that most media are negotiated by audiences and are,

therefore, more interested in exploring the ways that negotiations between reader and text transfer into lived practices and experiences; they also focus on how media plays a contextual role in providing space for readers to identify and articulate their own experiences (Clark, 2002; Mankekar, 1999).

This study, then, adopts the methodology of earlier audience research, but it is particularly interested in the way religious individuals who are already exposed and connected to religio-political subcultures interact with *The Colbert Report's* religious rhetoric. This study does not suggest that the show has a direct effect or influence on viewers; rather, it suggests that religious individuals utilize various cultural tools when considering and reflecting on their religio-political identity (Swidler, 1986). *The Colbert Report* provides one occasion for religio-political formation and articulation.

Assuming, then, that most media texts are negotiated by audiences and individuals who receive them, this dissertation will utilize social identity theory and the use of symbolic boundaries to explore and name the plethora of ways young adults make sense of Colbert's critical messages. According to Lamont and Molnar (2002), "symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space. They are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality," (p. 168). These symbolic boundaries, therefore, allow individuals and group to further articulate and classify themselves in relation to others. This can easily be applied to religious individuals and groups, as people often utilize symbolic boundaries to create distinction and distance from other groups and individuals, and this symbolic boundary formation and articulation can often strengthen one's own identity.

Due to the nature of *The Colbert Report* as a humorous deconstruction of religious symbols and myths, the show provides open space for viewers to negotiate between his or her identity and the show. This dissertation suggests, then, that Colbert leaves room for symbolic boundary formation for both liberal and conservative emerging adults of varying subcultures. Further, it suggest that because of the porousness in *The Colbert Report's* approach to religio-political identification, young adults who affiliate with conservative Christianity do not seem to feel that it is necessary to reject Colbert outright as a means of creating and maintaining their religio-political identity as conservatives. In other words, the show becomes a point of reference for the reinforcement of religious and political symbolic boundaries and outgroups (Smith, 1998), as chapter seven will discuss, and it allows individuals to further articulate stances and beliefs that are a part of their preexisting ideologies. Therefore, just as many contemporary reception studies suggest that media texts are merely one avenue for social and subcultural identity formation, this study suggests that media play a contextual role in identity formation when individuals call upon a plethora of authoritative tools for reinforcing religio-political identity.

Methods

Utilizing in-depth interviews and analysis of online reactions and discussions (N. Baym & Markham, 2008), the body of this dissertation explores how young adults of varying religious self-identifications (Smith, 1998; Smith & Sikkink, 2003) relate to and understand the critical messages of religion and politics that are a key part of *The Colbert Report's* humor.

The research participants were 18-35 years old, and I conducted three specific phases of interviews with each participant. 25 people from a variety of religio-political Christian practices participated in this study. Participants represented a variety of denominational backgrounds as well as various political positions (e.g. liberal evangelical, conservative Catholic, moderate mainline Protestant, etc.). Furthermore, since *The Colbert Report* seems to attract a fairly homogenous fan base that is composed of primarily highly educated, middle class to upper middle class viewers, the participants additionally represent this demographic (Green, 2010). In order to recruit a diverse sample population, I used the snowball or rhizome (Stehlik, 2004) method to find participants for this study. Participants heard about the study through various religious and political activities including conferences, retreats, camps, etc. As I built a participant base, I was referred to others who might be interested in partaking in the study.

The research consisted of three phases. In the first set of interviews, I learned about each participant's religio-political location (see Appendix I). This set of interviews asked questions about the participants' religious, political, and family history and how they shaped their religio-political identity up to the point of the interview. I used self-identification as a method of locating each participant in a specific religio-political context, whether that is liberal evangelical, conservative evangelical, moderate Catholic, etc.

The second phase of the study involved analysis of various episodes of *The Colbert Report* that directly relate to Christianity. Each participant was asked to watch and comment on the same episodes as a constant throughout the study. Because of the amount of participants as well as their location across the country, I set up a private blog

for each participant on a website I created specifically for this project (Markham, 1998). Subsequently, I let each participant know which episodes to watch, and they blogged their responses and reflections on the website. I monitored their responses and ask follow up questions depending on their posts. Each participant had exposure to the show over the course of four to six months.

The last set of interviews provided a wrap up and conclusion about our conversations regarding *The Colbert Report*. In this phase, I asked follow up questions that tied up loose ends that I found important to the study. Additionally, it allowed participants to give me any final thoughts that were on their mind pertaining to the study.

Throughout the entire study, I categorized and coded the data based on consistent and important themes that emerged through the interview phases. I looked especially for the importance, or lack thereof, of symbolic boundaries that participants created as they referenced *The Colbert Report* in relation to their own identity, and how these trends are different and/or similar to previous Christian generations.

Chapter Outline

In order to understand how *The Colbert Report* fits within many young adults' religio-political frameworks, it is important to first investigate the wider religio-political landscape of today's emerging adults, and how the current landscape is both similar to and different from previous generations. Chapter one, then, will investigate these shifts as it considers the way young adults think about the role of the church, denominational ties, and political commitments.

Because this study is interested in the role religious irreverence in mainstream media plays in the religio-political formation of Christian emerging adults, it is also

important to explore the way contemporary mainstream media, and specifically television programs, have used humor to challenge religious authority and orthodoxy. Various television genres and programs have capitalized on religion as a catalyst for humorous social critique. Therefore, chapter two explores how cartoons such as *South Park* and *The Simpsons* have utilized a critical rhetorical strategy to subvert various religious-political metanarratives. Subsequently, it will consider the way sitcoms and dramas similarly use religion as a reference point for satire and humor. This chapter, then, provides a basis for understanding how soft news programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* also frequently reference religion in order to critically analyze religious authority and dogma.

Chapter three subsequently considers the way *The Colbert Report* critiques religion. This chapter will provide some important information about Stephen Colbert and *The Colbert Report*, including background information. It will look specifically at the character of Stephen Colbert and his unique role on *The Colbert Report*, that being an overly emotional conservative pundit. It will look closely at Colbert's rhetorical strategies, especially as they pertain to the intersection of religion and politics.

A rhetorical analysis of various episodes suggests that while Colbert often vehemently critiques religious authority on his program, his own religious beliefs allows him some success in articulating an alternative Christian worldview from those that dominate news media. In other words, Colbert's Catholic faith allows him to gain enough cultural and religious capital to appeal to Christian viewers.

Chapter four will outline the specific methods I used in the case study, including rhetorical analysis, qualitative interview methods, and Internet research. The chapter

discusses my location in the field as both an insider and outsider, and how I attained participants and demographic information about the participants.

Chapter five will explore the way theologically conservative and moderate young adults respond to Colbert's segment titled "Colbert's Anti-Gay Marriage Campaign," which provides a parody of the National Association for Marriage's original commercial. Overall, the responses from conservative viewers reflect a committed stance against homosexual behavior. What is the most interesting, however, is the way viewers consider how their religious beliefs are dissonant from their political ones. Participants such as Ben, Emily, and others were able to discern and separate religious beliefs from what they consider a constitutional right. Colbert, therefore, allows these viewers to wrestle further with this disconnect.

Chapter six will explore the way Colbert allows viewers to identify positively with certain religious figures. This chapter looks at how participants respond to Tony Campolo's interview on the show. Tony Campolo, a self-identified liberal evangelical promotes new way of thinking about religion and politics in an increasingly divided religious and political climate. Overall, participants identified positively with Campolo's message, and therefore, the clip allows them to further articulate their disdain towards the current political system and a desire for change.

While chapter seven shows an example of how viewers reinforce identity by positively resonating with Colbert's messages, chapter eight will explore the way Colbert allows participants to reinforce identity through referencing symbolic boundaries or outgroups (Smith, 1998). Part of this boundary formation involves referencing outgroups that represent that which is not a part of one's own social or subcultural identity.

Through maintaining distance and potential threat, this referencing, then, allows individuals to strengthen their own identity. Chapter seven explores participants' responses to Colbert's segment "Glenn Beck Attacks Social Justice," during which he pokes fun at Glenn Beck's critique of churches that promote social justice. Participants of various Christian subcultures and political affiliations utilize the clip to rearticulate and reinforce Glenn Beck and fundamentalism as an outgroup. Identifying Glenn Beck as someone who is outside their definition of Christianity allows them to further reinforce their own identity. Therefore, Colbert allows these participants the space to reflect upon alternative Christian identities from that which Beck purports on his Fox News Program.

Chapter nine will re-review the existing literature on *The Colbert Report* and emerging adults and place this study in discussion with that literature. It will acknowledge places where the study disagrees with the previous literature and theories and where it confirms and builds upon other literature and theories. It will seek to answer the questions mentioned in this chapter. The concluding chapter will also recognize limitations in the study and places where there might be room for further research.

Chapter Two: Emerging Adults Today

For many, emerging adulthood is a time of transition, and often, the shift from teenage years to young adulthood can be difficult. During high school, teens are just learning to gain responsibility and make tough decisions. For example, many teens face decisions such as where to go to college, what to study, what job to take, and how all of this might be financially affordable. Subsequently, young adulthood brings the realities of the aforementioned catalog of tough decisions. The dreams of teenagers are no longer distant thoughts; rather, they become lived experiences for emerging adults. Furthermore, this time often means moving away from home, learning to become financially independent from their parents, and forming new relationships (Clydesdale, 2009a).

It is no wonder, then, why this time between youth and adulthood perplexes a variety of people, including church workers, educators, sociologists, and parents. In recent years, scholars have noticed a trend surfacing among adult ages 18-29. It is suggested that the transition from youth to adulthood has become longer and more complex, and thus, there is a need to redefine this stage of life. Therefore, young adults, ages 18-29 are often referred to as emerging adults (Arnett, 2004). This term is used to describe the time between adolescence and adulthood, where young adults are finding their way into a secure and settled adult life. Whereas, older generations settled down, married, raised a family, and secured a long-term career in their early twenties, today's

emerging adults seem to take longer to accomplish all of the above (Brooks, 2007).

Many young adults today will go back to school, transition from one career to the next, live at home, and date multiple partners during the transition into adulthood. A lot of this may be due to shifts in technology, the role of women in the workforce, education, and the demographics of entry-level positions for new college graduates.

As one can see, emerging adults today are quite different than their older counterparts were at the same age, and this chapter will outline these ever-present shifts (Clydesdale 2009b). Subsequently, it will highlight the changes in religiosity and spirituality among emerging adults as well as the shifts in political and civic engagement. This chapter will also consider how changes in media and technology have played a role in the various facets of young adult life. This chapter then, will shed some light on the emerging adult landscape, in order that one might see how young adults, in many ways, are constantly making meaning of and shaping their identity, now more than ever.

Education and Work

Most young adults transition from high school to some form of education, whether it be liberal arts education, technical school, or junior college. Young adults who do not go to school often find a job or join the military. Whatever the circumstances, this transition symbolizes a new level of autonomy.

Over the last several decades, a college education has become more accessible to diverse populations, and young people are attending college more than ever (Lee, 2009). Making the choice to attend college, for many young adults, comes with a great deal of decisions. Choosing which institution of higher learning is best suited for them evokes decisions that involve proximity to home, size, extracurricular opportunities, majors

offered, etc. Furthermore, for those young adults entering college, the transition often comes with monetary challenges, as emerging adults are often expected to contribute financially to their tuition, room and board, books, or all of the above.

Once admitted into college, young adults face the challenges of balancing an education with a social life, extracurricular activities, and sometimes a job (Nathan, 2005). The college student today is more likely to become involved in extracurricular activities and/or hold down a job than previous generations (Lee, 2010). Due to the stress that comes with juggling an education with the financial burden of tuition, many college students begin their education later or take periodical time off.

The alternative to college is also appealing to some recent high school graduates. Those who do not make the choice to attend school enter the workforce. Subsequently, their transition into full adulthood often comes more quickly than those who transition into college. Similarly for those who enter the workforce, though, utility bills, rent, car payments, and phone bills often fall into the hands of newly independent high school graduates. This route, then, comes with serious challenges, as young adults with high school diplomas often find low-paying work that does not serve to support a family long-term. For many who enter the workforce early, going back to school later in life, or part-time, becomes an appealing and sometimes necessary option. Due to the aforementioned factors, some emerging adults opt to stay at home, or as trends show, will choose to return home following graduation from college.

While past generations have made their mark on the workforce, it is curious as to how emerging adults understand their role in the workplace today. At a time when globalization and technology have changed as well as reduced some entry-level positions,

and at a time when wages are lower than decades past, emerging adults struggle to find meaningful work. Although these factors make finding a rewarding job difficult, emerging adults today represent a highly optimistic and achieving demographic (Edgell, 2010b).

It is the characteristics of young adults, then, that have provided a shift in the way others experience the workplace. Due to this generation's upbringing, many young adults behave differently in their place of work than older generations. For example, young adults today tend to work in teams, demand respect from their authorities, question their authorities, and demand flexibility in the workplace (Hira, 2007). Furthermore, due to their increasing exposure to diversity, emerging adults tend to resist racial prejudices as well as prejudices based on sexual orientation. Subsequent chapters will explore how their experiences with diversity have challenged their religious beliefs. Chapter six, for example, elucidates how young adults often discern the difference between their religious beliefs and their political beliefs when it comes to gay marriage. This approach distances them from previous generations, especially among evangelicals.

Friends and Romance

It seems clear that, given the educational, vocational, and economic changes in the lives of many emerging adults, relationships with friends, family, and potential partners also go through changes. But, for many young adults, friendships and romantic relationships are extremely important. At a time when many transitions are taking place, emerging adults rely on connective relationships to help them shape their identities, make decisions, and maintain emotional stability. In fact, research has shown that, due to the changes in when people tend to marry and raise a family, connections with friends serve

as a familial function for many emerging adults, especially those who have yet to find a romantic partner.

It seems that same-sex friendships are often different for men and women. As women seek meaningful relationships with other women, they tend to look for female friends who provide them with intimacy, companionship, and emotional security. In contrast, men's relationships tend to center on competitiveness and validation. Although these differences occur, intimacy is still the benchmark of solid relationships (Barry & Madsen, 2009).

As emerging adults transition further into full adulthood, their relationships with friends take on different characteristics. For example, for young adults who marry and raise children, the amount of time spent with friends decreases. Similarly, as emerging adults enter the workforce, their time spent with friends becomes less about finding social things to do together, and more about finding time to catch up (Barry & Madsen, 2009).

While maintaining important connections with friends, young adults also consider finding a romantic partner. While, the average age that young people marry has increased, finding a serious romantic companion also comes with dating multiple partners and exploring one's sexuality. It seems that this generation of young adults is different from past generations in their dating and romantic patterns, and there are myriad factors that play a role.

For young adults, sexual activity has become a norm in romantic relationships, and casual sexual activity is also frequent. Almost 70 percent of young adults have had at least one sexual experience. In fact, studies have shown that, of young people ages 18-23 that find themselves in dating relationships, only 6 percent of them are not having sex

(Regnerus, 2010). Furthermore, although most regret one-time sexual encounters, many young adults have admitted to one-night stands. It seems that, for many emerging adults, exploring different sexual experiences and partners is common before settling down.

The changing landscape and definitions of marriage also provide shifts in the way young adults consider settling down with one romantic partner. Young adults today are cohabitating with their partners more frequently before marriage, and in addition, same-sex partners often feel more open to living together. Furthermore, gender roles in a marriage have also caused young adults to reconsider the characteristics of a marriage, especially when both partners have fulfilling careers (Bartowski & Xu, 2010). Finally, many young adults feel that establishing a career is important before they make the decision to marry. Therefore, young adults consider all of these factors when making decisions about dating and sexual partnerships.

It is clear that both romantic and non-romantic relationships are important to emerging adults. Finding long-lasting and significant friendships is especially important to single young people, but is additionally important to those who marry and raise a family at a young age. Similarly, finding a long-lasting romantic partnership, while it seems to take longer for this age demographic, is also paramount. It seems, though, that while these aspects are important to all generations, the aforementioned catalog of cultural shifts for this particular generation shows that young adults today discover sexuality, form friendships, and approach dating in markedly different ways than their older counterparts.

Music and Television as Social Expression

Media play an integral role in the lives of young adults. From old media such as music and books to new media such as social networking sites, these mediums are extremely important in allowing young adults to shape individual and collective identities and express themselves (Livingstone, 2002; Silverstone, 1999). This section uncovers how various media such as music, television, and the Internet assist in shaping young adults identities.

Throughout history, the arts have responded to society's need for questioning, reflection, and meaning making. Music, especially, is capable of providing space to move people emotionally and to express the joys and sorrow of real events (Kellner, 1995). Additionally, music can be an entertaining way to connect and form community. In the United States, for example, the African spiritual brought slaves together under a common purpose, folk and rock music sprung out of a communal need to express concerns about the Vietnam War (Bennett, 2001; James, 1989), and rap and hip hop emerged out of a common struggle to express identity (Kellner, 1995). It is no wonder, then, that young adults utilize music as a starting point for relationship building and expression. Although this has been a historical trend among young people, the way young adults use and share music has certainly evolved. Now, young adults can both listen to and create music on their computers, and subsequently share it with their friends or online networks (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Moreover, websites such as Myspace and Youtube have become hubs for popular bands with large fan bases as well as struggling young artists trying to make a name for themselves.

Once again, for young adults, music engenders creativity and a space for expression and connection. Furthermore, many young adults today are looking for deeper meaning within the texts of musical lyrics rather than listening for pure entertainment. Young adults often appeal to artists with whom they can identify and share a common goal. U2's Bono, for example, has appealed to many young adults because of his passion for HIV/AIDS education and poverty relief. For the average emerging adult, music is about sharing lived experiences through artistic expression (Dierberg & Clark, 2010).

Television has always been a large draw for young adults. Ever since the television was invented, networks have attempted to draw in young fans. Shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and late night television appeal to young adult culture and humor. Other shows like *The Colbert Report* and *The Office* appeal to irony and a sense of irreverence to certain dominant customs and standards.

Today, young adults watch television, in large part, because it sparks a starting point for conversation with friends and allows them to identify more strongly with their particular age group (Bauerlein, 2006; Harwood, 1999). Moreover, young adults are transforming the way television is consumed today. For example, young adults are more likely than other age groups to watch television online (Pew, 2009). Watching television online may increase fan-based blogging. Viewers can watch a show and then comment about what might happen in the future, what they liked about the show, or any kind of philosophical symbolism hidden throughout.

Additionally, young adults are more likely than other age groups to watch television outside their homes. Watching sporting events such as the Super Bowl or the

World Series has historically been a community event, however, this is especially true of young adults, and for them, it goes beyond sports. Young adults often watch their favorite primetime television shows in groups where they can converse before, during commercials, and after the show (Bauerlein, 2006). Even if a show isn't watched communally, young adults still know who their fellow fans are and often converse with them about the current events of their favorite hit series. Therefore, for young adults, television provides a language through which they can speak to others about what matters to them or what they can agree about that's funny or ironic (Dierberg & Clark, 2010; Newcomb, 1994). As it relates to this dissertation, then, programs such as *The Colbert Report* often provide an occasion or platform for religious dialogue. The dissertation will explore how many participants felt urged to share clips with their friends, family, or church communities. This is evidence that television and potentially other forms of media can be authoritative for this demographic.

Emerging Adult Religiosity

The Christian landscape has changed drastically in recent years. With mainline Protestant churches shrinking in membership (Uecker & Regnerus, 2007) and evangelical churches gaining momentum (Symonds, 2005), the ways in which we think about the makeup of Christianity in America are shifting. Within these particular shifts and trends, though, it seems that emerging adults are playing a large role in catalyzing religious change (Edgell, 2010a). This section will cover the ways in which young adults form their religious identity and the shapes those identities take as they enter young adult life.

In recent studies, it seems clear that many youth and young adults are most influenced by their parents and peers when it comes a system of beliefs and religious

practices. Recent scholarship suggests that young people tend to mimic the faith and practices of their parents (Smith & Denton, 2006; Webber & Singleton, 2005). Carol Lytch (2004) also found that adolescents are more committed to worship and religious life if their parents show stability and consistency in family life and devotions. Other studies have shown that family dynamics play a large role in youth and young adult religiosity. For example, studies have shown that youth living in two-parent households tend to be more religiously active than youth living in one-parent households (Petts, 2009). Additionally, parents whose level of education were higher than other households tended to provide youth with more stability, and studies have shown that youth from this demographic were, in turn, more consistent in their religious participation (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006).

Some studies also suggest that behavior patterns among youth play a role in determining their levels of religious activity. For example, Regnerus and Uecker (2006) conclude that youth who are sexually active are less likely to be religiously active, while behavior patterns such as drug and alcohol use do not play a significant role in religious activity. Additionally, youth who tend to take risks are more likely to decline in religiosity, which is consistent with previous studies, and Regnerus and Uecker argue that this could resemble the large difference in gender participation in religion (i.e. young boys are riskier and therefore attend church less).

While the studies mentioned in the previous paragraphs deal primarily with youth, research suggests that the role of parents and peers is still significant for religious young adults (Smith, 2009), although there seems to be a significant decline in religious attendance in the shift from youth to young adulthood (Pew, 2010). Research suggests,

in fact, that young adults are the least religious adults in the U.S, and that young adults today are less likely to attend religious services than their older counterparts were at the same age (Edgell, 2010a). While young adults make up 22% of the adult population, they make up less than 10% of the adult population in today's churches (Hackett, 2010). The most severe decline in young adult religious activity comes at the expense of Catholic and mainline Protestants, groups that have lost significant numbers of this age demographic. In fact, of young adults that do attend religious services, 14% attend evangelical churches, 10% attend Catholic churches, and only 6% attend mainline Protestant churches (Hackett, 2010).

Young Adult Religious Frameworks

While the aforementioned scholarship enlightens us of some important variables for youth entering young adulthood, the characteristics of young adults religiosity remain to be explored. For those young adults who do still practice some kind of religious faith, what shape does this take for them and how is young adult religiosity different from those who came before them?

Smith and Denton's (2005) concept of moralistic therapeutic deism provides one framework for thinking about religious youth and young adults. Consistent with earlier studies, this study concludes that youth are content to believe and practice religion much as their parents do or don't. But Smith and Denton go more in depth, noting that most teens associate religion with something "nice" that "gives people morals." Religion, according to most teens, is rooted in a belief of a good if somewhat distant and uninvolved God. They note that young people discuss religion as something that provides therapeutic benefits to its adherents but that does not make demands on them.

The authors found these expressions of religious identity to be so widespread that they argue it is a very dominant aspect of religious life among most young people today. They coined the term “moralistic therapeutic deism” to explain this phenomenon. Moralistic therapeutic deism, according to these authors, is closely related to the rise of therapeutic individualism, which in turn is an outgrowth of a capitalist society that is constantly seeking to identify new needs and then satisfy them through consumerism. Teens thus discuss morality in relation to therapeutic benefits and advice-giving. What’s most important to teens, they suggest, seems to be acquiring a feeling of happiness. In short, moralistic therapeutic deism explains a religious identity where the church exists to show people good morals, and the right way of living, and there is a strong belief in a God who created them but is no longer active in their lives, and finally, the church exists to make people feel good about themselves and happier.

Smith’s work on young adult religiosity makes similar claims, however he states that there is a significant decline in religious affiliation among young adults. He suggests that young adults can be grouped into six different categories of religious adherence. Committed Traditionalists represent those who practice religion regularly and have a strong understanding of religious dogmas. Selective Adherents are those who remain strong in some traditional beliefs, but not all. Spiritually Open represents the demographic that is open to the idea of a higher power and religious affiliation, but do not identify with a religious practice. The Religiously Indifferent and Religiously Disconnected represent those who are either apathetic or ignorant to religious practices and beliefs. And finally, the Irreligious are those who consider themselves secular, and are sometimes opposed to religion altogether. Of these six categories, over half fall into

the last three, which suggests that most emerging adults are not committed, apathetic, or opposed to religious institutions.

Another framework for considering the spirituality of emerging adults is the “spiritual but not religious” framework. It seems that this rhetoric has become more popular among Americans, and specifically young adults (Marler & Hadaway, 2002). As about 20% of Americans consider themselves “spiritual but not religious,” this trend seems to exist most densely within the younger demographic (Edgell, 2010a). As young adults become more frequently disenfranchised with religious institutions, due, in part to the politicization of religion and the “culture wars” that religion seems to bolster, the term “spiritual but not religious” has gained popularity. Furthermore, this identity marker may be suggestive of the trend towards universality and away from rigid boundary markers and truth claims.

Similar to these frameworks, Nancy Ammerman suggests another way of thinking about American religiosity, which also reflects the changes in religiosity among young adults. In two works, *Everyday Religions: Observing Modern Religious Lives* and “Golden Rule Christianity: Lived religion in the American Mainstream”, Ammerman articulates that counting people in the pews or measuring orthodoxy are not adequate measures of religious identity today (Ammerman, 1997; Ammerman, 2006). In both works, she challenges sociology’s attempt at only labeling those who are orthodox as religious. Ammerman coined the term “Golden Rule Christianity” to describe Protestants who were less concerned with beliefs and personal salvation, but were more concerned with lived practice, otherwise known as orthopraxy. Basing her views on the findings that only a small percentage of people within evangelical circles were concerned with

being saved, she concludes that most religious people in the United States focus instead on living out the Golden Rule and making the world a better place. As later chapters will discuss, many participants in this study represent this particular religious framework

Some, like Smith, argue that the decline in religious attendance signifies a cultural crisis in knowledge and value” (Smith, p. 292); however, others suggest that the decline in church attendance among emerging adults merely represents the demographic’s life stage, and that young adults today are still committed to a sense of values. For example, young adults today are committed to volunteerism and diversity, and those that claim a religious affiliation use it as a framework for making decisions about marriage, family, and political issues (Arnett, 2004; Wuthnow, 2007).

The Evangelical Generation

While the previous models for thinking about the ways in which young adults consider a higher power and their own moral framework, it is imperative to note, once again, that the highest concentration of young adults in the church attend evangelical services. Therefore, it is important to consider the ways in which young adult evangelicals contemplate their religiosity.

Young adults represent a substantial percentage of evangelicals. In fact, about 17 percent of evangelicals fall between the ages of 18 and 29 (Banerjee, 2008). And, as young adults seek to claim a space within the evangelical movement, studies have shown marked differences between young adult evangelicals and their older counterparts. Most of these differences relate to political issues. In fact, many young adult evangelicals claim that the political agenda of the Religious Right is harmful for America (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007), and have taken a stand on behalf of issues such as poverty, the

HIV/AIDS epidemic, and global warming. Nonetheless, historically significant issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and biblical literalism still remain important to this subculture. For example, about half of young adult evangelicals still hold exclusivist views of salvation as well as a belief in biblical literalism, although this is still a significantly lower percentage than older evangelicals (Pew, 2010). As one can see, though, while the issues and political leanings of young adult evangelicals remains complex, it seems that this subculture desires to distance itself from older evangelicals in order to create a new evangelical image. This will be clearly seen when participants from this study express their desire to maintain dissonance from ultra conservative fundamentalist and evangelical figures.

While identity markers such as Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical, or something else play a role in shaping young adults' theological and religious frameworks, there are general trends that show dissonance between the concerns of religious young adults and their older counterparts. For example, overall, young adults are more accepting of homosexuality, more willing to accept evolution as the explanation for existence, and are less inclined to view the Bible as the literal word of God (Pew, 2010). Furthermore, religious young adults are more inclined towards contemporary styles of worship than older generations (Hackett, 2010). On the other hand, there are some similarities that still exist between young adults and older demographics. For example, young adults today still share similar beliefs about an afterlife, miracles, and salvation. In fact, a higher percentage (albeit slightly) of young adults believe their religion is the exclusive means of salvation than older groups (Pew, 2010). While the latter similarities show patterns of consistency, the former catalog of contrasts marks shifts in the way

future churches as well as the catholic church may act in both domestic and world affairs. In other words, the differences between younger and older generations signify dramatic changes in the way we think about the church's role in shaping beliefs, practices, and political agendas. The findings of this study suggest that many young adults are disenfranchised from religious authorities and hierarchies, and therefore, it is understandable why many gravitate toward evangelical churches and Bible studies. Many young adults, then, are different from older Christian generations who often aligned themselves more rigidly within specific denominations. Furthermore, the study will elucidate the increasing role media play in shaping religio-political identities and how that contributes to the desacralization of religious authority (Demerath, 2008).

Political Engagement

Young adults' engagement with politics has seen waves of increase and decrease in the past fifty years. In the 60's and 70's, for example, young adults were highly active in political causes, and high percentages of young adults voted. Since then, however, there has been a sharp decline in political interest among emerging adults, and as few as 40% of young adults voted in 2000 (Youniss, 2010). Additionally, with the decline in voting came a decline in keeping up with the news through traditional sources such as newspapers and network news. Therefore, in 2000, it seemed that the trend of political disinterest would only continue. The incline in political interest among young adults today, then, would come as a shock to many. While there has been a thirty-year drought in young adult participation, the last decade has shown a turn in political participation and civic engagement. In 2004, for example, almost half of young adults voted, and subsequently, in 2008, 51% percent went to the polls (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg,

2009). It is curious, then, as to why young adults are more involved today, and the shape this political interest has taken for this age demographic.

Much like shifts in religious beliefs and practices, young adults today have dissonant political beliefs than older generations. As the 2008 election suggests, young adult voters “favored Democrat Barack Obama 2-to-1, whereas a majority of voters over age 60 voted for Republican John McCain” (Youniss, 2010, p. 4). For many young adults, the contrast in political convictions with older generations comes down to issues such as gay and interracial marriage as well as other social issues. Furthermore, studies have shown that young adults are more active in their communities through volunteer work and community service than older generations were at the same age (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn et al., 2007). Most of the volunteer work reflects a young adult passion for social justice, which may attribute to a more left leaning generation.

Along with generational differences, there also exist differences in political engagement between young adults of varying educational levels. College educated young adults, for example, are more likely to be politically engaged than those who are not (Flanagan, Levine, & Settersten, 2009). This may be due to the fact that college students have more opportunities for extracurricular activity, political discussion, and involvement in campus-wide political rallies.

Non-Traditional Political Engagement

Along with using the Internet for social purposes, emerging adults have used the Internet for political purposes. For example, during the United States election in 2008, most people shared their political views via the Internet. In a Pew Internet Study,

researchers found that young adults are most likely to use the Internet, specifically social networks, for political reasons (Pew, 2009). On particular social network sites, young adults could find out for whom their friends voted, endorse a candidate, or give money to a political party. Most of these activities were publicly known. Following the election, young adults still post links to news articles or write blogs or notes about their political interests on their social network sites. Even the use of social network sites for political purposes reflects young adult's needs for a place to express themselves and connect with their friends on issues pertaining to their lives. Over the years, social network sites have become a place where lived experience can be expressed and discussed.

Along with the changes in political engagement due to social networking, political comedy has also played a large role in shifting the way young adults receive their news as well as engage politically. In fact, some argue that young people look to political entertainment rather than to traditional news sources to learn about current events (Mindlich, 2005). And, although young people tend to receive less news than their older counterparts, the trend for young people to stray away from traditional news sources and gravitate towards political entertainment has only increased throughout the years.

According to a Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey, 21 percent of young adults (18-24) during the 2004 presidential campaign watched comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* to receive their political news (Pew, 2010). Shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* can be placed in the subcategory of soft news (Baum, 2003a; Baum, 2003b), and many wonder how the transition from soft news to hard news influences those who receive it.

Some might be skeptical of the exodus from hard news to soft news, claiming that this represents a growing ignorance and apathy towards politics among young people. Scholars have suggested that soft news downplays the complexity of world events and makes them seem mundane or oversimplified (Fallows, 1996; Kalb, 2001). However, researchers such as Katz (1993) and Calavita (2004), are more optimistic, and suggest that political humor is appealing for young people because it allows them to be simultaneously entertained and informed, characteristics that are necessary for their identity and political formation. Young people certainly appeal to other forms of entertainment such as film, television, and music, which all provide some instances of political rhetoric, and therefore, one's political education is multidimensional (Calavita 2004, Barnhurst 1998). In a similar vein then, just as young adults call upon a variety of cultural tools for religious formation, they also call upon various cultural tools when considering their political commitments.

The Role of Political Comedy

Political comedians such as John Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Bill Maher have become household names among viewers for their ability to humorously critique the American political system (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009; Jones, 2004). In addition to political humor, though, each of these personalities critiques religious systems and the role religion plays in political discourse, each in his own way. For example, Bill Maher's *Religulous*, the highly controversial documentary about Maher's various interviews with religious leaders and lay people from all over the world, seeks to undermine religion altogether, as Bill Maher, the self-proclaimed atheist is skeptical of anything religious. On the other hand, Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* seems far less atheistic while he uses

overt criticism in order to undermine religion's misuse of power in politics and culture. Then, we have Stephen Colbert, who, as a practitioner of faith both on and off the camera, uses more covert tactics to parody both his own faith and others, as he plays the role of an overly emotional conservative Catholic pundit.

As this chapter has suggested, young adults are going through incessant shifts in their relationships, careers, popular cultural tastes, and religious and political convictions. For this age demographic, finding space to shape identity is integral to every facet of their lives. And while young adults continue to carve new spaces for religious identification and formation, media certainly play a role in allowing emerging adults to create space for both religious and political expression. Moreover, in some cases, media have created spaces for young adults to innovate new ways of being religious as well as find new sources of authority. As the mediatization of religion seems to weaken orthodox authoritative structures, it also allows young adults to find religious and political authority elsewhere (Hjarvard, 2008). It is clear, then, why considering political comedy as an occasion for religio-political meaning making allows one to gain insight into the myriad ways emerging adults shape their religio-political identities.

Chapter Three: Religious Irreverence: Trends Old and New

Religious irreverence in the media is certainly not a new phenomenon. For years, and even decades, the film and television industry has played a role in critiquing religious dogmas and truths through satire and humor, and print media has been doing the same for even longer. We have seen this evidence as early as the Enlightenment, when scholars such as Voltaire, Montaigne, and Hume utilized satire to criticize Christianity's role in political hegemony and the marginalization of various religious groups, namely, Jews (Clark & Dierberg, 2011). These critiques subsequently led early nineteenth century writers such as Mark Twain to lambaste religion, and more specifically, Christianity. For example, in his famous work, *Letters from the Earth*, Twain (1991) challenged traditional dogmas such as the role of God in the creation of humanity and the concept of heaven. He writes, "He [God] took pride in man; man was his finest invention; man was his pet, after the housefly" (Twain, 1991). Ambrose Bierce made similar lampoons, and his definition of religion in *The Devil's Dictionary* is a prime example: "Religion/n./A daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the Fear of the Unknowable" (Clark & Dierberg, 2011).

While print media and journalism have paved the way for post-Enlightenment critiques of religion, visual media have followed suit. Whereas contemporary political satirists such as Bill Maher and Jon Stewart poke fun at religion in general, Judeo-Christianity seems to take the brunt of many jokes. Moreover, religious satire has

expanded to fit within genres such as the animated feature and sitcom television, which this chapter will explore. It is clear that, especially within the last two decades, religious satire in television has found its place.

This chapter, then, will look specifically at a few examples of religious irreverence as seen in television. For the sake of staying in the same media realm as Colbert, this chapter will solely focus on visual media, and will therefore ignore examples of religious irreverence in print. Using textual analysis, this chapter will highlight both the denotations and connotations of several examples of religious rhetoric in film and television programs such as *Glee* and *Scrubs*, animated programs such as *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and finally political comedians such as Bill Maher and Jon Stewart. The chapter focuses on each according to genre as well as in order of the degree and severity with which each critiques religion. Therefore, this chapter will shed light on the various ways these television shows have used humor and satire to subvert dominant religious symbols so as to attempt to challenge status quo sentimentalities, therefore taking a somewhat poststructural and critical approach.

The Role of Media in Cultural and Religious Critique

Within the discipline of cultural theory, media's role in society has been widely debated. More specifically, cultural theorists have long debated the capacity for media to engender social change, and on the other end of the spectrum, the capacity for media to reinforce the status quo. In the early years of cultural studies, however, the latter was more widely accepted as the norm, and in some circles, especially within critical cultural theory, this ethos has remained the same (Garnham, 1979).

Much scholarship that was originally devoted to media and society focused on the media as a means of corporate, commercial, and political propaganda and reification (MacDonald, 1957). Nazi propaganda played a large role in engendering this theory, but other major historical factors perpetuated the theory such as the fall of Communism and the emergence of Late Capitalism. Many scholars who contribute to mass society theory (as it is formally called) are heavily influenced by Marxist and critical theory, and are subsequently urged to critique the role of media, especially the news, in legitimizing dominant paradigms such as capitalism and commercialism (Chomsky, 2003; Gramsci, 1971; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Marcuse, 1964).

Marx, for example, felt that the media of his day were merely suppressing the proletariat, and advertising represented the alienation between the laborer and his/her product (Fuchs, 2009). Subsequently, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) understood that mass media could never engender social change, but that high art such as theater and symphonic music were the only forms of art that were capable of subverting dominant ideologies. Mass media was, therefore, contributing to the dominant metanarrative. Gramsci (1971), on the other hand, was more conflicted on the issue. While he understood media's potential for co-opting mass society toward the status quo and hegemonic structures, he also saw potential for the media to challenge the system, although his optimism toward the latter was minimal.

Taking a different approach, structuralists aimed, not at debating the effects of media on the masses, but at locating the way mass media shapes meaning in general, basing their insights on the work of linguists such as Saussure and Peirce. As Saussure (1916) and Peirce (1931-58) argue, language allows us to make meaning, as we identify

signs and subsequently give linguistic labels to them through the process of signifying them over the course of time and repetition.

Roland Barthes mentions the role media has on structuring the way we make sense of every day symbols, and that, in some way, media ground those symbols through visual representation, but simultaneously allow for multiple interpretations. He suggests, then, that there are two levels of signification, denotation and connotation (Barthes, 1991). Whereas denotation refers to the first order of signification, the most basic, literal, meaning of something, connotation refers to the second order, or the additional meaning that is added to the denotation. For example, as Seiter argues, the media played the role in making meaning of the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. The rhetoric used by news reporters purported that the explosion represented “tragic loss of noble and patriotic cause,” rather than a false hope in technology (Seiter 1992).

The brief nod to structuralism was necessary in order to come back to critical theory, as I develop here an argument for the use of poststructuralism within mass media for purposes of social critique. I argue that recent media trends, especially when it comes to religious irreverence, show that it is possible that some forms of media employ critical rhetorical theory as a form of challenging dominant metanarratives.

Critical rhetorical theory stems out of critical cultural theory, which has some roots in poststructuralism (i.e. Foucault and Chomsky). Theorists such as Foucault and Bourdieu, for example, sought to challenge existing structures by pointing out ways in which systems dominate through power and oppression (Cronin, 1996). Therefore, they seek to break down these systems, and one way that this happens is through rhetorical critique. McKerrow (1989) points out, “as theory, a critical rhetoric examines the

dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercised in a relativized world...in practice, a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power” (p. 1). Therefore, while critical rhetorical theory demystifies pre-existing power structures (West, 1988), it also seeks to engender practical social action (Misgeld, 1985).

While most critical theorists were under the impression that mass media ultimately contributed to hegemonic dominance, I argue that some more contemporary examples in mass media are proving otherwise, and are, therefore, utilizing poststructural critical methods, with comedy and satire as a catalyst, in order to demystify dominant cultural symbols (Baym, 2010; Jones, 2004). In practice, then, some television shows, as I will highlight below, take specific denotations and subvert them through the act of humor and satire in order to connote something entirely different. Therefore, I argue that humor and satire can (when they are deliberate) be thought of as poststructural or critical instances (Feldman, 2007).

While I argue that television programs can behave this way, it is important to note that programs have varying degrees of ideological critique, which may be related to the program or network’s desire or pressure to maintain positive feedback from its intended audience, a pressure that, consequently, often comes with maintaining a certain amount of cultural familiarity and status quo. For, it has been suggested that television programs often relate to a specific cultural group, which then requires a program to depend on that cultural group for its survival. White (1992) states, “ideological criticism [of television] examines texts and viewer-text relations to clarify how the meanings and pleasures generated by television express specific, material, and class interests” (p. 129). Therefore, when considering the way various television genres humorously critique

religion, it is important to consider the intended audience. This chapter, then, will explore the ways television genres critique religion on a variety of levels and from different points of view. The sitcom and drama, as this chapter will argue, are the least confrontational in their critique of religious ideology. As mentioned previously, this may be due to the program's desire to provide humor while simultaneously maintaining the audience's familiarity with the program's cultural and ideological norms. On a different note, the contrast in the ways television genres approach religion may be due to the genre's proximity to real life experience or network pressure to maintain ratings (Mittell, 2009), themes that I additionally highlight throughout the chapter.

The Sitcom and Drama: Simultaneously Irreverent and Somber

Stuart Hall suggests that cultural identities are “the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past” (Hall, 1993a, p. 394). The sitcom has historically played a role in providing an audience with a narrative with which to identify memory and negotiate identity. In fact, “mass media allow audiences to share intimacy without familiarity and to create new memories -and hence identities-from seemingly impersonal and specularized encounters” (Castiglia & Reed, 2011, p. 115). While a lot of research on identity and the sitcom revolve around sexuality and race, it can also be said that mediated subcultural identification is just as powerful when it comes to class, gender, and perhaps religion.

This section will analyze the role of religion in two primetime television shows, *Scrubs* and *Glee*. Both shows deal with religion and faith when the plots turn toward issues of death and dying, a common characteristic of the sitcom. While both shows humorously and sardonically point out the inconsistencies of faith, the end result of each

turns toward a somber questioning of the role of the supernatural in human suffering, one of the age-old questions known to humankind. Therefore, while the poking fun of certain rituals and myths plays a central role in attempting to debunk status quo ideologies, the sitcom can only go so far in its attempt to critique cultural norms and symbols due to the pressure of maintaining a wide and diverse viewership. A rhetorical analysis of episodes in each of these hit series will elucidate this argument.

Grilled Cheesus. The primetime hit show *Glee*, which airs on Fox, has been highly successful, especially among young adults. The show features a high school glee club that is constantly pressured by the school board to win the highest awards lest the organization cease to exist. Additionally, the characters in the show symbolize modern high school stereotypes, and the hierarchy of the stereotypical social ladder is reflected in the show, with football players and cheerleaders at the top of the chain and members of the glee club at the bottom, especially those who bend gender and sexual norms. Throughout the show, members of the club, the club's faculty supervisor, and other guests of the show often share their feelings and sentiments through song, as they perform contemporary and mostly upbeat covers.

In an October 2010 episode titled "Grilled Cheesus," religion was addressed, both humorously and somberly (Falchuk & Gomez-Rejon, 2010). The episode began as football quarterback and member of the glee club, Finn, cooked a grilled cheese sandwich and subsequently thought that the sandwich's charred markings resembled the face of Jesus.

It all started a week ago. I was super hungry, but my mom was gone, so I busted out the George Forman. It wasn't making the cool grill marks it used to after I tried to use it to dry my shoes, but when it comes to grilled

cheese, I'm not that fancy. And when I pulled the sandwich out, I saw the face of God! Literally. I had made a Grilled Cheesus...I'm not the most religious guy. I sort of worship Eric Clapton and Ocho Cinco, but this was different. So I decided to see what it felt like to, ya know, pray.

Following his vision, Finn professes his newfound conversion to his girlfriend and members of the glee club, which sparks the premise of the episode:

I have something to say. Something happened to me, and I can't really get into it, but it's shaken me to my core...There is a man who has sort of recently come into my life, and that man is Jesus Christ. And I know there's others in here who dig him too, and so I thought maybe this week, we could pay tribute to him in music. You know, pay tribute to Jesus.

Throughout the show, Finn prays to the sandwich, which he affectionately calls "Grilled Cheesus," asking it for superficial things such as the ability to touch his girlfriend Rachel's breasts and that his quarterback status, which had been momentarily revoked, be reinstated.

What up Grilled Cheesus. I need to ask you for something. I didn't go to Sunday School, so I don't know if God works the same way as a genie, and I only get three wishes, but here's the thing. Dating Rachel is great, but she's kind of a prude, and I'm sort of going crazy. Anyway, her boobs aren't that great, but they're still girl boobs, and I'd really like to touch them. So, Cheesus, considering that I've dedicated a week of my musical life to you, I hope you can see it in your heart to answer my prayers. Amen.

Later in the show, the viewer finds that all of Finn's requests come to fruition, which consequently causes him to place even more faith in the "Grilled Cheesus."

The image of Finn praying to a grilled cheese sandwich plays into a widespread assumption about the absurdity and irrationality of faith. The image connotes that faith and trust in God might as well be the same thing as faith in a sandwich. Furthermore, the fact that Finn's prayers were answered, shall I add unexpectedly, seems to connote that people of faith often place false meaning onto acts of coincidence. Even the school's

counselor points out that Finn's answered prayers could be traced back to concrete situations that led to the events. But for a moment, Finn's faith in the sandwich is real and profound, almost magical. Finally, it seems that the show makes a statement about the symbols and relics with which people of faith hold sacred. While someone who is Catholic might pray to a picture of Mary or a saint, Finn's prayers to a sandwich, something that our society finds ordinary and mundane, attempt to subvert such a practice. It is through the absurdity and humor of the grilled cheese sandwich that the dominant ideologies of faith, ritual, and practice are placed in question.

While these images capture some of the absurdities of faith, the episode simultaneously deals with more grave issues, as death becomes the central theme. Kurt, an openly gay character on the show, finds that his father has had a serious heart attack, which leaves him unresponsive in intensive care. This leads Kurt to denounce faith altogether, shunning those who try to give him spiritual comfort.

In the midst of Finn's newfound religious awakening and Kurt's father's condition, other characters on the show authentically contemplate their own beliefs and traditions. The episode quickly becomes about the power of prayer as well as God's existence. For example, Sue, the archrival of the glee club, contemplates God's existence, as she questions why God would ever do terrible things to good people. She reminisces, for example, about how her peers would ridicule her older sister with downs syndrome. Towards the end of the episode, even Finn finally denounces his faith as he sings, "Losing my Religion," and says, "I used to think God was up there looking over me. Now I'm not so sure."

While Kurt, Sue, and now Finn believe that God does not exist, let alone answers prayers, the other characters rally around Kurt's father with songs of spirituality in an effort to both comfort themselves and sway Kurt. For example, Mercedes, a friend of Kurt's, takes him to her charismatic church, where she, accompanied by her gospel choir sings, "Bridge Over Troubled Water." Prefacing the song, she says to Kurt in front of the entire congregation, "Kurt, I know you don't believe in God. You don't believe in the power of prayer, and that's ok. To each his own. But you've gotta believe in something; something more than you can touch, taste, or see, because life is too hard to go through it alone without something to hold onto, and without something that's sacred."

One of the last scenes shows Kurt in the hospital room with his father, who remains unresponsive. While, throughout the episodes, Kurt has remained steadfast in his belief that there is no God, he lovingly and tearfully expresses his faith in his father as he pours out his heart. Heeding Mercedes' advice, he says to his father, "I don't believe in God, Dad. But I believe in you. And I believe in us. You and me. That's what's sacred to me. And I'm so sorry that I never got to tell you that." Just as he utters those words, Kurt's father slowly squeezes his hand.

At the conclusion of the episode, the glee club sings "What if God was one of us," by Joan Osborne. With lyrics such as, "What if God was one of us, just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on the bus tryin' to make his way home" the song appropriately wraps up the message of the show, that God exists in the places where one is least expected to find God, such as in humanity, or perhaps, that faith in people and relationships are just as important as faith in the supernatural. While the episode toes the line of status quo beliefs and largely represents middle America's spiritual demographic, the show also

plays an important, albeit subtle, role in critiquing orthodox Christian dogmas, namely the role of prayer, iconography, and the transcendence of God.

My Long Goodbye. The hit comedy, *Scrubs*, written by Bill Lawrence, first aired in 2001. The show features a group of friends who work in a hospital together, and generally serves as a comedic spoof on hit drama shows such as *House*, *E.R.*, and *Grey's Anatomy*. Main character Dr. John Dorian, also known as J.D., serves as the narrator of the show. His character is an effeminate male who is often made fun of for his nerdy demeanor, sensitive emotions, and lack of interest in things such as sports or beer. Throughout the show, J.D. intermittently goes in and out of daydreams, where his mind wanders to humorous situations that reflect his thoughts on real life issues happening at that time on the show. Each episode usually wraps up with J.D.'s often thoughtful summary of the events that took place and how it affected each character.

While the show often deals with issues of death and dying in a flippantly humorous manner, there are glimpses throughout the series where the show gives the viewer a deeper perspective on grief, an afterlife, and the importance of relationships in the midst of suffering. Rarely does the show deal with religious themes, except when it comes to thinking of an afterlife, and even then, some kind of supernatural presence is hardly ever mentioned. The few times that religion or faith is introduced in the show, however, the topic is handled with sensitivity and care, and the episodes usually reflect a more serious spin than the usual slap stick. Throughout the series, we find that several characters consider themselves people of faith, while others are outright atheists. Nurse Roberts, for example, serves as the archetypal Christian who constantly uses Jesus and the bible to place judgment on others' behavior. J.D.'s best friend, Turk, also explains

his faith in God, and that his faith gets him through working at a hospital where people are constantly suffering. A bullheaded and stubborn Dr. Cox, who reluctantly plays the role of J.D.'s mentor, on the other hand, serves as an archetypal atheist who refuses to see faith as reasonable or rational.

In a series of several episodes centered on Nurse Roberts, the show deals with the issues of death and dying and the role of the supernatural in human suffering both humorously and somberly. As is standard when dealing with these issues on the show, however, the viewer is left deeply pondering and questioning, rather than laughing. Therefore, similar to *Glee*, the sitcom may make a few humorous jabs at the role of faith in everyday life, but, in the end, the turn towards a somber ending allows people of faith to relate to the show's overt message while still challenging central doctrines of mainstream Christianity. In this section, we see how this is played out in the series of episodes in Season 5 of *Scrubs* (Braff, 2007; Tennant and Nelli Jr., 2007).

The first of this several-part series begins with a scene where main character Dr. John Dorian (J.D.) consults a patient following a surgery. When the patient's attractive physical therapist shows up, J.D. imagines her as an angel with wings as he admires her appearance. "Oh my god. It's an angel." His fantasy cuts back to reality, where the viewer sees Nurse Roberts standing behind the physical therapist with wings. She says, "That nasty burlesque dancer with syphilis forgot her damn ostrich feathers." As J.D. excuses Nurse Roberts, the sitcom cuts back to fantasy as the nurse flies away with the wings. J.D. briefly notices the strangeness of the image. This image is the first of various similar images where Nurse Roberts becomes a central part of J.D.'s conscience as, throughout the episode, she gives him advice while flying with the angel wings. He

continues to comment on the strangeness of the image. These intermittent occurrences serve as a foreshadowing of events.

Meanwhile, when Elliot and Carla discuss Elliot's premarital cohabitation with her boyfriend Keith, Elliot mentions that "he doesn't even mind living in separate rooms. Living with a guy before marriage makes me feel too whory." An eavesdropping Nurse Roberts, whose character, once again, has always emulated the archetype of fundamentalist Christianity says, "You can live in separate states, but if you're doing the nasty before you get married, your ass is going to burn."

In another episode, Dr. Cox is flustered because everything seems to be going wrong in his personal life, including his wife being bedridden due to pregnancy complications. As he airs all of his dirty laundry to Nurse Roberts, she says, "Does it help to know that Jesus loves you?" He responds, "It does not," to which Nurse Roberts replies, "Well everything happens for a reason." Her rebuttal sends Dr. Cox into a rant, where he sarcastically questions her logic. "Are you really trying to tell me that things like New Orleans, AIDS, sugar free ice cream, crack babies, and Hugh Jackman, and cancer all happen for a reason? Because I'm sorry, but I'm just not buying that." A steadfast Nurse Roberts quotes scripture. "God works all things for good. Romans 8:28." Finally, Dr. Cox, still not buying her method of conversion sardonically responds, "Bull dinkie- Perry Cox 6:1."

From then on, Dr. Cox makes it his mission to dissuade Nurse Roberts from her opinions. He approaches her and says, "Well if it isn't Nurse 'everything happens for a reason.'" He proceeds to spill some of his coffee on purpose as he asks in a sarcastic tone, "Oh! Gosh darn it! I went ahead and spilled some of my coffee. I wonder what the

reason was for that.” Directly following this question, J.D., with whom Dr. Cox has a tumultuous relationship, walks by, only to slip and fall on the spilled coffee, which humorously suggests was the reason Dr. Cox spilled it in the first place. Then, still on the subject, Dr. Cox asks Nurse Roberts, “There is no rhyme or reason to anything! Why can’t you just get that?” Nurse Roberts responds. “Why is it so important that everyone believes what you do?” A confident Dr. Cox rebuts. “Because I’m right and I’m the only one with any proof.” Finally, Nurse Roberts says, “you don’t need proof when the Good Lord fills your heart with faith.” Meanwhile, J.D. is still on the floor, trying to get up, hoping someone will assist him. He storms off in a fury.

Directly following this humorous sequence, another character enters the scene hurriedly, seeking assistance in one of the hospital rooms. Dr. Cox and Nurse Roberts come to find that an eight year old had been stabbed at a grocery store. Dr. Cox, once again, feels this is proof that his argument is the correct one. “Why don’t you go ahead and tell me what the reason is for this?” Just as he figures he is so confident that he had won her over, she says, “there’s a reason for this. God’s gonna show us eventually.”

Dr. Cox, still determined to break Nurse Robert’s spirit, presents to her a man whom he claims is the child’s father. “This is Mr. Peterson. He’s that young lady’s father. And, as you can imagine, he’s having a pretty tough time with all of this, and since you think that everything happens for a reason, I was hoping you could tell him why this happened.” Nurse Roberts humorously points out that the person, is not in fact the child’s father; rather one of the regular characters on the show who delivers the mail to the hospital. “That’s not her father. That’s a delivery guy in a sweater.” The delivery man, offended by her abrasive response, breaks his “father-figure” character, saying, “It’s

Lloyd [his name].” When Dr. Cox slaps him over the head and asks him to stay in character, Lloyd shows off his less than ideal acting abilities by proclaiming, “She’s my world!” in reference to his so-called daughter. Just when Dr. Cox is at his breaking point once again, asking Nurse Roberts what she would hypothetically say if Lloyd were, in fact, the real father, the woman examining the girl’s X-Ray says, “Oh my God, there’s a tumor the size of a golf ball right where the knife went in. If we hadn’t found this she’d be a goner.” Nurse Roberts turns to Dr. Cox and says, “I think that’s what I’d say.”

Dr. Cox, still furious that Nurse Roberts has remained steadfast in her argument, later suggests that the previous events were merely a coincidence. “The knife, it just happened to go into the exact right spot. You don’t get a win for dumb luck.” At this point, Nurse Roberts has finally had enough of Dr. Cox’s arrogant rants, and vehemently replies:

Look! If that’s how you choose to see the world, then so be it! But don’t you dare try to take this away from me! I’ve been coming in here every day for 24 years, watching children die and seeing good people suffer. And if I quit believing that there was a bigger plan behind all of this, well I just wouldn’t be able to show up tomorrow, so just STOP IT!

When Dr. Cox finally apologizes, Nurse Roberts says, “You would be surprised at how many bad things happen around here for a reason.” Dr. Cox admits that he wishes he could believe her argument. Finally, Nurse Roberts asks him how his marriage has been since his wife had her prenatal surgery, to which Dr. Cox is forced to admit that his marriage has been better than ever.

As the episode wraps up, main character J.D. suggests that maybe all things do happen for a reason, as he highlights the various moments that turned out for the best in that particular episode. Just as the viewer seems to think the show has taken a particular

slant on the argument, J.D. says, "Be careful though, because around here when you start to believe that bad things happen for a reason, it hurts that much more when they don't." He says this as the gang somberly gathers around the hospital when Dr. Cox approaches them asking, "What's with all the sad faces?" J.D. has to break the bad news. "Laverne [Nurse Roberts] was in a car accident on her way to work. She's in a coma and unresponsive."

The message here is vague and convoluted at best. Therefore, when reconsidering this chapter's previous statements about television networks' pressures to maintain cultural familiarity due to fear of audience retention, it seems that this episode is doing just that. As White suggests:

The contradictions and multiplicity of views help explain a program's appeal to a broad potential audience.... An awareness of this field of multiple meanings as the work of ideology is crucial to understanding the effectiveness and appeal of television as a mass medium (White, 1992, pp. 139-140).

It is clear then, in this particular episode, that the program's vague conclusion is intentional. The viewer is left having to decide for him or herself about the role of a higher power in human suffering. When considering a variety of television programs, "Viewers consent to watch, and to submit to its array of appeals, in exchange for the text and the possibility of identifying particular meanings, mobilizing the voices that seem to speak "to them," (White, 1992, p. 143). In this case, many Christian viewers are easily able to relate to Nurse Roberts' traditional beliefs, while some Christian viewers or atheistic viewers, etc. might identify with Dr. Cox. Though many Christians will relate to Nurse Roberts' ideology, J.D.'s ending statement, however, does seem to suggest that not everything happens for a reason, which challenges the traditional religious belief that

God has a greater purpose for all things. This age old dilemma concerning God's role in the presence of evil and suffering has caused great debate among theologians, but in more progressive theological circles, some scholars have argued that God does not pre-ordain all things, which therefore, places God's omnipotence into question. This subsequently, becomes a huge challenge to the more traditional and conservative teachings of the Christian Church. Once again, while this episode still privileges a traditional ideology and only subtly pushes the envelope by providing alternative views, it opens opportunities for the average church-attende to at least pause for further reflection.

Animated Irreverence: *The Simpsons* and *South Park*

Rhetorical theorists have argued that animation has the ability to be irreverent and politically incorrect in ways that traditional sitcoms do not. For the past decade, animated film and television has been recognized for its capacity for social critique, due to its fantasy like quality. Bruce (2001) argues that cartoons are like "rhetorical heirs of the nursery rhyme...Cartoons may say, do, and show all kinds of things that would be 'forbidden' in more serious cultural forms" (p. 230). Shows such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park* are capable of de-mystifying and deconstructing longstanding religious traditions and institutions through animated comedy. This section will look at the ways these two animated features have played this role, and how each is unique from the other in its challenge of religious dogma and authority.

The Simpsons. Since its genesis, the hit animated program *The Simpsons* has devoted a great deal of its material to religious humor. The show, which features a nuclear family that lives in the mythical city "Springfield," satirizes the mundane American life as the characters symbolize archetypes of various American beliefs,

personalities, and behaviors (Cantor, 1999). Scholars and fans alike began to see the trend toward religious satire, and nearly 70% of the show's episodes have religious references (Lewis, 2002). While the show certainly uses religion as a comedic catalyst, Keller (1992) and Lewis (2002) argue that the show pokes fun at quotidian religious expression but does not cross the boundary into undercutting religious authority. Trammel (2000) argues that the show "proves it is possible to produce a profitable, respected program that credits religion as a part of the American lived experience" (as cited in Lewis, 2002, p. 1).

And that is exactly what goes on in the everyday life of the Simpson family. The traditional family regularly attends church at First Church of Springfield, which resembles a typical Protestant church, where the Simpson children attend Sunday School and learn about topics such as Forgiveness, Mercy, and Hell (Bowler, 2001). The church is a part of the Western Branch of American Reform Presbylutheranism, a name that humorously plays on the variety of different Christian denominations in America.

Reverend Lovejoy serves as the pastor of First Church of Springfield, and he represents an archetypal fundamentalist or "fire and brimstone" preacher. With sermons titles such as "Today's Topic: He knows what you did last summer" and "God welcomes His victims," Lovejoy's sermons often present scare tactics in an effort to convert non-believers (Dart, 2001). Furthermore, Lovejoy is often judgmental and insensitive to other religions or lifestyles. While he is quick to condemn gambling, for example, the humor lies in the fact that the church often sponsors events such as Bingo and Monte Carlo nights. Additionally, he is quick to point the finger at others, as his harsh words are latent with condemnation. When he finds, in one episode, that Homer has decided not to come

to church, he and his wife, Helen, accuse Homer of staying home to binge drink, and Rev. Lovejoy makes the ever so sardonic comment, “let us not glory in Homer’s binge drinking. There but for the grace of God goes Marge herself [to church][isn’t this a reference to the binge drinking?]” (as cited in Symynkywicz, 2010). Therefore, Rev. Lovejoy quickly becomes the critique of the hypocrisies of organized religions, especially of those that claim acts of love and service to be at the focal point of their faith, while they simultaneously use words to judge those who don’t fit within their rigid boundaries.

The Simpsons’ reaction to church serves as a parody of many middle-Americans. All of the Simpsons find church boring but a necessary part of their weekly routine. Bart is found in one episode criticizing the pastor for his boring sermons as he makes snoring noises. Even Homer’s encounter with God humorously reinforces the stereotype that church is boring. In an episode, he and God argue about the necessity of church, to which God agrees that church and Rev. Lovejoy aren’t all that great. Finally, though, when Homer agrees to go back, he falls asleep in the pew. Another time, the whole family falls asleep in an Easter service, after which Marge awakes to find that Judgment Day is upon them and her family is being ushered into hell. After pondering why they aren’t going to heaven she resolves, “Oh right. The sins.”

Prayer at the dinner table is another staple that characterizes the family. Once, Homer prays over a meal and says:

Dear Lord, thank you for this microwave bounty, even though we don’t deserve it. I mean...our kids are uncontrollable hellions. Pardon my French, but they act like savages! Did You see them at the picnic? Of course You did: You’re everywhere, You’re omnivorous. O Lord! Why did you spite me with this family? (as cited in Symynkywicz, 2010).

This prayer is a prime example of poking fun of every day American religious behavior. First, it deals with the fact that the food wasn't actually made by the family, rather microwaved, a daily routine for many American families. Second, Homer mentions that God is everywhere, or as he puts it, omnivorous (rather than omniscient), a nod to the kind of dissonance that exists between lay people and clergy members in their uses and understandings of theological jargon.

Furthermore, when dealing with arguments, the Simpsons often refer to biblical passages. The humor lies in the way they deal with such issues. For example, when the Simpsons argue over whether or not to let Otto, the bus driver, stay at their house, Marge asks, "doesn't the Bible say, 'Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me,'" to which Homer creatively replies, "Yes but doesn't the Bible also say, 'thou shalt not take moochers into thy...hut?'" (as cited in Pinsky, 1999).

Other minor characters often play roles in engendering religious themes and conversations. For example, Ned Flanders, neighbor of the Simpsons, is an evangelical Christian who graduated from Oral Roberts University. The character is often portrayed as Homer's uptight, naïve, yet generous neighbor, who practices his faith at all costs. For Ned, everything revolves around his faith, even his doorbell, which rings to the tune of the famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress is our God." Additionally, Flanders is committed to keeping the Sabbath, tithing, and even staying kosher, "just in case." His two sons are equally as zealous, and play video games such as Billy Graham's Bible Blaster (Lewis, 2002). As a neighbor to Homer, Ned is often thought of as a nuisance, although there are times when Homer shares deep respect for him (Lewis, 2002). As his character represents an ardent and fervent yet simultaneously charitable and virtuous faith (Pinsky,

2001), he symbolizes characteristics that many secular and mainline Americans often project onto evangelical Christians.

There is much more that can be said about the role of religion in *The Simpsons*. However, it is clear that the show certainly plays several roles when it comes to religious issues. While the cartoon serves as a prime vehicle for depicting quotidian American life and religious practice, and therefore, emulates many middle class Americans (once again, the show mimics the daily norms and habits of its intended audience) when it comes to their beliefs about church, prayer, and ritual, the show also serves as a critique of the extreme forms of religion that exist within the American framework, namely fundamentalism. The critique mostly comes in the form of the character development of the Lovejoy family, and perhaps sometimes through Ned Flanders. The show, through these developments, aims at pointing out some of the contemporary hypocrisies of fundamentalist Christianity, especially the stereotype of the overly judgmental fundamentalist. Through a more extended reading of the cartoon, one would find the overall message points to the fact that most American Christians do not behave in this way; rather, most behave similarly to the Simpson family, yet the behavior of those on the margins must be questioned.

South Park. Like *The Simpsons*, the hit animated program, *South Park*, also frequently uses religion as a reference point for laughter. The hit show, created by Matt Stone and Trey Parker, originally aired on Comedy Central in 1997. Subsequently, the show, which is intended for a mature audience, has gained a reputation for its crude and vulgar language, satire, and its ability to ridicule a plethora of cultural issues. It has been highly controversial, yet extremely successful. In fact, in 2007, the show made *Time*

magazine's list of "100 Best TV Shows of All Time," claiming the show has been "America's best source of rapid-fire satire for a decade now, blasting hypocrites left and right" (Poniewozik, 2007). It has also received recognition from *Rolling Stone*, VH1, AOL, and *Entertainment Weekly* among others for its iconic humor and social critique (need to find citation). It has received several Emmy nominations, and in 2006, Comedy Central received a Peabody Award for the show's ability to serve as a social commentary on American life (Leonard, 2006).

The show centers on four main characters, Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Eric Cartman, and Kenny McCormick, all of whom live in the fictional village of South Park, which is based on the South Park basin of Colorado. Stan, an average American kid, and Kyle, the only Jewish kid in the group, are best friends, while Cartman plays the role of a racist anti-Semite, and Kenny, a child from an economically disadvantaged background. Throughout the show, these four deal with myriad incidents ranging from the every day to incredible. The characters often serve the role of providing reason and critique of authority figures whom they believe are irrational and hypocritical when it comes to moments of controversy and moral issues (Fallows, 2002).

The show's religious themes have been prevalent since its inception. In 1992, creators Stone and Parker created an animated short called "The Spirit of Christmas: Jesus vs. Frosty" (Parker & Stone, 1992). In the short, the four characters build a snowman, which comes to life and kills Kenny. After Stan yells the infamous *South Park* line "Oh my God. He [Frosty] killed Kenny," the characters call upon Santa, who also turns out to be evil. Finally, when just Stan and Kyle are left, they have an epiphany that Jesus is the only one who can save Christmas. They summon baby Jesus, who

decapitates the snowman as he hurls his halo at Frosty as they yell out in thanks “Jesus! Our Savior!” After all is said and done, the two wrap up the clip with the message that Christmas isn’t about Frosty or Santa, or even Jesus; rather, Christmas is about presents, a humorous reference to the way the secular world has made meaning out of Christmas. Later, the short was remade as a Christmas video card, which instantly went viral. When Comedy Central got hold of the video, *South Park* was created as one of the channel’s first staples.

When it comes to religion, *South Park* centers on the issues of authority as well as absurdities. While *South Park* targets all cultural and religious topics ranging from Scientology to Islam, Christianity has become a popular target. For example, in one episode titled “Red Hot Catholic Love,” the show deals with the controversial issue of child molestation within the Catholic Church (Parker, 2002).

The episode starts off in a church, as the priest announces a boys boating retreat. Stan’s father, a member of the congregation, instantly daydreams of drunken priests and young boys getting “Christian Action.” Stan’s father subsequently cautions the other congregants about sending their young children off with priests, based on the recent sex scandals. The congregation automatically grows suspicious of their own priest, Father Maxi, and vow to investigate. They hire a counselor who interrogates the boys and asks them, “Did Father Maxi ever try to put something in your butt?”

While the children are under questioning, the parents sit outside and decide that they have had enough, and they resolve to become atheists. The scene shifts to the four boys sitting on the sidewalk as Stan asks, “What would the priest ever want to put up our butts?” As they all consider the answers, Cartman humorously suggests, “It makes

perfect sense. Run with me on this. If you eat food, you crap out your butt, right? Well if you eat food and crap out your butt, then maybe if you stuck food up your butt, you would crap out your mouth.” After Kyle accuses Cartman’s logic of being ludicrous, the parents come by and tell them all they are atheists now, which confuses the children further. Later, Cartman proves Kyle wrong, as he shows he can crap out of his mouth. Throughout the episode, this image become more prevalent, as the theory of shoving food up the butt and crapping out of the mouth has turned into a nation wide phenomenon, as health experts, with no evidence whatsoever, declare it is better for the body to eat in this way. This causes the whole town of South Park to change its eating habits. The parallel storyline to the Catholic priest scandal signifies the role unquestioned authority plays in engendering religious behavior.

Subsequently, the episode turns to a meeting of priests, led by Father Maxi, during which all the priests try to come up with ways to keep the boys they have molested from going to the public, because it is bad for the church. Father Maxi is immediately taken aback by these suggestions, having been ignorant of the fellow priests’ behaviors. He suggests, “The problem is that children are being molested, not that they are reporting it.” A confused priest replies, “How do you mean?” When it appears that all of the priests in the room, except Father Maxi, have engaged in sexual misconduct in their parishes, Father Maxi says, “We are here to bring the light of God, not harm the innocent,” to which all the priests laugh unanimously. Someone then chimes in saying, “Father, having sex with boys is part of the Catholic priest’s way of life.” When Father Maxi realizes the issue is beyond his control, he decides to bring the conflict all the way to the Vatican.

When he finally arrives at the Vatican, Father Maxi finds the same arguments as he did in South Park, that the problem lies with the children reporting the incidents, rather than the incidents themselves. When Father Maxi says, “Not get caught?? No! I think what we should do is not have sex with boys,” the crowd heckles him. Then the leader reports that “it is not written anywhere in the holy document of Vatican Law that having sex with the boys is wrong.” Father Maxi suggests changing the document, which further angers the crowd of priests. How could Father suggest that the document could ever be changed? Then someone mentions that the document cannot be changed because the document cannot be found. To this, Father Maxi becomes determined to find the document of Vatican Law, which results in him going deep into the catacombs. When he finally finds the document, he praises God for showing him the way.

Father Maxi returns to the Vatican with the document and once again suggests a reformation. At this point, the Pope finally suggests that they seek a higher power to resolve the issue. Then, a bright light shines throughout the room, and a giant spider appears in the Vatican that they call “The great queen spider.” She says, “What do you ask of me?” The leader says, “Great queen spider, we wish to change one of the Vatican rules.” When the spider suggests that the law cannot be changed, Father Maxi bursts into a frenzy. “Alright that does it. I have had enough. You people have completely lost touch with the outside world. You sit in this big room with your queen spider and none of it applies to what being a Catholic is all about...to hell with the holy document of Vatican law.” As he rips the document in half, the Vatican begins to crumble. At the end of the episode, in front of the destroyed Vatican, Father Maxi sums everything up with a meaningful message.

All that is dead are your stupid laws and rules. You have forgotten what being Catholic is all about- this book (points to the Bible). You see these are just stories. Stories that are meant to help guide people in the right direction. Love your neighbor. Be a good person. That's it! And when you start turning those stories into literal translations of hierarchies and power, well you end up with this. People are losing faith because they don't see how what you've turned the religion into applies to them. They've lost touch with any idea of any kind of religion and when they have no mythology to try and live their lives by, well they just start spewing a bunch of crap out of their mouths.

He says this as the scene ironically portrays one of the adults crapping out of his mouth, dumbfounded by Father Maxi's words, as the parallel stories of the episode finally coalesce. Father Maxi finishes his speech with some inspiration. "Look I'm proud to be a Catholic, but I'm a Catholic in the real world -in today's world. It is time for you all to do that too. It is time for change."

This monologue causes all of the adults to stop being atheists and turn to God for forgiveness. Finally, when Stan asks, "Does this mean we have to go to church again," his father replies, "No, it means we get to, son. It means we get to," as gentle inspirational music plays in the background. Stan's father's response and the inspirational music serve as a humorous summary of the episode, as the tone is clearly sardonic in nature.

Here, the viewer clearly sees that the cartoon pulls out all the stops in its aim of bringing to light the severity of child molestation within the Catholic church, not to mention the church's seemingly irrational justification for papal authority and documentation. This kind of critique is more akin to the political comedy, which we will explore further in this chapter. Whereas *The Simpsons* often toes the line in its critiques of religious behavior and practice, sticking somewhat to the status quo, *South Park* has

been known for its aggressive critiques of unjust systems, even if it means becoming unpopular amongst certain audiences. And, perhaps it is able to do this because it has successfully reached a niche group, the mature audience, and isn't interested in catering to a large population, as seen in previous cases throughout this chapter. Additionally, it may have more freedom to take the kind of risks it does perhaps because *South Park* is more contemporary than its counterpart, *The Simpsons*. Nonetheless, *South Park* has paved the way for animated programs to behave similarly.

Political Comedy: Overt Religious Criticism

Whereas the animated feature and the sitcom have their moments in challenging religious authoritative structures, practices, and dogmas, contemporary political comedians have plowed full steam ahead in their pursuit of undermining religious institutions and practices, especially those that utilize power to marginalize groups of people. It is here where we see critical rhetorical theory come into play the most of the three television genres examined in this chapter.

For example, Bill Maher, a self proclaimed atheist and host of Comedy Central's hit show *Real Time with Bill Maher*, consistently undermines faith, especially the Christian faith, because, as he sees it, faith is merely a crutch for humanity and there is no rationale behind having any religious convictions. When speaking about the unique character of America as an overly religious and simultaneously industrialized country, Maher suggests, "We as a nation are unenlightened because of religion. I do believe that. I think religion stops people from thinking. I think it justifies crazies." He has also been quoted saying, "Religion is a neurological disorder" (as cited in Baker, 2005)

His recent documentary, *Religulous* highlights these themes without pause for consideration of the middle American believer (Maher, 2008). The documentary portrays Maher traveling throughout the world, finding religious people to talk to and discovering various important religious landmarks. Mostly, the documentary is quite humorous, as it pokes fun of absurdities of religious institutions and the absolute extreme ends of the religious spectrums that people see in the media every day. In a humorous manner, Maher says, “Religions are maintained by people, people who can’t get laid, because sex is the first great earthly pleasure. But if you can’t get that, power is a pretty good second one. And that’s what religion gives to people. Power. Power is sex for people who can’t get or don’t want or aren’t any good at sex itself.”

While the previous quote is latent with some serious connotations about the role of religion in society, Maher is much more overt in some of his criticism, keeping power and violence as a central theme of his overall message. As he stands in Israel, he says, “It seems peaceful, but this is where the world will end. The irony of religion is that because of its power to divert man to destructive courses, the world actually could come to an end.” For Maher, religion is clearly violence in disguise, a tool with which people use to motivate others toward violent and oppressive behavior. He says in the documentary, “The plain fact is religion must die for mankind to live. The hour is getting very late to be able to indulge in having key decisions made by religious people, by irrationalists, by those who would steer the ship of state, not by a compass, but by the equivalent of reading the entrails of a chicken.”

While Bill Maher plays the role of vehement atheist, Jon Stewart takes a different approach. Host of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, the Jewish

comedian is not quite as abrasive as Maher, yet still overt in his central critiques of religious power and authority and of the irrationality of faith. For example, Stewart is quoted saying, “Yes, reason has been a part of organized religion, ever since two nudists took dietary advice from a talking snake” (Stewart, 2004) which humorously suggests that reason has never been a part of organized religion. Like Maher, he sees religion as historically and fundamentally violent. He has commented on the irony of the fact that most world religions are fundamentally against war, yet war has historically broken out over religious clashes. “Most world religions denounced war as a barbaric waste of human life. We treasured the teachings of these religions so dearly that we frequently had to wage war in order to impose them on other people” (Stewart, 2004).

While Stewart pokes fun at any religion and its aims in gaining power for purposes of oppressing marginal groups, Christianity certainly plays a central role in his critique. When speaking about the American public, the presidency, and the role of religion in both, Stewart says:

Yes, the long war on Christianity. I pray that one day we may live in an America where Christians can worship freely! In broad daylight! Openly wearing the symbols of their religion...perhaps around their necks? And maybe, dare I dream it? Maybe one day there can be an openly Christian President. Or, perhaps, 43 of them...consecutively (2004).

There are times, like the previous quote, when Stewart’s humor is highly sarcastic, and there are other times, when his criticisms are blatant. For example, when the earthquakes in Haiti happened, Stewart was quick to vehemently attack those that were not willing to come together in support of Haiti. He opens his segment saying, “Whenever something this horrific happens everyone comes together. Everyone. (Sarcastically) Almost everyone” (Stewart, 2010). Then the scene shoots to Rush Limbaugh, who claims that the

earthquake will play into the hands of the Obama Administration. But the real Stewart punch line happens when he highlights host of the Christian Broadcasting Network's *The 700 Club* Pat Robertson's reactions to the earthquake. Stewart transitions into Robertson's comments saying, "I guess Rush Limbaugh is not the one you turn to in times of crisis...in times like these you turn to men of God." Then the scene cuts to Robertson, who says:

You know, Christie. Something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people may not want to talk about it. They got together and swore a pact to the Devil. They said, 'We will serve you if you get us free from the prince.' True story. But ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other.

This causes Jon Stewart to simply say, "Shut your Piehole, Old Man!" He then continues, "Out of all the things! Out of all the things that you could draw on from your religion to bring comfort to a devastated people and region?" As he pulls out a rather large Bible, he sarcastically says, "Look how big your book is!" He then opens the Bible and, humorously playing into the way Christian fundamentalists sometimes use the Bible to justify a certain agenda, quotes scripture. 'The Lord is close to the brokenhearted. He rescues those who are crushed in spirit. Fear thou not for I am with thee. Be not dismayed for I am thy God. I will strengthen thee.' A now angered Stewart finally says: "But you decided to go with 'Tough titties Devil Folk!' Have you read this book?" Again, quoting scripture, he says, "'From the depths of the earth, you will again bring me up. Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken, nor my covenant of peace be removed,' says the Lord who has compassion on you." Even angrier still, Stewart yells, "I mean that

almost sounds like it's about F&*%ing earthquakes! You got all this, and you went with an urban legend about a deal with the devil... These are terrible events. Can't we put aside ideology for a second!"

Rants such as these are commonplace for Stewart, especially when the ludicrous statements of those whom he attacks go deeper than surface level humor. Here the viewer sees Stewart's true passion for humanity come through, but the viewer also sees that, for Stewart, religion has the potential to give people hope, but ultimately thus far, he is disappointed with the way religious leaders have, instead, used religion to condemn individuals and groups.

Therefore, while Maher aims to truly dissuade people of faith altogether, Stewart seems to care more about the role religion plays in political structures and hegemony, rather than faith itself. In other words, when faith goes public, Jon Stewart takes issue. He doesn't seem to mind that the majority of Americans practice their religious faith privately, so long as it doesn't bother or harm anyone else. This seems evident when Stewart says, "Religion. It's given people hope in a world torn apart by religion" (Stewart, 2004).

Conclusion

It is clear that television has, especially more recently, played a role in critiquing various forms of religious life and expression, especially within an American context. While the animated comedy may be able to critique religious practices and dogmas more frequently and with more fervor than the sitcom, the sitcom has still found its role in utilizing religion as a source of humor. Moreover, political satire has certainly found a niche in this area. Nonetheless, each genre has its own way of dealing with American

religious behavior and critiquing those expressions that seem less credulous, or perhaps, more unjust. In an increasingly postmodern and religiously plural society, the desire to see these critiques within media frameworks has increased, and furthermore, the media industry has, in turn, felt more autonomy in making riskier choices about the kinds of cultural symbols to subvert. In this chapter we have explored just a few examples of how power structures have become unmasked through genres such as cartoons, sitcoms, and political comedy (McKerrow, 1989; West, 1988). The next chapter will explore the role *The Colbert Report* has played in subverting these cultural symbols, and how Colbert's rhetorical critique of religious authority and doctrine plays a unique role, that firstly, distances itself from other political comedians, and secondly, has allowed Colbert to become an authority figure on issues of faith.

Chapter Four: A Rhetorical Analysis of *The Colbert Report*: Constructing the Conservative Religio-Political Persona

As discussed in the last chapter, television, especially political comedy on television, has played a larger role in recent critiques of religious systems. Lauren Feldman (2007) argues that political entertainment has played a role in challenging the journalism industry. She states that the *The Daily Show* is an example of a ‘critical incident’ (Gerbner, 1973), which means that the show performs the function of reevaluating power relationships within journalism and media. In other words, *The Daily Show* is a powerful force to be reckoned with (Peyser, 2003, Rich, 2003), and ultimately serves as an alternative to traditional journalism, which has caused journalists to reconsider conventional journalistic practices (Gray et al., 2009; Jones, 2004). *The Daily Show*’s highly successful spin-off, *The Colbert Report* is certainly no exception to these claims. In fact, the show aims at mocking pre-existing ideologies for the sake of deconstruction, a truly postmodern take on journalism (Baym, 2009; Baym, 2010). Furthermore, *The Colbert Report* delves into new journalistic territories as it tackles religion and politics, not objectively, but subjectively through covert satire, reminding the viewer that perhaps the media are never objective.

This chapter, then, will highlight the foundation of Stephen Colbert’s Christian conservative character and *The Colbert Report*’s role in challenging both the traditional journalism industry and status quo norms as it analyzes Stephen Colbert’s rhetorical

strategies for poststructural and critical deconstruction of conservative Christian norms and cultural symbols.

This chapter argues that the character of Stephen Colbert utilizes critical rhetorical theory as a framework for his show, thus creating a conservative religio-political persona in order to critique it. As discussed in the previous chapter, critical rhetorical theory is the study of how researchers understand the use of rhetoric in the uncovering of power relations (McKerrow, 1989; West, 1988). Building upon Feldman's claims (2007) about *The Daily Show*, I argue that *The Colbert Report* not only reconsiders power relationships within journalism, but also reevaluates power and domination within the political, religious, and cultural spheres. The chapter will also highlight how Colbert's humor distances itself from that of Stewart or Maher, and how his own extra-textual status as a person of faith has allowed Colbert to become an authority figure on religion, especially among Christian viewers.

Methodology

This chapter will rely upon interpretive textual analysis of episodes of *The Colbert Report* and excerpts that are included on the accompanying website, Colbert Nation (J. Fiske & Hartley, 1978; Seiter, 1992). I define textual analysis as the study of communication, in this case, through the medium of television. Borrowing from Lasswell (1948), I ask the questions, "Who says what, to whom, why, in what channel and with what effect" (p. 46). More specifically, this chapter will rely upon structural analysis, which aims at uncovering the meaning of texts and how that meaning is transmitted (Barthes, 1972). The chapter relies on structural analysis in order to

deconstruct specific episodes of *The Colbert Report* that parody Christianity, making an argument for *The Colbert Report* as critical rhetoric.

While there are a plethora of examples of Christian parody on *The Colbert Report*, this chapter will analyze four specific instances where Colbert, playing the role of conservative Christian pundit, gets to the heart of his Christian character in order to undermine certain hegemonic Christian structures. The four examples were chosen for several reasons. First and most importantly, the four segments highlighted in this chapter were the segments about which the participants in this study were most passionate. As chapter five will discuss, each participant was given eight to ten episodes to watch, but they spent the most time and fervor reflecting upon the segments discussed in this chapter. This marks an important component of the findings. It seems that these particular segments engender something with which myriad young adults can identify. Second, the four examples highlighted in this chapter each serves a different and unique function. The first is an example of Colbert's mockery of the anti-gay movement, where he uses parody throughout the segment to make his case. The second is an example of Christian rhetoric and parody on one of Colbert's most popular segments, "The Word," during which he challenges Christian and biblical authority. Utilizing monologue mixed with text, this segment uses humorous contradictions and plays on words to engender laughter from the viewer. The third segment is an example of when Colbert's faith collides with his character as he attempts to sort out the recent comments made by Glenn Beck about churches that focus primarily on social justice, which simultaneously serves as a parody of the journalism industry's commitment to objectivity. His subsequent interview with Rev. Jim Hunter further reveals his alignment with liberal Christian

viewpoints. The final segment, which builds on the previous section, further elucidates Colbert's desire to create space for liberal Christian viewpoints through an interview with liberal evangelical leader, Tony Campolo. Furthermore, his ability to speak with figures from various Christian denominations allows him to appeal to myriad Christian viewers. This chapter, then, lays the groundwork for understanding why a celebrity like Stephen Colbert has a certain amount of authority amongst young adults on religious issues.

Truthiness: Creating the Conservative Religio-Political Character

Stephen Colbert, the host of *The Colbert Report*, originally played a correspondent on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, during which he became popular as the host of *The Daily Show*'s segment called "This Week in God." In his segment, Colbert reported various events that dealt with religion, and more often, he reported on religious issues that had become highly politicized. In this vein, Colbert played the role of an overly zealous unwavering Christian, which served as a parody of those in society who actually behave this way. He was so successful that Comedy Central decided to develop Colbert's character even further to create a separate show, *The Colbert Report*, which airs right after *The Daily Show*. And, on October 17, 2005, what became a highly successful program aired on Comedy Central.

The incessant deconstruction and demystification of cultural symbols is seen clearly from the show's genesis to date. The premise of *The Colbert Report* lies in his pilot episode, during which Colbert created the word truthiness, which later became Merriam Webster's 2005 Word of The Year. Truthiness, according to Merriam Webster, means "truth that comes from the gut, not books" and "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts of facts known to be true." In other

words, Colbert believes that truth is no longer about what people know based on facts, rather truth is something that people feel in their gut, thus the creation of the word truthiness, and thus the object of Colbert's satire. As Baym (2009) argues, "Of course, in the multilayered world of Colbert, the concept of truthiness functions as challenge to those who would disregard fact to preserve belief" (p. 135). Colbert exemplifies truthiness when he says; "anyone can read the news to you. I promise to feel the news at you" (2005).

The show plays on the very notion of gut feeling versus factual knowledge in each episode as Stephen Colbert plays the role of an overly emotional conservative pundit who claims to know the truth. Additionally, his interviews with various people from journalists to politicians to religious figures constantly evoke the notion of truthiness in the show's guests through Colbert's aggressive satirical interrogations. This framework, then, is where one can see a rhetorical distance between Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Whereas, Jon Stewart utilizes overt liberal punditry in order to cast laughable criticism on the United States political system, Stephen Colbert's tactics are far more covert, as he plays a conservative fictional character, when in reality, the program is a parody of conservatism. In an out of character interview, Colbert says, "It's the friction between the reality, or the truly held concerns of the person and the farcical concerns that I have, or my need to seem important as opposed to actually understanding what's true... where those two things meet is where the comedy happens" (as cited in Baym, 2009, p. 133).

Colbert's critical rhetoric is evident when self-proclaimed feminists Jane Fonda and Gloria Steinem appear on the show (2006) to promote their new radio program dedicated to women. In the midst of their explanations about the premise of the program,

Colbert audaciously interrupts them and directs them to “the kitchen” where they put on aprons and make apple pie, America’s favorite. This image clearly represents a satirical deconstruction of gender roles as Colbert humorously identifies the frictions of pre-existing and newly existing, and often competing “truths,” those being the feminist movement and the traditional role of women in the household. In this vein, then, parody and satire become tools for deconstruction and demystification.

Evangelical Christian Truthiness

The concept of truthiness certainly plays a role in the show’s overall embrace of religious irreverence. For Colbert, evangelicalism, especially conservative evangelicalism, has become an accurate example of truthiness played out in the lives of everyday Americans. Because evangelical Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the only means of salvation as articulated for them in the Bible passage John 14:6, a belief that characterizes as well as mobilizes the evangelical movement, it seems likely that evangelical Christians would be the object of satire on *The Colbert Report*.

Colbert’s parody of evangelical Christianity is evident on April 16, 2009, when *The Colbert Report* aired a fake commercial that parodied The National Organization for Marriage’s public service announcement that aired on mainstream television called “The Gathering Storm,” which was a direct response to Iowa and New York’s decisions to lift their states’ bans on gay marriage. The original commercial showed various people throughout all walks of life in the midst of ominous clouds and lighting in the background. In the announcement, these people advocate that unions between people of the same-sex are harmful to society and the family for various reasons.

The Colbert Report's parody of the original commercial was called "The Colbert Coalition's Anti-Gay Marriage Ad" (2009). In the segment, Stephen Colbert showed the original commercial, after which he said, "I love that ad. It's like watching the 700 Club and the Weather Channel at the same time." After quite a bit of monologue, during which Colbert's character vehemently articulates his disdain for these new responses to the marriage amendments [or "developments in the marriage debate" maybe?], he shows his version of the advertisement.

The overtly homoerotic commercial starts out as a complete mockery, saying, "The storm is coming...a giant gay storm. The winds are blowing in from the east, and winds are blowing in from the west. Before long they will be blowing each other," as ominous clouds close in on the screen. Throughout the commercial, various people share their sentiments about gay marriage as they stand amidst the clouds, much like in the original commercial.

For example, one man exclaims, "Did you know that if all 50 states approve gay marriage, straight marriage becomes illegal?" One heterosexual couple suggests that, as a normal heterosexual couple, they don't want to see gay couples and all the fun they have. "We're a perfectly normal, totally happy heterosexual couple, and I don't need gay couples flaunting how much fun they're having." Another man proclaims, "I like gay people, but only as hilarious best friends in TV and movies," which directly mocks those who are opposed to gay marriage, but still enjoy various movies and television shows with gay characters in them, such as *Will and Grace*.

Later in the Colbert ad, the same married man who was in a "normal heterosexual relationship" becomes attracted to another man as part of the commercial depicts a well-

built man caught in a thunderstorm while the married man admires him from a distance, as he gets soaking wet from the rain. Finally, at the end of the commercial, Stephen Colbert appears as the clouds lift and a rainbow emerges. He says, “But there is hope. Join the Colbert Coalition, A rainbow of proud people, coming together in a commercial...”

This parody, which juxtaposes itself in contrast to the original, is a profound example of the kind of deconstruction that exists on *The Colbert Report*, and Colbert’s framework for critical reflection. It is evident that Colbert utilizes several pre-existing cultural signs in order to demystify them. For example, the Rainbow Coalition serves as an ironic deconstruction of the Christian Coalition as Colbert wittily uses the rainbow, a prominent symbol of the gay rights movement to undercut the Coalition’s anti-gay agenda. Furthermore, the overt homoeroticism that is evident throughout the video plays the role of parodying those who believe that gay people exemplify a specific stereotype, that gay people are overly lustful, promiscuous, and effeminate.

The Word: “American Orthodox”

On December 4, 2006, Stephen Colbert performed one of his regular segments called “The Word,” during which he spoke about the state of evangelical Christianity. He introduced the sketch by stating that the evangelical movement was searching for a leader following Ted Haggard’s dismissal from the presidency of the National Association of Evangelicals after his sex and drug scandal. “Now Nation, it’s been a tough month for Christian leaders. First Ted Haggard was forced to step down as the president of the National Association of Evangelicals when he admitted NOT doing crystal meth with a gay hooker he did NOT have sex with.” Then Colbert speaks about the new candidate,

Reverend Joel Hunter, who was also forced to step down after he urged the evangelical movement to “broaden its agenda to include fighting poverty and fighting global warming,”

Colbert added his own sentiments to Hunter’s comment. “While you’re at it, why not throw in collective farms and the 5 year plan, Comrade Reverend Hunter. Well the Coalition told him to stick those ideas right up the old Tabernacle.” Colbert continued, stating that evangelical leaders didn’t share Hunter’s vision and were “deathly afraid of being labeled a liberal by other Christians, media, talk radio. Which brings us to tonight’s Word: American Orthodox.”

The Word has been a segment on *The Colbert Report* since its birth. In fact, truthiness was the first “Word” of the show. “The Word” is a point in the show when Stephen Colbert performs a monologue about the word or phrase he chooses, in this case American Orthodox, while the screen interjects witty text. Colbert introduces American Orthodox by continuing his original thoughts about the Hunter debacle mentioned above (2006).

So the Christian Coalition are afraid they will be called liberals. I don’t blame them. After all, there’s nothing more Christian than refusing to do good works because you might be called a name, especially the name liberal! Because one thing we know for sure. Jesus was a conservative!

As he says this, the screen flashes “Ascended by his own Bootstraps,” a mockery of the conservative ideal that one can climb the economic ladder by working hard. The monologue continues:

After all, [Jesus] hated welfare. Why do you think he was so upset when Judas took that government hand out (screen flashes: ‘Thirty pieces of government cheese’). Even the word orthodox comes from the Latin

ortho, meaning right, and doxa, meaning thinking. And the Christian Coalition has always thought right (screen flashes: 'Extreme Right').

While Colbert speaks from his "gut," suggesting that the Christian Coalition is always right, in a literal sense, the text to the right of the screen undermines his words with the sarcastic phrase, "Extreme Right," which suggests the Coalition isn't always literally right, rather, politically right, a humorous play on words. This kind of irony continues throughout the segment.

It [the Christian Coalition] was founded by Pat Robertson from the remnants of his failed 1988 presidential bid (screen says: 'Quit to Spend more time with Health Shake'). And, it pioneered the process of bringing evangelical voters to the Republican Party with their trademark blend of traditional values (screen says: 'Gay Bashing' with the copyright symbol behind it).

Using the words "Gay Bashing" to describe the Christian Coalition's version of traditional values is a complete mockery of the movement. While the entire sketch is a mockery, the difference here is that Colbert seems to move out of the realm of parody and into the realm of vehement disdain for the Coalition, a rarity on the show.

Nonetheless, the overt ridicule is short lived as the sketch continues. The next phase of the monologue portrays Colbert's critique of biblical literacy, a consistent theme throughout *The Colbert Report*.

Reverend Hunter's agenda would have been a bastardization of the Coalition's Christian message. I mean fight global warming? Our Lord was no tree hugger (screen says: 'Meek Shall Inherit what's left of the earth')! On Palm Sunday, Jesus encouraged his people to throw palm fronds at his feet while he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, an animal notorious for its green house gas emissions (screen says: 'Should have gone with Hybrid Mule'). Now, if Jesus was so anti-poverty, how come he didn't end poverty? I mean he raised the dead, he made the blind see, and he made the lepers less leprosy (screen says: 'Apply Directly to the Forehead'). No. Jesus instructed us that the poor will always be with us (screen says: 'Like a Bad Penny—But without the Penny'). Now

Reverend Hunter seems to want to make Jesus look like a liar (screen says: 'Liar, Liar, Shroud on Fire').

The Bible verse where Jesus states, "The poor you will always have with you," comes from Matthew 26:11 and again from Mark 14:7. The above monologue encapsulates Colbert's simultaneous creation and parody of conservative religio-political persona as he references many conservative Christians' justifications for capitalism as well as reasoning behind a lack of commitment to social justice. This has been a contested issue between liberal and conservative Christians. It is understandable, then, why conservatives would be concerned over a potential leader pushing an agenda of social justice. Colbert humorously raises the issue.

Now some of you are going to say, 'Stephen, but Jesus said we should sell all our things and give the money to the poor.' Exactly! Jesus contradicted himself a lot. It's hard to know what he meant sometimes (screen says: 'Need Mel Gibson to Translate'), which is why it is so important that the Christian Coalition keep their focus on two things, reproductive rights and gay marriage (screen says: 'Add Flag Burning for Holy Trinity'). On those subjects, Jesus was very consistent. He never said a thing about either of them. So it's easy to know what he thought...whatever the Christian Coalition says he thought! You can trust that, cause no one thinks more right than them. And that's the Word.

In this passage, Colbert highlights an irony: leaders of the Christian Coalition claim to be the most orthodox followers of Jesus Christ, yet rather than focus on poverty, which is a frequent topic within the scriptural record, they focus on topics that have no direct reference within that record. Colbert thereby calls attention to the tenuous claims of authority upon which the Coalition bases its arguments. In so doing, he enables viewers to examine the claims of authority that conservative religious leaders make about a host of related social issues. This segment example elucidates Colbert's concern for matters of

social justice and his vehement attacks on those who seek to undermine human rights movements. Examples such as these are commonplace on his show.

Glenn Beck, Social Justice, and the State of Colbert's Faith

While Colbert's humor often turns towards the religious, the irony lies in the fact that Colbert, both in and out of character, is a man of faith. As a devout Catholic, Colbert often speaks about his upbringing in the church and the role it has played in his own search for truth. In an interview for an article for *Time Out New York* (2006), Colbert states:

I love my church, and I'm a Catholic who was raised by intellectuals, who were very devout. I was raised to believe that you could question the church and still be a Catholic. What is worthy of satire is the misuse of religion for destructive or political gains (as cited in "Key Interviews," 2006).

Furthermore, in his adult life, Colbert has cultivated his own faith as well as faithful youth. In fact, Colbert has often spoken about his experience as a Sunday School teacher at his church. For example, in a humorous in-character interview with Stanford Professor Phillip Zimbardo, author of *The Lucifer Effect*, Zimbardo is impressed with Colbert's knowledge about the fall of humankind, to which he says, "Obviously you learned well in Sunday School." Taking the bait, Colbert quickly responds, "I teach Sunday School, mother F%&*er!"

On a more serious note, it is clear that Colbert's faith informs his politics. As an avid proponent of human rights, Colbert often mixes his passion for justice with his religious convictions. For example, in 2010, in a rare out-of-character testimony to a group of Congressmen, Colbert was asked why he was using his role on *The Colbert Report* to advocate for migrant workers, he said:

I like talking about people who don't have any power. It seems like the least powerful people in the United States are migrant workers who come and do our work, but don't have any rights...And, you know, 'whatsoever you do for the least of my brothers,' and these seem like the least of our brothers right now... Migrant workers suffer and have no rights (as cited in Dionne, 2010).

While this type of behavior and scripture quoting seems inconsistent with journalistic practices, it is this very instance that sets Colbert apart as a journalist, whether taken seriously or not. Clearly, he sees his roles as a Christian and a comedian as important parts of his desire to challenge power structures (Dierberg & Clark, 2012).

Colbert often mixes his own convictions with his TV personality, therefore making his faith a large catalyst for religious humor. In this vein, then, on March 2, 2010, Glenn Beck announced on his radio broadcast, "Look for the words social justice or economic justice on your church website. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social Justice and Economic justice...they are code words" (as cited in Colbert, 2010).

A few weeks later, on March 18th, Colbert wittily responded to Beck's comments by saying "Yes! They are code words...(dramatic pause)...for helping people...code words used by communists and by Nazis. I know when I think Hitler and Stalin...(dramatic pause)...I think social justice" (Colbert, 2010). He said this as a video of Glenn Beck holding up pictures of a swastika and a communist flag appeared on the screen. Here, Colbert ironically elucidates the humor in Beck's associations of social justice and totalitarian leaders.

The segment turns back to Beck's comments, when he says, "If you have a priest that is pushing social justice, go find another parish. Go alert your Bishop and tell them, 'excuse me? Are you down with this whole social justice thing?'" The fact that Beck uses words such as "priest" and "Bishop," which are inherent to specifically Catholic

vocabulary, leads Colbert to ponder his own faith and the role the Catholic Church has played in cultivating his passion for human rights and social justice. In his typical conservative persona, Colbert passionately and sardonically states:

Is Glenn attacking my faith? No. He is correcting my faith. And it is long overdue because for over 100 years, popes have declared a doctrine of social justice including support of labor movements and the distribution of wealth in capitalist societies. Now I know the popes are infallible, but did they screw the pooch on this one! You see, the God I worship doesn't encourage social justice. I have a personal relationship with Jesus, and he wants me to continue acquiring wealth. That's why his symbol is the plus sign, OK? Not divided by.

As he says this, Colbert holds up a wooden cross with his hand over the bottom as if it looks like a plus sign. This monologue paves the way for Colbert's next guest on the show, Rev. James Martin, author of *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, who talks about the meaning of social justice and the role it plays in American capitalist society. As the segment shifts to the interview with Rev. Martin, the viewers see Colbert's persona change slightly, as he interviews someone whose religious beliefs match his out of character beliefs. This is additionally seen when Colbert interviews Tony Campolo, as the next section will discuss. Therefore, as Colbert remains in character, his character also allowed Rev. Hunter more time to clarify the Catholic teachings on social justice. Thus, the two have an honest conversation about Capitalism, social justice, and the Catholic Church. He first introduces Martin as he shows a video of him commenting on Glenn Beck's attack of the Catholic Church. He says, "I don't think it's as much an attack on my faith as it is someone who seems to not know what he's talking about. The ultimate defense, I think, comes from a Bishop in Brazil who says, 'When I feed the poor, they call me a Saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a Communist.'"

Colbert humorously cuts the video at this point and says, “Not true, Father. Sometimes Glenn calls you a Nazi! Here to confess his sins, please welcome *The Colbert Report* chaplain, Father James Martin.” The fact that he refers to Father Martin as “The Colbert Report chaplain,” already leads the viewer to believe Colbert has a great deal of stock in what Father Martin has to say.

As Father Martin comes onto the stage, they begin to talk about his book, and then the interview leads into the Catholic teaching on social justice and the importance of serving the poor. Throughout the interview, Colbert never breaks his conservative persona, and his attempts to engender laughter are at the expense of conservative stereotypes, rather than at the expense of Father Jim. Staying in character, Colbert asks, “Father Jim. You say social justice addresses the root causes of poverty. So Social Justice addresses laziness?” Father Jim delicately responds, saying “ Social Justice addresses the things that keep people poor, and it’s an addition to charity, which is helping the poor, but social justice ask you, ‘Why are these people poor?’” Once again, in true character, Colbert says, “Cause they don’t work hard enough! Our capitalist society says everybody’s got a chance. You dig down, you do what you have to do, and you have a chance to make it. Or don’t you believe in capitalism?” Father Jim goes on to say that, while he believes in capitalism, he knows it is not the answer for all people. He suggests, then, that the poor are actually the ones who work the hardest in today’s society.

Colbert, still utilizing his character to produce laughs, brings it back to himself, a true attribute of his persona. He says, “If I help the poor, what’s in it for me? Why should I help the least of our brothers?” At this point, it is Father Jim’s moment to

produce the laughs when he says, “Other than eternal salvation you mean?”

Immediately, Colbert mitigates his comment, saying, “Yeah Yeah. What’s my immediate payoff?”

From this point on, Colbert allows Father Martin the space to say his piece. Here we see the moment when Colbert’s out of character commitments match those of the interviewee. Father Martin says, “The poor actually teach us a lot about the gospel. They teach us how to live simply. Working for the poor helps you to feel closer to Christ and to the disciples because Christ asked us to work with the poor.” Colbert only interrupts once, asking a clarifying question, “When did he do that?” Then, Father Martin continues, “Well all throughout the gospels. In fact, in the gospel of Matthew, he says that the way that we are going to be judged at the end of our lives is not what church we prayed in our how we prayed, but really, how we treated the poor. So it’s sort of a litmus test for Jesus.”

Once Colbert lets Father Martin say his piece, he immediately returns to his character as he begins arguing with Father Martin. He counters Martin’s statement, suggesting that Jesus was not, in fact, poor, and therefore, there is no religious justification for championing the poor. To this, Martin wittily responds, “Jesus was relatively poor.” Colbert, not fully convinced, humorously suggests that Jesus was only poor by choice. “I mean he may not have had much but he was like you know one of those Hobo Hipsters or Trustafarians. You know. You know his dad is loaded. He was just choosing to be poor. He could have changed anytime he wanted. There’s a difference between that and poor, Right?” At this point, Father Martin, who is very tuned in to the way Colbert’s persona works, feeds his ego by giving credence to his point.

This, though, allows him another platform to solidify his point. To Colbert's comment, Rev. Martin says, "There is, which is an important point. Jesus chose to be poor, not only to show us what it means to live simply, but to show God's love for the poor, so when you're with the poor, you're really with God's beloved."

His last statements essentially wrap up the interview, as Colbert is finally satisfied with Father Martin's answers, though, he does not let the segment end just there. As he wraps up the interview, he brings the segment full circle, once again mentioning Glenn Beck. He asks Rev. Martin, "Do you think Glenn could be the next pope, because he certainly seems comfortable with telling Catholics with what to do." Jim sarcastically responds, saying, "Well I think if he were, I would listen to his advice and leave the church." Finally, to end the interview, Colbert utilizes an often-used liturgical phrase as a send off, which engenders laughs from those who are familiar with traditional forms of Christian worship. "This interview has ended. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord"

Once again, the viewer sees that, at the beginning of this segment, Colbert offers vehement critique of Glenn Beck through sarcastic remarks at the expense of Beck. He is not concerned with having a dialogue with Beck, rather, he is interested in bashing his stance. Subsequently, Colbert brings Father Jim Martin to the set, where he allows Martin the room to clarify why Christians, and specifically Catholics, should have passion for social justice and service to the poor. As mentioned previously, Colbert never produces laughs at the expense of Father Martin, the laughter, rather, comes at the expense of Colbert's persona. In other words, the viewer never laughs at Father Martin's stance on social justice. The viewer, therefore, laughs at Colbert's mockery of

conservatism. This, therefore, is one method Colbert utilizes to critique the extreme right and make a more poignant case for liberal Christian thinking.

Campolo on Colbert: Creating Space for Liberal Evangelicalism

As seen in the last section, Colbert's persona often leaves room for left leaning figures to share their views interrupted by Colbert's incessant mockery. As the previous section allows both Catholic and liberal Protestant viewers to identify with a figure such as Rev. Hunter, his interview with evangelical leader Tony Campolo plays a similar role for moderate and liberal evangelicals as well as other Christian subcultures.

Tony Campolo is a prolific writer and minor celebrity within this progressive evangelical subculture, and identifies himself as a Democrat evangelical. Campolo, a repeated guest on *The Colbert Report*, appeared on February 27, 2006 to talk about the evangelical left. Colbert, pointing out that the terms evangelical and "left" often don't fit together, opens the interview by saying, "Now you claim to be a member of the evangelical left. Now doesn't that seem to be a contradiction in terms to most Americans?"

A passionate Campolo, determined to defend the amalgam of the two responds. "If you mean by the left people who care about the poor, people who take the words of Jesus very literally and want to live out love and commitment for justice, then I think the two words belong together." Later in the interview, however, Campolo points out that those who claim both evangelical and left as identity markers are calling themselves "Red letter Christians," which suggests that they take the words of Jesus more seriously than other biblical texts. "We've really begun to call ourselves Red Letter Christians" Colbert interrupts, "What is that? Is that really special, like a red letter day?"

Campolo, eager to clarify his point says, “Cause if you go to the Bible, all the things that Jesus says are in red letters, and we are very very committed to exactly what Jesus says, to love our enemies, to do good to those who would hurt us, to overcome evil with good. We are red letter Christians. We don’t like religious left anymore than we like religious right because Jesus transcends partisan politics. Get that!” Subsequently, Campolo adds that Jesus would be ashamed at the way fundamentalist and conservative evangelical Christians have claimed a political party, when, in his opinion, there are issues on both sides about which Jesus would be passionate.

Colbert humorously states, “So you’re saying Jesus doesn’t care who’s president. There’s no such thing as WWJVF? Who would Jesus vote for?” Campolo replies, “If Jesus went into the voting box he would be very confused....Name the issue.”

Finally, the interview turns to Campolo’s relationship with the National Association of Evangelicals, a historically politically conservative organization. Colbert asks, “Do you get a frosty reception at the annual evangelical pancake breakfast?” to which Campolo responds, “They don’t even invite me anymore. They don’t like people who don’t knee jerk to their particular ideology...and that’s a shame.”

Once again, we see Colbert’s persona and humor change as he interviews a guest whose theological and political convictions match some of Colbert’s out of character beliefs. In the interview, Colbert barely interrupts Campolo, letting him speak for longer periods of time as he makes a case for his ability to employ biblical literalism to defend leftist viewpoints. Colbert’s sardonic remarks are jabs, not at Campolo, but at the absurdity of the stereotype that Christianity is exclusively compatible with Republican views (Dierberg & Clark, 2012).

Colbert: A Religious Authority

This chapter has discussed how Colbert uses both his persona and his own personal knowledge of the Christian faith to provide a critique of conservative fundamentalism and evangelicalism. As mentioned in chapter three, critical rhetorical theory aims at critiquing systems that seek to dominate through power and oppression. This chapter has highlighted the ways Colbert critiques systems and figures that represent for him, those particular systems. The “Anti-Gary Marriage Ad” clearly demonstrates Colbert’s disdain for what he says as an illogical belief against gay marriage and homosexuality. Through the use of parody, he is able to undermine and subvert the National Organization for Marriage’s arguments. In his segment called “American Orthodox,” Colbert utilizes monologue and text to show fallacies in the ways evangelicals rationalize some of their choices. He is furthermore able to sarcastically and overtly point out the euphemisms behind conservative evangelical values. For example, when he says, “[The Christian Coalition] pioneered the process of bringing evangelical voters to the Republican Party with their trademark blend of traditional values,” Colbert uses text to highlight the notion that “traditional values,” might actually mean something more straightforward and discriminatory like “Gay Bashing.”

In the latter portion of the chapter, the reader is able to gain insight into Colbert’s out of character Catholic faith. It is clear that Colbert is not only passionate about his faith and his commitment to social justice, but he is also extremely well versed on the subject as well as other facets of Christianity. His religious capital, therefore, sets him apart from comedians such as Jon Stewart and Bill Maher, as Colbert is critiquing religion, yet simultaneously offering an alternative Christian worldview. This is

something that Stewart and Maher are not able to do, as their personal beliefs are outside the confines of Christianity, and their humor often comes at the expense of Christianity as a whole. Christian viewers, therefore, appeal to Colbert's faith and are able to identify with his personal struggle to find truth in the midst of a tumultuous religious and political climate (Clark & Dierberg, 2012).

The episodes explored throughout this chapter were especially popular and thought provoking for the participants, as the issues raised in these particular episodes struck a personal chord with many of them. Therefore, as Dierberg and Clark (2012) suggest, and as the rest of this dissertation will explore:

The nature of *The Colbert Report* offers various audiences opportunities to negotiate with television messages in ways that may reinforce their preexisting perspectives. In this sense, then, studies of television rhetoric and studies of audience interpretations of such programs through the lens of religion can help to illuminate insights about changes in religious life today.

This chapter, therefore, informs the findings section of this dissertation, as it will highlight how Christian young adults from various religious and political subcultures clearly resonate with Colbert and subsequently affirm and elevate him as an authority figure, which further bolsters why Colbert was the natural choice as the object of reflection and study.

Chapter Five: Methodology

While hardly any literature has been devoted to religious rhetoric and soft news or reception analysis of religious viewers and their reactions to *The Colbert Report*, there is a great deal of literature devoted to how various late night shows, many of which can be considered soft news, have a political effect on their viewers. The majority of the research concludes that political entertainment can subtly increase political education and involvement, albeit slightly (Moy, 2005, 2006, Cao & Brewer, 2008). Although there is significant correlation between political comedy and political education, because of the nature of political satire, studies have shown that this education might lead some in the direction of cynicism towards political institutions and candidates (Baumgartner & Morris, 2005). And finally, although young people are more likely to watch political comedy, there is not a significant correlation between age and political influence, nor is there a significant correlation between education and political influence (Cao, 2008).

While previous research concluded that shows such as *The Daily Show* bolster political knowledge, and in some cases, political cynicism, studies have shown that after watching *The Colbert Report*, viewers were more confused about their political identity, they tended to favor more Republican issues (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), or they merely perceived what they wanted to perceive from the show, which suggests that liberals understand Colbert in their own terms while conservatives understand Colbert

literally, as a conservative pundit who mocks liberals, (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2008).

Although these studies are certainly helpful in understanding some trends in the way audiences receive soft news programs, little has been done to investigate the nuances with which young adults come to conclusions about these particular programs. Furthermore, little has been explored regarding the way religious rhetoric is interpreted amongst viewers. So, while the previous research employ quantitative effects approaches to audience research of *The Colbert Report*, this study is a departure from earlier models, and is therefore interested in a qualitative approach, considering the ways religious young people interact with the messages on the program.

Qualitative audience research situates itself as one kind of method within the larger discourse of media studies. While other methods grounded in mass communication theory are interested in quantitative empirical data and the consumer relationship between media and audience, as the aforementioned paragraphs have elucidated, qualitative audience research is more interested in what the relationships between media and audiences say about the wider culture. Therefore, this chapter relies upon qualitative audience research as it attempts to study what the negotiations between audience members and a specific media text says about the wider religio-political landscape of Christian emerging adults in the United States. This chapter will situate qualitative audience research in the wider discourse of media studies as well as provide a brief conversation about debate over method within the sociology and anthropology of religion, in an attempt to construct a thorough methodological framework, informed by both media studies and the fields of sociology and anthropology, for my study on *The*

Colbert Report and Christian emerging adults. Subsequently it will delve into the practical methodological tools that I plan to use throughout the research project.

Qualitative Research in the Field of Media Studies

The evolution of the field of media studies has been a rather short (given the short lifespan of the field), but interesting progression. Up until this point, there have been various trains of thought regarding the relationship of media to audiences, and many of these trains of thought emerged given a specific place and time in history. Nonetheless, the various theories regarding the role of the media in the lives of those who receive it are still contested and debated within the field today.

As chapter three discussed, a great deal of scholarship regarding media's role in society centered on the use of media as propaganda (MacDonald, 1957). Due to the influence of Nazi propaganda and yellow journalism, many scholars felt that the masses were generally unable to decipher truthful messages from untruthful ones, and that mass media often have damaging effects on society. Mass society theory emerged, and it continues to reemerge in various forms. Many scholars who supported some form of mass society theory were heavily influenced by Marxist and critical thinking and often critiqued the role mass media play in reinforcing dominant metanarratives, specifically capitalism and commercialism (Chomsky, 2003; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Gramsci, 1971; Marcuse, 1941).

In the midst of the debate over the power of mass media, some scholars came to the conclusion that the media has less influence on its audience than previously suggested, thus the birth of limited effects theory. Major players in this school of thought believe that audience members have more agency than mass society theory implies, and

moreover, that the media has very little effect on the viewer. Scholars such as Lazarsfeld et. al., for example, studied audience responses and opinions to news media during the 1940 political campaign (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). They concluded that viewers were minimally influenced by news media, rather they were much more susceptible to changing their opinions after listening to a trusted friend or family member.

At around the same time, uses and gratifications theory suggested that there is a disconnect between media as a means of cultural and commercial imperialism and those who watch it. Scholars in this camp believe that many viewers are fully aware of the commercial characteristics of media and the potentiality for propaganda, but are able to set these things aside for the sheer pleasure and gratification they receive from viewing certain media texts (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Both limited effects and uses and gratifications emerged as a response to the growing popularity of sitcom television.

Heavily influenced by Marxism, the rise of British cultural studies stemmed from a growing interest in the way mass media influence and reinforce ideologies, especially ideologies that reify hegemony and class distinctions (Turner, 2003). Early studies within the field looked at the role of mass media on the working class, and in particular, why the working class formed certain ideological commitments and lifestyles. For example, in the 1970's, many working class Brits supported Margaret Thatcher, and scholars were interested in how popular culture bolstered many people's commitments to the Conservative Party (Hall, 1988).

The influence of British cultural studies on the field of media studies subsequently paved the way for a departure from previous theories that focused primarily on the

influence of media on individual members of audiences and a movement towards an engagement with the way media provide a space for identity formation and negotiation among groups. In other words, scholars in cultural studies are less interested in obtaining hard empirical data gleaned from quantitative inquiry, but are more interested in the larger cultural issue that given media texts raise for individuals and groups of various social locations within their own contexts, and how they process the texts. At the time of this departure, qualitative research was able to inch its way into the field, and has had legitimacy as a methodological tool ever since.

Negotiated Texts

Out of cultural studies emerged the concept that media is often negotiated. Stuart Hall's important essay encoding/decoding brought forth the audience-centered notion that media can be read in various ways. Stuart Hall (1993b) provides three different viewing positions that viewers adopt as they receive a particular media text. The first is the dominant/hegemonic reading. This position suggests that viewers agree with the intended message of a particular media text. The second is the negotiated position, which purports that the viewer accepts only some of the intended messages, but not all. And finally, the third position is an oppositional reading. Regarding this position, Hall suggests that the reader or receiver will reject the dominant/hegemonic reading in favor of his or her own decoded message. This oppositional reading often directly contrasts the intended message.

Morley's (1980) often cited work on how people of varying social classes read *Nationwide*, a British news broadcast at that time, was a pioneer study which aimed to test the encoding/decoding model. Liebes and Katz also utilized Hall's method in a study

that looked at the way viewers of various national identities and contexts negotiated the television sitcom *Dallas* (1993). Studies such as these looked primarily at the role of one particular text and how viewers negotiated meaning in relation to it.

Since Hall's essay, much scholarship has been devoted to testing this theory. While much scholarship focused on the negotiated position, others were interested in finding audiences that fit within the oppositional reading (J. Fiske, 1987; H. Jenkins, 2000). Moreover, scholarship that has critiqued the encoding/decoding model suggest that the researcher must rely on his or her own subjectivity in order to properly determine the dominant reading of a text, and that it is possible that there could be more than one preferred reading (Wren-Lewis, 1983). And, if this is the case, how does one determine the "true" preferred reading, and furthermore, how does one determine who fits into which category? Because media studies scholarship had not yet dealt with issues of subjectivity and objectivity (i.e. objectivity and empirical truth was still of utmost importance to researchers), the critiques raised of the encoding/decoding model became problematic (Murphy, 2005). Furthermore, critics suggested that scholars should be more concerned with the wider context in which a viewer makes meaning, and that the media text is just one isolated event during which a viewer negotiates identity.

Another critique suggests that Hall's theory often fits best within media frameworks that reinforce dominant ideologies, and therefore, has often been proven useful when applied to hard news programs (Dierberg & Clark, 2012). Therefore, in the case of *The Colbert Report* and other contemporary television programs that employ satire and parody, the viewing positions become somewhat problematic, as it is unclear what the intended message might be. Furthermore, because of the satire, the reader must

consistently negotiate the messages in order to make sense of the narrative. Therefore, it becomes difficult to passively watch *The Colbert Report*.

Nonetheless, researchers in the field today acknowledge the claims regarding the negotiated position, and utilize Hall's theory (albeit sometimes loosely) to assume there will be some degree of negotiation between reader and text, and that this negotiation fits within the larger framework of the reader's social location. Therefore, the elucidation of the encoding/decoding model and specific empirical studies that employed Hall's theory ultimately informs this particular project, as I approach it with the assumption that all Christian emerging adults will negotiate their religio-political identity in relation to *The Colbert Report*, although the degrees of intensity or the modes with which each individual negotiates is unknown. I am most interested, then, in how each participant's reading of the text informs the way they negotiate their own religious identity within their social context.

Negotiated Viewing as Occasion for Reflection

Many studies within mass communication, especially those that study media effects, look at the relationship between media text and its audience in one isolated instance, and attempt to make assumptions based on that one particular study. Often these studies will put participants in a controlled space or a focus group and ask them to respond to a particular media text (Morley, 1980; Seiter, 2004). In the midst of the encoding/decoding phase of media studies, a phase which still looked at objectivity as an important characteristic of empirical research, some researchers, mainly scholars from the U.S. who were influenced by cultural studies, took a point of departure from both media effects as well as the study of audience negotiations in relation to one particular media

text. They were, therefore, interested in how media play a role in participant's lived experiences, distancing themselves from the empirical media effects model, and moving towards a model that allowed researchers to study the local, name research limitations and biases, and name the reality that much social science research is reflexive, a concept that was previously pejorative (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln, 2009).

Through shifts towards reflexive research as well as anthropological critiques on studies that focused solely on the relationship between the viewer and the media text, scholars studied participants in their own contexts over a longer period of time. Others were interested in how the media provide space for participants to think about or articulate their identity, and are therefore concerned with the long-term relationship between participants and specific media texts. Scholars took several approaches to answer these questions, however, studies such as these that gather data over the course of several months to several years, can be categorized as ethnographic studies, and these types of studies are recommended today.

For example, Purnima Mankekar conducted an ethnographic study of the way lower class and upwardly mobile lower class Indian women negotiated their gender, class, and racial identities in relation to public news broadcasting, which Mankekar (1999) characterized as hegemonic. As Mankekar suggests, "While previous research on Indian television has generally dwelt on the political and cultural effects of texts (e.g., Krishnan, 1990; Singhal & Rogers, 1989), I have focused on the ways in which viewers interpret specific themes and images" (p. 8). This study relates to my dissertation in that I am interested in the way Mankakar chose a particular group of people for her study in order to understand how women's lived experiences resonated with specific media texts,

especially, as they dealt with gender, race, and class. Similarly, my project is interested in the ways Christian emerging adults interpret specific themes and images in *The Colbert Report*. Therefore, Mankakar's methodological approach will be useful to this project

Clark's work *From Angels to Aliens* (2005) has also informed my methodological decisions. This particular study looked at the way youth understand the role of the supernatural in the world, how the media, specifically television shows such as the *X-Files*, *Charmed*, or *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, played a role in their formation of these views, and how their understanding of the supernatural either coalesced or conflicted with their more traditional religious views, or those of their parents. During her project, Clark undertook a longer ethnographic study, utilizing multiple in-depth interviews. She categorized the findings, not based on religious preference as one might think, but based on the spectrum and intensity of negotiations that took place between traditional religion and the supernatural among these youth. For example, some youth appreciated both traditional religion and the supernatural, while others despised the religion of their parents but were fascinated with the concept of supernatural power or life beyond Earth. Still others maintained a great deal of religious orthodoxy, enjoyed shows that portrayed the supernatural, but purely for their entertainment value.

Like Mankakar, Clark is interested in the discursive strategies for negotiation centered on specific themes and images, which, as mentioned previously, informs my own methodological decisions, although I am additionally interested with the way Clark categorized the data, as I believe my findings will be somewhat similar in nature.

While, this particular project is interested in the way viewers negotiate their identity in relation to one text, which in some ways places it in the encoding/decoding model akin to Morley's *Nationwide* study (Morley, 1980), it also is more interested in the way the media allows viewers to articulate and negotiate their identity, and how that negotiated identity plays a role in contexts other than the media sector. Furthermore, it aims to focus on specific themes, mainly the intersection of religion and politics. In other words, as this dissertation adopts the aforementioned methodological approaches, it is less interested in whether young adults negotiate their religio-political identity or not. Rather, this paper explores how *The Colbert Report* creates space for critical religious reflection and meaning making, and how that reflection represents or relates to practices of lived religious experience and expression. Finally, it does not make the claim that Colbert is the sole authority on or catalyst for religious meaning making; rather the show is one of myriad opportunities for negotiation.

Methodological Conversations in the Social Sciences

For years, methodological atheism was the long-standing method to approaching the ethnography of religion. As Peter Berger suggests, methodological atheism is an approach in which the researcher must make no claim on the truth or validity of the given religion because, in his view, religion is based on a culturally produced institution, separating religion from the sacred. Therefore, the observer must take a step back and look objectively at a particular organization, leaving the sacred out of the issue (Berger, 1990).

Subsequently, scholars such as McCutcheon (1999) lobbied for a methodological shift, albeit a slight one. McCutcheon notes that, "Not knowing how the universe really

is organized – not knowing if it is organized at all – the scholar of religion seeks not to establish a position in response to this question but to describe, analyse, and compare the positions taken by others” (pp. 217-218). In his view, methodological atheism forces the researcher to reject any possibility that religious characteristics are true or valid in a world where this claim cannot actually be proven. Instead, within the social sciences, religion is sometimes thought of as a “human interaction with a culturally postulated nonfalsifiable reality” (Thomas, van Beek, & Blakely, 1994, p. 2). McCutcheon and others make a claim, then, for what they would call methodological agnosticism.

Many ethnographers have since recognized the flaws in both methodological atheism and agnosticism. Post-colonial and post-modern researchers, for example, critique these methods for being overly naïve of the ability of the observer to be truly objective. Michael Bourdillan (1996), an anthropologist who studies African religion, suggests that our preconceived judgments might as well coalesce with our research because we can’t escape our limitations and biases. “If we are aware of our limitations, we can enter into academic debate in an undogmatic way, ready to listen and to learn” (p. 151). Therefore, instead of denying our judgments, we might as well embrace them and make them known.

Situating Myself in the Field

In light of the aforementioned concerns, it is paramount, then, that I locate myself in the context of this study. Currently, I self-identify as a Christian and more specifically as an active member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), however, I have not always identified in this way. I was raised in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) and attended church regularly. Additionally, I attended a LCMS

elementary and high school. Throughout my childhood, I also attended an evangelical Christian summer camp, which had a large influence on my religious identity, and therefore, in my early formative years, I considered myself evangelical, yet as an active member of the LCMS. Furthermore, in my first few years of college, my religious identity was consistent with conservative fundamentalist evangelical discourse. In my last few years of college, however, both my theological and political ideals shifted, mostly due to the influence of peers and a liberal theological education, and I subsequently joined the ELCA. I have considered myself politically and theologically liberal ever since.

Religious Self-Identification

There are several ways one could locate another's religious identity, and this has become a growing problem within the social sciences, however, for issues related to power, I chose for participants in this study to self-identify (Smith, 1998; Smith & Sikkink, 2003) with a religious denomination rather than choosing a religious category for them based on their answers to various questions.

One possible approach to religious identification is to categorize individuals based on certain religious markers, some of which include belief about the Bible, belief about certain political issues such as gay marriage and abortion, belief about salvation, etc. This type of identification poses several problems. The primary problem, though, is the issue of power. For any research on human subjects, the researcher already has a certain amount of power, as he or she is often speaking for or on behalf of research participants. Therefore, to allow the researcher to name the religious identity of the participants would only create a larger power gap between the researcher and participant.

While the previous consideration has its own set of problems, religious self-identification is certainly not a perfect solution. For example, many Christians, and specifically young adults, might not self-identify as fundamentalist because of the pejorative connotations associated with the term, yet their beliefs might embody the characteristics of fundamentalism. In a similar vein, within the sociology of religion, the issue of religious-self identification poses the question, “How does one decide who is a Christian and who is not?” It is clear that some Christian subcultures have made claims about who is a Christian and who is not. Additionally, there are individuals within groups who have either struggled to earn the marker of Christian, or some within those groups who don’t see themselves as Christian. For example, while all Mormons consider themselves Christian, many other Christians do not consider Mormons within this framework. On the other hand, some Unitarian Universalists consider themselves Christian, while others do not. One could see how this poses a potential problem for religious self-identification, although, as I constantly situate myself as a sociologist of religion and a media scholar, I am not interested in deciding who is in and who is out, as this would be a theological task rather than a sociological task. Therefore, if someone self-identifies as a Christian, I cannot disagree with him or her. All I can do is ask them why they locate themselves that way and incorporate their responses into the project.

While allowing the participant to religiously self-identify has its own set of problems, and may skew the research in other ways, it seems that the pros of allowing the participant the autonomy to self-identity outweigh the cons associated with the researcher forcing a religious marker upon him or her. Therefore, utilizing self-identification (Lewis & Bernardo, 2010; Smith, 1998; Smith & Sikkink, 2003), This dissertation explores how

young adults of various Christian subcultures reflect upon the critical religious messages inherent in *The Colbert Report*.

Participant Demographics

I utilized the snowball or rhizome method (Stehlik, 2004) to find participants for this study, which allowed me to find a few participants who subsequently referred me to other volunteers who fit the demographics. I found my initial participants through various conferences, camps, and retreats, and many of those participants told their friends about the project. 20 volunteers committed to participating in the study.

Because *The Colbert Report* tends to attract a fairly homogenous fan base in terms of race, ethnicity, and education, my participant demographics reflect this. In fact, according to Green (2010):

Colbert's viewers tend to be young, white, educated, and male. Their median age is 37 and there's a 60/40 male-female split. So far this year, he's drawn a nightly audience that averages 1.3 million viewers nationwide, 874,000 of them in the 18-49 year-old demographic.

While my demographics represent the similar viewer demographic, I was also concerned with reflecting the demographics as closely as possible to the makeup of the Christian church. Therefore, because more females are represented in Christian churches than males (Grossman, 2008; de Vaus & McCallister, 1987), seven males and thirteen females participated in my study. In addition, my participants come from various Christian denominations and subcultures. Of the participants who took part in the research, five participants identified as Catholic, five identified as Evangelical, 5 identified as Mainline Protestant, three identified as Anabaptist, one identified as Conservative (LCMS) Lutheran, and one person identified as Fundamentalist. While

only one person identified as Fundamentalist, it is important to note that several Fundamentalists were asked to take part in the study, but all but one declined. This might suggest something about the way these Fundamentalists utilize media as tools for identity formation. For example, their lack of interest in a study of Colbert may indicate that Colbert does not fit within the scope of things they would like to discuss or take seriously. The concluding chapter will reflect upon this further.

The political demographics of this group also represent a fairly even distribution. Seven participants identified as conservative while eight identified as liberal. Alternatively, three participants considered themselves moderate, one considered herself independent, and one identified as radical/other.

Along with political and religious diversity, the participants are also from diverse regional backgrounds. Of the twenty participants who took part in the research study, five were from the Western part of the United States, five were from the South, seven were from the Midwest, and three were from the East/Southeast region of the United States.

While the majority of the participants in this study had familiarity with *The Colbert Report*, and many of them considered themselves somewhat regular or regular viewers, there were a few participants who had little or no exposure to the show prior to this project. Of the twenty participants who took part in the study, only two had never watched the show before, and three had little exposure to the show. The other fifteen participants expressed that they watched the show occasionally or regularly. Therefore, the majority of the participants highlighted in the subsequent chapters are somewhat regular or regular viewers of the show, although the two non-viewers are also

highlighted, as their responses are noteworthy. The relationship between viewers and non-viewers to *The Colbert Report* is important to note, as it is curious as to how these non-viewers approach the show. Do they take Colbert seriously? Do they just consider the content of the show? Would they watch the show again? How is this different from the viewer who already watches Colbert and takes him seriously as an authority figure? These questions will be considered in the subsequent chapters.

Data Collection

The project consisted of three specific phases. The first phase involved in-depth interviews of each participant. In these interviews, I gathered information about each participant's religio-political context (see Appendix I). I learned about their religious, political, family, and educational history and how these components played a role in shaping their religio-political identity until now. As discussed previously, each participant self-identified with a specific religious and political category, and based on his or her answers, her or she was given a religio-political identification. For example, one participant considered herself Liberal and Mennonite, and therefore, her religio-political identity is liberal Mennonite. Other religio-political identifications might be moderate evangelical or conservative Catholic.

In the second phase of the study, I asked participants to reflect upon various segments of *The Colbert Report* that related to Christianity and politics. Each participant viewed and responded to the same episodes, which served as a constant throughout the study. Due to the number and regional location of participants, I chose to collect the data using a private blog. Therefore, each participant was directed to a blog that was created specifically for this project. The blog gave instructions about which episodes to watch

and an optional rubric that assisted them with their reflection (see Appendix II). The rubric asked them to consider factors such as moments when they agreed or disagreed with the message, when they laughed or didn't laugh, and what their overall thoughts were. Some chose to utilize the rubric while others did not. During this phase, I monitored each response, ensuring anonymity, and I asked follow up questions as I felt necessary. Each participant was given four months to respond to the various episodes. Many participants, however, responded to the segments in a shorter period of time, at their own discretion.

The last phase of the study provided a wrap up and conclusion of the dissertation research. This was a time for me to ask clarifying questions that I thought might be helpful in analyzing their responses. In addition, it allowed each participant to provide a final reflection on the project.

Following the three phases, I analyzed and coded the interviews and responses based on themes that consistently emerged over the course of the interview and reflection phases. I was especially interested in the length of their answers, which often translated into the amount of passion or excitement they had for a particular episode. Additionally, I was interested in the significance, or lack thereof, of the referencing of symbolic boundaries and outgroups that surfaced as participants reflected upon segments of *The Colbert Report* in relation to their own religio-political identity.

The subsequent chapters, then, provide an analysis of the participant's responses. I categorized the findings section according to the intensity of their responses. In other words, while the participants were asked to watch eight to ten particular segments of *The Colbert Report*, an overwhelming majority of the participants were more interested in and

passionate about the segments featured in the following chapters, which are also the same segments discussed in Chapter Four. The fact that most of the participants were primarily concerned with these particular episodes certainly suggests something about the overall concerns of this particular demographic. While they come from myriad religious and political backgrounds and affiliations, it seems that many of these emerging adults can find common ground on significant issues related to religion and politics.

Chapter Six: Gay Rights: Separating Personal Beliefs from Political Rights

Television studies has become a growing field, and many scholars are concerned about the way television plays a contextual role in shaping identities. As the last chapter suggested, media, and in this case television, have been explored through various lenses. Contemporary television studies has been widely concerned with the way subcultures utilize television to negotiate subcultural identity (H. Jenkins, 2000; Morley, 1980). As previously mentioned, it must be made clear that recent scholarship does not suggest that television is the only influencer of identity reflection and negotiation, rather, television programs are one of many opportunities for reflection (Cullity & Younger, 2004; La Pastina, 2004; Lembo, 2000; Newcomb & Hirsch, 1994). Scholars such as Ellsworth, for example, suggest that feminist and lesbian viewers utilize film and other “cultural forms” in order to shape identity (Ellsworth, 1986). While the majority of contemporary research on television focuses on race, class, and gender, there is a growing body of literature concerned with religion and television, and much of the current literature confirms past claims that suggest television plays an important role in identity formation. As Diane Winston (2009) suggests, “television converts social concerns, cultural conundrums, and metaphysical questions into stories that explore and even shape notions of identity and destiny- the building blocks of religious speculation” (p. 2).

In this light, as chapter two discussed, emerging adults today are in a constant state of flux, and many call upon myriad tools to shape their identities (Swidler, 1986). For Christian emerging adults, these tools might include tradition, parental influence, peer influence, and various media. Therefore, while past research on young adults has

been primarily interested in the role of tradition, parental influence, and peer influence, it is important to also consider the role of media in providing a space for young adults to negotiate and articulate their beliefs. As discussed in chapter three, it is clear that many television shows give credence to the reality that religion plays an important role in the lives of everyday Americans. While many of these shows humorously critique religious orthodoxy and traditional beliefs, media producers are often careful to avoid crossing certain boundaries when it comes to matters of faith, as these are often delicate personal matters to a plethora of viewers. When considering the ways television programs have approached religion, it is curious whether religious irreverence in media contributes to religious secularization (Berger, 1990).

While some might argue that the mediatization of religion leads to increased secularization, Hjarvard argues that media have become powerful agents of religious change (2008), and therefore, this dissertation argues that media can actually play a role in the resacralization of American society (Demerath, 2003). In other words, although much media aim to critique religious authorities and dogmas, it is possible that media offer a new and refreshing avenue through which people engage with and shape religious beliefs and practices. And, as chapter four suggested, Stephen Colbert serves as an example of how a particular media outlet can successfully critique Christian metanarratives while simultaneously reinforcing an alternative Christian worldview, and subsequently allows space for Christian young adults to consider their religious beliefs in new and refreshing ways.

This chapter will discuss the ways in which various participants reacted to Colbert's "Anti-Gay Marriage Ad", during which Colbert provides a parody commercial

of the National Organization for Marriage's original commercial, which was a response to Iowa's vote to legalize gay marriage. Almost all of the participants reacted passionately to this particular episode. Some were unwaveringly in favor of Colbert's inherent message, which suggests that the attempts to rationalize the opposition of gay marriage are ludicrous. Others, which this chapter will highlight, reacted with both passion and hesitance toward Colbert's message. These particular participants used the clip as a sounding board for their personal beliefs about gay marriage. They subsequently reflected on the tensions between their religious and their political beliefs. As this chapter will discuss, it seems that some of these participants are still negotiating their own religio-political identities when it comes to this subject matter. In this vein then, *The Colbert Report* serves as a space for further reflection and articulation of religious and political beliefs.

Reflecting upon Gay Rights

A Pew Survey suggests that "the most common reasons given for objecting to gay and lesbian marriage are moral and religious" (Pew, 2003). But, as the topic of homosexuality comes up in religious circles, young adults come to diverse conclusions about the subject, and many young Christians think differently than older generations about the issue (Nolan, 2011; Snyder, 2011). Of the participants interviewed for this research project, less than half of the participants believe that homosexuality is a sin, while over half believe that homosexuality is not a choice, rather something God created, and therefore, Christians should affirm homosexuality. While some of the participants disagree with the homosexual lifestyle, an overwhelming majority of those participants have no problem with the legalization of homosexual unions in some form or another.

Robert Wuthnow suggests that this phenomenon has existed within Mainline Protestant circles for quite some time (Wuthnow & Evans, 2002), but this chapter reflects a wider circle, including Catholics and evangelicals. Christian Smith (1998) also touches on this phenomenon, describing it as voluntary absolutism. Smith argues:

Many Evangelicals think that Christian morality should be the primary authority for American culture and society and simultaneously think that everyone should be free to live as they see fit, even if that means rejecting Christianity. Because they often firmly believe both positions simultaneously and cannot make up their minds between them, evangelicals have difficulty formulating a coherent philosophy of or strategic plan for faith-based social influence (p. 210).

For many evangelicals, like the participants in this chapter, the emphasis on individual freedoms often trumps absolutism.

In this vein, Maggie, Mandy, Brittany, Emily, Dave, and Ben all represent Christians who have contrasting religious and political views when it comes to homosexuality and the legalization of gay marriage or civil unions. Colbert's clip, "The Anti Gay Marriage Ad" allowed them to express the differences they had concerning the issues, and how they are able to separate their religious beliefs from what most of them consider a political right or the freedom of choice. Each participant took the time to articulate his or her stance while presenting the reasons why he or she is either apathetic to or in favor of homosexual unions. It is clear, here, that this issue, on a political level, seems less important to younger generations (Newport, 2012; Pew 2010), and as Ben suggests, may be completely unimportant in the next few decades.

Just as the previous chapter suggests, it is important to note once again that, while each participant took the time to reflect on the clip, not every participant is considered a regular viewer of the show. Though, while only one participant in this chapter, Mandy,

was not previously exposed to the program, all of the other viewers have at least some familiarity with the show, and viewers such as Maggie, Ben, and Dave are somewhat regular viewers. Nonetheless, their reflections still offer the reader an insight into the way these Christian young adults shape beliefs in relation to *The Colbert Report*.

While this chapter highlights participants' responses to the particular clip, it is also important to consider each participant's religio-political background, as this will allow the reader to place the participants' responses to one particular media text into the larger context of their lived experiences and beliefs. As mentioned previously, I argue that media consumption is just one avenue through which Christian young adults contemplate their religio-political identities, and therefore, their responses to *The Colbert Report* should not be interpreted as occurring in a vacuum. Rather, they must be considered within the wider context of their everyday influences and practices. This chapter will introduce each participant with information concerning his or her religio-political background, and it will subsequently explore his or her responses to Colbert's "Anti Gay Marriage Ad."

Maggie: Conservative Catholic

Maggie is a 30 year old professional who lives in a large Southern city. Her parents immigrated to Texas from the Philippines before she was born, and she was raised there with her older sister and younger brother, with the help of her maternal grandparents, who lived with her family while she was growing up.

Maggie grew up in the Catholic Church, and for her, her religious upbringing played a large role in how she understands her faith today. As a child, Maggie's maternal grandmother prayed with her daily, and she mentions that her "dad was always a quiet

example [of faith], praying and reading scripture nightly.” Furthermore, her parents sent her and her siblings to Catholic schools, which allowed her to further solidify her Catholic identity. Overall, though, Maggie says that, “family life in general helps me to understand a little bit of the love the Father has for us and see God’s hand in our lives.”

As an adult, Maggie’s faith is still very much rooted in the Catholic Church. She says that her siblings still play a large role in her Catholic formation. When speaking about her siblings, she says, “As adults, my brother in-law, sister, and I are learning and growing together, so we often share our questions and discoveries.” When asked how important her denominational affiliation is to her, she says:

Pretty important, personally. While all faiths profess some of the truth, I believe that the fullness of truth remains within the Catholic Church, and that only the Catholic Church has handed (with the grace of the Holy Spirit) down the faith in an unbroken line. That does not give me or anyone else the right to judge our Christian brothers and sisters in other denominations!

When asked if Maggie’s religious beliefs inform her political commitments, Maggie responds, saying:

Yes, because faith is the foundation of every aspect of my life. At least, that’s what I strive for. In general, faith establishes people’s values, and people should always act in accordance with their values. In other words, if you believe in something, then you believe that it is the truth (reality, or how things are). We should always base our actions on reality.

While Maggie is not a regular viewer of the show, she mentioned that she watches *The Colbert Report* sometimes. After Maggie watched Colbert’s “Anti-Gay Marriage Ad,” the clip clearly evoked in her an urgency to share the reasonable arguments against homosexuality. Overall, she was discouraged by Colbert’s dismissal of the logical claims that make heterosexual marriage more legitimate than homosexual marriage. For

Maggie, the anti-gay rights movement has certainly done its part to promote ridicule through its illogical and discriminatory rhetoric, however, she wants to make clear that, in addition to those people, there are plenty of educated and anti-inflammatory people in the world who have also made reasonable arguments against homosexuality. She says:

After watching this episode I feel a little frustrated. It rightly mocks the hypocrisy, discrimination, and poor logic of many who argue against same-sex marriage. However, it seems to dismiss the possibility that there can be positive, legitimate reasons to oppose same-sex marriage. Yes, many of these reasons are too complex to explain in a comedy show, and it's not Colbert's job to do so. But it seems to me that the popular culture is already rife with critiques of the poor reasons and almost nobody takes the time to discuss the good ones.

Maggie's stance on homosexuality is informed by her Catholic beliefs. Throughout her response to the clip, she uses the Catholic Church's teachings about homosexuality as fodder for her argument. Before delving into her stances on homosexual behavior, she begins with an apology for why the Catholic teaching reflects a loving attitude. "The Catholic Church teaches that all people should be loved and respected, regardless of sexual orientation." Maggie is adamant to emphasize the fact that, although she believes homosexuality is a sin, her stance towards homosexual people is both loving and embracing. She outlines her reasons clearly.

Our stance is the more loving one because: 1. Sometimes the truth can be uncomfortable, but it is more loving to speak it than to allow people to keep believing a lie. Our choices, even when they feel good at the time, can hurt us and others in ways we don't even know.

Here, Maggie outlines the idea that those who free themselves from sinful acts are ultimately happier and are subsequently able to lead more enriching and fulfilling lives. Furthermore, for Maggie, a Christian should, out of his or her love for all of humanity,

hold people accountable to their actions and encourage them to live a life of higher worth. For those who follow Maggie's line of thinking, this is the Christian duty. She continues with her list, "2. Unlike many "gay-rights supporters" and many "anti-gay" activists, we do not define individuals by their sexual orientation. A person is more than just "gay" or "straight", just as he or she is more than his or her eye color." Here Maggie suggests that one should not be defined by any one characteristic, and that a gay or lesbian person is not one-dimensional, rather multifaceted. Therefore, Christians should not judge people just by one quality or feature; rather, they should look at the whole person. And, finally, Maggie adds:

3. Unlike many others who oppose gay marriage, we acknowledge the complex factors that contribute to sexual attraction and how difficult it is to change. However, that does not mean that we condone acting on those impulses, just as we would never condone drinking by an alcoholic.

This argument represents the classic "homosexuality is a disease" phenomenon that is persistent throughout many Christian circles. Making homosexuality analogous to alcoholism allows one to consider that a gay or lesbian person may have been born with certain genetic tendencies, but actions associated with homosexuality are what leads one down the path of sin and brokenness, similar to an alcoholic choosing to drink.

Subsequent to her reasonable arguments against homosexual behavior, Maggie delves into the theological components of marriage. Her beliefs, ultimately, are grounded in how God intended for God's people to live and procreate.

We believe that we were made in God's image and that God is three persons in one – the Holy Spirit proceeds from the love between the Father and the Son. This image is imprinted on our bodies, in the way that

man and woman are needed to create a third person. Biologically, life and a family cannot happen without male and female. If a homosexual female couple wanted to conceive a child, they would essentially be reducing a man to his sperm, making him a means to an end rather than an end in and of himself. The same goes the other way.

It is clear that Maggie has a firm stance about homosexuality based on her beliefs about natural order. For Maggie, homosexuality cannot be in God's plan because God designed man and woman biologically to procreate, a belief that falls in line with Catholic thought. Nonetheless, Maggie has a difficult time separating her Catholic beliefs from the political components of marriage. She says:

I am still forming my political beliefs, for example, trying to understand the church's teaching on civil unions. Government is involved in marriage and family because they are more than private matters. These personal choices have public ramifications, such as the health, stability, and productiveness of children in society.

It seems that Maggie sees marriage as both a religious and political institution, and therefore, her beliefs ultimately return to the natural order debate, although it seems clear that she is continuously wrestling with this issue. She concludes her argument:

Yes, there are many healthy, successful children of same-sex parents, and many of these individual families are more stable than some heterosexual ones. My limited understanding of history, human development, and scientific studies, however, shows that in general, on a macro level, the ideal upbringing for a child requires both mother and father roles, in different genders.

Overall, it seems that Maggie remains open to receiving more information on the issue as well as open to potentially changing her stance. While Maggie did not agree with the way Colbert addressed the issue, the clip still provided her a platform to articulate her theological and political stance concerning homosexuality and gay

marriage. Perhaps the clip allowed her to further elucidate her argument, or perhaps, the clip muddled her beliefs. This is unclear. However, it is certainly clear that Colbert provided Maggie with yet another occasion to formulate her beliefs about the issue. While her beliefs rely heavily upon the Catholic Church, the latter part of her reflection suggests that she is willing to consider other sources of authority when making political decisions about gay marriage.

Mandy: Conservative Lutheran

Mandy is a 23 year old recent college graduate. She and her older sister were raised in a traditional nuclear family. Growing up, her father was, and still is, an ordained minister and army chaplain and her mother was a music teacher. Because of her father's job, Mandy moved a lot during her childhood and adolescence, and consequently, her family unit was the major engenderer of her religious and political development.

Mandy grew up in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS), a traditionally theologically and politically conservative denomination of the Lutheran Church. Her dad serves as an ordained minister of the LCMS as well as an army chaplain. Mandy's Christian identity is extremely important to her. She says:

[Christianity] is basically my identity. It defines who I am and what I do...I believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and some of my experiences in Christian communities have made a huge impact on who I am as a person. My dad being a pastor, I've grown up in the church my whole life, the Lutheran Church. I definitely agree with LCMS's doctrine, and that's where I fall when it comes to the details of my faith, but I'm a Christian first and foremost and believe in Jesus Christ.

For Mandy, not only has Christianity become an important identity marker, but specifically, the LCMS has played a large role in how she lives out her Christian faith and what she believes. The LCMS places much authority on the inerrancy of Scripture and the teachings of Martin Luther, and Mandy certainly echoes those components when she talks about her Lutheran identity.

[The LCMS] defines who I am in interpreting Scripture, who I am and how I talk about my faith is defined by the Lutheran church. I have areas where I disagree with some of the doctrine, but for the most part when it comes to questions about doctrine and scripture, I fall in line with the Lutheran church.

It is clear, though, that while the Lutheran church has played a significant role in shaping Mandy's belief system, she understands that the Lutheran church is a part of the larger catholic church, and that ultimately, a person's understanding of Jesus defines their Christian character. She reflects upon this when she speaks about other Christian denominations.

But, at the same time I don't discriminate against people who aren't Lutheran. I'm very open with my conversations with people and my relationships with people of other denominations. I believe the most important thing falls to who Christ is and what he's done.

Mandy's political convictions are less important than her religious beliefs. "I would say I fall on the Republican side, but I'm not very politically focused. It is not something I highly value, but when it comes down to it, I would say I am a somewhat conservative Republican." While she states that she is mostly conservative and comes from a conservative family, Mandy is uninvolved in political debates and doesn't share her political opinions with her peers. In fact, almost all of her political conversations are

held with her parents, and she says that her father, more specifically, has played an important role in her political education as well as her religious education.

My dad being a pastor and a chaplain in the army, both of those things, his profession surrounded by his faith and politics, and because of that I hear a lot from him...Of course it affects my view on it. I don't side with him on everything without doing my own thinking and researching, but definitely what he says plays a part on how I feel about it.

While Mandy's political convictions play a small part in who she sees herself as an individual, she does suggest that her religious beliefs play a large impact on how she votes and what issues she supports. Ultimately, it is the authority she places on Scripture and Christian values that significantly shapes how she votes in elections.

My Christian beliefs have a lot to do with my political beliefs. An example would be before I vote or I'm looking at a president to vote for, I look at his morals and values, and see if they line up with mine. I would say it's important to me that he's a Christian, but that's not the most important thing, just that they have good morals. When it comes to the hot topics like abortion and things like that, I look to Scripture to see what it says on the topics before I make my own decision.

When contemplating Mandy's political and religious affiliations and commitments, one might assume her response to Colbert's Anti-Gay Marriage Ad would be predictable, however, her response was anything but. She approached the clip, not knowing much about Colbert or Colbert's persona, which at first confused her, but nonetheless, it allowed her the space to articulate her own thoughts on homosexuality and gay marriage. She begins her response, saying, "You know, after watching that clip, I'm not really sure weather [sic] he is for or against gay marriage. He did a pretty good job of making fun of both sides of the argument. And I think he's right. Both sides of the argument can be pretty ridiculous at times." Here she acknowledges the weaknesses of liberal and conservatives alike and the fact that both can be equally ludicrous. Her

introduction provides a nice transition into her views on homosexual behavior.

She says, “I personally do not agree with homosexuality because I don’t think it was what we were made for. This is my religious belief. We were not made for homosexuality, or violence, or gossip, or slander, or hate. But this is a part of the fallen world we live in.” It seems, for Mandy, that homosexuality falls into the category of sin, and is no different than the sins in the aforementioned catalog. She, like Maggie, although subtly, uses the natural order argument to reinforce her religious views.

While her religious views about homosexual behavior are clear, Mandy is quick to suggest that her political opinions might differ when it comes to the right for same-sex couples to marry. “It is the political side of the argument where I am on the fence about my beliefs. I agree with Colbert, neither side is great. Even if I believe that homosexuality is sinful, who am I to make the decision whether or not marriage should be legal?”

Mandy clearly separates her religious beliefs from the role marriage plays as a legal institution. For her, though, it is because marriage in society is no longer a sacred institution that she is able to make the distinction. She says:

When marriage stopped becoming a thing that was connected with the church and a commitment in faith, marriage left the realm of religion and entered the realm of politics. And that’s why we have a problem with it. Because now we don’t really know what marriage is.

Mandy is able to see that, while marriage is a religious institution in her own understanding of the term, it is not for all people, and therefore, the definition of marriage has become altered. This is what allows her the ability to make the distinction between a religious view and political one.

Mandy's viewing of Colbert is different than others as she is unfamiliar with the program. Nonetheless, she is able to utilize the clip to think about her own stance. It is clear in her response that there is tension between Mandy's religious and political views. While she has not previously used Colbert as a reference point for religio-political identity formation, it seems probable that she has utilized other sources of authority to shape a dissonant political stance from her family and church's teachings.

Furthermore, while Mandy does not utilize Colbert as a regular source of authority, it is still noteworthy that she doesn't reject him either. Overall, her responses to the clips suggest she has respect for his critique of ideas that stem from emotion and prejudice (truthiness). Even though she may not agree with everything Colbert has to say, she can find comfort in the fact that Colbert's message represents a more rational point of view. It also seems clear that she is refreshed to hear someone like Colbert suggest that not everything is absolute, and there are, in fact, grey areas when it comes to religion and politics. Whereas the church often purports absolute truths, media often allow viewers to wrestle with the contradictions that exist between religious orthodoxy and lived experiences (Winston, 2009). Therefore, although Mandy does not understand the intended message, the clip still allows her to name the contradictions that exist between her own religious beliefs and what she considers a basic human right.

Brittany: Independent Fundamentalist

Brittany is an 18 year old college student from a small, rural, Midwestern town, where she has lived her whole life. She is one of four children, and her parents are happily married. As her parents are both Lutheran school teachers, Brittany's upbringing

was rooted in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), a small, very conservative denomination of the Lutheran church, which she places in the category of Fundamentalist. When speaking about her family Brittany says, “We are pretty close. We are very normal I think, and we are all pretty Christian.” Brittany’s religious beliefs are very important to her, and her faith is grounded in the authority she places on Scripture.

For me, Christianity is kind of a broad thing, and there are a lot of things you can believe as a Christian, but for me, my faith is entirely Bible based, and so I believe every single word of the Bible is true and it is the inspired word of God. I am WELS, which I really think is probably the closest I can get to believing what is in the Bible exactly. I don’t like people’s desire to be a part of a church. I think that’s kind of the less important aspect of your faith. Like, a church is very useful in building it up, but I believe everything should be built on the Bible and having a true faith in what you believe.

Growing up, Brittany attended church every Sunday. She says that she could count the number of times she didn’t go to church as a child. Now that she attends a Christian college with a different denominational affiliation, however, she does not go to church because she doesn’t agree with the teachings at her school, but Brittany hopes to find a church that matches her viewpoints in the near future. When talking about her religious formation, Brittany understands that her parents inevitably played a big role, but she reflects upon a time when she made decisions about her beliefs for herself, starting in high school.

I would probably say it was my parents because I’ve gone to church with them my whole life, and I went to a Lutheran grade school and a Lutheran high school, but I don’t like using that as the label of how my faith is supported because I think it is something that people tend to judge, but there was a point where, in high school, I started working things out in what I really believe, and that’s when my faith took hold.

As Brittany was forming her own religious beliefs and making them her own, she relied less on her parents and more on the influence of her peers and mentors. She recalls a pastor in high school being heavily influential in the way she thinks about Scripture and her personal faith. “When I was in high school we had a few pastors on staff who would teach our religion classes, and there was a pastor there who really taught me how to live my own faith and kind of made it less about tradition and more about the Bible.”

Although Brittany has come to certain truth claims through routes other than her parents, it is ultimately her parents who provided the foundation for her faith. She certainly acknowledges the role they played in her religious education as well as providing her with a Christian high school education, which allowed her the opportunity to further explore her faith.

In addition to her religious education, Brittany has been heavily influenced by her parents when it comes to politics, although during high school she took hold of her own political identity, claiming herself as an Independent while still leaning towards the conservative side of the political spectrum. “For the longest time I thought I was Republican because my parents are Republican, but I consider myself Independent leaning to the right, for probably four years or so.” For Brittany, while she considers herself conservative, she holds a deep disdain for the two-party system, and she feels that no one party really captures all of her views. When speaking on this topic, she says, “I’d say I probably place more of my political views with Republican, but I don’t like the party system. I don’t like placing it Republican or Democratic because I believe in both things, and I think that is kind of restrictive as a political system.”

While Brittany has strong opinions about America's two-party system, she is also vehemently in favor of the separation of church and state, which is certainly interesting considering her identification as a Fundamentalist. She shares her concern in the interview, stating:

I would say that my religious beliefs play a pretty big role on my political commitments. I am very much about separation of church and state. I think it is very important, so there are points when my political viewpoints will probably deviate from what my faith would dictate, but I don't think it's compromising my faith I guess.

Although Brittany has only seen *The Colbert Report* a few times, it is clear, based on her political beliefs, that she might find something about Colbert's messages with which to resonate. And, her commitment to the separation of church and state certainly informs the way she responded to Colbert's "Anti Gay Marriage Ad." Of all the participants highlighted in this chapter, Brittany is the most firm about her stance in favor of the separation of church and state. While she elucidates this point later in her reflection, it is important to note that Brittany, like other participants, also struggles with the way theologically conservative Christians are perceived by gay rights activists. This clip engenders the need for Brittany, as well as other participants, to defend her Christian subculture and clarify her views about homosexuality.

Gay marriage is a topic that is growing in importance, I feel. For me it's tricky because I believe that homosexuality is a sin. That doesn't mean that I hate homosexuals or am close-minded. Jesus would not have liked that. Many supporters of gay marriage think of Christianity as evil and archaic if the denomination doesn't adopt their view.

While it is clear Brittany struggles with this portrayal, she is quick to point out that her political views about the subject are very different. Much like Mandy, Brittany is able to separate her religious convictions from her political beliefs. For her, there has to be a

separation of church and state, and this is a clear example of the need for that separation.

She says:

Though I do not view gay marriage as religiously correct, I do not believe that the religious belief I hold should be placed on those who do not hold to it. Separating church and state is essential for a fair government and homosexuality is not a moral issue outside of my religion.

In a response to another clip regarding gay marriage, Brittany shares similar sentiments.

She says, “While I believe that homosexuality is a sin, I feel that gay marriage should probably be politically acceptable with true separation of church and state because outside of religion, there is no reason why it is morally wrong.”

Brittany is able to clearly express her conflicting religious and political beliefs in her response to Colbert’s parody. It seems that, while the reflection allows her to share struggles with the way Christians are perceived by outsiders, this clip additionally allows her a space to share her political beliefs. As a person who comes from a conservative tradition, this may be difficult for her to do in familiar religious circles. Therefore, like Mandy, the clip serves as an occasion for further articulation of a belief she already holds but may not frequently express. Emily’s response will also reflect this theme.

Emily: Liberal Evangelical

Emily is a 25 year old nurse who currently lives in a small Midwestern town, where she moved to be closer to her fiancé. Her parents still live in her hometown, which is just outside a mid-sized Midwestern city. Emily’s parents were divorced when she was about 16 or 17, and both have since been remarried. She is the oldest of three, and she says she is very closer with her younger brothers, both of whom still live close to her parents. Following high school, Emily had a wide range of experiences, and she

considers those years to be extremely formative, especially when it comes to her religious and political views.

Emily grew up in a theologically and politically conservative household, where they attended a nondenominational church weekly. When reminiscing about her childhood church, she says, “I grew up going to church every Sunday, so that has definitely had a huge part of shaping me. I grew up in a nondenominational church, that would be maybe a little on the evangelical side.” Growing up, Emily’s parents played a large role in forming her faith and her belief system. “My mom has a very strong relationship with God, and she’s always shared that with me.” For Emily, being a Christian is fundamentally about knowing who Jesus is as her personal savior. She says, “I am a Christian and that means that I believe that Jesus Christ came to die for our sins and I accept him into my life, and if I accept him I will go to heaven, and I try to live my life according to that principle.” Emily’s religious beliefs have not changed much over the years, and she still holds a great deal of value on the belief system her parents taught her.

On the political side of the spectrum, Emily’s views have changed drastically since high school. While her parents raised her in a highly active and conservative political family, her college and post college experiences led her towards more liberal modes of thought, especially when it comes to social issues. When reflecting on the role her parents played in her political education, Emily says:

When you are a kid you believe everything your parents tell you, my parents, and my dad especially were into anti-abortion stuff. They marched in marches in DC and stuff like that, so I mean, not that abortion is the big issue here, but in general, I was very influenced by my parents. The last part of high school, and into college, I just started being a little

more open to other things and not just taking blindly that what my parents said was what I should believe. I still have great respect for my parents and what they believe and I've had open conversations with them about what they believe versus what I believe and very much respect their opinion, and to a certain extent, I mean, that foundation raised me and gave me the morals that I have, and even politically, I still think of things within the framework probably of how my parents think.

It is clear that Emily holds different views than her parents, but she still respects where she came from and how they still shape her today. Overall, she can have positive and respectful discussions with her family about political issues. When asking more about her political conversion, Emily speaks more specifically about her college years: "As I grew older and was in college and was exposed to different people and different things and started to think about things for myself I became a little bit more liberal and a little bit more open to different ideas." She reminisced specifically on the role of her professors, classmates, and peers as well as her move to Chicago post graduation, where she was exposed to ethnic and religious diversity. In addition, Emily reflects upon conversations she occasionally had with her aunt, who was the lone liberal in her extended family.

I have an aunt who is extremely liberal, like in everything. She is a college professor, and she was actually a pretty big influence on me when I was younger as well because she was kind of the only one in my family that was not super ultra conservative. My relationship with her allowed me to share some opinions and voice some concerns and thoughts that I wouldn't necessarily been able to have around my family.

While Emily has gone through a very drastic transformation in her political views, it seems that she struggles with making sense of her religious convictions in light of her political commitments. When asking her if her religious beliefs inform her political views, Emily felt very torn. She said:

I definitely think there is a separation between my religious thoughts and how the world actually works, so I wouldn't base all of my decisions based on like, "is this person a Christian", or something like that. I definitely feel like there is a separation between politics and religion.

In a follow-up question, I asked Emily if she ever feels there are contradictions between her religious and political beliefs. She answered yes. For Emily, her religious beliefs are extremely important to her, but she does not feel that her beliefs should carry over into laws or a governmental structure, and therefore, they should be completely separate from politics. She makes an interesting point when she says:

I guess it comes down to the fact that I don't think my religious beliefs should be laws for everyone in the country or everyone in the world. There are a lot of religions in the world, and obviously I believe that what I believe is right otherwise I wouldn't believe it, but I don't want anyone else's religious views be made into laws that affect me in ways that I don't think are appropriate, so I don't know why mine should affect people.

Emily gives a concrete example of how her political beliefs do not match her religious ones. She says:

Take abortion. I know God thinks that is wrong and that is wrong, but I would never, myself vote to make that illegal because I don't think that it should be illegal because I think that the world we are living in today people should have the right to do that even though I think it's wrong. I would never do that myself.

It is clear, here, that Emily has both a religious and a political stance on the issue of abortion. She holds a firm religious conviction that abortion is morally wrong, but she has no desire to infringe upon someone else's right to choose. This is especially interesting considering Emily's upbringing in a family that was very active in pro-life rallies.

When considering Emily's religious and political context, it is curious as to how she contemplates homosexuality and gay marriage. The Colbert clip offers Emily, a

participant who has had some prior exposure to the show, a space to articulate the contradictions between her religious and political views on hot button topics, especially homosexuality. To begin, Emily shares the challenges she faces going to a church where homosexuality is not widely accepted. “I haven’t had a specific conversation with members of my church about gay marriage, but I think that most of them would be against it. The clip definitely pokes fun at people who are against it.” For Emily, then, Colbert especially allows her a forum to identify with a political stance that might be different from her church’s views. She states the contradictions between her religious and political beliefs clearly in her response to the clip when she says:

Religiously, I feel like it’s not God’s plan or God’s best for people to be gay. I believe that God designed marriage for a man and a woman. However, politically I feel differently. Today we are in a world where many people do not choose to follow God’s plan for their lives. I don’t feel like our government and laws should reflect individual religious beliefs. If two men or two women want to get married and abide by the laws that govern marriage, then I don’t see why that shouldn’t be allowed.

Her response here seems predictable given her context, but intriguing nonetheless. She adds, though, that she is able to make the distinction between her political and religious views in this case because of the changes in the way society defines marriage. She says, “To a certain extent, it comes down to discrimination. Who am I to decide who can get married and who can’t? And so many marriages end in divorce these days anyway. There really is not much sanctity left in marriage anymore, so why not let gays get married.” Much like Mandy, Emily approaches the separation between her religious and political views regarding gay marriage from the standpoint of the secularization of marriage as an institution. As her response suggests, Emily no longer sees the institution as sacred or as being affiliated with Christianity, as it once was. Furthermore, she is able

to see the flaws in marriage, which further allows her to adapt the definition of marriage to include gay and lesbian people.

Colbert's parody does not offend Emily; rather, it allows her the space to share her views openly and honestly. Once again, we see how a viewer like Emily finds comfort in Colbert's message when she might feel ostracized by her church community for openly sharing her views. As stated previously, this is an example of the ways in which media can create space for reflection on convoluted issues. It is a space that orthodox churches have difficulty creating or maintaining, and therefore, young adults like Emily find other outlets to validate their minority viewpoints (or at least they perceive them as minority viewpoints). In this light, media can play a powerful role in religio-political identity formation and articulation.

Dave: Liberal Evangelical

Dave is a 27 year old who originally grew up in a metropolitan area in the Upper Midwest but currently lives in a Western metropolitan area, where he is a physician assistant. His parents still live in the Midwest, where they spend half of their time in Dave's hometown in Wisconsin and half their time at their lake house in Missouri. He is still relatively close with his family.

Much like all of the other participants in this chapter, Dave grew up in a Christian home, where his family took him to church on a regular basis. As a child, Dave went to several different churches of various denominational affiliations. When he was in high school, he decided to attend a nondenominational church on his own, and he has identified as nondenominational and evangelical since then. Looking back on his

religious upbringing, Dave speaks about the role it played on how he views Christianity today.

My family has had a strong influence just from growing up in the church, and I think because I have moved churches so many times I've had to think about the particular differences between the churches and that has been food for thought and has made me think about it more than someone who didn't switch churches so frequently.

Dave's Christian identity is still very important to him. When speaking about his faith, Dave says:

Yes I am a Christian. To me that means that we were all born sinners and that we need a perfect Savior, who came in the form of Jesus Christ and we need to put our trust in his redeeming work. As a Christian, I think that your faith it's not the building that you practice in.

When speaking specifically about identifying as an evangelical, Dave says, "I think that basically [Evangelicals] believe in the basic fundamental structure in that we need to be sharing the gospel message with other people." The church where Dave attends now has what he calls a "missional philosophy" insofar as the church makes a conscious effort to reach out both locally and abroad to make church more appealing to those who currently do not attend.

Dave's political awakening was quite similar to Emily's. As a child and adolescent, Dave grew up in a very conservative household where he attended a theologically and politically conservative Christian high school. But, following high school, Dave encountered myriad beliefs and opinions that allowed him to think differently about his political identity. He says:

I was very conservative growing up. I went to private schools growing up, and there was really only exposure to a very conservative Republican viewpoint, and then when I went to college, and I got to hear both sides, it felt like things weren't as rigid as I had always thought.

He reminisces about college professors, co-workers, and peers playing a major role in his political transformation.

For the most part, Dave considers himself more active in political issues and races than the average young adult. For example, in 2011, while Dave was living in northern Wisconsin for a short period of time, he traveled to Madison to protest the union budget cuts. He says:

My parents were both union employees and growing up I really see the benefits of a union, whereas a lot of people only get what they hear from the news about how they are destroying American economy, and I don't agree with that. It felt good to be a part of that and a part of grassroots democracy.

For the most part, personal experience plays a large role in the way Dave makes political decisions, which has also allowed him to separate his religious and political beliefs on certain issues. When asked if his religious beliefs inform his political commitments, Dave says:

I think it depends on the issue, but I think there is a lot of give and take both ways for me. I guess I don't believe the way our government is set up that everything necessarily has to have a religious undertone to it. There is separation of church and state in this country, and in some ways that's a good thing. I don't allow my personal moral beliefs to influence everything that I vote for.

While Dave considers himself only moderately liberal, he says that his political alignments really depend on each issue. Overall, Dave has allowed his experiences post high school to shape his political convictions, and his parents political beliefs do not necessarily match his own. In fact, he says, "We engage in political discussions, but most of the time we just sort of agree to disagree."

Dave considers himself a somewhat regular viewer of The Colbert Report, and therefore, his previous exposure gives him the ability to understand Colbert's humor right from the start. His reflection on his viewing of "The Anti Gay Marriage Ad" allows him to articulate the nature of his political and religious beliefs concerning gay marriage. When it comes to homosexuality, Dave stands on the theologically conservative side of the issue, considering homosexuality to be a sin.

This is obviously a very sensitive subject within the church today. Right or wrong I believe that God loves all his creation and that we are all sinners and that we require his grace and mercy. I don't believe that God automatically excludes homosexuals from his love and salvation because of their lifestyle.

When it comes to his political convictions however, Dave is fully supportive of allowing gay and lesbian couples to freely live out their relationship in a civil union.

Politically I support the freedom for homosexuals to live their life without fear of discrimination or bullying...I honestly do not believe that homosexual relationships fit the traditional definition of marriage. I do support civil unions, which offer the same rights as marriage but with a different nomenclature.

While the episode resonated with Dave and allows him the ability to further articulate the differences in his beliefs, the clip also discouraged him, as it further reinforced the negative stereotypes of Christians. He says, "After watching this episode I feel conflicted. Politically I see the entertainment in the irony that Colbert points out but worry about the perception of people watching who are not Christian." For Dave, while he believes that it should be legal for gay and lesbian couples to enter into a civil union, he does not feel ashamed to say that he doesn't agree with homosexuality from a religious standpoint, and he felt that Colbert was poking fun at his belief system. For Dave, Colbert reduced the argument to an "either you are for or against," scenario, which

clearly does not align with Dave's understanding of the issue. Dave further explains his discouragement when he says:

It began poking fun at an organization that is standing up for "traditional Christian values" even if I do not agree with them. It's frustrating to see them being made fun of because non-Christians view most Christians in this way. This makes it harder to be open about your faith for fear of judgment. I also believe that it's their right to stand up and say what they believe. All too often Christians are silenced because they are not being "open" enough or politically correct.

In this response, which is similar to Brittany's, Dave articulates his disappointment with the way Christians are often portrayed in media, and he is frustrated that Colbert, who is also a Christian, additionally feeds the pejorative Christian stereotypes to his viewers. While Dave resonates with the clip, he also resonates with the viewer who holds traditional beliefs. He is able to consider how they might feel about the clip or how outsiders perceive them. This may be due to the fact that Dave, an Evangelical, potentially has several peers or family members who hold more traditional views, and even though he doesn't agree with those views, he can still respect them. Furthermore, like other participants, he also wishes non-Christians might begin to understand that these issues are not black and white to many Christians, as the clip portrays, rather, many Christians are conflicted about their views regarding gay marriage. Therefore, this clip allows space for Dave to not only consider his own beliefs about gay marriage, but for him to also voice his concerns with the way media often portray Christianity.

Ben: Moderate Christian

Ben is an editor and producer for a multimedia company. At 28, Ben helps his company produce corporate video, TV, and radio commercials and videos for the

Internet. When Ben was seven years old, his family moved to a mid-size Midwestern City, where he has lived since then. His parents have been happily married for over 30 years, and together, they raised him and his older sister.

When Ben reflects on his religious upbringing, he recalls growing up in a Methodist church, but during his childhood, his family made the decision to leave his local church in pursuit of a church that allowed his family to deepen their faith. Ben says:

The church I grew up in got a new minister my junior year in high school. While a nice enough guy, my family wasn't being spiritually fed. We decided as a family to stick it out at that church until I graduated due to my involvement with the youth fellowship program. After I left for college, my parents began attending the church I am now a member of, and I joined them on breaks. When I moved home after graduation, I had established enough of a relationship with members of that church that I decided to join.

While the church that Ben currently attends is affiliated with the United Church of Christ, Ben considers himself somewhere between Mainline Protestant and Evangelical, as he also attends Bible Study at a local Vineyard Church, which is affiliated with the National Association of Evangelicals. When describing his religious identity, Ben is clear to express that denominational labels lack importance to him. Ben says he is “Honestly... just Christian. Others might say I'm in that grey area between Mainline Protestant and mild Evangelical.” For Ben, being a Christian means that “ Jesus is my Lord and Savior. I try to live as He did and love as He loves, and am thankful for the grace He freely gives when I fail--which is often.”

Ben describes himself as politically moderate. To Ben, voting on the issues or a reliable candidate is more important to him than voting for one particular party. “I'd vote

for the politician I deem more trustworthy or more likely to get the ball rolling over a politician aligned with a political party or agenda. I like to say I've got the heart of a Democrat but the fiscal responsibility of a Republican.” Ben considers himself to be an informed and responsible voter, as he stays up to date with current events and votes in every election. When asked if Ben’s religious beliefs inform his political views, Ben responds, saying, “Only in the sense of morality... I vote for those who espouse what I consider to be moral traits and convictions based on my Christian view of morality.” When talking about how important his faith and politics are, Ben suggests that his religious identity is extremely important, while his political identity is only as important as the issues about which he is passionate as he, once again, reiterates his moderate stance.

Since I tend to focus more on individual issues than party politics, probably not very important--at least in the sense this question is being asked. I am passionate about specific issues and levies, but not so much about politics in general. They tend to come off as too high school cliquish.

Ben considers himself a regular viewer of *The Colbert Report* and a fan of the show. It is clear in his response, though, that while he takes Colbert seriously as an authority figure, he is also quick to critique him. Like all of the other participants highlighted in this chapter, Ben does not support homosexuality from a theological stance, however, his political stance contrasts his religious beliefs. As he passionately responds to this clip, Ben clearly shows the reasons for his beliefs:

While I believe that the Bible does not endorse or condone homosexuality, I find it heinous how much we (Christians) focus on the sins of others when Jesus expressly tells us to "clean the inside of the pot" and to "remove the plank" from our own eye before we try to remove the speck from others'. Jesus loved the ones cast out from religious tradition and

society, so why are we (Christians) isolating and condemning people? Especially when our own sins condemn us. The episode was for homosexual marriage, and theologically, I stand against it, but politically, I say it should represent the will of the people.

This comment does not necessarily suggest that Ben is in favor of gay marriage, rather, it suggests that he is willing to go along with the majority viewpoint. But, his subsequent comments further elucidate his willingness to sacrifice his religious beliefs for political causes. Later in the response, Ben explains that his political stance in favor of gay marriage reflects a Christian call to love all people regardless of their choices and circumstances. He says:

From a religious standpoint, I do not support gay marriage, but as previously stated, I believe that as a Christian, my purpose is to share the love of Christ with everyone regardless of their heritage, their financial situation, their education level or their sexual orientation.

As Ben concludes his response, he explains that, in his opinion, the issues surrounding homosexuality and gay marriage are becoming a thing of the past. In his observation, younger generations are becoming more tolerant and accepting, and that we will see a full legalization within the next few decades.

Homosexuality was a huge issue in the 70s 80s and 90s because it was an unknown to much of society. It's depicted everywhere in our media now, so people are becoming much more comfortable with it. The issue of gay marriage will cease to be an issue in the next 10-20 years. Each generation seems to be more accepting of pretty much everything, and I think that in a relatively short amount of time, gay marriage will be 50-state legal.

While Ben's response shows his conflicting beliefs, his response also shows his anger towards the way Colbert presented the clip, as it gives a negative perception of Christians as well as mocks an entire group of people without calling them to a higher

standard. Like Dave, the episode allows Ben to articulate how his religious beliefs differ from his political views, but he is still left with some anger towards the way Colbert handled the episodes. Ben is “frustrated that Christians are mainly known for what we're against versus what we're for. And that what we're perceived as being against is not reflective of all Christians.” Furthermore, Ben is angry that Colbert doesn't take the time to question the beliefs of those he mocks; rather, he merely ridicules them and makes them look ignorant. Overall, Ben feels the episode could have been more effective if it called for a public debate or a general understanding of theological beliefs. He says:

Colbert does a great job of showing just one side of a story. In this case, he's making fun of an entire group of people for expressing their views, which is a pillar this country was founded on-being able to speak your mind and share your beliefs freely. Rather than merely expressing disagreement and stating his reasons, he's mocking people rather than seeking actual answers or response to the unasked questions of why they take the stand they do on the issue of gay marriage.

Ben's response, like the reflections highlighted throughout this chapter, suggests that he has differing political and religious beliefs when it comes to homosexuality and gay marriage. The clip allows him the space to reflect further on his own beliefs and his hypothesis for the future. While his reflection upon the tension between his beliefs is consistent with other responses, his final comments and disagreements with Colbert's tactics are also noteworthy. Like Dave, Ben finds Colbert's message both refreshing and disappointing. While he can appreciate Colbert's critique of those who are against gay marriage, Ben feels that Colbert could have used his time and celebrity status more wisely by perhaps engendering a respectful dialogue about the issue rather than simply attacking the conservative side. By even suggesting this, though, Ben recognizes that

Colbert has a certain amount of religious and political clout amongst Christians and non-Christians alike (Clark, 2012). Here, then, we see a viewer who believes that Colbert can and does play a role in creating space for people to formulate opinions about issues pertaining to religion and politics.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted various participant responses to Colbert's mockery of conservative beliefs about gay marriage. When considering the way theologically conservative participants responded to Colbert's "Anti Gay Marriage Ad," there are obvious connections one can make to literature within both the sociology of religion and media studies. In terms of its connection to the sociology of religion, as this chapter has elucidated, some young adults seem comfortable with the grey areas between religiosity and politics. When considering homosexuality, a topic that has become highly debated over the last few years, many young people are able to separate their religious convictions from what they understand to be an American freedom, an example of voluntary absolutism (Smith, 1998). As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this points to literature that suggests mainline Protestants have come to these conclusions for a few years now (Wuthnow & Evans, 2002), although this chapter certainly extends the circle to include evangelicals and Catholics.

The reflections highlighted in this chapter also agree with research that suggests there are generational differences when it comes to beliefs about the separation of church and state. While many of the participants in this chapter are able to make the distinction between religious and political beliefs because of the secularization of marriage as an

institution, for the most part, their beliefs about the separation of church and state guide their politics. This reflects the overall phenomenon that younger generations are less in favor of mixing religion and politics than older generations. In fact, millennials are less likely than any other generational group to consider religion as an important factor in America's success as a nation (Marcotte, 2011, Pew, 2011). This is also fundamentally different from the dominionist perspective that has permeated much of evangelical political thinking for decades, and even today (NPR, 2011). For many young Christians, freedom of choice and freedom of expression are important liberties, and therefore, the separation of church and state becomes a pivotal political issue (Louwagie, 2010).

In terms of its contribution to media studies, this chapter further reinforces previous literature that suggests that television programs sometimes provide a forum for reflection on convoluted subjects (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1994; Primiano, 2009; Reinhartz, 2009), a space that the church often lacks. Therefore, for many Christian viewers, television can play a role in representing lived religious experiences (Winston, 2009). Furthermore, this chapter suggests that television and media serve as one avenue through which people negotiate subcultural identities, and therefore, it should be considered as an important cultural and contextual tool for identity formation. As this chapter has shown, *The Colbert Report* provides an occasion for Christian viewers of various religious and political affiliations to reflect upon their own beliefs and practices. While Mandy is the only participant who had no prior exposure to the show, viewers like Ben and Dave, who are somewhat regular viewers of the show, utilize clips such as these to reinforce their religio-political identities.

Although this clip allows participants to further articulate and reinforce their religio-political beliefs, the clip also allows them the space to hold a celebrity such as Colbert to a higher standard. As one can see, Colbert's mockery of Christians who believe homosexuality is a sin or that homosexual unions should be banned does not go unquestioned by these particular viewers. It is clear that, while they have created dissonance between their political and religious convictions, these participants are discouraged by the reinforcement of negative stereotypes as seen in this particular clip. Overall, they wish Colbert, instead, would take his celebrity platform to educate people about the issue as well as elucidate the fact that it is a gray area for many Christians, rather than reducing it to a dualistic belief. By calling Colbert to a higher standard, this shows that these viewers recognize Colbert's status in the religio-political realm (Clark, 2012). While this dissertation aims to suggest that Colbert has become an authority figure on matters pertaining to faith and politics and therefore contributes to the mediatization of religious authority, these viewers are merely reinforcing this hypothesis through their desire to see Colbert, a successful celebrity, take these issues more seriously.

Chapter Seven: Jesus “Transcends Partisan Politics”

The previous chapter explored how theologically conservative participants were able to separate their personal and religious beliefs from their political views.

Throughout the research, it was evident that separation of church and state is an important component of most participants’ religio-political ideologies, a belief that is consistent among liberals, conservatives, and independents alike.

While it is clear that the separation of church and state is important for many participants, these participants are also committed to the separation of religion and politics. Although there has been a resurgence of religion in public squares throughout the world (Berger, 1999), these young people are tired of the American two-party political system polarizing and politicizing religious issues. Furthermore, many young adults are discouraged to hear politicians attempt to co-opt Christianity for political purposes, and on the other side of the coin, some young people have left their churches because their overall messages no longer relate to young Americans (Stepp, 2011). This trend echoes wider scholarship that suggests that young Christians are disillusioned with the current political system and think that the mixing of politics and religion is bad for America (Campbell & Putnam, 2012; King, 2012;).

In this vein, this chapter will consider how the desire for separation of religion and politics runs deep for liberal and mainline Protestants as well as Evangelical Christians. But, although there is a consistent desire for separation of religion and

politics, most participants acknowledge that the two are difficult to sever when it comes to their individual beliefs. Therefore, most participants believe that individuals often allow their religion to inform their politics, but they do not believe that political and religious institutions should mix, an important distinction.

This chapter will consider the way participants responded to two clips, “American Orthodox” and an interview between Colbert and Tony Campolo, both of which allow Colbert to critique the way the Religious Right has staked a claim over the term “Christianity.” For Colbert, Christian ideals are not always consistent with conservatism, and often, they align with liberalism. Through his “American Orthodox” monologue and his interview with Campolo, liberal and conservative participants find Colbert’s overall message inspiring and refreshing. For liberal Protestant participants, identifying with public media figures such as Colbert and Campolo allow them to reaffirm a distance from Christian conservatism, a theme that will be explored more in the subsequent chapter. For Evangelical Christians, these messages allow them to resonate with Evangelical ideals that are also liberal and to reaffirm the notion that Christianity and conservatism are not synonymous. Evangelicals are particularly encouraged by Campolo’s message, as it allows them to identify with a public figure who calls himself an evangelical but sees bi-partisan politics as a system in which Jesus’ does not fit. This, therefore, allows them to reclaim the term “evangelical” as it fits within their own religio-political identity.

Identifying with Liberal Christianity

Liberal and radical Christians like Nancy, Jennifer, and Emily are deeply frustrated with the rhetorical strategy of Christian conservative politicians to debunk the claim that liberal politics can coincide with Christian ideals and practices. These three

participants, like many of the liberal participants throughout the research, are encouraged to see public figures like Colbert and Campolo stand up on the side of liberal Christianity and renounce the claims of many conservative Christian leaders. Therefore, their responses reflect evidence that Colbert's rhetoric and overall message allows many liberal Christians to bolster and further articulate their own religio-political identity. And, as this chapter will show, for many of these young liberal Christians, they would even go so far as to share clips such as these with their friends, families, and communities, which is further evidence to suggest they resonate with Colbert and see him as an authority figure on issues such as these (Clark, 2011).

Nancy: Radical Methodist

Nancy is a 22 year old special education teacher. Although she is originally from a Midwestern urban metropolis, Nancy currently works in a small economically depressed rural southern community. Nancy grew up in a traditional Christian home, where her mother was the homemaker, and her father worked for a large business in her hometown.

Nancy's religious foundation starts with her childhood and the influence of her parents, although her religious identity since college has deviated significantly. Nonetheless, she claims that her upbringing provided her with cultural roots that she still holds important. She says, "My family is eclectic but close. Both of my parents were extremely involved in my upbringing and church was central to our family structure when I was growing up. Church and music were the two things that brought my family together." As a child, Nancy was extremely active in her church community. She

recalls, “During my childhood it would not be at all unusual for me to be at church three days a week, often attending more than one service within a week.”

Since college, Nancy has gone through tumultuous discernment concerning her religious identity. As she left home for an education in an urban Jesuit setting, Nancy began to deconstruct her Christian and political identity. Her professors were integral in her religious and political formation, as she began to question her upbringing.

Professors and the works that they have introduced me to have had the biggest influence on my religious and political beliefs. It is through college courses and suggested readings that I was pushed to question my conception of reality and to recast my beliefs according to my expanded view of the world. These conversations and readings also opened me up to alternative understandings in both the political and religious realm that I had to take into consideration as I challenged the beliefs that were passed on to me by my parents.

As Nancy began to question her foundations, her Christian identity became less important to her, and at times, nonexistent. She says, “I identified as an atheist for a year and as an agnostic for a few years as I struggled with the idea of religion and the possibility of the existence of a higher power.” Currently, Nancy uses the identity marker “Christian” to describe her cultural location, though it is clear that she does not prefer to use the label to describe her understanding of a higher power. As she struggles to identify with the identity marker, Nancy says:

I struggle with the term Christian because I disagree with so much of the institution of Christianity. While the Christian tradition is a large part of my history that continues to affect my life, I am not comfortable identifying with the term most of the time. However, I do identify with a desire to be “Christ-like” insofar as I see the Jesus that is described in the gospels to be an extraordinary figure from whom so much can be learned...Additionally, I struggle with the seemingly absolute nature of the term Christian. I do not believe that Christianity is the only valid expression of religious belief/spirituality and this belief seems to contradict many Christian institutions.

While it is clear that Nancy struggles with being labeled a Christian, she has never struggled with her denominational affiliation, as she believes the label “Methodist” most accurately describes her foundation and cultural formation. She says that even during the period of time when she considered herself an atheist, her Methodist roots were still important to her.

While I struggle with Christian identity for metaphysical reasons, I without hesitation identify as United Methodist for social/cultural reasons. This label is important to me because of how it is intertwined into my personal history. For me being a Methodist isn't so much about what I believe, but who I am. Even though I don't agree with the theology displayed in Methodist hymns, they still hold great value for me because they are such a huge part of my childhood.

Although her beliefs are non-traditional, and some conservative Christians may consider Nancy to be non-Christian, Nancy is still active in religious practices, as she has attended weekly Taize prayer over the years, and she is active in a local church where she lives. It is clear that Nancy's desire for participation, though, reflects her understanding of Christianity as a cultural institution that gives her cultural currency. Therefore, she places more importance, not on orthodoxy, but on what Nancy Ammerman calls orthopraxy (Ammerman, 2007).

Over the past four years I have attended traditional religious services only when visiting my parents, probably 6-10 services a year. However, I attended weekly Taize prayer services for the past two years. Now that I live in a small town in the South, I will attend church every Sunday in order to become a member of the community.

Along with her religious conversion, Nancy's political identity also evolved during college. Currently, Nancy considers herself radical, although she identified with the Democratic party before entering college. She says:

I consider myself a radical. I sympathize with both socialist and anarchist ideals, which I don't see as mutually exclusive. I have not always identified this way. Previously I identified as a liberal democrat but changed my identification as I encountered and embraced more "progressive" ideas."

As she explains the specific role she plays in politics, Nancy says, "Activism is a part of my core identity. I keep up with political news and races, but I also involve myself in the political system through working within the system and working outside the system (grassroots efforts, community organizing, protesting, etc.)." Nancy is specifically interested in activism surrounding LGBTQA issues and women's rights, and her leadership in groups surrounding these concerns is evidence of her passion.

Nancy's political identity is, in fact, more important than her religious identity. While many participants consider their religious identity more important than their political identity, Nancy considers herself a "political being," and her political beliefs are "fundamental." As Nancy reflects upon her political identity, though, it is evident that her religious formation informed her political passion and activism. For example, her understanding of the person of Jesus is inherently tied to her views on pluralism and justice.

I think that my political views are ultimately founded in the religious beliefs that were a part of my upbringing. As a child I learned about justice in a religious setting. As I first engaged in activism, I considered it a part of my religious expression/calling. Even as a struggle with religious identity I still find that my political perspective aligns with my understanding of the Jesus that is described within the gospels because in my political commitments are always tied to justice, primarily social and economic justice. It is also the case that my understanding of religion has changed because of my political views. Primarily, it has led me to a denial of absolute truth and a perspective of pluralism because my political views include the refusal to accept simply one perspective.

As Nancy, a somewhat regular viewer of *The Colbert Report*, reflects upon Colbert and Campolo's messages concerning religion and politics, her responses passionately echo her radical stances. The episodes allowed her to resonate with Colbert and Campolo and subsequently reaffirm her beliefs. When responding to "American Orthodox," Nancy says:

I found this episode to be hilarious. I particularly loved the line "there is nothing more Christian than refusing to do good works because you might be called a name." I find this to be particularly funny because it flies in the face of what I believe to be the heart of Christianity: doing what is right regardless of circumstances. I also like the line "One thing we know for sure, Jesus was a conservative" because to me it seems pretty clear that Jesus was a radical. Jesus went directly against both religious and social standards of his time in order to further justice. This is not what I interpret the American conservative political position to be. In fact, I usually think that the conservative opinion does not value Justice and thus are not embodying a Christ-like perspective.

Here we see that Nancy is vehemently frustrated with religious conservatism, and she is refreshed by Colbert's critique of the religious right. She finds humor when Colbert specifically points out that Jesus never mentioned gay rights or abortion, as Colbert points out the irony in a religious conservative stance towards those two issues while simultaneously placing value in biblical literalism. Nancy says:

[The episode] is mocking a conservative position as failing to address real issues such as global warming...through satire, it implies that Jesus was "liberal" according to today standards (although not necessarily with a particular party). Colbert points out that Jesus says nothing about reproductive rights or gay rights issues and mocks the idea that a religious group can focus on those issues and invent a perspective that is not biblically recorded.

It is clear that Nancy identifies positively with Colbert. While Colbert himself identifies with the Democratic Party, Nancy is still able to consider his messages as

radical. When referring to Colbert's clip "American Orthodox," she even says, "the episode can be seen as supporting both liberal/radical Christianity and atheism/agnosticism." Colbert then, provides Nancy with a platform for religious identification, which is particularly powerful for her when she does not often find such a platform in mainstream society.

Nancy's passion continues as she responds to Tony Campolo's interview with Colbert. The interview provides her with so much optimism that she even reflects upon her body language when watching the episode. "I found myself snapping in agreement more often than laughing out loud while watching this episode." It is clear that Nancy is unsure where Campolo stands on many issues, but she is still able to agree with his main points. She says, "While I may not agree with Rev. Campolo's political alignments (which seem to be left fairly vague) I do agree with many of his comments concerning Jesus and the definition of the left as people who want to live out love and a commitment for Justice." This particular clip, then, allows Nancy to delve into her passion for aligning Christianity with liberal and radical ideologies. In her response, she vehemently identifies with Campolo's quote, "Jesus loves America. Jesus loves Iraq. Jesus loves Afghanistan." In response to this particular quote, Nancy says, "True love for one's fellow human beings as taught by Jesus oversteps political, ideological, and national lines, and while no one can live up to this, we all must continue to struggle to do our best."

While Nancy was particularly responsive to Campolo's understanding of Jesus transcending party and national lines, she did not agree with Campolo's suggestion that religion and politics should not be mixed. In fact, as Nancy understands herself to be an

extremely political person, she finds it very difficult to separate the two. But, for Nancy, that means that her political and religious identities are rooted in understanding the person of Jesus as one who fought for justice. She sees it as illogical to think about Christianity any other way. While she thinks that it is impossible to separate individual religious beliefs from political beliefs, she does consider the dangers of institutions involving themselves in political endeavors. She says:

I don't agree that putting politics and religion together is like mixing horse manure. I think that one's religious convictions should influence one's political perspectives. For me, believing in the message of Jesus requires me to fight for justice which requires involvement in the political realm. I don't believe that religious institutions should be involved in politics, but I think that an individual's religious beliefs should inform their political beliefs and involvement.

As she concludes her reflection, Nancy feels confident and optimistic that Campolo's message is one that all Christians should hear.

I would definitely share this clip with my friends and family as well as those in my church community. I think Tony Campolo's perspective is of value to those who agree with him as well as those he is speaking against because his primary focus is love. Regardless of political/national identities, this is one thing that should be/is shared among all Christians.

Overall, Nancy is dedicated to connecting her religious identity with her political identity, and both "American Orthodox" and Tony Campolo's interview allow her to resonate with messages that are similar to her own identity. And, as the last paragraph shows, she is so passionate about these messages that she is willing to go to greater lengths to share them with her community. Once again, Colbert offers liberal and radical Christians a platform for identity affirmation and articulation.

Jennifer: Liberal Church of the Brethren

Jennifer, a 34 year old bookkeeper who currently lives in a small rural community, was born and raised in a politically and religiously active family and congregation near Chicago. Her upbringing certainly plays a role in the way she lives out her religio-political identity today.

Having grown up in the Church of the Brethren, which has roots in the Anabaptist tradition, Jennifer's religious commitments center on community. Like Nancy, Jennifer does not have a strong commitment to the belief in the divinity of Jesus, but she feels strongly about relating to the Christian community because it connects her to her heritage. When explaining her identification with Christianity, Jennifer says:

I guess I class myself as a Christian culturally. I'm not sure that that's exactly where my faith is. That's what I grew up in, and those are the churches I feel most comfortable in from a community standpoint. As I've gotten older, and I don't necessarily say this at church, but I really like Christ. I like what Christ stood for and what Christ said. I don't really feel a deep connection to Jesus as a spiritual figure. I know a lot of Christians who pray specifically to Jesus as a spiritual figure. I pray to God, not to Jesus. I think he is an amazing prophet, and I really like what he had to say, and I believe we can learn a lot from that and living our lives that way. Whether or not he was the son of God? I don't know, and it's not important for me to know that for sure... But, I have a strong faith in God, and I am most comfortable in the worship style that is Protestant worship, that is specifically low church or the Anabaptist tradition.

Jennifer's parents have had a big influence on her faith. Although her mother's family is Jewish, Jennifer's parents raised her and her siblings as active members of a Church of the Brethren congregation.

My mother's family is Jewish. She grew up Protestant. She didn't grow up Jewish. She joined the Church of the Brethren when she met my dad, and she really felt like that was her home. Being active in the church was definitely a big part of my family and growing up.

Because of her Jewish heritage, though, Jennifer has a great deal of respect for the Jewish tradition, and based on her interview, she has a strong connection with her ancestry.

[My grandparents] both immigrated right before the war, and we lost at least on my grandmothers side, at least 35 relatives in the Holocaust. So I think around the time of the war, my grandfather got really upset and disgusted with what was happening in Europe... and so he renounced his Jewish faith and swore he would never marry a Jewish woman and that he would raise his children Protestant and not Jewish. Well, he met my grandmother and that all went out the window, but to his credit, he didn't make my grandmother give up their faith, but he did make her promise that they would raise their children Protestant and not tell them of their Jewish heritage. And so my mother grew up in a Congregational Church.

Overall, Jennifer's tendency towards a Universalist stance stems from her ancestry. She says, "I think all of that has shaped, I can't sit here and say half my family was wrong, or my family that died horrible deaths are now in hell because they are Jewish. I can't do that. That just seems wrong to me, but I know a lot of Christians who do believe that." In addition to the religious diversity within her own family, Jennifer's husband also brings his Catholic upbringing into the mix. It only seems natural, then, that Jennifer is passionate about interfaith and ecumenical work. Jennifer not only attends weekly services at her congregation, but she also leads a local Taize worship service, which is open to the community. So, while Jennifer struggles with some theological components of Christianity, she is deeply rooted and committed to the Christian tradition.

Jennifer's connection to the Church of the Brethren is very important to her from a religious standpoint, but also from a political standpoint. She says:

from a political perspective they are important to me, in that the Church of the Brethren has taken some radical stances in terms of nonviolence and social justice, and that is one of the things that draws me to those

denominations is their kind of faith in action that permeates throughout the denomination.

Jennifer has always identified as very liberal, but she claims that her faith is deeply connected to her political beliefs. She continues, saying:

A belief in social responsibility to each other and to the world, that all informs how I believe government should work and what I believe we should do as a society, and that all comes from my faith...I think in the same sense, I grew up in this socially active family and congregation and denomination to a certain extent. The Church of the Brethren is one of the three historic peace churches, the commitment to that was very strong in my congregation growing up as well as in my family.

Although Jennifer considers herself very liberal, she admits that she is not very active in political issues, nor is she active in reading the news. For the most part, Jennifer is disconcerted with the current political system, and she doesn't see much hope for the future.

I've gotten really discouraged over the years, and frustrated. I rarely watch the news anymore, because it just depresses me to watch our political process in action. And kind of where I feel the majority of the country is, both from what you see on the news and on TV and the daily interactions. [There is] a very very selfish mentality to this country and how people think, that really makes me sad...My parents are much more optimistic that change can happen, because they saw change happen. They saw how standing up for what you believe in can change the world and the country, whereas I haven't grown up seeing that, and I'm a bit more cynical and defeated by the problems that face us.

Jennifer considers herself a somewhat regular viewer of Colbert. She says she watches the program occasionally, yet she suggests that she rarely watches hard news. As seen in the previous paragraphs, Jennifer is clearly disheartened by the current political system, however, she resonates positively with Tony Campolo. As is consistent with all of the participants in this chapter, Jennifer likes the tagline "Jesus transcends partisan politics." She says, "I agree Jesus transcends politics. He is neither democrat nor

republican.” Additionally, Jennifer agrees that politics is bad for religion when she says, “I agree that politics has polluted religion.”

While she agrees with much of Campolo’s interview, Jennifer does offer some critiques. For example, much like Nancy, Jennifer is not as optimistic that religion and politics can be completely separate. She sees both religious and political beliefs as being rooted in systems of values and morals, and therefore, it is difficult to not have one inform the other.

As much as I would like a tolerant society where for the most part religion is separate from the state, I think that is difficult to do as religion informs our morals and sense of responsibility or lack there of and therefore informs our politics and how we think government should or shouldn't operate. It is a very tricky and multifaceted issue.

It is clear that Jennifer is thoughtful about the way she understands how people formulate their religious and political beliefs, and for her, the two are often too intertwined to break apart. But, as the previous paragraph mentions, Jennifer is leery of the way politics has influenced religion and vice versa. For Jennifer, religion does not fit into tidy political categories, and the episode allows her to reaffirm this belief.

Erin- Liberal Lutheran

Erin is a 22-year-old recent college graduate from the Pacific Northwest, where she has lived her entire life. Erin’s Lutheran upbringing and Christian college experience has shaped her in a variety of ways. But, as she talks about her religio-political identity, Erin speaks mostly about her parents’ influence on her formation. When talked about her parents, Erin says, “They are definitely really quirky, and we are really similar in our views on life and stuff.” She goes on to share a story about her childhood.

I remember from a really really young age, like sitting in the car, and my dad telling us “you should not treat anyone different or let anyone treat you differently or poorly just because you are different, because you are black or white, or gay or straight, or male or female,” so I think that was drilled into me at a very young age. My parents went to church every Sunday and they’ve always been really involved with politics, so there is definitely that sense of church and that sense of duty to your country and to change your country by being involved in the political process.

When Erin considers her Christian identity, she says, “I’m a Christian and that means that I have a faith in Jesus and go to church every Sunday, well, when I can, and I try to be a better person and be a better Christian.” Although she claims Christianity, Erin admits that she did not always want to be associated with the term “Christian” because of the pejorative connotations of the term. She says, “For a long time I didn’t want to call myself a Christian. I wanted to say I believe in Jesus and God because there is so much negative stereotyping to that, so it’s much more than a label to me I guess.”

Erin not only considers Christianity as an important identity marker, but she also considers her ELCA Lutheran heritage as an important component of her faith. Even though Erin does not currently attend a Lutheran Church, rather a non-denominational church, she says that she will always hold her Lutheran upbringing as essential.

[The Lutheran Church] is where I had my traditional upbringing. That is where I was taught Christianity, and I have a lot of family history related to the Lutheran church, but at the same time, I don’t currently attend a Lutheran church so I think that labels are sometimes really funny in that, you can’t put people in boxes, so like even if you consider yourself Lutheran, you could be completely different from the person you sit next to so, I don’t know, I like it because that’s part of my tradition, but if I don’t go to a Lutheran church it’s not going to kill me... I would probably still identify as Lutheran because it is so fundamental and was such a core of me growing up... I think when you are taught at such a young age, that sticks with you.

When talking about her current church, though, Erin is particularly drawn to the church's use of art as well as its commitment to community engagement. "They have a lot of artistic expressionism within their services and within their church, and the artistic side really drew me to them. They are really involved in the community which I really like....no denominational affiliation." One can see that, while she still places importance on her Lutheran identity, Erin considers a variety of components when contemplating church membership, a characteristic that is evident in many Christian young adults today.

In addition to her Christian faith, Erin's political identity is also important to her. Erin has always identified as liberal. In fact, she says she has been liberal "for as long as I knew what that meant." As mentioned before, Erin's parents played a vital role in her political upbringing, but Erin also mentions her political awakening taking place in high school and through subsequent education. She says, "I think that really started in high school. I took a class on American politics and democracy my sophomore year, and that's when I really started to realize there were people in charge that I could vote for that could influence my daily life." In addition to both her high school and college education, Erin utilizes personal experience as a major influencer of her political beliefs. She provides an example as she shares a personal story about her friend.

I think having experiences with some friends, and seeing what they have gone through in life has really influenced me politically, like seeing my best friend live off food stamps for years because of family situations, so certain things I have seen have influenced what I believe and how I vote.

Overall, Erin considers herself to be highly engaged in and informed about political issues.

Since I've been able to vote, I've always voted, because I think that's important...I read a lot in the news about the political system and things

that are happening in our country, and I get involved when I can, but I have gone to political rallies and stuff...I feel like I got more involved through college groups for political issues than in the general public. I joined certain groups that dealt with certain political issues in college, but not necessarily associated with someone's political campaign or political party.

Although Erin has always considered herself liberal and affiliates with the Democratic Party, she is quick to suggest that she is generally disappointed with the political system.

Recently I have kind of been disenfranchised with being a Democrat, because [Democrats and Republicans] seem to almost blend together sometimes, or they are fighting each other, and there can't be a third idea. So I see myself as liberal but wishing there were more than two ideas, like Red or Blue, or Black or White.

It makes sense, then, that Erin, a regular Colbert viewer, is able to find Tony Campolo's explanation of religion and politics refreshing, and the clip, therefore, allows her to affirm her liberal Christian identity and beliefs. As she begins her response to Tony Campolo's interview, she expresses her hesitation with the word "evangelical," as the term is often associated with conservatism. "This episode with Tony Campolo was interesting. He stated things that I definitely agree with, but I still hesitate when the word "evangelical" comes into the picture." Overall, though, Erin is able to align with Campolo's message. She continues, saying, "I agree that mixing religion and politics is a dangerous game. The country has become so bipartisan, which in turn I feel like has split many religious groups." Erin is particularly frustrated with the way politicians have used religion to bash other candidates or to bolster their own political agendas. She says, "Especially in a time where people are headed to the primary polls, politicians seem to milk the religion card quite heavily. Either the candidate bashes another candidate's

religion, or attempts to trump their own.” Finally, Erin is grateful for Campolo’s mention of the poor and marginalized, and his concern allows her to critique both sides of the political spectrum for ignoring these important issues. She concludes her response saying, “Tony brings up points about helping the poor, etc. that many politicians, even on the "liberal" side tend to shy away from.” While Erin was originally hesitant to hear Campolo’s interview because of her associations with the term “evangelical,” she was able to resonate with the majority of the interview. She is grateful to hear someone like Tony Campolo, who has some religious and political clout, speak out as a Christian on behalf of more liberal causes.

Reclaiming Evangelicalism from Conservatives

For many young evangelicals like Naomi, Brittany, Dave, and Ben, their version of Christianity does not always align with the Christian Right, or perhaps it does, but they don’t think that conservatism and Christianity are always synonymous. Therefore, for these participants, Colbert’s clip “American Orthodox” as well as Tony Campolo’s interview offer refreshing insights into faith and politics. Thus, these participants are able to identify with Colbert and Campolo’s messages and reflect in a way that allows them to reclaim evangelicalism from the Christian Right. This desire is common among young adult evangelicals who want to distance themselves from the pejorative stereotypes of fundamentalism, and for those who look beyond polarizing issues such as abortion and gay rights to make political decisions. This section, then, will explore the way Colbert allows these participants a platform with which to resonate as well as further articulate the desire to see Christianity removed from the current bi-partisan political system, for, as Tony Campolo suggests, “Jesus transcends party politics.”

Naomi: Liberal Evangelical

Naomi is a 21 year old Computer Science and Mathematics Major at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest, not far from her small hometown. When Naomi was eleven, her parents were divorced, and her evolving relationship with her parents greatly influenced and impacted her religious and political identity. It was not until college when she chose and claimed Christianity for herself.

When Naomi was very young, she looked up to her father, who she considered “The man of God.” While her mom continued to attend the Catholic Church where she grew up, Naomi and her father attended a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) church. She recalls her family’s religious makeup when she says:

I looked up to my dad. I wanted to be just like my dad. My mom went every Sunday with us, but she was actively a member of the Catholic church she grew up in, and is still a current member at, and she taught there and stuff, so she would go with us on Sundays, but the rest of the week she was going to be there. So I saw that my family wanted unity, and I saw that religion was more important to our family than denomination, which had a great influence on me. Mostly I remember my dad ushering every Sunday and saying “This is the man of God that I want to be like someday.” And I was very drawn to his beliefs on different things and how he studies the Bible and what he cared about.

When Naomi’s parents neared divorce, her father’s religious interest waned, and consequently, Naomi was less interested in looking to him as a role model. “As I got a little older, he got less and less interested, and the more detached my dad got from religion, the more I looked at my mom.” For Naomi, the dissonance between her upbringing and her mother’s religious identity was so powerful, that it left her confused. She even recalls the moment at which her parents let her choose her own religion.

What [my mom] believed at the time in the Catholic church was so different from a WELS Lutheran, that I didn’t know what to think, and I

didn't understand how they had been put together. Shortly after my parents got divorced, they sat me down, and we had a wonderful conversation about what religion looked like in my life until I turned of age, whatever of age was supposed to mean at the time, essentially "it's your choice. If you want a religion great. If you don't, great. Mom will stay Catholic and dad's not gonna do anything." At like 11 ½ right before I turned 12, this was something no kid knows what to do with, and I didn't think much of it beyond now we don't go to church on Sundays... and that more than anything has shaped religion and how I look at religion and the value that it has had in my life. The experience of hitting a point in my life where I didn't have to have one and realizing why I needed it, what it did.

Naomi also recalls the theological struggles that emerged following her parents' divorce. She made it clear that her parents' marriage was not a positive one, and her father was, at times, abusive. Therefore, her waning respect for her father caused her to challenge the powerful metaphor of God as a father figure. She says:

It has also been the thing I struggle most with as a Christian- the concept of God as the father. It was something that, the one part of you wanted, because you want your dad to love you no matter what, and there was another part of me that couldn't understand it because my relationship with my father has been really broken.

It is clear, then, that Naomi's tumultuous relationship with her father that had, at one point, been "rock solid" provided various challenges for her spiritual growth.

It wasn't until college, then, that Naomi rediscovered her Christian identity.

While she still identified as a Christian during her high school years, Naomi says that she didn't understand what her faith meant to her until her sophomore year of college.

My Freshman year here, I came in pretty confident that, you know I grew up Christian, I labeled myself a Christian, I was pretty confident in my faith, rock solid, but I didn't have a practice to it... but coming here, wanting to be active on campus and stuff, put me exposed to a lot of Christians my age and challenged me immensely to share my faith, participate in discussion, study the Bible with them, and I just saw where I was.

In addition, Naomi places a large emphasis on the difference between calling oneself a Christian and living one's life as a Christian, and this was an important factor in her own spiritual awakening. She reminisces specifically on the choices she made over the course of her freshman and sophomore year of college, and the role her peers played in pointing out the discrepancies between her actions and her beliefs.

And some of the personal decisions I was making at the time outside of belonging to the Christian Fellowship and stuff, were not necessarily approved by my peers. I was dating a guy from high school, and it wasn't necessarily a bad relationship, but he wasn't a Christian at all, and it was a different value system...I had a couple of Christian friends that were in roughly the similar boat, and I thought ok we'll hang out together and be Christian, but you know, we thought we were being Christian, but we didn't know what it meant. Bottom line, we didn't know what it meant. There's a difference between labeling yourself Christian and knowing what that label stands for...Coming here, there has been quite a few people that have immensely transformed the way I look at it. Probably the graduating class two years ago, there were a couple of seniors in that group who actively mentored me and took the time to care, to just listen, and to notice where the things I face in life met religion and the conflicts there, and helped me deal with that.

It is clear that Naomi's religious identity has changed a lot since her childhood. Currently, Naomi is active in various Christian groups at her college, and in addition, she attends a local church affiliated with the Assemblies of God, a church quite different from that of her childhood. When speaking about the differences she says, "The church I grew up in was strictly hymns and a sermon. This church is much more energetic and passionate. It has challenged me to grow. It's exposed me to how I worship and why I limited it at times."

While much of Naomi's religious rhetoric echoes a conservative theology, her political identity is much the opposite. Although Naomi does not vote by party, rather by political issues, she considers herself on the left side of the political spectrum.

“Politically, I seldom vote by party. If I had to vote by party I would vote Democrat. In my family, I would be an outsider, and I know that. I tend to vote by the candidate or by a specific issue, depending on the election.” Overall, her parents have had an influence on her political education, but her mother and father’s political beliefs are very different from each other’s. She says:

My family’s influence on my political beliefs has been very intriguing. My father doesn’t like anyone to know who he votes for, but he very much votes for Republicans, and that’s just known within the family. My mom votes Democratic, and she will happily tell you that, and she has been pretty active in that.

When asked what has had the biggest influence on her political identity, Naomi immediately points to personal experience and exposure to her mother’s career in law enforcement. Her mother, who works in the sheriff’s office, introduced Naomi to a variety of social issues that allowed her to gain different perspectives on political issues.

[My mom’s career] shaped how I viewed poverty and how I viewed abortion and how I viewed all these different issues because she exposed me to so many situations where real people lived in those scenarios and real people faced that, and I saw time and time again what it would look like for somebody to hurt this way or to need that, and it changed how I voted, and I met a lot of elected officials as a result....to put a face with a name. It does a lot for how you vote.

As a result of her exposure, Naomi has been more inclined to vote Democrat. Furthermore, it encouraged her to stay informed as well as promote political candidates at the local level. Although it may seem that her political identity is at odds with her membership in theologically conservative organizations and denominations, Naomi states that her religious beliefs certainly inform her political choices, but she makes clear that it she votes in favor of issues, not candidates. She says, “Politically though, I have a hard time saying that either party is more Christian or more in line with Christianity.” Based

on her responses regarding her political commitments, it only seems obvious that she would react positively to Tony Campolo.

Naomi, much like Mandy in the previous chapter, had little previous exposure to *The Colbert Report*. Consequently, she was often confused by Colbert's satire and sarcasm, which, for her, often translated into frustration. Overall, Naomi saw Colbert's sarcasm as offensive and irreverent. This is evident when she says, "as some of the show's ideas were valid, they were presented in a manner that undermined them for the express purpose of humor." While this was the case, though, Colbert's interview with Tony Campolo was particularly redeeming for Naomi. It seemed that she agreed with Campolo and appreciated that Colbert allowed him the ability to speak, for the most part, uninterrupted. In the beginning of her response, she says, "the 'Tony Campolo' clip was redeeming, especially in comparison to other segments. I agreed fully with the remark, 'My spiritual counsel is God.' Also, I believe that Jesus is international and that He calls all people to love." Subsequently, Naomi goes on to talk about her own beliefs when she says, "I do think that the world would be a better place if more people listened to Jesus. However, I do not support thrusting Bibles in people's faces."

Perhaps Naomi had never heard of the notion of "Red Letter Christians" before, a term that Campolo uses to describe Christians who take Jesus words more seriously than other biblical texts, but she clearly identifies with this kind of Christianity, as well as the notion that Jesus does not fit within the current bi-partisan political spectrum. Identifying strongly with this, She says, "The presentation of Evangelical Christians or Red Letter Christians as those committed to exactly what Jesus said was fair. I certainly believe that 'Jesus transcends partisan politics.'" Later in her reflection, Naomi stresses the point that

many Christians are confused when it comes to how to vote in elections. She feels it is certainly true that Christians should align based on issues rather than based on party politics. She echoes Colbert and Campolo's sentiments when she says, "Mr. Colbert proposes a 'Who Would Jesus Vote For?' slogan, which illustrates the confusion many Christians feel on election days. I agree with Mr. Campolo that voting depends on the issue not the political party of the candidate."

It seems that, had Naomi not seen an episode that involved a more literal approach to the issues, she may not have known exactly what Colbert's agenda is, and perhaps she still does not know. It is clear, though, that while Naomi was often disconcerted and seemingly confused by Colbert's sarcasm, there are some central messages that allow her to identify positively with Colbert's overall agenda. It is with this example, then, that we see a participant who does not necessarily like Colbert's humor, but, as an evangelical who is frustrated with the conservative party making claims over Christianity, she can find a message that fits within the framework of her religio-political identity.

Brittany: Independent Fundamentalist

Naomi was not the only evangelical who identified particularly strongly with Tony Campolo's interview. In fact, almost all of the evangelical participants found his message refreshing and affirmative of their own political or religious beliefs. And, Brittany is no exception. As seen in the previous chapter, while Brittany self identifies as a Fundamentalist Lutheran, she holds a firm belief in the separation of church and state. Therefore, Brittany was particularly intrigued by Tony Campolo's explanation of the role of Christian theology in partisan politics. She says, "It bothers me that people need to

associate Christianity with right wing politics, or politics at all. I liked what the rev. said that Jesus transcends partisan politics.” It is clear that Brittany is passionate about the country upholding the separation clause as she concludes her response to the episode. She says, “On the other hand though, I believe that Christianity should not be the basis by which legislature is passed. That creates nasty situations in which the separation of church and state is not upheld and things get messy for both sides.”

Dave: Moderate Evangelical

In the previous chapter we learn that Dave, a regular viewer of The Colbert Report, is theologically conservative yet politically moderate. And, as a politically moderate Christian, Dave is able to resonate with the “American Orthodox” clip, as he is particularly frustrated with the political Right co-opting Christianity as it’s own. “I appreciated this clip because it really points out some of the frustrations I have with the how Christianity is associated with being conservative.” He passionately continues as he says:

It seems obvious to me that Christ is not affiliated with any party. His teachings often pointed to the need to serve others, give to the poor, and sacrifice for fellow man. The conservative parties in America seem to avoid these parts of scripture or believe that it is not the government’s responsibility, but rather the church’s responsibility. It is a complex problem and there are certainly arguments for both sides. That is a single issue where conservative parties deviate from Christ’s teaching. Colbert points out many others in this clip.

Dave is also able to resonate with Tony Campolo’s message for similar reasons when he says, “And Jesus transcends partisan politics.” Subsequently, Dave reflects upon how refreshing it is to hear someone talk about faith in the way that Campolo does. Campolo’s words allow Dave to reflect upon the notion that Christ actually challenged

the way Jewish leaders interpreted Scripture, and therefore, it only makes sense that we challenge the interpretation of scripture today. He says:

I think his idea of being a “red letter Christian” is a phenomenal idea. If you are truly a Christian and believe that Christ is 100% God, then the words that he speaks are the absolute truth and how we should interpret remaining portions of scripture through. So often in the gospels Christ would take portions of scripture that man had interpreted one way and turn it around so that it was apparent that the spirit of the law was much broader than how we had originally interpreted it.

As the aforementioned section suggests, Dave is tired of the public battle over Christianity and politics. As a moderate, Dave is able to connect his faith with issues on both sides of the political spectrum. Once again, he finds resonance with Tony Campolo, when he suggests that Christians should align with issues, rather than political parties. Dave says, “I like his idea that being a Christian does not mean that you have to be defined as a democrat or a republican. You have to ‘name the issue.’”

Ben: Moderate Christian

One can see how Ben, who identifies as both mainline Protestant and evangelical and as both liberal and conservative, is certainly refreshed by Tony Campolo’s presence on *The Colbert Report*. In fact, he reflects that the clip “left me feeling amused and positive.” Ben, who may have a tough time navigating all of his alignments, resonates with Campolo when he suggests that Jesus transcends party politics.

Much of what Tony Campolo said aligned with my religious beliefs and my convictions that we need to be doing more. I really resonated with Campolo's definition of the "religious left" at the beginning of the clip. I also liked his passionate speech about Jesus transcending partisan politics.

In addition, Ben shares his frustration with the way Christians have skewed Scripture so as to align it with a political issues and parties. He says he is “somewhat disappointed in

our [Christians'] ability to take a good thing like the word of God and twist and distort it to try to make it support our own agenda.”

Overall though, Ben is pessimistic about the notion that it is possible to completely remove religion from the political sphere. For Ben, it is only natural for people to mix the two, as both relate to the way we discern morals and values. But, for Ben, it is important that American citizens become more cognizant of their decisions, lest there be negative ramifications. He says:

It's naive to think that we can remove the influence of religion from politics. People bring the morals and convictions they learn through religious tradition into any role they perform. But as Campolo says, politics have had a big impact on religion. I think we need to be more aware of how the two areas of life interact and how they impact our decisions.

As he concludes his reflection, Ben is hopeful that leaders like Tony Campolo can help Americans discern the role of religion in the political sphere and vice versa. He says optimistically, “I think this clip pumped me up and reminded me that there are well spoken leaders out there, still.” Finally, he is positive that members of his church would also find Campolo appealing.

I would certainly share this clip with family or friends, and I'm thinking of using it in my Sunday school class. So much of what Campolo said resonates with the way I see the teachings of Jesus, and he says everything so succinctly and with such a positive attitude...I think members of my Church would wholeheartedly agree with what Campolo said in this clip. My Church is a very welcoming community that is always striving to serve our community and our world, regardless of faith, politics or background.

Ben's concluding thoughts are reflective of many participants' willingness to share Colbert clips with their family, friends, or church, and statements like these suggest that some young adult Christians give credence to Colbert's

religious rhetoric. For someone who would share a clip with their Sunday School class, it seems obvious that they have taken stock in what Colbert has to say, even to the point of considering him an authority figure on matters of faith.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the ways in which liberal, conservative, radical, and independent Christians of myriad denominational affiliations and subcultures find affinity with Colbert's critique of the use of religious beliefs to reinforce political agendas and vice versa. Overall, each participant struggles with the way the Christian Right has capitalized on orthodox religious beliefs to bolster a political agenda, and at a time when many young Christians are able to recognize that Christian ideals often transcend the current two party political system, clips like "American Orthodox" and Tony Campolo's interview allow them to further articulate and affirm this frustration. Therefore, Colbert provides these participants an occasion for religio-political reflection, and furthermore, a message that they might share with others.

Chapter Eight: “Glenn Beck Attacks Social Justice”: Referencing Outgroups while Reinforcing Identity

Symbolic boundaries have long been used in assisting groups and individuals to classify themselves in relation to other groups and individuals. Tajfel and Turner (1985) suggest “pressures to evaluate one’s own group positively through in-group/out-group comparison lead social groups to attempt to differentiate themselves from each other” (pp. 16-17). In other words, individuals and groups often create distinction from other individuals and groups in order to maintain strength and superiority. Subsequently, by drawing symbolic boundaries, groups reinforce their own collective identities (R. Jenkins, 1998). This type of identity formation has been seen clearly in rhetoric surrounding classifications of race, gender, and class (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; S. Fiske, 1998). It is easy to see, then, how religious groups and individuals additionally call upon symbolic boundaries and the referencing of outgroups for identity formation (Smith, 1998).

The reference of relevant symbolic boundaries and outgroups can be clearly seen, for example, following the events of 9/11, when conservative fundamentalist and evangelical Christians, utilizing blogs, radio, or newspapers, referenced themselves in relation to Islam, and therefore, Islam became an outgroup for religious identification among some Christian groups (Pew, 2001). For other Christian groups such as liberal Protestants, conservative evangelicalism has become an outgroup and point of reference

for religious identification (Wellman, 2008). Symbolic boundaries can also be created based on certain issues such as abortion, homosexuality, or war.

As this chapter considers symbolic boundary formation in relation to *The Colbert Report*, it is important to consider that the nature of the show's satire seemingly invites the viewer into negotiation between his or her identity and the show. On that note, it seems to provide open space for negotiation as viewers struggle with and between Colbert's constant deconstruction of cultural symbols and their own search for truth. Therefore, I believe the show represents and articulates a cultural shift towards critical reflection.

In this vein, some viewers may reference Colbert as an outgroup for their religio-political identification (i.e. they may reject Colbert's messages altogether), while others might utilize Colbert as a symbolic reinforcement of their religio-political identity. Most, though, are somewhere in between. In this chapter, we will consider the way in which Colbert allows liberal Protestants, Catholics, and evangelicals an opportunity to simultaneously create symbolic outgroups with extreme conservatism, specifically Glenn Beck, and reinforce the Christian commitment to social justice. While an overwhelming majority of participants resonated with the clip, "Glenn Beck Attacks Social Justice," this chapter will highlight a few examples of participants who passionately spoke out against Glenn Beck's statements and were subsequently provided with an occasion for identity reinforcement. This chapter, then, shows how liberal Protestants, Catholics, and evangelicals alike are able to create dissonance from the Christian Right and bolster a commitment to social justice that stems from their own experience and tradition.

Referencing Outgroups while Reinforcing Liberal Protestant Commitments

For liberal Protestants like Wendy, Randi, and Erin, social justice issues are paramount to their religious identity, and their responses echo wider liberal protestant circles, as many liberal protestant congregations and denominations stress social justice as a focal point of their teachings and ministries (Guth, Green, Kellstedt, & Smidt, 1996; Pyle, 1993; Regnerus, Smith, & Sikkink, 1998; Wuthnow, 2001). Simultaneous to a turn toward social justice issues, liberal Protestants frequently reference outgroups such as conservative Christian denominations and organizations that seem less interested in social justice concerns. Once again, Wendy, Randi, and Erin represent this demographic in their responses to Colbert's segment "Glenn Beck Attacks Social Justice," during which he sardonically berates Glenn Beck's critique of churches that promote social justice and subsequently asks Father Jim Martin to comment on the Catholic church's teachings on poverty.

Wendy: Liberal Methodist

Wendy grew up in a mid-sized metropolitan Midwest City. As a child raised by divorced parents most of her life, Wendy's upbringing was heavily influenced by the inner conflict that came with splitting her time equally between her parents. The now 20 year old college student reflects on this challenge.

My parents are divorced, My dad is remarried, my mom is not. My parents have been divorced since I was about four years old. My mom is clergy in the Missouri conference of the United Methodist Church and my dad and step-mom are both veterinarians. Growing up, they had shared custody, so split time almost 50/50 between the two of them. They live right down the street from each other, so growing up, I was in both households.

Wendy's time spent between households impacted both her religious and political education. Wendy's mother decided to go to seminary when Wendy was in high school, and now she serves as ordained clergy in the United Methodist Church. She recalls her mother playing an important role in her faith formation, even today.

I think I still have had the influence, especially of my mom, whenever we are together, with her being clergy, we do talk a lot about spiritual and theological things, and talk about books we read and different theologians and things like that so it's having challenging and stimulating conversation, especially with my mom.

Wendy's commitment to Christianity, and specifically the Methodist church is evident in the way she talks about what her faith means to her. She says:

I identify as Methodist. To me that means I am a follower of Christ, studier of Christ, lover of Christ trying to do good and be good to people and things and everyone in this world, leading by example not so much with what I am saying, or I try to do good and let that speak for itself.

Furthermore, Wendy's commitment to Methodism is also displayed in the way she chooses to spend her time. As a college junior at a Methodist University in the South, Wendy is active in leadership at her campus' Wesley Fellowship as well as a local Methodist congregation. But, while Wendy has made the conscious effort to remain in the Methodist church, she emphasizes that she is Christian first and foremost.

The label itself is not very important because I feel like, especially with denominational labels there's a lot of diversity within that, so me being labeled Methodist, I guess, is the name of the church that I grew up in and campus ministries I'm a part of, but I'm not 100 per cent aligning with everything the Methodist church has in its discipline, so I guess I am in name, but in practice, the best thing for me to be is Christian.

Wendy's political upbringing is much more convoluted than her religious upbringing and reflects the challenges that come with living in two houses most of one's life. While Wendy's mother's side of the family leans towards the left end of the

political spectrum, her father's family is on the opposite end. When speaking about the role that played in her life, she suggests that her father's family was a larger influence on her when she was a young child, but as she went into high school and college, she became more liberal. Wendy expresses that she has been liberal ever since she has been conscious of making her own decisions, but she says that,

As a child growing up, you are influenced by what your parents say and what they do, and how your family at large feels, and my mom and my dad's families are on opposite ends, so having the influence of that, and who is the stronger voice in all of that is sort of what you hear, so growing up my dad's family had a little stronger of the conservative to moderate conservative side, and so that's kind of what I think I believed in as I grew up.

Since her political conversion in high school and beyond, Wendy has been extremely committed to political issues and social justice concerns. In fact, her career path, in large part, is due to her calling to environmental issues and sustainability. As a student on a Masters track in Public Health and Environmental Health, Wendy says that she is "interested in environmental issues and sustainability and the ways we are stewards in creation, but I'm also very people oriented and health oriented and want to help people so this right now is the program that I've found to kind of intersect those things."

Additionally, when it comes to the way her religious beliefs inform her political views, social justice is at the forefront of her thoughts. For Wendy, being a follower of Christ is synonymous with being committed to justice, equality, and human rights. She says:

I would say that my understandings of the way I think I'm supposed to live from my religious background do influence my political decisions based on social justice and how I view, I guess, one of the main concepts I think in Christianity is love, and how I view that in terms of fairness and especially human rights issues.

Wendy is a somewhat regular viewer of *The Colbert Report*, and she clearly resonates with Colbert's intended messages. Her response to Colbert's attack of Glenn Beck reflects her passion for social justice and environmental justice. Her response sets up her desire to distance herself from Glenn Beck, and perhaps symbolically, the Christian right. She says, "After watching this episode I feel more convinced that Glenn Beck has no idea what he's talking about." Overall, Wendy is disgusted by the Christian's rights lack of emphasis on the poor, an issue that she finds most in line with Jesus' teachings.

For Wendy, then, Colbert provides a space for a reinforcement of her beliefs on these issues. In response to Beck, Wendy says, "I would not consider a call to social justice to be a reason to leave any church." Subsequently, her responses to the clip further emphasize the duty that Christians have in caring for the poor and the earth. "Christians have a calling to be involved in issues of global warming and poverty...I think that issues such as global warming and fighting poverty are issues that the state should be concerned with helping alleviate."

For Wendy, it is clear that this clip aligns with her passions, but she, like Father Martin, also takes her definition of social justice a step further. For her, social justice is not just about helping the poor, it is also about learning from the poor, and Father Martin's message allows her the space to articulate this sentiment. "I loved when James Martin was talking about how much we learn from the poor and that ultimately we are called as Christians to care for the less fortunate." Finally, she finds affinity with Martin when he challenges capitalism in general, and to Wendy, this is also an important

characteristic of social justice. “I totally agree with James Martin that capitalism doesn’t serve everyone; that the poor are usually the hardest working.”

As the rest of this chapter will elucidate, Colbert can play a role in providing space for the reinforcement of existing beliefs. Wendy is an example of someone who is able to relate to Colbert’s messages, and consequently, further bolster and more lucidly articulate her commitments to social justice. Additionally, the clip allows her the space to create cognitive dissonance between her own belief system and Glenn Beck’s version of Christianity, a theme that is also evident throughout this chapter.

Randi: Liberal Protestant

Like Wendy, Randi is also a somewhat regular viewer of Colbert. Furthermore, Randi’s response to the clip on social justice was similar to Wendy’s, in that it allowed her an opportunity to articulate theological and political distance with Glenn Beck and extreme conservatism as well as reinforce her own beliefs about social justice and the way people should be treated.

Randi grew up in a small suburb of a large Metropolitan city, where her parents still live today. As a student at a small Midwest liberal arts college, Randi currently studies English with an emphasis in Creative Writing, with hopes that she will someday become a fiction author. It is clear when speaking to Randi that her religious and political beliefs play a role on most aspects of her life. At only 19, Randi is able to lucidly articulate her religious and political commitments.

Growing up in a home where her parents attended a UCC church regularly, Randi was exposed to a liberal religious education. As she reminisces about her upbringing,

Randi says, “My parents raised me to be really accepting of other people and their beliefs.” To this day, Randi still identifies with the United Church of Christ, and to her, Christianity means that she “believes in one God and that Jesus died for people’s sins.”

Although Randi claims Christianity as an important label to her, she is quick to suggest that her beliefs are not always in line with the Christian tradition or most mainline Protestants. For example, Randi considers the significance of other religions in her own personal enrichment, and furthermore, she sees that other religions have something equally important to offer the world. Randi’s personal life is a testament to these sentiments, as she talks about her serious boyfriend, who affiliates with Neo-Paganism. For Randi, acceptance of all people is of utmost importance, and she tries to live her life in accordance with this rule.

In her response to Colbert’s attack on Glenn Beck, Randi vehemently shares her disdain for Beck when she says, “I’m really getting sick of Glenn Beck talking about things he doesn’t understand. He’s basically telling people not to help those less fortunate than themselves and the whole point of Christianity is to help those who are less fortunate.” Here we see, like Wendy’s response, a distancing of Randi’s beliefs from Beck and those who affiliate with Beck. She finds both humor and respect for Father Martin’s response to Glenn Beck. Further bolstering her disdain for Beck, she says, “I really like the priest that Colbert brought on the show. My favorite part was when he said that if Glenn Beck became the pope he would leave the church.”

The reference of Glenn Beck as an outgroup subsequently allows Randi to reinforce her own views on how others should be treated. Here, she reflects on the role

she has tried to play in the lives of others, and how even the smallest gestures can make a big impact on the lives of others. She says:

I have been making a conscious effort to try to help people more, even if it's just by giving random complements to strangers. This may not seem like much, but I always think about those suicide stories where they say in there goodbye letter that if someone smiles at them on their way to kill themselves that they won't do it.

While most would not consider this to be a mark of social justice, the episode still allows Randi to confirm what Christianity means to her and how she lives it out in her daily life. Once again, Colbert gives her a forum to articulate why acceptance is important. In this vein, she even says she would share this clip with her friends in hopes that it would engender discussion about these issues. She says, "I think that [my friends] would feel that the clip is really in line with their beliefs as well. And if they didn't feel that way we could debate about it, which I love."

Erin: Liberal Lutheran

Erin's response also resonates with the previous participants' views. As the previous chapter suggested, Erin identifies as politically liberal, and it is clear that her responses reflect a disdain as well as distrust for the Christian Right. Immediately, Erin creates a barrier between herself and Glenn Beck, when she says, "well, to start off, anything out of Glenn Becks mouth makes me angry. So we can just put that out there." From this point, she elucidates her argument against Beck a little more reasonably, saying, "I completely disagree with the idea that Christianity and social justice should not be combined. If anything, the Bible teaches us to help the poor, since that was the majority of Jesus' teachings." It is evident here, that Erin is fed up with the Christian Right's attempt to skew what she believes is a more pure form of Christianity.

In the latter part of Erin's response, she shows affinity with Father Martin, and his message, as we have seen throughout this chapter, allows her to reinforce her previous commitments to social justice. She says, "My beliefs align with James Martin. I also believe members of the church I have been attending would watch this clip and respond, because a large portion of the church community volunteers with the poor."

Subsequently, Erin is compelled to talk about her passion for caring for the poor and marginalized. We see how Colbert, then, provides an occasion for a reinforcement of political and religious beliefs. Erin passionately focuses on the systemic issues that maintain and sometimes widen the poverty gap when she says:

I have worked with people less fortunate, and plan on working with the poor for the rest of my life. People who believe others are just lazy do not realize the unfortunate truth, that people can be born into situations, places or can come across hard times. There are so many institutions that create disadvantages to others, especially outside of America. How can we blame them, when many times it is the wealthy countries that create a gap between the wealthy and poverty stricken?

Wendy, Randi, and Erin all share similar ideas about how Christians should respond to the poor, and their responses reflect a strong dissent towards those who do not share similar views. As this section has elucidated, this clip allows them a space to acknowledge their concerns and rearticulate passions, thus reinforcing identity markers that they find imperative to living a Christian lifestyle. While Colbert allows liberal Protestants to carve spaces for religio-political reflection and reinforcement, the show provides a similar space for Catholics.

Affirming Catholic Social Teaching

The Catholic Church has historically promoted social justice as a form of mission (Curran, 2002; Miller, 1999). For example, in 1971, Catholic Bishops opened their

document for justice with the often cited saying, “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel” (Justice in the World, 1971). In addition, from Mother Theresa to Dorothy Day, many contemporary Catholic leaders have called the church to a life of social justice, which stems from Jesus’ command to love God and one’s neighbor (Massaro, 2012). Catholic worker Dorothy Day writes, “We cannot love God unless we love each other” (Day, 1952, p. 285). It is clear, then, that Catholic social teaching places an emphasis on living a life of service to others.

Therefore, while liberal Protestants identify with Colbert’s strong messages in favor of social justice, it seems obvious that Catholics would relate similarly. As Colbert stresses his own Catholic identity in this particular segments, Catholic participants such as Jim and Mandy find affinity with Colbert and Father Jim Martin. Furthermore, Kim, a former Catholic, is particularly drawn to this episode, as it allows her to acknowledge that her Catholic upbringing played a large role in her commitments to social justice today.

Jim: Conservative Catholic

Jim grew up with his family in a large Texas metropolitan area. He describes his childhood, when he says, “We were kind of like a Norman Rockwell Family. We had a pretty great childhood.” At the age of 28, Jim still lives in Texas, where he works as an aerospace engineer. His parents raised him and his younger brother in a Catholic home, where his parents were examples of faith.

My parents raised me Catholic and they were very much involved in the church. My dad was part of the Knights of Columbus, and they had couples groups that they were in, and they took us to CCD

growing up so we got educated in the faith, I was an altar server, all those types of things. They raised us in the church, they made us go, but it was also important to them and they lived it out, so I got to see their example as well.

While Jim attributes most of his religious education to his parents, he acknowledges that, at some point, he made the decision to continue in the Catholic faith. He says, “But at some point, after I grew up, I had to make it my own, and then it became about ‘well do I really believe this,’ and then I chose it.” Jim’s church community has meant a lot to him throughout his life, and especially today. He recalls the local congregations where he worshipped being extremely formative for him. Currently, Jim is extremely active in his local parish, which he describes as a “vibrant community.” At his parish, Jim serves as a leader in the high school youth group, as an active member of his church’s men’s group, and as a participant in monthly family and congregational dinners. According to Jim, “I could spend every waking minute at church if I wanted to.”

When it comes to Jim’s religious identity, Catholicism is the most important identity marker, and he uses the label more often than “Christian” to describe his religiosity. To Jim, this means that:

I’m Roman Catholic and being a Christian means that I believe in Jesus Christ, and well, the entire Nicene Creed if you want to go through all of it, and that I try to live out a Christ like life as much as possible, and to emulate him and to be in relationship with him prayerfully, to obey his commandments, and I want to get to heaven someday, so I have hope in that, and I do the best I can to cooperate with grace to stay away from sin and stay close to him.

When it comes to political issues, Jim leans toward the conservative side, but overall, it depends on each issue. For example, Jim falls on the conservative side on issues such as pro-life and gay marriage, but he leans more to the left when it comes to

the death penalty and aid to the poor, both domestically and abroad. Politically, his parents played a role in influencing him towards more conservative views, however, Jim understands his Catholicism to be the most important component of how he votes. As he became older and more mature in his Catholic faith, Jim began to challenge his parents on some political issues. He says:

I disagree with them on some issues, so it just depends. I would say initially I was probably a little more conservative because of them, but as I grew in my faith and made it my own, I became a little more moderate because it was what my faith forced me into believing. For instance, my dad is for the death penalty, and I have tried to argue against him a lot.

For Jim, pro-life issues are the most important political causes. In fact, Jim's only real political participation in campaigns and causes comes down to his support of pro-life issues. He stresses this especially when he talks about his commitment to writing to congressmen over bills that are either in support or against pro-life issues. He says, "I always vote, and I'm signed up for a couple of pro-life email lists, so whenever I get warnings about bills that are coming through, I will send emails to my congressmen telling them to vote for this or don't vote for this." Furthermore, when talking about whether or not his religious beliefs inform his politics, Jim says:

I will go along with the conservatives when I agree with them. I happen to agree with them on the issues that are most important to me, which are the pro-life issues because if you don't have a right to life, what are your other rights that matter, but otherwise, I am against them when they are wrong.

Overall, though, Jim does not like political labels or the two-party system. He even said he doesn't like to get too involved in politics because it would just make him upset. For him, his Catholic identity informs his political decisions. "If you asked me my political

views, and it wasn't like more conservative or more liberal, I would just say I'm Catholic, and that is my political views as well."

When watching episodes of *The Colbert Report*, Jim, a regular viewer and fan of the show, is especially drawn to Colbert's Catholic identity, and therefore, Colbert's faith immediately becomes a point of entry and familiarity. Jim especially respects Colbert's knowledge on Catholic doctrine and social thought. When Colbert attacks Glenn Beck's social justice monologue, Jim's responses reflect an overall agreement with Colbert and Father Jim Martin. He says:

Once again I find myself to be a fairly conservative person politically, but Colbert is going after the extreme right for neglecting social justice. The priest does a great job at laying out rationale for social justice like eternal salvation and Colbert swats it away with ludicrous reasoning.

Here we see that, even though Jim leans more conservative, it is the issues that are particularly important to him, and because a stance towards social justice is rooted in Catholic social teaching, Jim is able to positively associate with this clip.

At the end of his response, Jim is quick to set up a boundary between himself and the claims of Glenn Beck as he references Beck as an outgroup. "Beck is clearly crazy, and he's attacking the Catholic Church so I think he's fair game and I think these clips are really funny." It is clear that, even though he is conservative, Jim does not want to be associated with the far right.

Jim reinforces this desire in his response to another clip, where Colbert attacks the Christian Coalition for suggesting that conservatism and Christianity go hand in hand. When responding to the clip, Jim says, "This one was pretty funny. I feel amused at the

extreme right. I never understand Christians who think politically first and religiously second.” In this particular clip, Colbert challenges the Christian Coalition, suggesting that they are afraid of being called liberal if they reach out to the poor or take a stance towards human rights issues. Jim positively identifies with Colbert’s message, as he says, “[Colbert] calls them out for not trying to reduce poverty because they’re afraid of being called liberal. Right on!!! And the ways he does it is hilarious. It’s in line with my religious beliefs because I’m Catholic and believe that it’s important to help the poor.”

As seen in the previous chapter, Maggie often utilizes Catholic teachings to guide her beliefs. Therefore, like Jim, Maggie’s response also articulates a commitment to the Catholic teachings on social justice, and the clip allows her to resonate with Colbert’s Catholic identity. She identifies particularly strongly with Father Martin’s message. She says, “Fr. Martin does a very good job of articulating the Catholic Church’s stance on social justice.” Furthermore, she says, “[the clip] highlights the inconsistency of many who claim to be Christian but who fail to heed Christ’s call for social justice.”

It is clear that Colbert’s Catholicism allows these two participants a particular point of entry for religio-political reflection. Both Jim and Maggie find humor in Colbert’s critique and comfort in Martin’s justification of social justice. For them, Catholic social teachings are a large source of authority, and therefore, they can appreciate Colbert’s knowledge of and passion about orthodox teachings of the church. Therefore, *The Colbert Report* provides a unique space for Catholics to consider their own religio-political identities. Kim, a former Catholic, also utilizes her upbringing as well as her contemporary experiences to find resonance with Colbert’s messages.

Kim: Liberal Mennonite

Kim is a 28 year old woman whose political and religious identity has been important to her since she was young. The stay at home mother currently lives in a small rural town in Virginia with her husband and daughter. In addition to staying at home with her two year old, Kim serves as a part-time journalist and is finishing her Masters in Social Work. Kim and her husband Chris have been in Virginia for the past two years, where they moved from a major Midwest metropolitan city. While Kim and Chris have been in the United States for quite some time, Kim's childhood was filled with a great deal of international travel, as her father's position as a political analyst for Coca Cola took her family to various countries in Latin America.

While Kim's father served as a political analyst, Kim's mother was very active in the church, and later in life decided to go back to school to become a minister, so Kim's upbringing revolved around theological and political rhetoric.

My dad has his PhD in political science, so that's why he was a political analyst, and my mom is a pastor so like literally, at every conversation at the dinner table we were talking about religion and politics on a regular basis and so my interest in both of those things I think grew from my family's ability to talk about it in a very comfortable way and in a way that analyzes all sides of the situation. My parents never told me growing up whether they were Republican or Democrat or Liberal or Conservative, they would just discuss things with us. And it definitely affected the way I think about things and to this day I still feel comfortable talking about those things with my parents.

Kim's parents certainly had a large impact on her current beliefs and convictions, as she states that both religion and politics are extremely important to her, and equally so. She says, "[religion and politics] are really important. My knee jerk reaction is to say

religion is more important, but I think in reality they are equally important to me in the way that I live my life.”

As well as her childhood, Kim also attests her commitment to her faith to her college experience and her spouse. She recalls the Christian liberal arts university where she attended providing her with an open space to reflect upon theological issues as well as discern her commitments to community engagement and social work. Overall, she appreciated the school’s dedication to providing space for people to critically reflect upon difficult theological questions as well as providing her with a religious community.

I think [my college experience] had a big impact, especially on my religious beliefs. I think If I hadn’t gone [there] it would have been really easy to have gone to a secular school and just dropped off of religion in general. I don’t think I would have found a purpose in going to church anymore or being a part of a religious community. I think going [there] really strengthened my need to bring together that idea that you can have both an intellect and a faith and that they don’t contradict each other, and it gave me other people who thought that was a possibility too...there were also significant courses that I took that really affected the way that I see theology and religion and God. The one that comes to mind is that there was an Urban Ministry class that I took and we read all of the sort of classic social justice literature and it really reframed the way that I saw faith.

In addition, Kim is grateful to her husband, whom she met in college, who has continued to push her to stay interested in her faith and political issues. “I think definitely marrying someone who is also a Christian and who believes strongly in social justice as a part of the Christian faith has kept me interested in issues of politics for the sake of the voiceless.”

Although Kim was raised Catholic and then Lutheran, currently, Kim and Chris attend a Mennonite congregation (the denomination in which Chris was raised), where they are very active in their religious community as well as the rural community where

they live. When Kim considers what her Christian identity means to her, it is obvious that community engagement and social justice are important frameworks for living out her faith. She says:

[Being Christian] means a variety of things in terms of how I live my week to week life. Like we go to church every Sunday. We are heavily involved in our Church. It is a very community focused church. It means that we give whenever we can. We tithe 10 per cent of our income. We volunteer. It means that Christ has set a way of living and of treating other people that I look to in terms of how to live my own life.

As well as being involved in her church, Kim is extremely civically engaged.

Although she considers herself liberal, Kim does not consider her role in civic engagement to be particularly political; rather, she considers her role in civic engagement to be informational and educational.

I think I'm very active in civic engagement, I wouldn't say I'm involved with any certain political party, like even though I identify as really liberal I'm not really involved with the Democratic Party, I'm not a registered Democrat, I have never campaigned for anyone before, but I have campaigned for basic get out the vote initiatives. I've been a member of the league of women voters, I've done door to door things for young voters to get young voters under 25 to vote.

Kim even utilizes her position as a journalist to inform the community of things she considers important, and one can see that Kim's career choices are intertwined with her understanding of civic duty. When recalling her role as a journalist, Kim says:

one of the things I do for the newspaper that I believe in is writing about the school board on a regular basis and making sure people understand what's happening at the level of school board with their schools, and here in Fluvana County where the schools are 60 per cent of the county budget, that's a big deal and it's important to me to cover that well.

Kim hopes that someday she will finish her Masters in Social Work, which will provide her the opportunity to get involved on a larger scale.

When thinking about whether her religious beliefs inform her political commitments, Kim clearly believes the two go hand in hand. As her interview made clear, Kim is both active in her church and community outreach, and she believes there should be no separation between the way she discerns her political views and the way she lives her life as a Christian. As she concludes the interview, Kim says, “I think I would have a cognitive disconnect if [religion and politics] weren’t intertwined. I think I would have a difficult time justifying voting a certain way or going to a certain church if they weren’t in agreement with each other.”

After learning about Kim’s context, faith, and commitments to social justice, it is no wonder that her response to the clip “Glenn Beck Attacks Social Justice,” would be particularly interesting. Her response to the clip first allows her to reignite passion for her calling and vocation, second, allows her to confirm and articulate the Catholic, Lutheran, and Mennonite emphasis on social justice, and third, allows her to create distance between her beliefs and Glenn Beck’s. All three of these aspects of Kim’s response are important, as they all resonate with various components of this chapter.

Social justice is an integral part of Kim’s life. As a passionate journalist and future social worker, Kim is committed to Jesus’ call to help the poor and marginalized, and for her, activism, community engagement, and policy change are the ways in which our society can best impact the economically disadvantaged. This episode, then, allows Kim a forum to articulate her passions and calling. As she introduces her long and emotionally charged response to this particular clip, Kim says:

The issue of poverty and social justice in the church is one I hold close to my heart. In fact, it has defined my life. I chose to become a social worker because of my belief in Christ’s call to the poor. I go to church and

volunteer with social justice organizations that work for policy change because I believe Christ calls me to do it.

Kim's call to serve the poor is one characteristic that allows her to feel at home in the Mennonite church, where she currently attends with her husband. In her response to the clip, Kim suggests that even though her local congregation as well as the national Mennonite community has conservative theological teachings and constituents, the church's teaching about social justice has always been paramount. "Even though there is a fair share of political conservatives in our church, and through out the Mennonite church, social justice is one issue where Mennonites stand strong, and have done so long before it was culturally popular."

While Kim does not currently identify as Catholic, one can see through her response that her Catholic upbringing has played a large role in shaping her vocation. It seems clear that Kim's life experiences have significantly influenced her religious and political beliefs, and her early Catholic education is no exception. In her response to the clip, Kim says:

I grew up Catholic, and was taught at a young age about Catholic Social Justice teaching. Later, when my family converted to Lutheranism, social justice teaching continued to be a strong part of my belief system, only further strengthened by theology classes I took in college and experiences working with the poor after college. I also grew up, for most of the childhood, outside of the United States in third world countries, which undoubtedly affected my view of poverty and the necessity for structural level change rather than believing in an ethic of personal responsibility.

Much like the other participants highlighted in this chapter, Kim has prior exposure to Colbert, and watches the program occasionally. And, similar to the other participants, Kim is also able to argue against Beck's claims based on her intellectual understanding of

Catholic history and doctrine. She provides a very reasonable, albeit passionate response to Beck. Kim says that:

[The clip] showed Beck's ignorance and arrogance that he was challenging people to question their Catholic priests and Bishops. Catholic Social Justice teaching is a top-down Papal doctrine. No amount of questioning local Catholic leadership will change that.

Here Kim poignantly articulates the longstanding Catholic commitment to the poor and marginalized as she simultaneously creates distance between her beliefs and Glenn Beck's, therefore referencing him and his followers as an outgroup.

While the aforementioned paragraph shows a glimpse of Kim's disdain for Glenn Beck, it becomes even clearer that she does not respect Beck's viewpoints and wishes to disregard them outright, a seemingly thematic trend that has emerged throughout this chapter. It seems that, throughout her response, there are times when Kim is speaking directly to Glenn Beck. In part of her response, Kim attacks Beck's lack of knowledge (or use) of scripture passages that support social justice. She even uses a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to support her argument. She passionately responds to Beck, saying:

Glenn Beck asserted that "social justice" and "economic justice" are code words. Code words for what? GOD? Check out Amos 5:21-24, or Micah 6:8, or heck, Jesus. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, 'If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice ... it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.'

Finally, as she concludes her response to the episode, Kim vehemently reiterates her desire to create dissonance between herself and Beck when she says, "Faith-based social justice is what I've given my life to, and to hear someone as culturally popular as Glenn Beck assert that social justice doesn't belong in the church burns me to the core. What

does he know?” Once again, Kim is an example of a Christian young adult who utilizes Colbert to rearticulate a religio-political identity that is not often portrayed in mainstream media. Furthermore, his message may even validate and empower Kim’s vocational decisions, as it gives her encouragement to continue to live out the life that she feels called, perhaps by God, to live.

Claiming Social Justice as an Evangelical Endeavor

An evangelical commitment to fighting poverty and economic issues is far from new, however, many young evangelicals have recently broadened their political agendas and renewed their commitments to social justice (Harris, 2008; Kearns, 1997; King, 2012; Palmer, 2012; Public Religion Research Institute, 2012; Sullivan, 2010), and many have potentially done so in an effort to reclaim the term “evangelical” from pejorative stereotyping. In fact the Southern Baptist Convention finds that “younger evangelical pastors are less likely to self-identify as conservatives than older generations and more apt to view social justice as a gospel imperative” (Allen, 2009). Ed Stetzer, director of Southern Baptist Convention’s LifeWay Research says, “I think ultimately that we are at a season right now where the issues of social justice are growing and a desire to integrate compassion and commission are clearly evident among younger evangelicals and evangelicals as a whole” (as cited in Allen, 2009).

Colbert’s segment, therefore, provides an excellent occasion for evangelicals, both liberal and conservative, to express their concerns about Glenn Beck and extreme conservatism. In this case, evangelical participants are quick to create dissonance from fundamentalism and groups that support Beck. It is evident then, in the case of evangelicals such as Nate, Ben, Naomi, and Brittany, that creating and maintaining

distance between their version of evangelicalism and the extreme right is utterly important to articulating a meaningful religious identity, especially if in fact, the term “evangelical” is one that they find central to their identity.

Nate: Conservative Evangelical

Nate is a 27 year old business consultant who resides in a Western city, where he has lived his entire life. Nate’s parents and siblings all still live within an hour of Nate’s childhood home, and he describes them as a tight knit conservative family. Nate’s upbringing informs the way he understands his religious and political identity, as his beliefs have not deviated much over the years.

Nate has been a Christian since he was four years old, and he considers himself a conservative evangelical. Nate’s Christian identity is central to who he believes himself to be. He says, “I am a Christian and what that means to me is that I have a relationship with Jesus Christ.” When speaking further on his denominational affiliation, Nate both expands upon his non-denominational background and what his beliefs.

I want to say that I am some sort of conservative evangelical, but I certainly don’t have a denomination that I consider myself. I go to a Non-denominational church, but my core beliefs revolve around John 3:16. And I really think the idea of free will, that God loved me so much he gave me the free will to choose him or not and it’s not based on works. So my salvation is based on grace and receiving God’s grace, and as a result, as I grow closer to God I desire to live my life in a way that honors him, so works do come as a result, but they do not drive what I believe.

Nate grew up in an evangelical household, where his family encouraged him to study scripture at a deeper level. He recalls never attending Sunday School as a child, rather, Nate’s parents had him sit in church and listen to the pastor’s message. He says, The reality is, as kids, we never went to Sunday School really, we always sat up front

with our parents, and that's kind of where this desire for more academic teaching has come from for us."

Along with church attendance, Nate was very active in the parachurch organization Young Life, which provided him with a powerful Christian social network.

I did Young Life in high school, and really, my parents never pressured us to do any of that, but they always offered it as an option, and they gave us that choice, and I chose to do young life, and also primarily because my closest friends who are still my closest friends now, I do Bible study with many of those guys that I went to young life with.

As Nate went off to college, he continued to stay active in Young Life, and is still connected as a leader of his local Young Life organization. While he has his own struggles with some of what Young Life does, overall, Nate believes that, at its core, the mission and vision of the organization are in line with what his own Christian mission.

The reality is that at this point, Young Life is a great vehicle for what I want to do, and that is to pour into young men... So I have been leading for the past 2 years, and for the most part it's been awesome. I really do appreciate young life for who they are and for what they allow for.

As noted above, Nate is active in his non-denominational congregation, which is a Vineyard church in his local community. While each Vineyard church has its own unique characteristics, Nate describes his particular church experience.

Vineyard churches have been known to be more radical or charismatic. This one, there are charismatic aspects to it, and those mostly revolve around prayer, but it's actually a really nice mix, so though at the end of the service, they ask, basically relating to what we just spoke about, is there anyone who would like to come up and get prayer, and it's not like done explicitly in front of everybody, but kind of the idea that you are walking down in front of people and getting prayer, so it's this kind of transparency, and so again, Vineyards are known to be charismatic. This one I would say is more of a conservative Vineyard church as far as those go, and I go there primarily for the academic teaching of the pastor there, so the community is fine, the worship there is not that good, but the

preaching is, from my perspective, phenomenal, so it's very biblically based and scripturally based, and it's very applicable.

While Nate's religious identity is extremely important to him, his political identity is not. Nate considers himself politically conservative, and echoes the political stance of his parents, but he admits he does not engage much in political affairs. He says, "To be honest, I have very little interest in politics. In my past, I've just kind of mimicked my mom, and she is very very conservative." When reflecting on his engagement in the current political climate, Nate says:

So I would consider myself conservative, at this point if you would ask me how that would reflect on how I vote in this upcoming election, I would say I have no idea, and that I wouldn't necessarily vote conservative. I'm trying at this point to be a little more astute and do a little more research than I would normally do, because it is more up in the air in my mind than it has been in the past.

Overall, though, Nate is not active in political campaigns or races, but he does suggest that his religious beliefs inform his political decisions. For Nate, issues concerning gay marriage and abortion are issues that are important to him, and where his religious convictions inform his politics. While he holds politically conservative views about gay marriage and abortion, though, he identifies that conservative candidates such as Mitt Romney may be disillusioned with the general public because of his financial wealth.

Nate considers himself a somewhat regular viewer of *The Colbert Report*. And, as Nate responds to the social justice clip, he is quick to create a boundary with Glenn Beck as he says:

I don't know much about Glenn Beck but he seems crazy to me. I don't agree with his lack of balance and he seems to operate out of fear. He

seems to be too concerned with the "love wins" postmodern mentality out there that I assume he believes to drive "social justice" in churches.

Subsequent to his critique of Glenn Beck, Nate delves into his own personal beliefs about social justice, where it is clear he has a passion for loving people regardless of their circumstances, which is his understanding of social justice. He says:

[Love] is a choice to do what is right for a person over and over again, in accordance with the Bible, and it is not based on how one feels but what someone believes is best for someone. It is allowing someone to make choices in free will, and responding in a way that does not enable destructive behavior but encourages the pursuit of truth. It does not incorporate personal judgment but situational and it requires lots and lots of grace and patience. Social justice and real love requires years and years of walking through life with someone; through the good and the bad. Patience and discipline to the calling God has asked of you to your wife, your community, your employees, your kids, your leadership, etc. Wow I am rambling. Social Justice is important. It is not everything but it is important and needs to be there.

It is clear that Nate is passionate about social justice and identifies social justice as a Christian duty that stems out of love. For Nate, it is not always easy to love all people, but it is something that God commands of all people, and therefore, it is necessary to living a Christian life. As he says, "wow, I am rambling," it seems evident that Nate could go on about the subject. The episode struck a chord with him that allowed him to articulate the importance of Christian love and social justice while maintaining distance from extreme conservatism.

Ben: Moderate Christian

As seen in earlier chapters, Ben finds himself leaning towards the right on some issues and to the left on others. In this vein, Ben's response to the episode allows him to carve a space between his sometimes conservative views and the views of right wing extremists. He references the religious right as an outgroup when he says, "I feel

frustrated by the religious right, but glad that there are Christians out there who can counter the paranoia against ‘social justice.’” Furthermore, Ben is quick to disassociate his evangelical identity with Glenn Beck’s version of Christianity. He says:

The Religious Right often claims to speak for all Christians, and they do it loudly. Ironically, many people who identify themselves as followers of Jesus disagree with the religious right, but they don't feel the need to seek validation from others in such a public way. All that Glenn Beck said in this clip I found to be preposterous... I was saddened when I was reminded that Glenn Beck has four hours a day, where he spouts of angry, peevish rhetoric in the name of my faith, and that his view of the Bible is the only perception many people end up hearing.

Overall, Ben believes that promoting social justice is an important part of the Christian faith. In fact, he believes the church should play a larger role in taking care of the poor and marginalized. In his response, he says:

Like Father Martin, I don't think "social justice" is against the teachings of Jesus--quite the opposite. Reading through the gospels, I see Jesus often telling us to treat others the way we want to be treated, to care for those in need, to serve others, etc....I think we (the Church) need to step up the ways we deal with poverty so people become less reliant on the government for handouts.

Ben’s response to this clip shows his particular disdain for people who have, in his opinion, skewed Scripture to mean something different. In the end, while he is disheartened by the messages of Glenn Beck and his followers, he is hopeful that the church will inevitably stay committed to serving the poor. He concludes his response, saying:

I think I am often disappointed in the way we so easily try to bend the Word of God to our own agendas, but hopeful when I see and hear church leaders like Father Martin who share similar views with me. This episode in particular struck a chord with me, as a Christian friend of mine has a

similar view as Glenn Beck, and has said to me that social justice is a communist idea (probably after he listened to this very broadcast).

When Ben says “I am...hopeful when I see and hear church leaders like Father Martin who share similar views with me,” it is clear that he is thankful for the opportunity to hear someone like Jim Martin speak about issues that are of personal interest to him. It is possible that he would have heard Jim Martin in a space other than on *The Colbert Report*, but it is also possible that his first encounter with Martin was through his viewing of the program. Therefore, it seems that, for Ben, Colbert is not only an authority figure on religion, as his other responses have suggested, but he is appreciative that Colbert’s program and platform creates the space for others to speak authoritatively on religious issues. He not only utilizes Colbert as a means by which to reinforce his own religio-political identity, but he additionally utilizes Colbert as a channel through which to hear perspectives that might match his own. It is clear that Ben, a regular viewer and fan of the show, acknowledges Colbert and his program in this way.

Naomi: Liberal Evangelical

As we read in the previous chapter, Naomi, a liberal evangelical, does not fit the stereotype of evangelicalism. As a theologically conservative Christian, Naomi is able to identify with Jesus’ teachings about the poor to reconcile a politically liberal stance on social justice as well as other issues. While Naomi struggled to identify with many clips and often found Colbert’s sarcasm and humor offensive, there were a few instances where she could respect the overall message. Usually this took place when Colbert invited guests on the show and allowed them a platform to speak their mind.

Therefore, Naomi found Jim Martin's articulation of social justice particularly refreshing, especially in light of the fact that she disliked almost all of the other clips. According to Naomi, "Father Jim presents a solid Christian understanding of social justice as addressing the things that keep people poor. I appreciated his response, "capitalism doesn't provide for everyone." I found his the "poor work the hardest" quote interesting." Subsequently, Naomi emphasizes the importance of Biblical truth, and for Naomi, the Bible clearly reinforces a platform for social justice. Once again, Naomi is impressed with the way Father Martin navigates Colbert's sardonic behavior. She says, "I appreciated Father Jim's emphasis on the Biblical truth, "When you are with the poor, you are really with God's beloved." Father Jim Martin was impressive in his handling of Mr. Colbert's twisted interview."

Brittany: Independent Fundamentalist

Brittany, a self-identified fundamentalist, shares a similar stance. Her response, like Naomi's, echoes a commitment to social justice and caring for the poor. According to Brittany:

The church should be a tool for helping the poor. Politically, I agree that capitalism is an excellent system and I agree that it has its problems. That problem is not so much with the idea of capitalism. By itself, it should allow for everyone to become successful, but sometimes, people just get left behind, by no fault of their own.

Like other participants, Brittany's comments also reflect a desire to distance from extreme conservatism as she says:

Jesus preached about helping the poor. He encouraged people to give as much as they could to help the poor. He was God and became pretty poor himself. I don't think there are groups within Christianity that reject the idea that helping the poor is not Biblical. That would be absurd.

Here, Ben, Naomi, and Brittany articulate a stance that many evangelicals have adopted over the years. While scriptural authority is paramount to evangelicalism, many young evangelicals have pinpointed that Jesus' teachings are central to the Christian message. And, for these young evangelicals, that means a commitment to serving the poor and oppressed. For evangelicals like Ben, Naomi, Brittany, there is a large desire to reiterate this characteristic and therefore assuage the pejorative stereotypes that seem to be associated with Glenn Beck and evangelicalism in general.

Conclusion

Catholics, mainline Protestants, and evangelicals alike can find something refreshing about this particular episode. While each subculture provides a different lens through which to critique Glenn Beck and find affinity with Jim Martin, each does so by referencing the extreme political right as an outgroup while simultaneously reinforcing their own religious identities. As we saw with mainline Protestants such as Erin and Wendy, social justice is a major part of their religious rhetoric. Furthermore, Catholics such as Jim and Maggie are able to find connection with Colbert's Catholic identity and Jim Martin's appropriate teachings. And finally, evangelicals such as Nate, Ben, Naomi, and Brittany are able to create dissonance from fundamentalist views while reclaiming evangelicalism for themselves (Dierberg & Clark, 2012). While almost all of the responses to this clip showed similar identity formation, these particular responses show the diversity and depth of commitment to social justice and a passion for claiming the space to vehemently disagree with Glenn Beck and other fundamentalists. It is clear that many Christian young adults have adopted social justice as a part of their religious

rhetoric and identity and wish to distance themselves from Christians who claim otherwise.

This chapter also further elucidates the argument that Colbert can be an authoritative figure on religious issues and an occasion for reflection for a variety of Christian young adults. Many of the participants highlighted in this chapter consider themselves occasional to regular viewers of the show, and these viewers responded with fervor to this particular clip. As mentioned in response to Ben's reflection of the episode, participants are not only drawn to Colbert, who has become a religious authority, but they are also drawn to the program, which invites guests to speak about issues that are important to these young Christians. In other words, Colbert is both the authority and the avenue through which others can speak authoritatively on matters of faith and politics. And, it seems that both are appealing myriad Christian young adults.

Chapter Nine: Discussion and Conclusion

As this dissertation has explored, young adults of various religious and political subcultures frequently call upon myriad tools for identity reflection and formation. Television is one avenue through which young adults shape their beliefs about important religious and political issues. And, because *The Colbert Report* often calls upon religion as a source of humor, the show creates a space for many young people to reference the show as an occasion for reflection. Furthermore, as Colbert situates himself in the context of the Christian tradition, his ability to relate to fellow Christians additionally gives him a certain amount of religious capital and authority. Colbert has used his celebrity status in ways with which young adults can identify. Therefore, the choice to use *The Colbert Report* for this dissertation project seems natural. It serves as one example of a television program that can provide an occasion for further consideration of religious and political issues.

Chapter one provided an introduction to the dissertation, highlighting the importance of this research and a preview of the scholarship to come. Subsequently, chapter two offered an overview of the trends regarding the behavior, beliefs, and practices of emerging adults today. As the chapter suggested, today's young adults are in a constant state of flux, and therefore, they utilize their parents, friends, education, and the media for guidance. This generation of young adults is highly skeptical about hierarchical structures, and consequently, they are reluctant to identify and affiliate with a

specific political party or a Christian denomination. Many young adults, then, identify themselves as Moderate, Independent, and Non-denominational, or simply, Christian. As the chapter also discussed, young adults utilize the media for a variety of reasons. Many young adults utilize media such as television, music, and the Internet as an avenue through which they can connect with friends and family. In an increasingly media saturated society, young adults look to celebrity role models to help shape their sense of identity, not only when it comes to fashion or musical taste, but also when it comes to political and religious convictions.

Chapter three explored how contemporary television programs have utilized religion as a catalyst for humor. Religion has become a prominent topic within many television genres, as producers and networks become increasingly aware of the role religion plays in the lives of everyday Americans. As the chapter explored, dramas and sitcoms such as *Scrubs* and *Glee* challenge traditional religious beliefs while remaining sensitive to the beliefs of their viewer demographics. Animated comedies such as *The Simpsons* and *South Park* push the line of religious irreverence a bit further as shows like these consistently mock Christianity and other religious groups. Their ability to take more risks when it comes to their religious critique may be due to the genre, as the cartoon creates distance between the program and the viewer. The success may also be due to the fact that programs such as these have targeted specific and niche viewers. Finally, the chapter explored how soft news programs address religion. Programs such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and *Real Time* with Bill Maher frequently lambaste religion and the way certain religious groups and organizations use religion as a source of power and oppression over others. Of all the programs discussed in this chapter, the

programs that fit into the category of soft news are the most direct in their attacks of religion. As contemporary television programs consistently represent and critique religious dogmas and practices, it is becoming increasingly imperative that religion scholars take media seriously when considering the way religious viewers reflect upon and negotiate their individual beliefs in relation to programs such as these.

Chapter four explored how Stephen Colbert also utilizes religion as a frequent source of humor in his highly successful soft news program, *The Colbert Report*. The chapter discussed the way Colbert has built a conservative religio-political persona that aims to mock programs such as *The O'Reilly Factor* and broadly critiques individuals and groups who use emotion to make authoritative decisions, rather than reason or logic. Additionally, the show aims to critique organizations and individuals who abuse power and privilege to further oppress marginalized groups. This persona and agenda naturally allows Colbert to bring up religion as a consistent subject. Subsequently, the chapter discussed the way that Colbert's Catholic faith gives him a unique platform for religious critique, and therefore, the show distances itself from soft news programs such as *The Daily Show* and *Real Time* with Bill Maher. As the chapter looked more closely at four specific clips, it is clear that Stephen Colbert is educated about myriad religious issues and doctrines as well as passionate about social justice and the separation of church and state. His program and celebrity, therefore, offer space for reflection upon an alternative Christian worldview that is different from the Christianity that is portrayed on programs such as Fox News or the Christian Broadcasting Network.

Chapter five explored the methodology of this particular project, and how the methodology situates itself in both media studies and the sociology of religion. As the

chapter discussed, this project took an audience reception approach, borrowing from scholars in the field who make the argument that television and media should be considered as important tools for identity formation, but should be considered within the framework of one's larger context. Therefore, utilizing self-identification and in-depth qualitative interviews, participants were asked questions not only about their responses to *The Colbert Report*, but also about their religio-political background and experiences. This allowed room for further understanding of participants' reactions to the program as it fit within the larger context of their lived religious and political experience.

Chapter six, seven, and eight serve as the findings of the in-depth study on the way Christian emerging adults of various religio-political subcultures responded and reacted to religious rhetoric on *The Colbert Report*. While the participants responded to eight to ten different clips, their responses to the same three or four segments were the most passionate and articulate, and their responses to these particular episodes were also the most similar. Therefore, the data was categorized according to the similarity and passion in their responses, which says something about what these young people are most concerned with as well as what religious and political issues potentially unite them as a generation of Christians. It also suggests the ways and degrees with which these participants utilize Colbert as a source of religious authority.

Chapter six explored how theologically conservative participants reacted to Colbert's parody of the National Association for Marriage's ad campaign. In the original campaign, conservative Christian activists spoke out against homosexuality and gay marriage, and the parody commercial directly mocked the original as well as their stance against gay marriage. Participants such as Dave, Ben, Brittany, and others used the clip

as a reference point for their own beliefs about the topics of homosexuality and gay marriage. Overall, these theologically conservative viewers often separated their religious beliefs from their political commitments. The clip offered the space for them to rearticulate and further negotiate the tensions that exist between their religious and political beliefs. For some, it also allowed them the space to defend their religious views and share their disappointment with the way Colbert painted the picture of conservative Christians. Rather than suggesting that most Christians see the issue as black and white, these participants believe the issue is far greyer, and therefore, they felt Colbert should have utilized his celebrity and authority to offer the reasonable points of both sides of the argument. It is clear, then, that many of these participants acknowledge that Colbert has a great deal of followers and a great deal of cultural and religious capital. They see him, then, as a celebrity figure that can offer a different kind of space for religious and political reflection.

Chapter seven explored the way participants of various religious and political subcultures responded to clips during which Stephen Colbert mocks the Religious Right for aligning Christianity with the Republican Party. Participants responded with passion to a segment called, “American Orthodox,” during which Colbert attacks the mixture of religion and politics and the Christian Right’s rhetoric to convince American Christians that there is no such thing as Liberal and Christian. In addition, participants responded to an interview with self-identified liberal evangelical, Tony Campolo, who has become a prominent figure and writer within the liberal Evangelical movement, aligning himself with figures and organizations such as Sojourners, Jim Wallis, and Brian McClaren. In the interview with Colbert, Tony Campolo makes theological claims that Jesus’ teachings

do not fit within the framework of the current two-party political system. Rather, Campolo emphatically explains that “Jesus Transcends Partisan Politics,” meaning that Christians should be more concerned with issues than with political parties and candidates. According to Campolo, there are some issues where Republicans have it right and some where Democrats have it right in terms of the way the issues align with Jesus’ teachings. As participants reflected upon this particular segment, an overwhelming majority were refreshed to hear a celebrity figure make statements such as these. This reflects the generation’s overall skepticism towards the two-party political system and a desire to see religious rhetoric removed from the political sphere. For the most part, these participants observe that the mixture of religion and politics is bad for America, and religious groups should not claim one political party over another. The viewers utilize Colbert, then, to reaffirm and reinforce a belief that already exists for them. They resonate with figures like Colbert and Campolo who offer different perspectives on the role of religion in the public sphere, and therefore, they see Colbert and *The Colbert Report* as a reference point for religio-political identity articulation and reinforcement.

Chapter eight discussed the way Christian young adult viewers strengthened identity through the referencing of symbolic boundaries or outgroups when responding to Colbert’s clip, “Glenn Beck Attacks Social Justice.” The clip begins as Colbert vehemently mocks Fox News conservative Glenn Beck’s stance against churches that promote social justice. Because Glenn Beck specifically attacks the Catholic Church, Colbert is urged to consider his own church’s approach to social justice issues. Subsequently, Colbert introduces Rev. James Martin, who humorously serves as the

shows chaplain, to clarify and defend the Catholic Church's teachings about social justice. In the interview, Martin offers a candid defense of social justice and how important it is to think through this lens. Once again, an overwhelming majority of participants responded passionately to this clip. Their responses were extremely similar in that, most of them utilized the clip to reference Glenn Beck and his followers as a symbolic outgroup. These participants made clear that their version of Christianity is not in line with Glenn Beck's teachings. This, then, allowed them to reinforce their own identity. Additionally, participants from myriad religio-political backgrounds positively resonated with Jim Martin's defense of social justice and were able to fit his message within the framework of their own context. Thus, they were able to reinforce their own identities as they rearticulated their own passions for caring for the poor and marginalized.

It is clear that the interviews and responses highlighted throughout this dissertation provided interesting insight into the sociology of religion and media studies. This section provided a snapshot of the way this dissertation has approached the fields as it specifically looked at the way Christian young adults utilized and responded to religion on *The Colbert Report* and related it to their own religio-political identities. The next section, then, will highlight the way this dissertation situates itself within literature pertaining to media studies and the sociology of religion. It will specifically identify ways in which the dissertation agrees with and builds upon scholarship that deals with emerging adults and the mediatization of religion.

Emerging Adults Today

As chapter two discussed, young adults today are both similar to and different from earlier generations when it comes to making decisions about religion and politics. While many young people often turn to their upbringing and the influence of their parents for religious and political guidance (Lytch, 2005; Smith & Denton, 2006; Webber & Singleton, 2005), once they transition into life away from their parents, many young adults turn to their peers, college professors, and media for guidance. These trends are evident when participants in this study such as Nancy, Emily, and Dave note that, while they hold onto the fundamental beliefs that they were taught, their political and religious commitments have changed drastically since high school.

Furthermore, for many young adults, as this study has shown, denominational and political affiliations are often not very important (Banjeree, 2008; Kinnaman & Lyons 2007). Participants such as Ben and Nate, for example, find themselves attending multiple churches as well as educating themselves on political issues rather than political candidates. Additionally, participants like Kim and Naomi have had experience in multiple church denominations due to peer and marital influences, and therefore, they may not be as likely to stay committed to the tradition in which they were raised.

As other studies have shown, many young adults today favor non-denominational and non-hierarchical church structures. This trend is reflected in their political beliefs as well. As this dissertation discussed, many young adults are frustrated with the current two party political system, and they have a desire to see a true separation of church and state as well as see more people make political decisions based on issues rather than candidates. Self-identified fundamentalist Brittany is a prime example of a theologically

and politically conservative young person who has a vehement desire for religion to be removed from policy. This trend is also evident as participants share their frustrations with Glenn Beck, who, according to them, continually distorts Christianity to fit within a specific political framework. It is additionally evident when viewers are refreshed to see a religious figure like Tony Campolo critique the way religion and politics have negatively coalesced in recent years.

It seems that the way viewers responded to various segments of *The Colbert Report* reflects what they find most important when it comes to religious and political issues. As chapter six discussed, while it is clear that some young adults hold traditional and conservative views about homosexuality, almost all participants put aside their beliefs in order to discern the way the political system should address gay marriage (Smith, 1998; Wuthnow & Evans, 2002). Then, in chapter seven, viewers express their passions for social justice. Once again, the majority of participants felt that social justice is an important, and often the most important, component of the Christian faith (Pryor et al, 2007). Finally, participants resonate with Tony Campolo's desire for Christians to become passionate about Jesus' teachings rather than favor politicians who have distorted Christianity for political gains.

Religious Frameworks Revisited

Christian Smith and Melinda Denton's often cited work, *Soul Searching* (2005), explores the final results and conclusions of the National Study of Youth and Religion. Consistent with earlier studies, this study concludes that youth often practice religion in similar ways as their parents. Smith and Denton take their research one step further, suggesting that many teens consider religion as an avenue through which they learn

morals and good behavior. According to Smith and Denton, religion, for youth, connects them with a God that is primarily good, yet somewhat distant from their everyday lives. In turn, young people speak about religion as something that provides therapeutic benefits, yet is not overly demanding. Because Smith and Denton found this phenomenon to be so common, they coined the term “moralistic therapeutic deism” to explain their findings. As discussed in chapter two, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, according to Smith and Denton, is strongly tied to the emergence of therapeutic individualism, which stems out of a capitalist society that incessantly seeks to identify new needs that are subsequently satisfied through consumerism. Consequently, young people discuss morality in terms of its therapeutic benefits. In addition, Smith and Denton note that young people are most concerned with acquiring feelings of happiness. In other words, moralistic therapeutic deism explains a mindset in which churches exist to provide people with moral frameworks, and that God created them but is subsequently distant and inactive in their lives. Furthermore, this mindset suggests that the church exists to engender happiness and raise self-esteem.

While the notion of moralistic therapeutic deism may be true for many young people today, the findings come with a great deal of biases, and they are certainly inconsistent with the findings of this dissertation. First, Smith and Denton argue that this way of thinking is somehow a weaker form of religiosity than orthodoxy. Smith and Denton’s methods and rhetoric when conducting surveys are biased toward an evangelical population. They ask questions such as “How often do you pray,” or “How often do you read the bible,” Additionally, many of the questions asked of participants are related to the rhetoric of a personal relationship with God. These questions are meant

to measure one's religiosity, and therefore, because they are written in language with which only some religious subcultures might be comfortable or familiar, it is no wonder that they conclude that evangelicals, Mormons, and black Protestants have a "stronger" religious identity. It seems that, for Smith and Denton, moralistic therapeutic deism is a notion that exists primarily in Catholics and Mainline Protestants, but what they may be missing, is that this religiosity is different rather than weaker.

Smith's *Souls in Transition*, which particularly studied emerging adults and their religious identity made similar claims to Smith and Denton's previous work on young people. Consistent with studies pertaining religious youth, according to Smith, emerging adults are heavily influenced by their parents but are less influenced by their peers than youth. Although emerging adults are the least religious adults in the US, they are still religious. But, much like *Soul Searching*, Smith found that there is a major decline in religion among Catholic and mainline Protestant young adults. While the existing literature supports these claims, research on the amount of young people in the pews hardly suffices as an adequate understanding of every day religious life, which Nancy Ammerman certainly points out in her work.

Taking a different approach, Ammerman (1997; 2006) articulates that counting people in the pews or measuring orthodoxy are not adequate measures of religious identity today. She challenges sociology's attempt at making terms such as "orthodox" and "religious" synonymous. Ammerman's term "Golden Rule Christianity," therefore, describes Protestants who are more concerned with living out the Golden Rule and working towards alleviating suffering in the world and less concerned with doctrine, orthodoxy, and personal salvation. Therefore, Ammerman concludes that this way of

being religious is simply *different than*, rather than *lesser than* those who place emphasis on orthodoxy. Unlike Smith and Denton, Ammerman does not wish to place a positive or negative charge on this kind of thinking. Her work points out many of the flaws of survey research and the biased rhetoric therein. The trend toward living out the Golden Rule is certainly evident in several of the young adult's responses to Colbert clips. Participants such as Nate and Randi, for example speak about being charitable and treating people with respect when they respond to Colbert's interview with Jim Martin.

While there are several instances where participants reflections mirror Ammerman's "Golden Rule Christianity," a great deal of participant responses reflected a greater commitment to social justice and human rights that goes above and beyond living out the Golden Rule. This commitment is seen clearly as Catholic and Mainline Protestant participants in this study reflect a religious identity that exemplifies a commitment to the social teachings of their respective churches. For example, Catholic participants such as Maggie, Dave, and others utilize Catholic social teachings and doctrines in their responses to Colbert's messages. Similarly Mainline Protestant and Mennonite participants such as Wendy, Kim, and Jennifer are heavily influenced by their respective denominations to show strong commitment toward social justice and human rights. There was no evidence in any of the participant's responses that suggests that they are religious because their religion gives them happiness or a good feeling, as Smith's moralistic therapeutic deism suggests. Rather, participants across all subcultures represent young adults who are passionately engaged in the religious and public sphere and who believe that their Christian duty is to serve others through social justice and civic engagement. In summary, participants' responses point to the trend toward a

Christian worldview that promotes human rights and social justice, a worldview that many young adults see as central to Jesus' overall message.

Social Identity Theory Revisited

Building on social identity theory (Lamont and Molnar, 2002), this dissertation also suggests that young adults often reference individuals and organizations as outgroups for identity reinforcement. It is clear in this dissertation, that Christian young adults of a variety of religious and political subcultures utilized Colbert clips to reference fundamentalist groups and individuals as utterly different from their own religious and political identifications. Liberal Protestants, Catholics, and evangelicals alike were able to use *The Colbert Report* to rearticulate their desire to distance themselves from figures such as Glenn Beck and groups with which he associates. Subsequently, they strengthened their own identity as they solidified their alliances with a specific group, church, or belief system that was vehemently different from fundamentalism or ultra-conservatism.

This section has elucidated the ways in which this dissertation situates itself within scholarship pertaining to sociology of religion and emerging adults. It is clear that, while much of this study builds on previous literature and theories, young adults today are also carving new spaces to think about religion and politics, and therefore, the religious landscape is constantly changing. It will be interesting to see how these new trends shape the future of Christianity.

Colbert and the Mediatization of Religious Authority

As this dissertation has discussed, television can play a powerful role in creating space for identity formation on issues such as race, class, gender, and even religion (Ellsworth, 1986; H. Jenkins, 2000; Winston, 2009). While some scholars might argue that media in general contributes to the secularization of society, other scholars argue that media allow viewers to renegotiate and resacralize their beliefs (Demerath, 2003; Hjarvard, 2008).

This project has made clear that young adults of myriad religio-political subcultures formulate their opinions and beliefs based on a variety of influencers. While the church is no longer the sole authority on religious doctrine, young adults can look to media to help shape and reinforce their beliefs. In the in-depth interviews conducted throughout this study, all of the participants noted that media play an integral part of their everyday lives. Whether it be from television, books, film, or music, these young adults convey that media influence them greatly. Therefore, television becomes one forum for identity formation (Cullity & Younger, 2004; La Pastina, 2004; Lembo, 2000; Newcomb & Hirsch, 1994).

With that being said, it is curious, then, as to how viewers respond to religious irreverence in mainstream media. It is also curious as to how a Christian figure such as Stephen Colbert uses his celebrity platform to garner attention on behalf of a plethora of religious and political issues about which he is so passionate. Therefore, this dissertation has looked specifically at the way religious young people have responded to religion on the hit political soft news program *The Colbert Report*.

While media in general play a large role in the lives of every day young adults, it is important to note that not all of the participants in this study were familiar with *The Colbert Report* prior to the study. But, although some participants in this study had little familiarity with the program, an overwhelming majority of the participants resonated positively with his messages. It seems clear, though, that there was a distinction between the responses of previous viewers of the show and non-viewers of the show in regards to their treatment of Colbert. It seems that non-viewers were less interested in Colbert's persona and were more interested in the message. Perhaps these viewers, who still resonated positively with the message, needed more familiarity with the program to be able to speak about Colbert as an authority figure. Regular and somewhat regular viewers, however, seemed to respond with greater ease to the segments. These viewers already understood Colbert's humor and persona, and were therefore able to breeze past his sarcasm in a way that non-viewers could not. This allowed them an easier entry into the messages and issues. This is not to say, however, that these viewers dismiss Colbert altogether. On the contrary, participants such as Dave, Ben, and others acknowledge the importance of Colbert's celebrity as well as the use of his program as a platform for offering an alternative Christian worldview. One might ask, then, whether Colbert is actually the authority, or if he paves the way for others, such as Father Jim Martin and Tony Campolo, to speak authoritatively? It seems that, for these viewers, Colbert serves as both an authority and an authoritative channel through which others can speak. This is seen clearly as viewers resonate positively with both Colbert's monologues such as "American Orthodox" as well as his interviews with guests such as Martin and Campolo.

The fact that many of the viewers felt inclined to share particular clips with their family, friends, or members of their church further bolsters the argument that Colbert can be an authority figure for a variety of Christian emerging adults. Participants in this study felt especially encouraged to share Colbert clips when they were extremely passionate about a particular segment, or if they found it more humorous than others. Although this study did not contrast the amount of times young people would share Colbert clips with the amount of times they would share sermon information from their church, it is hard to believe they would be as passionate about the latter. It is clear, then, that their desire to share these clips says something about Colbert's ability to engender passion, and subsequently, his ability to command respect from a diverse audience.

In a society that has become increasingly media saturated and social media savvy, it seems that young people utilize social media such as Facebook and Youtube to share political and religious information with their friends and family. Kevin Allocca, Youtube's trend manager, suggests that community participation is one of the reasons why videos go viral. He says, "we don't just enjoy now, we participate" (2011). He suggests later that we are moving into the realm of "a new kind of media in a new kind of culture where anyone has access, and the audience defines the popularity." While Comedy Central and *The Daily Show* certainly helped Colbert brand a conservative persona, it is because of participants such as Ben, Dave, Emily, and others who consistently share his messages that he has become not only a successful comedian, but an authoritative figure on issues pertaining to religion and politics (Clark, 2011; Dierberg & Clark, 2012).

In addition, even church workers utilize social media to share Colbert clips as a way of articulating a particular stance or belief. Church leaders such as Nadia Bolz-Weber, a leader in the emerging church movement, for example, often shares Colbert segments that relate to religion on Facebook and her blog (see her blog at www.sarcasticlutheran.com). Many of these leaders often reinforce Colbert's authority by suggesting his message is prophetic or in line with Jesus' teachings. Clearly, then, if church workers are also on the Colbert bandwagon, there is something to be said about his authoritative voice within Christian circles.

It is curious as to whether the use of mainstream media and celebrities to reinforce religious beliefs is a new phenomenon or a generational shift. As mentioned previously, tradition and scripture are no longer the sole tools with which people shape and articulate religious beliefs. While the use of experience and reason have long been a part of many Christian organizations' approaches to beliefs and practices, the role of mainstream media in the lives of Christians has been highly controversial among various Christian circles (Horsfield, Hess, & Medrano, 2004). In fact, in the past and still today, many conservative Christians frown upon too much exposure to mainstream media for fear that it will corrupt traditional beliefs (Baehr & Boone, 2007; Goheen and Bartholomew, 2008; Vallorani, 2007). This study, then, might suggest that young people, especially evangelicals, are breaking away from these traditional views of media use, although the fact that many fundamentalists declined the offer to participate in this study might also suggest that there are some young adults who still share traditional Christian beliefs about mainstream media use. Nonetheless, for many participants in this study, Colbert, a celebrity figure within mainstream television, serves as an occasion for identity reflection

and reinforcement. The fact that various Christian young adults see Colbert this way suggests a change in the way younger generations utilize media to negotiate their religio-political identities. At a time when tradition and scripture were the shapers of religious doctrines and beliefs, older Christian generations may have never thought to utilize a mainstream celebrity as an occasion for religio-political reflection. Of course, they may have (and still do) utilized a celebrity who has become acclaimed within specifically Christian media outlets such as James Dobson of Focus on the Family or Christian singers and artists, but the use of Colbert is a departure from these previous methods and channels with which one shapes and articulates beliefs. Colbert, therefore, represents one example of a mainstream celebrity who can garner the attention of and identification with Christian young people, perhaps paving the way for others to do the same.

This dissertation, therefore, agrees with literature that suggests that media can play a powerful role in religious identity formation and reinforcement. Participants in this study represent young adults who consistently utilize celebrity figures like Colbert to articulate and negotiate their own beliefs. And, in addition, many of them try to convince others of this alternative Christian worldview as they share clips with family, friends, and church members.

Limitations and Future Considerations

As the last two sections suggest, this dissertation has made important contributions to both the sociology of religion and media studies. It displays the importance of media in the lives of Christian emerging adults and the way they utilize media to shape religious and political identities. While this in-depth qualitative study

situations itself in the appropriate fields, it is important to also consider weaknesses and future research.

This dissertation looked at the ways Christian young adults from a variety of religious and political backgrounds considered *The Colbert Report* within the context of their lived religious experiences. The participant demographics portrayed much diversity in terms of religious affiliation, political affiliation, regional location, age, and gender. While this is a fairly diverse demographic, it is also fairly homogeneous. It would be interesting to expand this research to include a more heterogeneous population in terms of race, educational status, and sexual orientation. Although the demographics in this study closely represent similar viewer demographics of *The Colbert Report*, it would still be interesting to consider the way minority groups also utilize the show within the context of their own religious experiences.

Another limitation of this study is that fundamentalists are generally absent from this project. While Brittany self-identifies as fundamentalist, it is probable that her responses do not represent many fundamentalist beliefs, and therefore, she may, in fact, be an exception to the norm. Although there was a lack of fundamentalist participation in the project, it is noteworthy, however, that many fundamentalists were asked to participate in the project, and all of them declined. This could either be because of the time commitment, or it could be due to their lack of interest in the project or *The Colbert Report*. The absence of fundamentalist participants could suggest that Colbert represents an outgroup for them, and therefore, they would not want to even consider viewing the program, however, without their participation, this point is unclear. Therefore, future

literature on the subject could look more in-depth at the way Fundamentalists utilize Colbert, whether it be positively or negatively.

Another potential limitation to this study relates to the way participants reflected upon the various Colbert segments. As mentioned in chapter five, the research project consisted of three phases. While the first phase served as an in-depth study of the participant's religio-political contexts, the second phase asked participants to reflect upon segments in an online blog that was created for the project. The creation of a reader-response forum in order to gain insight into participants' negotiation with media is a method that has been used in a variety of previous reader-response studies (i.e. Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984); however, this method comes with its own set of challenges. The challenges related to my study involve the way in which I elicited responses from the viewers. As mentioned in chapter five, participants were offered an optional rubric to help assist them with their reflection. The rubric offered them lead in statements that helped guide their thoughts such as: "This clip made me laugh when..." or "This segment was in line with my beliefs because..." (See Appendix II). After further reflection on the responses to Colbert clips, it is possible that this rubric was more influential than I intended it to be. Did participants respond in the ways they did because I offered them the rubric? If I hadn't offered them the rubric, would they have responded differently? In other words, did I intervene too much as a researcher by providing such a rubric? It is possible. It is also possible, however, that the participant's responses reflect beliefs and opinions that they already held, but my rubric offered them a chance to bring those beliefs and opinions to the surface. It is clear that for many of the somewhat regular and regular viewers of the show, their responses accurately reflect their inner thoughts and

opinions, as many of them expressed their desire to share the clips with their friends and family because they felt compelled by Colbert's messages. Therefore, it is probable that the rubric only assisted in bringing to light their inner cognitions.

While many of the limitations described above involve demographic and methodological stumbling blocks, there are certainly other places where this particular study can expand. For example, as briefly mentioned in this conclusion, some clergy utilize Colbert frequently as a means with which to articulate theological and political positions. It would be interesting to study this phenomenon more closely. Additionally, while this dissertation focuses on young adults, the study references the way Christian young adults are both similar to and different from older generations quite frequently. It would therefore be interesting to compare young adults responses to the responses and reaction of older Christian generations.

Conclusion

While there are myriad avenues through which one could look at religion and *The Colbert Report*, this study was specifically interested in the way Christian young adults reflect upon their beliefs and practices in relation to Colbert's religious rhetoric. It is clear that Colbert has become a powerful authority on religious and political issues. His Catholic faith has allowed him more religious capital than comedians such as Bill Maher or Jon Stewart, which allows Christian viewers to take him more seriously when it comes to matters of faith. And, as this dissertation has suggested, participants' desires to regularly share his messages further contributes to the argument that Colbert has become a religious authority.

When it comes to reactions to Colbert's religious messages, Christian emerging adult viewers often resonate positively with Colbert's religious message. Overall, viewers from diverse backgrounds are refreshed by an authoritative figure that offers an alternative Christian worldview from those portrayed in mainstream media such as Fox News or conservative fundamentalist media such as The Christian Broadcasting Network. This dissertation has clearly demonstrated that Christian young adults of myriad religio-political subcultures often use figures such as Colbert and programs like *The Colbert Report* as occasions for religio-political identity reflection and reinforcement.

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Appendix I

Questions: Phase 1

Demographic Questions

Tell me a little bit about yourself

How old are you?

What is your race?

What is your ethnicity?

What is your gender?

What is your sexual orientation?

Where do you live? Have you always lived there?

Tell me about your family

What is your current occupation? If you are a student, what do you study?

Religious Identification

Are you a Christian?

If so, what does that mean to you?

Do you consider yourself fundamentalist, evangelical, mainline Protestant, Catholic, Black Protestant, or something else?

Do you identify with a specific denomination? How important are these labels to you, and why?

How often do you attend religious services?

Have you always identified as a Christian?

Have you always identified as a (enter denominational affiliation)?

How did you come to be a (enter specific affiliation if there is one) Christian?

Have you recently read any Christian or other religious books? If so, which ones and what were your thoughts on them?

Political Identification

Where do you place yourself politically?

Have you always been (enter political affiliation)? If not, what were you before?

How active are you in political issues, races, etc.?

Religio-Political Questions

Do your religious beliefs inform your political commitments or vice versa? Why, why not, or how?

How has your family had an influence on your political and religious beliefs?

Other than your family, what or who has had the biggest influence on your religious and political beliefs?

How important are your religious and political beliefs to you?

Do you follow the news? How do you get your news and who do you read/watch?

Media Questions

What type of music do you listen to?

What are some of your favorite television shows?

What kinds of movies do you watch?

Is media an integral part of your life? Why or why not?

Appendix II

Searching for Truth(iness) Phase 2 Questions

Participants will be asked to watch eight to ten segments of *The Colbert Report*. Following the segments, students will be asked to respond to the clips. This rubric provides lead-in questions that they might utilize in order to frame their reflection. This rubric is completely optional, and participants may choose to reflect upon the clips as they wish.

Lead-In Questions:

After watching this episode I feel...

This clip was in line with my religious beliefs because...

This clip was not in line with my religious beliefs because...

This clip was in line with my political beliefs because...

This clip was not in line with my political beliefs because...

This clip made me laugh when...

This clip made me angry when...

Other Questions:

After watching this episode, do you want to share this clip with your friends, family, or members of your church? Why or why not?

Do you think members of your church would appreciate this clip? How is this similar to, or different from your own reaction to the clip?

Do you think this episode emotionally charged you more or less than other episodes you have watched? Why or why not?