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Obscured Conflations, (Un)Bending Frames: Considering the Concept of "Truth" in the Politics and Rhetoric of the Religious Right

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College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Obscured Conflations, (Un)Bending Frames: Considering the Concept of "Truth"
in the Politics and Rhetoric of the Religious Right

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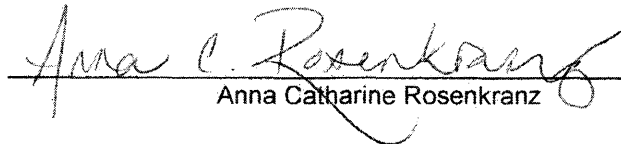of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
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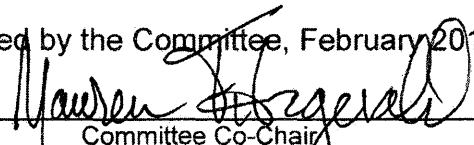
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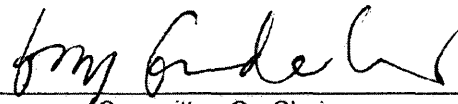
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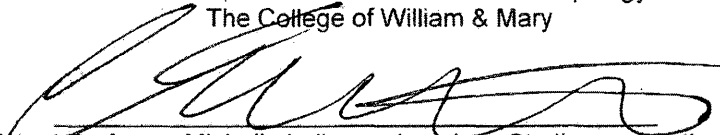
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to identify and trace the impact of conservative evangelicals' conception of "truth" upon their political tendencies and rhetoric through the early 1980s. The first chapter of this thesis relies upon several significant works of scholarship on the roots and coalescence of the religious Right in order to craft one potential genealogy of conservative evangelicals' unique and uniquely confident assumption that economic libertarianism and social conservatism - the distinct threads that combined to mark the "New Right" - represented both the "American way" and "God's way" at one and the same time. I argue that historical precedents and regional contexts combined with this increasingly-coherent political bloc's evangelical religion to bestow upon their political stances the appearance of incontestable, universally beneficent absolute truth. In the second chapter, I conduct a close reading of a book published in 1985 by a Texas couple who were influential in altering public school textbooks to reflect religious Right ideals. I do so in order to locate one cause of the appearance of "talking past each other" (an effect that consistently characterized rhetorical engagements between those on the religious Right and their opponents) in the authors' conservative evangelical conception of "truth." Together, these two papers highlight some of the problems arising from the common assumption that religion and theology are extricable from politics. Finally, the essays contained in this thesis point to ways in which accounting for the theology of particular religious groups can contribute to a fuller understanding of those groups, their development, and their social and historical impact.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This M.A. thesis is dedicated to two professors who first challenged me to think deeply about the relationship between history, religion, and that thing we call "America." Dr. Jerry Faught encouraged me to question my assumptions about the relationship between faith and citizenship. Dr. Glenn Sanders helped me see not just that beliefs and ideas have histories as complicated and fascinating as those of events and people, but also that those histories are always intertwined. Both men, through their inspiring teaching and their genuine interest in and devotion to their students, instilled in me the firm yet wonderfully expansive conviction that *this stuff matters*. For that conviction alone I am immeasurably grateful.

Preface

"Reagan's overwhelming victory" in 1980, claims Bethany Moreton in <u>To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise</u>, "and the growth of his evangelical base forced a sea change in the political and cultural landscape, moving the right from marginal fringe to controlling center."[1] However many scholars debate the extent to which the "right" ever qualified as a "marginal fringe," a great number of scholars of twentieth century conservatism have, like Moreton, accepted the 1980 presidential election's significance as axiomatic. The date continues to function either as a marker for a "sea change" in American political and social history, as Moreton puts it, or as a symbolic point of departure for investigating the causes and effects of that change. The explanations for the broad cultural and political shifts that occurred as part of the "Reagan Era" have become more complicated over time. The floods of initial and somewhat-panicked cries of localized right-wing conspiracies have largely given way to the assertion more common today, that (as Moreton herself argues) whatever the degree of conservative political organization that existed at the dawn of the decade, all that 1980 symbolizes was in actuality a long time in coming.

In the first half of this thesis, I review several monographs that trace a variety of quite complicated pasts behind the conservative resurgence in the 1980s. The works I include contribute, at least in part, to an explanation of the origins and successes of the political phenomenon now labeled the "religious

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[1] Bethany Moreton, <u>To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise</u> (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4.

Right" (which many in 1980 did not yet distinguish from the broader "New Right"),

and that phenomenon's largest demographic – conservative evangelicals. My

goal in examining this literature is to propose one possible genealogy of the

fusion of evangelical religion, conservative politics, and nationalism that marked

1980 as a point of departure from the more liberal trends of prior decades. More

specifically, I aim to highlight some of the factors that played a key part in

normalizing that fusion within conservative evangelical communities themselves.

I suggest that recent scholarship on the religious Right points towards the ways

in which conservative evangelicals from the early part of the twentieth century to

the early 1980s internalized particular economic and social ideas, conflating both

those ideas and their religious beliefs with their own American "imagined

community."[2] My literature review affirms the notion that conservative

evangelicals within the religious Right demonstrate a conundrum unique to the

American experience, in part because of the common and peculiarly American

assumption that an individual's "religion" can and ought to exist as a distinct and

more importantly *discreet* entity, but also because of the way in which

conservative evangelicals and their predecessors have historically tended to act

in direct opposition to that assumption. Indeed, as the books reviewed highlight,

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[2] I borrow here from Benedict Anderson's terminology. The nation, according to Anderson, is "an imagined political community... It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship." Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, 3rd ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 6-7.

conservative evangelicals have tended to bestow upon their political ideals and their nationalistic fervor the weight of their belief, rooted in their evangelical faith, in their possession of absolute truth.

The second portion of this thesis centers on a 1985 book, <u>What Are They Teaching Our Children?</u>, written by Mel and Norma Gabler, a Texas couple passionate about correcting what they perceived to be the tragic disintegration of a "Christian America," disintegration resulting from what they strongly felt were immoral public school textbooks. I rely heavily on the literary technique of close reading to conduct an examination of their rhetoric. I do this to explore the ways in which an examination of that rhetoric contributes toward a deeper understanding of the reasons why the appearance of talking past one another characterizes much of the political debate surrounding and involving conservative evangelicals in the 1980s and onward. In light of the history of insisting upon a separation of church affairs from state ones (however incompletely that ideal has ever been enacted), and in part because of the nature of debate (meaning, at its most broad, communication intended to persuade), the Gablers' work can be read as an effort to "translate" the concerns of deeply-religious people into terms that could be persuasive both to those who shared the Gablers' faith *and* to those who did not. On a rhetorical level, at least, their attempt singularly fails. Their attempts to use what Jürgen Habermas has called "generically accessible language" merely masks the fact that they are *not* interested in crafting

"generically accessible" presuppositions.[3] Thus, while they frequently argue in

terms that *appear* "generically accessible," their foundational premises, rooted in

the conservative evangelical theological tradition, remain largely

unacknowledged. The effect is a work that, to all but those who share that

theological tradition, appears incoherent and self-contradictory.

This project as a whole then reinforces the now-prevalent observation that

the separation of religion from state processes and institutions – the supposed

division between "church and state" – has been throughout United States history

a mostly rhetorical dualism, a distinction that has in fact rarely (if ever) been

lived.[4] Indeed, as Sarah Rivett eloquently and persuasively argues in The

Science of the Soul in Colonial New England, the wide acceptance of a "natural"

separation between religious and empirical ways of knowing is a recent

development.[5] As law and religion scholar Winnifred Sullivan points out in The

Impossibility of Religious Freedom, this epistemological division occurred in

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[3] Jürgen Habermas, "'The Political': The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," in The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 26.

[4] See Philip Hamburger, Separation of Church and State (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), for one example. Hamburger suggests that "separation of church and state" was an ideal crafted retrospectively and not, as is so often assumed, embedded in the U.S. Constitution.

[5] Indeed, Rivett argues that through the mid-eighteenth century, the notion that there was or ought to be a distinction between scientific and spiritual knowledge was not at all widely accepted. "Inductive reasoning," Rivett writes, "recourse to discoveries, the compilation of data, and the testing of a scientific theory through experiment were among the new measurements applied to metaphysics and spiritual study," in the Puritans' hunt for "evidence of God on human souls." Sarah Rivett, The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 5.

conjunction with "religious freedom and the legal disestablishment of religion, as political ideas, [which] find their origin in the early modern period of Europe."[6] The attempts throughout United States history to compartmentalize religion (or at least, non-dominant religion), however, have created perpetual problems, not the least of which is the problem of *defining* religion. As Sullivan argues, "in order to enforce laws guaranteeing religious freedom you must first have religion."[7] "Defining religion," however, "is very difficult," something Sullivan argues law really cannot do without undermining the very religious freedom it ostensibly protects.[8] As she observes and as my examination of current scholarship affirms, "Ordinary religion, that is, the disestablished religion of ordinary people, fits uneasily into the spaces allowed for religion in the public square and in the courtroom."[9]

Sullivan argues that "the precondition for political participation by religion increasingly became cooperation with liberal theories and forms of governance."[10] The problem lies in the fact that such cooperation necessarily requires "religion" be subordinate or adaptable to the values liberal government requires, terms unacceptable to those whose religious beliefs must by their very definition take priority over and inform all other demands. Furthermore, by the 1980s, the "theories and forms of governance" in the United States had shifted

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[6] Winnifred Sullivan, The Impossibility of Religious Freedom (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 7.
     [7] Ibid., 1.
     [8] Ibid., 1.
     [9] Ibid., 138.
     [10] Ibid., 7.

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toward an increased acceptance of many forms of diversity. Furthermore, many

citizens, including leaders in public education and national media outlets,

affirmed the idea that a pluralistic society is a positive good. As Giovanni Sartori

argues persuasively, however, that presumption is itself a "value-belief."[11] "That

difference (and not uniformity), dissent (and not unanimity), change (and not

immutability) are 'good things,'" Sartori explains, "– these are the value-beliefs

that properly belong to the cultural context of pluralism and that a pluralistic

culture should convey in order to be true to its name."[12] Many conservative

evangelicals on the religious Right were like the Gablers – eager to participate in

the political process but finding the growing emphasis on "pluralism" antithetical

to their deepest moral instincts. Sartori claims that "pluralism… cannot be said to

exist until the realm of God and the realm of Caesar are divided. This entails that

no total claim is legitimate," or, I would qualify, can at least be legitimately

imposed upon a non-consenting population.[13] What the Gablers' rhetoric

suggests first is that this Texas couple was quite aware that they lived in a

diverse society whose members were likely to take issue not merely with their

specific aims but with their core premises. The Gablers' recognition of the

existence of diversity seems to have compelled them to attempt to communicate

their agenda in terms that would not *appear* religiously partisan. The problem lay

in the fact that the terminology did not alter the Gablers' driving presuppositions,

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[11] Giovanni Sartori, "Understanding Pluralism," Journal of Democracy 8,
no. 4 (1997): 62, http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.wm.edu/journals/journal_of
_democracy/v008/8.4sartori.html (accessed June 26, 2013).
    [12] Ibid., 62.
    [13] Ibid., 63.

assumptions rooted in their unique worldview and which were in direct conflict

with the notion upon which the peaceful perpetuation of a pluralistic society rests

– that "no total claim is legitimate." This notion was for the Gablers and numerous

others on the religious Right untenable, for one of the beliefs most basic to the

conservative evangelical tradition is the assertion that there *is* one true, totalizing

metanarrative, and it is in believers' possession.

As noted earlier, Jürgen Habermas suggests that "religious language"

ought to be allowed "in the public sphere," but citizens who choose to use that

religious language "have to accept that the potential truth contents of religious

utterances must be translated into a generically accessible language before they

can find their way onto the agendas of parliaments, courts, or administrative

bodies and influence their decisions."[14] What I argue throughout my work on the

Gablers is that this "translation" process is precisely what they, and many others

on the religious Right, *tried* to do. The problem is one that Charles Taylor

identifies in his reading of political philosopher John Rawls: "Religious languages

operate outside this discourse [of secular reason] by introducing extraneous

premises that only believers can accept;" Rawls' solution, according to Taylor,

was to have everyone "talk the common language."[15] Yet Taylor rejects both

Rawls' call for a "common language" as well Habermas' proposition that religious

ideas can be used in the "public sphere" but must translated *into* a common

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[14] Habermas, "Political Theology," 25-26.
[15] Charles Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," in
<u>The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere</u>, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan
VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 49.

language prior to broad enforcement. Instead, the common "distinction in rational credibility between religious and nonreligious discourse," a belief stemming from an "understanding of the Enlightenment" and its categorical split between reason and faith "as an absolute, unmitigated step forward," is, Taylor argues, "utterly without foundation."[16] Religious reasoning is, according to Taylor and as I suggest in my study of the Gablers' rhetoric, quite rational in its own way. But I also argue that "in its own way" is an important caveat. Habermas presumes the "truth content" of religiously-based reasoning is somehow "translatable" into a "common language." Taylor insists that there should be little need for such translation. I suggest that perhaps in particular cases such translation, even when it is attempted, remains singularly ineffective because of the *untranslatable* premises undergirding the logic of particular arguments, including those that the Gablers make in <u>What Are They Teaching Our Children?</u> Together, the papers that comprise this thesis suggest that debates within a pluralistic democracy will proceed productively only if participants acknowledge both the historical twists and turns involved in the ways certain groups' ideas and beliefs develop, and if participants correctly and clearly identify which presuppositions are being accepted *a priori*, and which are the source of the disagreement.

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[16] Ibid., 53.

Chapter 1: Towards a Genealogy of the Conflation of Christian and American Identity

I.   Introduction

Who owns "America"? This question is rarely asked pointedly. It nevertheless lies at the heart of many of the most heated debates over citizenship and political participation since the time that there were any "United States" to discuss. More useful for intellectual investigation, perhaps, is the following question: what can we learn from those who claim to own "America"? I must first make clear that I use the term "America" not to refer to any geographical area within the political boundaries of the United States, however contested those boundaries have been and continue to be. Nor am I referring to the larger western hemisphere, in which region every nation arguably has a rightful claim to the term. Rather, I am referring to "America" as a word deployed in an effort to delimit the behaviors and qualities of an ideal citizenry, a sign hailed most often in efforts to exclude those with an alternate ideal. While throughout United States history, racial, class-based and gendered limitations have been drawn and redrawn in order to variously expand or restrict citizenship, religion, too, has played a consistent critical part in marking the boundaries around what and who count as "American."

For much of the twentieth century, and particularly since the beginning of the Cold War, conservative evangelical Protestants have been among those groups to most vocally assert themselves as the true defenders (and their

morality as the truest foundation) of the ideals comprising their "America."[17] Their

efforts to fashion a "Christian America" have recurred with such visible frequency

that there is an illusion of necessity regarding the connection between their

religion and their politics. Michel Foucault's essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy,

History," provides an important corrective to such a view: "What is found at the

historical beginning of things," Foucault insists, "is not the inviolable identity of

their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity."[18] Taking Foucault's

words to heart enables us to recognize that however easy it is to conflate

"Christianity" and right-wing nationalism – however consistently conservative

evangelicals have conflated the two themselves – the two can exist and have

existed independent of each other. There is no logical (or theological) necessity

for an affinity between the two, no "inviolable identity of their origin." Throughout

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[17] I use the term "conservative evangelical" as the least cumbersome method of speaking of a theologically-nuanced group that includes self-proclaimed fundamentalists (such as Jerry Falwell), those whom Margaret Bendroth in Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) terms "neo-evangelicals" (such as Billy Graham), as well as Pentecostals. The "conservative" label indicates the highly critical stance toward the American moral climate and a close alliance with conservative political policies, as opposed to other "progressive" evangelicals, such as Jim Wallis, who have claimed the "evangelical" label but have taken a markedly different approach toward social justice issues in particular. The "evangelical" label indicates the theological similarities each of these groups has historically shared. In David Bebbington's terms, there are four core components of the evangelical tradition that continue to persist: "conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and... crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross." Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 3.
[18] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Language, Counter-Memory, Practice, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 142.

history, of course, a proclaimed commitment to Christianity and a commitment to national interests have quite often been in the service of one another, but each particular conflation *has* a genealogy, and conservative evangelicals' claims to the right to define "America" are no exception.

By the 1980s, a brand of conservative politics that had evolved to incorporate both economic libertarianism and social conservatism had become rhetorically fused with the brand of Christianity associated with conservative evangelicals. To outsiders, this fusion has persistently been perceived as illogical and anti-historical at best and manipulative or hypocritical at worst. To those on the inside, the "natural" connection between the component parts of this fusion has been understood as quite simply obvious, *a*-historical common sense. The fact that so many conservative evangelicals have spoken and continue to speak of nationalism and conservative politics as if they were an integral part of a unified, universal Christian belief system, while also demanding that their particular religious belief system be considered a necessary part of a true patriot's identity is a fact that needs to be studied in light of the knowledge that this fusion *has* a genealogy.

These combinations became naturalized quite quickly within conservative evangelical communities. Yet answering how they became normative for so many and then, importantly, *rearticulated* as normative, even by conservative evangelicals who are not politically active, remains a question answered only in bits and pieces as of yet. While this matter demands much more intensive scholarship, each of the books examined in this paper more or less obliquely

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make insightful and important suggestions. David Sehat's <u>The Myth of American</u> <u>Religious Freedom</u> makes it clear that the United States has had a long history of using a moral code rooted in a Protestant worldview to determine the qualifications for citizenship, granting a historical precedent for conservative evangelicals' claim that Protestant morality (albeit their own sense of it) should be upheld as the nation's moral code. Jonathan Herzog's <u>The Spiritual-Industrial</u> <u>Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War</u> examines the ways in which intellectual, theological, and political elites in the early years of the Cold War self-consciously shaped and deployed a generically "Judeo-Christian" religion to combat the threat of Communism. This temporarily-explicit official endorsement of religion laid the groundwork for many of the presuppositions off of which the religious Right would operate, including providing its members with an identifiable point-in-time to mark the beginning of America's spiritual degeneration. Susan Friend Harding's <u>The Book of Jerry</u> <u>Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics</u> describes a unique discourse, rooted in the language of the Bible, that masks ideological tension and elides historical change, creating the illusion of stability and eternal "truth" that appears obviously true for those who accept presuppositions regarding the Protestant Bible's inerrant, literal nature and typological function. With the efforts of Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell in particular, this discourse evolved to incorporate once-divided factions of conservative evangelicals into a unified, broader group, uniting their expanding array of conservative political causes and bestowing upon political efforts the same appearance of moral indisputability granted the Bible.

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Bethany Moreton's <u>To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise</u> and Ruth Murray Brown's <u>For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right</u> both focus on the development of key religious Right ideas within the context of "Wal-Mart Country," the southern states west of the Mississippi. Together their work suggests the way a wide array of regionally-rooted concerns and cultural norms – from free enterprise to patriarchal gender roles – came to be perceived and articulated as essential components of the "Christian America" that was the "true" America. Lisa McGirr's <u>Suburban Warriors: Origins of the New American Right</u> and Darren Dochuk's <u>From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Conservative Evangelicalism</u> help explain the expansion of regionally-rooted movements to a nationally-recognized political bloc by looking at the changing dynamics in southern California over the decades surrounding and following World War Two. Together, the books reviewed in this paper suggest the ways in which an awareness of the historical privileging of a Protestant moral order, both culturally and institutionally, and an existing civil-religious rhetoric melding God and country were themselves assimilated into a conservative evangelical discourse. This was a language that weighted every endeavor with spiritual significance, simultaneously masking tensions between core ideological components of the larger New Right's platform and eliding a history that exposed such tensions. For conservative evangelicals within the religious Right in both its nascence and its maturity, these factors worked together to inspire and legitimate their claims to represent America's true heritage, making the inseparability of nationalism, right wing politics, and

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conservative evangelical faith appear to them to be a historical fact, an indisputable truth, and an obvious good.

II. The Persistence of Protestant Hegemony

A particularly Protestant articulation of American identity – what the social mores that define that identity are, and what they ought to be – has a history as old as the United States itself. In The Myth of American Religious Freedom, David Sehat explores this history. His book is a project arguing for the persistent failure of the United States' political and legal systems to guarantee what is often touted as *the* central American ideal – religious freedom. The existence of religious freedom in the United States is, he argues, a myth, and one that "wither[s] under scrutiny."[19] Regardless of how often the United States' founding documents are cited by both sides of the aisle as the legal basis for a long-standing tradition of religious freedom, and despite the fact that a handful (although by no means the oft-assumed consensus) of far-seeing Founding Fathers did push for a definitive separation of church and state, "the U.S. Constitution and the First Amendment did not create the separation that [men like] Madison and Jefferson advocated."[20] While the Constitution proclaimed this separation on a federal level, at the state and local levels such separation rarely occurred, and was in fact often deliberately resisted. Furthermore, the governing white male elite considered this Protestant morality to be normative and *not* religious – regardless of how often marginalized religious groups protested both

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[19] David Sehat, The Myth of American Religious Freedom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.
[20] Ibid., 5.

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assertions. Sehat asserts the existence, then, of what he terms a "moral

establishment," which he defines as a persistent bias toward a Protestant moral

ethic in political and legal practice, aided and abetted by the individual states'

power and by the ambiguity of the First Amendment's language.[21]

Sehat's notion of a "moral establishment" resembles quite closely the idea

of cultural hegemony – "that part of a dominant worldview which has been

naturalized" – that anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff describe.[22]

Interestingly, Sehat himself does not, at least explicitly, discuss the heuristic

benefits of the concept of hegemony at all, and as a result his efforts "to get at

something" like a "moral establishment" that is "so misty and yet persistent" fall

short, keeping his explanations of its character and consequence a bit "mistier"

than they need to be.[23] The numerous and almost constant legal challenges that

non-Protestant groups brought against the moral establishment, Sehat argues,

were not enough to depose it, for the issue was not merely or even primarily a

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[21] "Principles of federalism gave the states an enormous reservoir of power to regulate the health, welfare, and morals of its residents, and religious partisans drew from this source to imprint their moral ideals onto state constitutions and judicial opinions. Supporters claimed that a religiously derived morality, enforceable by law, was essential to the health of the state... This connection between Protestant Christianity's moral code and state power was commonplace throughout much of U.S. history." Ibid., 5.

[22] Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 25. The Comaroffs, pulling from the work of both Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci and French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, provide a clear and useful definition of hegemony: "We take hegemony to refer to that order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images and epistemologies – drawn from a historically situated cultural field – that come to be taken-for-granted as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it." Ibid., 23.

[23] Sehat, Myth, 9.

legal one. The problem lay, he quite accurately asserts, in the pervasive presence of a mostly unconscious bias toward a particular religion's moral code that lay at the heart of the dominant definition of what counted as "American" – essentially the affirmation of Protestant hegemony. Sehat acknowledges that for centuries, the idea that countries depended on legally-enforceable morality for their very survival was a commonplace. But as he makes clear, what most of those in the United States who wielded political and legal authority could not recognize (a blindness also reflected in widespread popular opinion, up through the middle of the twentieth century, at least) was the religiously-partisan nature of the definition of the supposedly *a*-religious "morality" that they were enforcing. Theories of hegemony go much further than theories privileging *willful* blindness toward explaining the persistence of such blindness in the face of consistent opposition. "Hegemony, at its most effective, is mute," and those who are within it are within it precisely *because* its presence and power is invisible to them.[24]

The theory of hegemony that the Comaroffs espouse also helps explain *why* it was not until other cultural trends began broadly undermining the authority of religion in general that the "moral establishment" faced its first serious threats. Through explorations of the experience of religious dissenters (from early Baptists to the internally-divided abolition movement, from women's rights advocates to the often-hounded atheists, "freethinkers," and Catholics of the end of the nineteenth century), Sehat describes how the confrontations between these groups and the states' legal and political apparatuses illuminated, however

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[24] Comaroff and Comaroff, Of Revelation, 24.

briefly, the otherwise "shadowy character of the moral establishment."[25] Tellingly, however, he argues that it was not until the widening division between science and religion in the university, the social upheaval and new moral dilemmas posed by industrialism and corporate capitalism, and the falling-out between liberal Protestants and fundamentalists, that the existence of this "moral establishment" became visible to the dominant white male elites themselves, increasingly legible to them as religiously partisan. In the theory of hegemony the Comaroffs articulate, "once [hegemony's] internal contradictions are revealed, when what seemed natural comes to be negotiable, when the ineffable is put into words – then hegemony becomes something other than itself. It turns into ideology and counterideology."[26] It is at this point that resistance to an erstwhile hegemony but still-dominant ideology can effect significant change.

Nonetheless, "it is, more often than not, a very long road from the dawning of an antihegemonic consciousness to an ideological struggle won."[27] Sehat's failure to utilize theories of hegemony lies at the root of his uncertainty about the status of the moral establishment *now*. At one point, he refers to the 1973 decision in <u>Roe v. Wade</u> as the "death knell for the moral establishment," but his

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[25] Sehat, <u>Myth</u>, 9.
[26] The Comaroffs distinguish hegemony from ideology as follows: "Whereas the first consists of constructs and conventions that have come to be shared and naturalized throughout a political community, the second is the expression and ultimately the possession of a particular social group, although it may be widely peddled beyond. The first is nonnegotiable and therefore beyond direct argument; the second is more susceptible to being perceived as a matter of inimical opinion and interest and therefore is open to contestation. Hegemony homogenizes, ideology articulates." <u>Of Revelation</u>, 24.
[27] Ibid., 26.

further discussion of the emergence of the religious Right and the political

success of religious conservatives in the 2000s suggests that this moral

establishment persists in some form with a vitality and tenacity that is unlikely to

disappear.[28] His assertion of the moral establishment's "ultimate dismantling"

seems contradictory in light of the fact that a moment later he insists that, "When

the moral establishment went into decline, the religious Right mobilized to restore

it, leaving us where we are today."[29] The Comaroffs' theory sheds light on this

puzzle. Hegemony, "always intrinsically unstable, always vulnerable" according

to them, morphs into ideology that, as it is articulated and therefore made open to

debate, makes it possible for both components of cultural domination to give

"way to an ever more acute, articulate resistance," and a proceeding counter-

resistance.[30]

It should not be unexpected, then, in light of Sehat's work, that as

American culture has become more pluralistic and (in general) more comfortable

with religious diversity, certain Protestant communities with whom that long-

dominant moral code continues to resonate should attempt to claim the role of

defenders of the Protestant moral order – in their minds, the "true" American way.

Whatever its shortcomings, Sehat's work offers the profound insight that

conservative evangelicals who argued (and still do) that Protestant morality

should be equated with "true Americanism" have historical precedent to back

them. Whether or not Protestant morality (defined in selective ways) *should* be so

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[28] Sehat, Myth, 263.
[29] Ibid., 8.
[30] Comaroff and Comaroff, Of Revelation, 26-27.

equated with "true Americanism" is debatable, of course, and as Sehat makes

clear, that question *was* debated from the beginning, and with increased

consequence throughout the twentieth century. Understanding Sehat's "moral

establishment" as a kind of Protestant hegemony helps articulate what he

struggles to explain – the persistence of structural, institutional, and cultural

biases toward Protestant morality; the explicitly partisan nature of the religious

Right's efforts to once again make a Protestant morality the unspoken boundary

between those within "America" and those without; and the effectiveness of

efforts to contain such re-hegemonizing campaigns by *perpetuating* the debate

over the answer to the question, "Who owns America?" rather than settling any

single answer.

III.   The Religious Rhetoric of Early Cold War Nationalism

Jonathan Herzog claims in The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's

Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War that not long after the

close of World War Two, a nation-wide "revival" was in the works.[31] "Of course,"

Herzog acknowledges, revival itself "was nothing new. Religious leaders had

long called for revival in times of trial and triumph. What made the early Cold War

different was the degree to which other, secular institutions had reached the

same conclusion."[32] Herzog exposes the deliberateness with which national and

local political and cultural leaders linked American nationalism to a generic but

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[31] Jonathan P. Herzog, The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's
Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War (Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 2011), 70.
[32] Ibid., 70.

explicit "Judeo-Christian" religious affiliation and expression. What began as a primarily intellectual discussion following the Russian Revolution developed into the "spiritual-industrial complex," encompassing a range of institutional and organizational efforts to foster faith and draw a sharp line between "America" and "communism." This multi-pronged but temporary effort is another thread that bolstered conservative evangelicals' self-assured claim that their own version of "Christian Americanism" represented the "true America." However short-lived official efforts to uphold claims to America's "(Judeo-)Christian-ness" were, those efforts granted the appearance of official legitimacy (to those primed to see it as such) to conservative evangelicals' claims over the next several decades that America was indeed and, more importantly, *ought to be* a "Christian nation."

Equating people's "American-ness" with their explicit (however vague) Judeo-Christian affiliation was an equivalency forged amidst the pressures upon national political leaders following World War Two to firmly demarcate between the United States and the stubbornly-amorphous nemesis, "communism." The evolution of this equation between Judeo-Christian faith and American-ness originated primarily, according to Herzog, amidst conversations between intellectuals and theologians in the 1920s and 1930s who argued for understanding communism as a kind of religious rival to the "Judeo-Christian" tradition. These conversations occurred in tandem with evidence from various censuses and surveys suggesting a significant decline in religious practice throughout the American middle class as well as the clear signs of a growing *dis*respect for the religion of the middle class among the media and

intellectuals.[33] Thus, Herzog suggests that perhaps the key reason the Cold War

conflict so quickly took on the shape of a "holy war" is because what began as a

discussion among the American intelligentsia defining communism "as a rival

faith" antithetical "to Judeo-Christianity" was picked up by powerful political

leaders post-World War Two who were managing a conflict in desperate need of

clarification.[34] If "displacing God as the center of morality" would, in the logic of

the day, inevitably lead to communism, and if the secularizing trends that

scholars and journalists among others were observing had indeed begun to

affect that displacement, the urgent argument that "Americans had to fight faith

with faith" might indeed appear well-founded.[35] Attuned to the logic developed by

intellectual and theological elites, national leaders began a "joint effort of

government, business, educators, the media, and others" to rally the people to

belief in God, in order to wield the weapon of religion against America's

ambiguous and atheistic new enemy, communism.[36]

Herzog, in his close attention to the decade following World War Two,

does not fully examine the implications of what Sehat makes clear: the belief that

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[33] Herzog argues that the existence of a widespread *impression* of secularization operated perhaps even more powerfully than however real that widespread secularization actually was, for "more Americans received information from the media than ever before, and the information they obtained increasingly minimized and assailed the authority of American religion." As he further explains later on, "Few had the time, ability, and interest to read the ever-expanding corpus of Communist treatises, so the task of defining Communism for public and political consumption fell to a relatively small group of scholars, journalists, religious leaders, politicians, and Communists themselves." Spiritual-Industrial Complex, 22 and 45.

[34] Ibid., 45.

[35] Ibid., 51.

[36] Ibid., 178.

"the success of any nation was tied intimately to a moral culture, incubated and guarded by religion" and official enforcement of that belief were not new, however novel the efforts to make that argument on the federal level were.[37] Sehat describes the way in which religiously-rooted morality gained hegemonic force through people's refusal or inability to recognize those religious roots. Herzog, in agreement with Sehat, acknowledges that the rhetorical and ideological materials with which this equation could be made were themselves in existence long before the Cold War. Thus, insisting that Americans were by definition "Judeo-Christian" could appear, even to politicians, to be far more genuine than a mere political ploy – a description of reality, in fact. Thus, the fact that leaders found somewhat intuitive the need to call for and implement a "Judeo-Christian" affiliation as a requirement for full citizenship in the 1950s suggests that the reason such a move could gain even the temporary credibility it did has much to do with Sehat's longstanding "moral establishment," newly visible and now deployed in explicit and powerful ways.

Naming, though, also fractures, creating apertures through which alternative definitions and explanations can be advanced. Winnifred Sullivan argues in her case study of court efforts to enforce religious freedom that "in order to enforce laws guaranteeing religious freedom you must first have religion."[38] "Defining religion," however, "is difficult," perpetuating debates over

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[37] Ibid., 78.
[38] Sullivan, Impossibility, 1.

whose "religion" qualifies as such.[39] The spiritual-industrial complex Herzog

describes was a highly organized, multi-pronged attempt to do exactly that –

define religion in an effort to clarify the limits of citizenship. For at least the

decade-and-a-half on which Herzog focuses, a great range of people did indeed

accept the "faith" of "Christian Americanism"– willingly or begrudgingly – as a

truism and mark of citizenship. Yet this top-down infusion of religion into

nationalism through institutional channels worked on a large and general scale

for a short time only, until the beginning of John F. Kennedy's presidency.[40]

Representing the Cold War as a battle between "faiths" ultimately exposed the

limits and contradictions of state-guided spirituality in a nation whose constitution

famously proclaimed religious freedom. The spiritual-industrial complex became

further evidence of the excesses of the McCarthy era, prompting dissenters to

offer alternative definitions both of religion and the qualifications for citizenship.

By the 1960s, voices were crying persuasively for the "reprivatization of

spirituality."[41] As Herzog suggests, "The usefulness of religion in the Cold War

was not self-evident to most Americans; they needed direction. So too did

sacralization require more than the words of religious leaders. Sacralization

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[39] Ibid., 1.

[40] "The Cold War, now fifteen years old, had not produced the sweeping
domestic conversions to the Communist faith that had concerned J. Edgar
Hoover, Tom C. Clark, or Claire Boothe Luce. The uncertainty and speculation
once at the forefront of American consciousness had diminished. There were fits
of anxiety still to come, but the kind of Communist infiltration depicted
metaphorically in cinematic romps like Invasion of the Body Snatchers seemed
an ever fainter possibility." Herzog, Spiritual-Industrial Complex, 185.

[41] Ibid.,188.

required consensus. And as that consensus began to disintegrate, so too would its spiritual fruits."[42]

However hazily-outlined Herzog's "consensus" is, he nonetheless illuminates our understanding of "Christian Americanism" in its later twentieth century manifestations by insisting that at least some people continued to *believe* in the existence of that consensus, and more importantly in the need to maintain it: "By the late 1950s, conservative religious leaders had picked up the drooping banner of religious anti-Communism and were carrying it in their own crusade."[43] Indeed, the "religious arguments marshaled against Communism during the 1950s provided a platform from which both modern religious and political conservatism grew."[44] This "holy war that once concerned all religious Americans," from Catholics to liberal and mainstream Protestants, had become "the province, and indeed the obsession, of a fraction of them."[45] The organizers of the "spiritual-industrial complex" had intended it to be a largely ecumenical affair (within "Judeo-Christian" bounds, of course). Yet the heritage of Protestant privilege and the very generic nature of the rhetoric, it could be argued, made it easier for this unique Cold-War tactic to appear like confirmation that the government was merely upholding a particularly Protestant Christianity as American once more. Furthermore, this "spiritual-industrial complex" birthed "a tautology used by the opponents of secularism in future decades...: America

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[42] Ibid., 173.
[43] Ibid., 206.
[44] Ibid., 12.
[45] Ibid., 207.

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employed these expressions [entwining nationalism with religion] because it was religious, and America was religious because it employed these expressions. Sacralization had become a self-justifying endeavor."[46] Herzog demonstrates convincingly that in his particular case, "the process by which religious faith has been fused with popular conceptions of Americanism was not brought about by some movement of destiny's hand."[47] He argues that "for millions constantly bombarded with the message that the religious could not be Communists, it was a short logical step to the authoritative axiom that the irreligious could not be true Americans."[48] A centuries-old history of Protestant privilege made this "logic" immensely easier, and it resonated with those groups inclined to perceive and interpret all experience through a religious lens.

IV.   The Impact of Bible-Based Discourse

Like Sehat, Herzog's focus is not on religious communities or groups, but rather on the way in which language and ideas rooted in particular religious traditions became entwined with supposedly non-religious institutions. Thus, rather than focusing on the ways in which *religious* groups incorporate and deploy *nationalistic* rhetoric – the issue that I wish to explore – Herzog looks at the ways in which in which "other, more unlikely, institutions" such as the media, higher education, and various arms of the federal government became, in the first decade of the Cold War, "the greatest advocates of religion's importance to

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[46] Ibid.,186.
[47] Ibid., 12.
[48] Ibid.

American society."[49] Herzog's work nevertheless provides critical insight into the reverse conundrum. While he makes it clear that to many within the state and civic structures employing "spiritual" rhetoric, "God" and "faith" were deliberately vague and ambiguous terms intended to encompass a broad group of people, groups such as conservative evangelicals consistently found, in those terms already familiar to them, a much narrower meaning, and thus a much narrower definition of "America." Many citizens came to be convinced that the socially and economically conservative political package increasingly claimed by adherents to a political "New Right" was simultaneously God's way and the American way. To understand how this process worked, we must look carefully at the unique "language" conservative evangelicals often speak, a language that according to anthropologist Susan Harding, is a Bible-based discourse whose primacy over other discourses tends to translate – to powerful effect – many otherwise non-religiously grounded ideas into its own terms.

In The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics, Harding provides profound insight into understanding the means by which conservative evangelicals have come to accept "Christian Americanism" as an indisputable truth. The nucleus of Harding's work is based on her observations throughout the 1980s of Virginian fundamentalist and Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell and his community of followers. She conducts lengthy exegeses of Jerry Falwell's sermons and his organizations' various publications, as well as of the political rhetoric he and his organizations developed surrounding certain key

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[49] Ibid., 12.

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issues for the religious Right – social issues such as abortion, educational issues such as the debates over evolution and creation science, public relations issues such as the televangelism scandals of the 1980s, theological issues such as eschatology. Through her close readings, Harding describes a rhetoric based on Protestant fundamentalism's unique understanding of the Bible, arguing for that rhetoric's central role in uniting divergent strains of conservative evangelicalism around a shared vision of "America," what it is and what it should be.[50]

The discourse that evolved through the efforts of Jerry Falwell and others derived its power, she argues, by guiding willing listeners toward perceiving political issues through the lens of the language conservative evangelicals trusted most and with which they were most familiar – the language of the Bible. While "Falwell's fundamentalist empire" might indeed have been an "immense empire of words," calling it a "factory of words, a veritable Bible-based language industry," as Harding does, is somewhat misleading.[51] Uniting a particular political ideology (conservatism) with a particular religious faith (broadly evangelical) was an effort that certainly required the movement's leaders to self-

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[50] Regarding the somewhat unlikely reconciliation of fundamentalists with neo-evangelicals, Harding writes, "Most notably, forty years of ecumenical crusade evangelism by Billy Graham's organization, supplemented by the work of Bill Bright [of Campus Crusade] and many others, had renewed and reentrenched a shared elementary language of what counted as a Christian, namely, someone who had realized he was a sinner, asked Jesus to forgive him, and accepted Jesus into his heart as his personal savior." By simplifying the message to basics most could agree upon, these men "thus willfully worked against the grain of the many forces that divided theologically conservative Christians." Susan Friend Harding, The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 19.
[51] Ibid., 15.

consciously develop a convincing and flexible rhetoric. That rhetoric, though,

evolved in such a way as to incorporate new ideas and new causes into a

language *already spoken*. Harding's choice to remain on the well-worn path of

focusing on the religious Right's leaders limits her ability to explain the efficacy of

such language, particularly its ability to consistently persuade such a large

contingency of "followers." She justifies her almost-exclusive "focus on the

language of preachers" by arguing that "preachers are master-speakers. As they

teach their language through sermons, speeches, and writings and enact its

stories in their lives, they mold their church into the Church, a living sequel to the

Bible."[52] To a degree this claim is persuasive. Preachers, even in anti-

hierarchical religious traditions like evangelicalism, play an important role in

guiding their flock. Denying the notion that to some degree pastors' speech is

persuasive because *they*, as trusted authorities, speak it, would be naive. Yet

Harding's reticence to qualify preachers' power is itself an oversimplification of

the phenomenon she is trying to explain, making it hard to see the importance of

a reality that lurks behind her narrative. Preachers may be "master-speakers,"

but they only succeed in "molding their church" because the language they

master is a language that is for many of their "followers" quotidian, a discourse

whose presuppositions infuse the way in which most who tacitly affirm them

speak of nearly all of their experiences. Leaders like Falwell succeeded largely

because of their ability to use familiar verbal gestures and rhetorical techniques

for new ends and to address new causes. However, only because the preachers'

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[52] Ibid., xiii.

language was also the listeners' could the dissonances that occur between Christian cause and economic or political cause be so widely camouflaged, and the translation of right-wing economic or political causes into a legitimizing religious language become so broadly convincing.

Whatever the weaknesses of her focus on leadership, Harding's project is truly innovative, and she succeeds in making a strong case for arguing that actually believing the Bible is literally true, as fundamentalists by definition do (and most conservative evangelicals do as well), lies at the foundation of a unique and uniquely unifying discourse. This belief shapes how this particular group of people interprets the past:

> Biblical narrators, past and present, tell histories, the way things actually happened. Their stories are literally true in the sense that they do not represent history, they are history. Likewise, the connections that anointed narrators propose between one story, such as Joshua's [an Old Testament figure], and another, such as Jerry [Falwell's], are not mere filaments of interpretation tying tales together in some folk fantasy. They are historical tissues, sinews of divine purpose, design and will that join concrete events across millennia.[53]

Harding is right to assert that "fundamentalists, and born-again Christians generally, do not simply believe, they know, that the Bible is true and is still coming true… [L]ike biblical realists before the coming of modernity, modern Bible believers effectively and perpetually close the gap and so generate a world

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[53] Ibid., 110.

in which their faith is obviously true."[54] For these people, the past as told in the

Bible provides the model by which people should presently live. Harding thus

hints at the ways in which this argument can be applied not just to the lens

through which many on the religious Right understand *biblical* history, but how

they understand history in general. With this knowledge it becomes less

surprising that United States' own past – and specifically the historical privileging

of the Protestant moral code – should be upheld as a similar model, the model by

which all Americans should presently live. The way in which this particular group

reads their past and their world is the way they read the Bible – with the

assumption that there is one correct interpretation and with, in Margaret

Bendroth's words, an "insistence on the utter reliability of God's word" to provide

"answers to life's mysteries, both social and personal."[55]

V.   God and America in Wal-Mart Country

Susan Harding accurately reminds us that, "as fundamentalists,

pentecostals, charismatics, and even evangelicals, these theologically

conservative Protestants had until the late 1970s seen themselves as marginal, if

not enclaves or scattered remnants, relative to a perceived liberal Protestant

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[54] Ibid., 272. "The slippery slope argument and, more generally, the strict Bible inerrancy polemic cover up the variety of interpretations of a text that coexists even within one church. And they cover up the speed with which interpretations, including official ones, can be revised – or even forgotten altogether...." For example, "As support for segregation gradually eroded during the late 1960s and 1970s, there was no debate about the truth of these Bible verses. They simply stopped being cited. They, or rather their prevailing interpretation which had been considered to be the biblically inerrant truth, ceased to be part of the spoken Bible." Ibid., 180-181.
[55] Bendroth, <u>Fundamentalism and Gender</u>, 33-34.

mainstream."[56] Harding emphasizes the central role a Bible-based language

played in creating a sense of shared vision and purpose between not-always

friendly "enclaves" of conservative evangelicals, arguing that "once they saw

themselves, and were seen, as related to one another and, taken together, as

the Protestant majority, their marginal days were numbered."[57] Recognizing the

existence and power of this Bible-based discourse itself, however, does little to

explain the connections between a project that for Harding began in Lynchburg,

Virginia in the mid-1970s and the efforts of people from across the United States

to rearticulate their sense of nationalism and their conservative political platform

in terms of their religious faith. In order to explain how conservative evangelicals

came to imagine themselves as a "majority" (to use Falwell's term) and as the

true heirs and defenders of American identity, we must step back and look at the

development of their sense of national unity through close examination of the

regional contexts which inspired and reinforced the acts of translation required to

claim "America" as conservative evangelicals' own.

Bethany Moreton's To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian

Free Enterprise, as its subtitle suggests, centers on how capitalism became not

just an American but a "Christian" thing to do. Wal-Mart was established in rural

Arkansas, where Jeffersonian-style populist democracy and evangelical Christian

faith had long grown hand-in-hand. The rapidly-interconnecting world of the post-

World War Two era and the Sunbelt's growing role in fulfilling Cold War demands

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[56] Harding, Jerry Falwell, 20.
[57] Ibid., 20.

created new realities and opportunities, simultaneously challenging long-held

beliefs about the importance of small-scale democracy and a patriarchal family

and community structure. The growth of corporate capitalism from the turn of the

century forward, along with rural women's need to become wage-earners in order

to supplement the suffering farm economy were unstoppable changes. The

inevitability of these changes is nonetheless an inadequate explanation of

people's attitude toward them. Moreton's study of Wal-Mart's development

reveals the ways in which the company repackaged free enterprise so that "mass

consumption [became] safe for the white Protestant heartland, and mass service

work [became] an honorable zone of endeavor," a project that proved to be the

key to the company's otherwise-unlikely success.[58] Together, Wal-Mart's leaders

and the local Arkansas populace succeeded over the course of several decades

into translating what was once unpalatable to a deeply-religious region into terms

that made consumption and service work not just acceptable, but appear to many

to be the truly American – and Christian – way of life.[59]

Moreton argues that "the new Republican coalition" that emerged around

the 1980 presidential election "comprised a pair of strange bedfellows: laissez-

faire champions of the free market unevenly yoked to a broad base of

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[58] Moreton, Wal-Mart, 88.

[59] Moreton explains that by "entering the waged work force under a service economy rather than an industrial one, they changed both work and family life, and crafted a new ideology to explain the relationship between the two. For the emerging Wal-Mart constituency, faith in God and faith in the market grew in tandem." Ibid., 5.

evangelical activists."[60] Why the combination of these two things, particularly

when "the very antigovernment, probusiness policies" for which so many of these

working Americans were voting "undermined their own tenuous place in the

middle class?"[61] Moreton makes the simple but important observation that

geographical locality and economic necessity played a part in fusing key ideas.

Quite simply, when, in the 1960s and 1970s, "Wal-Mart's rapid growth and

increasing technological sophistication forced the retailer to recruit new

managers on college campuses, it turned to the nearby Christian colleges."[62]

Drawing upon local resources – in this case Christian colleges – was at one level

a pragmatic choice. "Small Protestant colleges and big businesses," however,

"were not traditional allies":

> At least initially, [Christian colleges'] broader faculty constituency was
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> rarely independently motivated by the cause so much as alive to the
>
> practical benefits, generally in favor of free-market economics – they
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> taught business, after all – and alert to the interesting teaching and
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> research opportunities offered by the new subfield. Forging the alloy of
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> Christian free enterprise required tremendous effort and resources, and
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> the zeal of one or two ideologically committed proponents... Once the
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> genie was out of the bottle, however, the equation shifted. The new

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[60] Ibid., 4.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 127.

centers and majors drew faculty as well as students with those interests, and the corporate sponsors' influence became ubiquitous.[63]

Whatever novelty there was to what was born out of practical necessity for business and religious leadership, then, gradually wore off, becoming accepted as common sense to their respective and overlapping constituencies.

However influential those initially-pragmatic choices were in the long run, Moreton asserts that the key to understanding the forging of "Christian free enterprise" in the Ozarks and beyond lies in the way in which Wal-Mart's version of free enterprise was rhetorically refashioned to fit within the explicitly religious framework of "Christian service." Sam Walton, well-aware of the resistance local Arkansans would have for any northern-style big chain stores, inaugurated this approach with his decidedly local tack. When he opened "his first Wal-Mart Discount City in 1962," Walton knew he would have to promote "his enterprise as an Ozarks affair."[64] Moreton argues that "the Wal-Mart mode of shopping removed several traditional stumbling blocks for Christian devotees of consumption."[65] First, "the entire dime-store tradition" off of which Wal-Mart was initially modeled signified "frugality, not opulence," something thrifty Arkansans would have resisted.[66] Secondly, in communities that idealized patriarchal family structures, "as long as mass buying could mean procuring humble products 'for the family,' as long as men could perform women's work without losing their

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[63] Ibid., 161.
[64] Ibid., 28, 25.
[65] Ibid., 89.
[66] Ibid., 88.

authority, as long as front-line service workers could derive dignity and meaning from their labors, the service economy could survive its internal contradictions. Consumer capitalism could be born again."[67] Because "in this context, the salient identity became not citizen-consumer nor worker of the world, but Christian servant," the potential tensions between conservative evangelical faith, white middle-class material interests, patriarchal family structure, and free market capitalism could be overlooked.[68]

The economic realities of Wal-Mart's corporate capitalism may have resembled those of any large corporation, but the evangelical-friendly rhetoric and practices in which Wal-Mart packaged itself worked to discourage the populace from closely critiquing the company. Sam Walton and his peers knew that Wal-Mart could only succeed if it spoke the language of its people, and in cooperation with the people themselves, the company forged a "gospel of free enterprise."[69] The language of Christian service bestowed upon free enterprise not just spiritual significance, but also a way to retain an important sense of continuity about the values that had long mattered most in Wal-Mart country – the dignity of "self-sufficiency" and "family stability and masculine authority" – in a rapidly-changing world.[70] A "particular historical moment, a particular geography, and a particular religious ecology" thus shaped and fulfilled Sam Walton's business vision, but Wal-Mart's success "was not a simple matter of elite

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[67] Ibid., 89.
[68] Ibid., 101.
[69] Ibid., 270.
[70] Ibid.

manipulation; it did not make political dupes of Kansans or Arkansans."[71] Rather,

the way in which Wal-Mart's leadership presented the business resonated with

the needs of a regional culture in crisis. Wal-Mart country's deeply religious

demographic recognized and found reassurance in a rhetoric that put inevitable

and potentially threatening changes in a positive, familiar language. And, once

translated, the gospel of free enterprise could become not just a part of their

political platform, but a compatible component of their faith itself.

Bethany Moreton argues for Wal-Mart's significant part in making free

enterprise believably compatible with conservative evangelicalism in the Ozark

region. She does not explore how those conservative evangelicals, who came to

widely accept that notion that their faith had always upheld free enterprise policy

and practice, also came to assert the "truth" of this conflation with the "true"

American way. While Ruth Murray Brown does not focus on economics as does

Moreton, in For a Christian America: A History of the Religious Right, she

explores a parallel conflation and offers applicable insights. Brown argues that

the campaign against the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in the 1970s laid a

significant portion of the groundwork for the formation of the religious Right in the

1980s by mobilizing conservative evangelical women to political action.[72] The

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Brown's claim that the anti-ERA movement laid "the foundation for what
came to be called the Christian Right" is, as are many of her claims, overstated,
as even the few books discussed within this review essay make clear.
Nevertheless, she makes a strong case for the movement's important role both in
explaining the rise of and understanding the nature of the "Christian Right." Ruth
Murray Brown, For a "Christian America": A History of the Religious Right,
(Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002), 16.

movement to defeat the ERA began in earnest in Oklahoma, the first state to

deny ratification of the amendment (in March 1972) and part of the same "Wal-

Mart country" that Moreton studies. While Moreton explains the desire to uphold

a patriarchal family model and the resistance to big government and big business

in regional and historical terms, Brown proposes another explanation. The heart

of Brown's argument is that a particular patriarchal view of the family, as well as

a refusal to countenance any government interference in the family, persuaded

evangelical women and their allies in Oklahoma and the surrounding states in

particular to work to defeat the ERA. However many other factors may have

contributed to the regional development and elevation of patriarchy and

resistance to state interference, Brown insists that those fighting the ERA

themselves understood their ideal family model as essentially sacred, rooted in

their religious worldview. Thus, "On a very personal level, they feared that

entrenching feminist values in the Constitution would mean the end of their Bible-

based way of life."[73]

This fear that their "Bible-based way of life" was at stake stemmed largely

from the fact that conservative evangelicals throughout the South, as Brown

argues, had become increasingly "disturbed" by the "rebelling against the norms

of personal behavior" that had occurred particularly dramatically throughout the

1960s. The ratification effort for the ERA, insists Brown, provided one of the first

opportunities for these concerned citizens to articulate their fears in a public

manner and mobilize in a specific, nationally-important effort. However popular –

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[73] Ibid., 15.

and at times accurate – the assumption that conservative evangelicals'

conscious intent in their mobilization was to regain political power lost in the

earlier part of the twentieth century, Brown reminds us that for many of the

women who fought against ratification, "the real threat of the ERA was not just

the specifics of unisex restrooms or of drafting women, or even of legalizing

abortion – things emphasized by the popular media – but the broader threat of

government interference with the right of families to raise their children in the

ways prescribed by their religion. They saw defeating the ERA as a way of

restoring those rights and halting moral decline."[74]

Brown's phrasing makes it easy to pass over the fact that "restoring those

rights" and "halting moral decline" were two distinct rhetorical stances, however

often they were intertwined. While understanding the anti-Era campaign as

merely an attempt by certain religious groups to defend and protect their

particular way of life holds some truth, it is only partially accurate, for it does not

offer a satisfactory interpretation of the reasons why they not only fought against

what they perceived would negatively affect themselves personally, but why they

also sought to instate their way of life on the entire nation. Importantly, Brown

herself "came to see that the early fight against the ERA was just one facet of the

struggle to regain what they believed was a lost Christian heritage."[75] As noted

earlier, those who celebrated the nation's "Christian heritage" could find

affirmation of their stance in the Cold War government-promoted religious

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[74] Ibid., 16.
[75] Ibid., 16.

nationalism that Herzog describes and whose broadly Christian language they could quite easily (mis)read as an official endorsement of their way of life as the "American" way of life. Furthermore, Brown effectively demonstrates that "the arguments of the Christian Right in these cases are... plausible if one accepts the premises that constitutional interpretation should be limited to the actual words of the original Constitution, and that practices common in the early nineteenth century should therefore be allowed in the late twentieth century as well."[76] Believing that the Constitution should be interpreted in a similar literal, devotional way as the Bible, and believing that an idealized point in the American past provides the model whereby we all should live were beliefs that stemmed directly from fundamentalist theology. Furthermore, Brown's argument intersects with Susan Harding's here, for "the pastors of [these women's] churches, like Jeremiah in the Old Testament, prophes[ied] the wrath of God's judgment against the people... The belief that God would punish America for her sins, preached in so many churches, primed fundamentalists to join a movement promising to 'turn it around.'"[77] Brown's example offers further confirmation of Harding's idea that fundamentalists and their less-strict evangelical counterparts tended to envision themselves as a continuation of and modeling their lives after the stories of the Bible. Thus, reading America as a type of Israel, fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals broadly remained convinced that "God looks with favor on America because of the 'faith of the forefathers'... [Anti-

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[76] Ibid., 240.
[77] Ibid., 73.

ERA activists] were appalled at what they saw as America's moral decline, not only because they personally disapproved of societal trends and attitudes, but because they believed that God's favor" upon America "is conditional."[78]

Why did so many people find a reading of "American" identity as a type of Israel so appealing and convincing? The answers are complex and many, as always. Brown's work, however, highlights the importance of the belief that the United States' (highly mythologized) moment of founding provided, like Israel's founding moment, the blueprint for what the nation's identity *ought* to be. Perhaps just as importantly, "the social life of a Church of Christ member [and members of many other conservative evangelical denominations] is... closely circumscribed by church activities, so there is less opportunity to develop ideas independent of the church."[79] The very fact that religious activities absorbed anti-ERA activists' mental *and* social activities suggests how a highly-stable, self-sustaining interpretation can develop. For the Oklahoman fundamentalists Brown interviewed, the larger portion of their social time was spent conversing with those who agreed with them and shared their religiously-grounded worldview. In a region in which religious life has, as Moreton emphasizes, long dominated the cultural landscape, it should perhaps not be surprising at all that experience and constant community affirmation would make it rather natural to assume that one's particular way of seeing the world was universally true, and therefore applicable to everyone. Thus, the campaign that Brown describes carried, for those

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[78] Ibid., 235.
[79] Ibid.,75.

Oklahoma women who fought against the ERA, the weight of saving not just these conservative evangelical women's own skins, but of saving the soul of the nation itself.

VI.   California: Bringing Conservative Evangelical Nationalism to the National Stage

Lisa McGirr's <u>Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right</u> reinforces Jonathan Herzog's conclusion that the Cold War decisively shaped the development of the New Right, of which the religious Right, with its loud defense of a "Christian America," was a part. McGirr's work is a case study of the suburban culture of Orange County, California. Orange County is often considered the heart of the Cold-War military-industrial complex, a region whose economic development exploded as a result during the decades following World War Two. It was within this rapidly-growing and ever-changing landscape that the white, middle-class citizens who contributed to and benefited from California's military-industrial complex lived and worked. These denizens of the burgeoning suburbs, McGirr argues, were critical in uniting the "distinct ideological strands of right-wing thought" – social conservatism and economic libertarianism – that became the platform of an increasingly coherent movement that, by the 1980 presidential election, had gained enough momentum to shape politics on a national scale.[80] McGirr sets her work against a long tradition in both popular media and contemporary scholarship of portraying this recent strain of

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[80] Lisa McGirr, <u>Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right</u>, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 152.

conservatism as a collection of "emotional, irrational 'kooks'" motivated by

"psychological distress."[81] This, McGirr insists, is not only unfair, but inaccurate.

The emergence of the New Right was from the get-go a largely mainstream

affair, as its vibrant presence outside of the almost-mythical rural "backwoods" of

the South makes clear. McGirr studies the issues that motivated these new

suburbanites (largely eager émigrés from the South) to political action. She also

carefully examines the environment in which these suburbanites lived, parses the

rhetoric of key conservative political leaders to discover that rhetoric's appeal to

the suburbanites, and conducts oral histories, allowing a number of these

"warriors" to speak for themselves. Through these various means, McGirr

attempts to access the reasons why the New Right was able to expand to the

national stage – and stay there. Upsetting the popular notion of conservative

appeal as essentially irrational, McGirr proposes instead that, in light of their

regional context and the evidence of their own lives, for successful suburban

Orange Countians at least, the new economic and social conservatism that

comprised the New Right quite simply *made sense.* While Suburban Warriors

treats religion only briefly and primarily obliquely, it is nevertheless an important

contribution to the effort to identify the various threads that merged to allow and

encourage the conflation of evangelical faith, conservative politics, and

nationalism that this paper examines.

How did such a fusion *come* to make sense, however? For McGirr, the

key lies in understanding context, and more specifically, the way in which the

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[81] Ibid., 6-7.

Orange County environment and culture – "a fertile seedbed for right-wing growth" – shaped these suburbanites' political stances.[82] The fusion of economic and social conservatism that came to define the New Right proved persuasive because it resonated not only with these suburbanites' firmly-rooted moral and spiritual beliefs, but because the two threads together resonated with many Orange Countians' lived experience. Put simply, "The middle-class men and women who populated Orange County found meaning in a set of politics that affirmed the grounding of their lives in individual success and yet critiqued the social consequences of the market by calling for a return to 'traditional' values, local control, strict morality, and strong authority."[83] Whatever justification these members of the emerging "New Right" might themselves have given for their political activities, one thing stands out from a more distanced perspective - *it was in their own interest* to make sense of the lives they were living in a way that justified that lifestyle. To do so, they drew ideas together that there had been less of an impetus to draw together before. Within the context of their experience, the New Right agenda seemed intuitively, if not tightly logically, correct to these suburbanites.

In order for any sort of shared mindset uniting people in political endeavors to emerge, however, communication networks must develop. Orange Countians had to deliberately and self-consciously forge these networks in the isolating environment of sprawling, depersonalizing suburbia. Thus, while the

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[82] Ibid., 15.
[83] Ibid., 53.

grassroots activists that McGirr studies did not, for the most part, have a national

political agenda on their minds at the outset, they did deliberately search out and

maintain connections with others like themselves. As McGirr explains, "It was...

in the mundane yet complex world of school battles, evangelical churches, and

local politics, that the grassroots New Right asserted itself," and suburban

grassroots activists received increasing confirmation of a broadly shared identity

through their gradually snowballing connections with others who shared their

views.[84] These activities and communication networks met not only their political

aims, but their desires for community as well. McGirr argues that the reality (and

equally important *sense*) of being part of a large community of like-minded

people only continued to expand as a result of conservative rhetoric de-

radicalized after Barry Goldwater's presidential campaign, "the debacle of

1964."[85] McGirr insists that after this moment of self-evaluation, "these men and

women" of suburban Orange County "appreciated the need to jettison the

controversial rhetoric that had gotten Goldwater into trouble. In effect, they

expounded a new brand of conservatism."[86] As suburban life expanded to more

(white) Americans and the nation's moral climate became more tumultuous, "the

reworked conservative package, voiced ever more in the language of the

'people,' resonated with growing numbers of Americans, bringing conservatives

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[84] Ibid., 56.
[85] Ibid., 196.
[86] Ibid..

to a position of power that they had previously enjoyed only prior to the New Deal."[87]

While McGirr's focus is on the New Right as a whole, not merely its religious arm, she nonetheless takes a significant amount of time to answer the question, "Why were so many Orange Countians attracted to [conservative evangelical] churches?"[88] This way this question is phrased unfortunately implies that these suburbanites came to church only after they became politically active, or else that conservative evangelical churches and politically active suburbanites were two separate groups of people. These implications are, as Darren Dochuk's work will shortly make clear, very much not the case. Still, McGirr is right to argue that "the grassroots dissatisfaction with the trend of national politics may have come to naught, had it not been for the institutional support provided by strategically placed local organizations," and churches were among these organizations.[89] McGirr's emphasis on external environmental factors leads her to quite logically intuit that these people's search for community "in a privatized, physically isolated landscape" in part compelled them to find that community where it already existed, and evangelical churches were one of those places.[90] To an extent, McGirr acknowledges the importance of many suburbanites' pre-existing religiosity, admitting that while "a belief in conservative Protestant doctrine did not make a right-wing political activist…, these adherents' normative

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[87] Ibid., 261.
[88] Ibid., 49.
[89] Ibid., 98.
[90] Ibid., 49.

conservatism, firm religious convictions, and moral values helped infuse a socially conservative political culture."[91] However, she does not fully explore the idea that, while it is highly likely that many people used churches as political platforms simply because the churches were *there,* it seems equally likely that those who worked through these institutions chose to do so because they believed there were religious *reasons* for the battles they fought. Here it is helpful to recall Jonathan Herzog's discussion of the "spiritual-industrial complex," particularly since fighting Communism was in large part the first "cause" for McGirr's New Right. If Herzog is right in his assessment that anti-Communism became a concern to religious people largely because it had been framed as an essentially spiritual conflict, then it also seems likely that people of faith living in prosperous, suburban Orange County might have conceived of "political" activities as essentially spiritual ones.

McGirr's work thus somewhat obliquely addresses the connection between the conservative political bent and a conservative evangelical religious worldview. She nevertheless manages to highlight several key ideas that help explain that connection. First, she affirms the importance of remembering that people with shared beliefs tend to attract each other, which easily paves the way for that particular group to re-imagine their particularities as universals. Second, she makes a strong case (as Ruth Murray Brown does, too) for examining the way in which particular *environments* tend to lead people to universalize and valorize their personal narratives about how they got where they are. Her organic

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[91] Ibid.

explanation thus offers some important clues as to how those who conflated

religion, capitalism, social conservatism, and American patriotism were able to

believe that conflation was, in a way, eternally true.

Whereas Orange County for McGirr is merely one "lens" through which to

examine the rise of the New Right, for Darren Dochuk, Southern California was

not just the heart of the broader New Right. It also functioned as the incubator for

the fusion of right-wing politics, nationalism, and conservative evangelicalism that

would become the distinguishing mark of the Religious Right. In From Bible Belt

to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical

Conservatism, Dochuk argues that many of these Southern Californians, recent

migrants from the western South, not only brought with them a distinctive

"Southern evangelicalism" whose pragmatic, confident "Texas theology"

blossomed in a "Hollywood culture" that demanded innovation and adaptation,

but whose continuing connections to the South played a critical role in

evangelicalism's politicization on a national scale.[92] Perhaps most importantly,

though, the fact that they, "like all other evangelicals, …held fast to certain core

tenets – the primacy of individual conversion, the inerrancy and infallibility of the

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[92] Darren Dochuk, From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Conservative Evangelicalism, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), xvii. Dochuk elaborates this web of connections, arguing that "developments within the West Coast's evangelical subculture did not unfold in isolation but rather transpired within the context of an emerging Sunbelt. Though always present during the early cold war years, religious interchange between Southern California and the South gained importance on a national scale in the late 1960s and 1970s as preachers and politicians sought ways to undo the Democratic Party's 'Solid South.' In this context of political upheaval, California precedents became pedagogy for others." Bible Belt, xxi.

Bible, and the scriptural injunction to witness for Christ" masked the flexibility of

those beliefs to adapt to new circumstances.[93] Furthermore, the central role of

the biblical terms with which these people had long understood their realities

allowed them to remain confident in the rightness of their causes. Dochuk

therefore makes explicit what McGirr only occasionally and obliquely implies –

that the terms through which these now-Californian conservative evangelicals

understood themselves and their world infused their activities as "plain folk,"

"preachers," and "entrepreneurs" with spiritual weight and moral purpose.

For Dochuk, historicizing the belief system that the émigrés brought with

them from the South to Southern California is a critical prerequisite to

understanding the increasing politicization of their faith over the last half of the

twentieth century. The "western South," the region from which many of the new

Californians hailed (and which overlaps much of Moreton's Wal-Mart country),

had, as noted before, fostered a unique "populist Americanism" that was

"inspired by the mythologized ideal of Thomas Jefferson's virtuous yeoman

farmer."[94] Furthermore, it was "the dialectic of being southern and western, of

wanting to preserve and create, defend and advance" that "not only motivated

them in their personal quests for fruitful lives, but led them to believe collectively

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[93] Ibid., xvii.

[94] Ibid., 9. Dochuk identifies this western South as the culture that
developed west of the Mississippi, "a region centered at the intersection of the
borders of Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma but also extending westward along
the Oklahoma-Texas panhandle and north-south between Missouri and
Louisiana." 8.

that they and their plain-folk Americanism held the keys to a better society."[95]

Perhaps most importantly for these southern evangelicals, "Jefferson and Jesus" had long embraced, and "at the core of their political culture was an unwavering faith that conflated [these] doctrines."[96] Thus, this heritage of "Jeffersonian precepts [that] came wrapped in a package of Christian, plain-folk Americanisms" formed an "all-encompassing worldview that gave white southerners especially a sense of guardianship over their society" that they carried with them to California beginning in roughly the 1930s.[97]

These émigrés framed their "sense of guardianship," however, not primarily in political terms, but in religious ones. Dochuk revises the way "historians of the South have described this region's out-migration" from the 1930s forward "by using Old Testament allegories."[98] Historians, however, have wrongly portrayed these white southerners as being in "exile," like the Israelites in Babylon. This, claims Dochuk, is not the biblical parallel white southerners would have chosen for themselves:

> [These southern evangelicals] chose to say that they were on an "errand," like the Apostle Paul journeying from Jerusalem to Macedonia – and the Puritans from England to North America – commissioned by God to evangelize the wilderness in hopes of saving it and the people they left behind... Confident of their religious heritage, they... envisioned

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[95] Ibid., 13.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., xx.
[98] Ibid., xviii.

themselves on a mission rather than forced egress. The choice of

metaphor was important, for it not only enabled them intellectually, it also

made them active participants in the seismic social transformations of the

period.[99]

While "southern evangelicals thus carried with them a mandate to make their

religion count" into their new Californian context, this was simultaneously a call to

make their politics count, too, if for no other reason than that, "in the world from

which they came, the distinction [between religion and politics] was a false

one."[100] Not all of southern evangelicals' political leanings drew directly upon

their faith. Nevertheless their sense of "errand," combined with the tendency to

"wrap" all ideas "in a package" of first and foremost their own unique Christian

language, provided the impetus not just to see their world in these terms, but to

shape their world to fit those terms as well – a project that, in their minds,

transcended political boundaries.[101]

Dochuk's book also "examines the clash of cultural views that resulted

from southern evangelicalism's West Coast sojourn," a clash whose lines were

drawn, Dochuk argues, first in battles over organized labor between "Social

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[99] Ibid., xix.

[100] Ibid., xviii, xix.

[101] Ibid., xxii. Dochuk elaborates later, "The sense of mission that animated their move west only added to the righteousness of this responsibility. It helped these once independent farmers and townsfolk now working assembly lines in colossal manufacturing and defense plants to know that they were assisting a divine plan. This concept of Christian servitude was psychologically soothing, but such vivid spiritual imagination was more than a coping mechanism. It also served as a blueprint for civic engagement and a public declaration that they would not be isolated in their blue-collar suburban enclaves." Ibid., 26.

Democrats on one hand, southern evangelical populists on the other."[102] What

appeared to many to initially be a fight between party factions, however, belied

the deeper differences between the dramatically different lenses through which

these two groups viewed the world. Dochuk's argument that these "southern

evangelical populists" became self-aware of their political potential as a group

"first contemplated in the pew and then exercised in the community" is telling,

and a subtle but marked difference from McGirr's description of the order of

those events.[103] The growing contingent of Social Democrats, then, represented

not just a political or social threat, but a spiritual threat as well, and thus, these

new Californians, envisioning themselves not just as Christian soldiers but

simultaneously as "American patriots" confronted with a newly-realized "enemy,"

"needed to marshal their energy against a liberal establishment that assailed

congregational and personal sovereignty in matters of faith as easily as it

undermined the autonomy of neighborhood and nation state in matters of

governance."[104] The dual threat that the liberal establishment posed clearly

encouraged these evangelicals to consider their political roles as "American

patriots" as deeply sacred ones as well.

The ways that McGirr and Dochuk understand the impetus for believing in

an inherent unity behind particular parts of a political agenda and a vision of

American identity represent two different pieces to the puzzle that is conservative

evangelicals' persistent claims to "own America." Whereas McGirr insists that the

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[102] Ibid., xx.
[103] Ibid., xx.
[104] Ibid., xx-xxi.

much of the glue between conservative ideas for suburbanites in Orange County

derived largely from a need to justify their lifestyle and a desire for community,

Dochuk argues that for southern evangelicals, at least, the reason that the

amalgamation of free-market, socially conservative ideals, and evangelical

religion appeared self-evident and essentially "American" is that the devotional

stance of southern evangelicals toward nearly all aspects of life left little felt need

for communal introspection.[105] The all-subsuming nature of this vision of the

"errand" bolstered the presumption that critical critique regarding the compatibility

of assimilated ideas was unnecessary so far as those ideas could be translated

into evangelical language.

VII.   Conclusion

Who owns "America"? The politicization of evangelicalism vividly evident

in the emergence of an identifiable "religious Right" in the late 1970s and early

1980s is one historical moment in which the members of a particular group –

conservative evangelicals in this case – claimed the right to offer themselves as

the answer. For conservative evangelicals from roughly mid-century forward,

discussions of Christian and American identity were increasingly intertwined, and

intertwined with the acceptance both of conservative economic *and* social

policies. Conservative evangelical claims to be the rightful heirs and loyal

defenders of the "American way" have persisted well into the twenty-first century,

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[105] "Theirs was not, in other words, an intellectual engagement meant to scrutinize the structural underpinnings of capitalism or, conversely, simply put one's mind at ease with the system. It was, rather, an exercise in devotion, of learning how to interpret financial reward in the context of spiritual blessing and maximize money for advancement of Christ's kingdom on earth." Ibid., 183.

in the face of persistent and quite vocal opposition. Such claims appear not just in political contexts but in literature directed solely at those who share the conservative evangelical faith. These two observations are important. Acknowledging them makes a strong case for arguing that conservative evangelicals did not just invent those claims as a matter of political expediency (however accurate such a judgment may be in many cases), but that they themselves *believed* those claims. If we accept that conservative evangelicals have sincerely believed in the absolute truth of their "Christian Americanism," however, and if we also accept Foucault's call to question "the inviolable identity" of any concept, we must also begin to investigate the ways and means by which that conflation of American identity, evangelical religion, and conservative, New Right politics was made to appear as "common sense" to so many.[106]

The works discussed in this paper put us well on our way toward beginning a genealogy of that process. David Sehat offers a very strong case for recognizing the existence of a Protestant "moral establishment" from the birth of the United States and into the twentieth century. Introducing theories of hegemony into this discussion helps to explain the moral establishment's shift from an often silently coercive power to a vocally disputed ideology, an ideology defended by conservative evangelicals from the Cold War period to the present. Jonathan Herzog's work on the deliberately and explicitly religious character of early Cold War tactics partially explains how a "holy war that once concerned all religious Americans," from Catholics to liberal and mainstream Protestants,

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[106] Foucault, "Genealogy," 142.

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became "the province, and indeed the obsession, of a fraction of them."[107] Susan

Harding demonstrates through intensive close reading that conservative

evangelicals' unique understanding of the Bible as literally true has the tendency

of bestowing the appearance of absolute truth to whatever ideas are explained in

those biblical terms, at least to all those who speak the language. Bethany

Moreton, Ruth Murray Brown, Lisa McGirr, and Darren Dochuk all argue for the

important role regional context plays in clarifying our understanding of the

reasons why certain concepts fed into the definition of evangelicals' ideal

"America" and others did not. Together, these four authors also demonstrate the

commonalities across regions, particularly the way in which what Harding terms

"fundamentalist language" helped translate ideas that resonated with largely

white, middle class, patriarchal communities into terms more palatable to deeply

religious populations. From Virginia to California by the 1980s, this particular

discourse had worked to effectively mask the genealogy of the conflation of

evangelical faith with a conservative vision of "America," bestowing upon that

conflation the appearance of timeless truth.

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[107] Herzog, Spiritual-Industrial Complex, 207.

Chapter 2: "Saints or Censors": Two Texans and the Art of Persuasion

I.   Introduction

In his introduction to education activists Mel and Norma Gablers' 1985

book, <u>What Are They Teaching our Children?</u>, James C. Hefley, a Southern

Baptist freelance writer, was simply noting the obvious when he stated, "Hardly

anyone who has heard anything about them remains neutral."[108] Hefley

articulated this apparent lack of middle ground by stating that the Gablers, most

clearly identifiable with the part of the conservative resurgence that became the

religious Right, were "either hated or adored, praised or shellacked, labeled

saints or censors."[109] This at first puzzling dualism, "saints or censors," is

nonetheless the key to making sense out of the Gablers' manifesto. Given a

cursory reading, their writing appears to be little more than a woefully-

disorganized, self-contradictory, often-redundant fusion of polemic, appeal, and

battle cry. Yet a close reading of their rhetoric suggests that the book's surface

incoherence is largely an effect of so much rhetorical static, static produced by

the Gablers' apparent attempt to simultaneously speak to their allies and

persuade the unconvinced to join their side. The resulting interference masks a

quite stable logic that runs throughout their book, a logic rooted in fundamentalist

theological concepts regarding the nature of truth. Taken alone, the phrase

"saints or censors" appears to be a comparison, to use the old adage, between

apples and oranges. Yet by rhetorically crafting "saints" and "censors" as a

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[108] Mel Gabler and Norma Gabler, <u>What Are They Teaching Our</u>
<u>Children?</u>, ed. James C. Hefley (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 5.
          [109] Ibid., 5.

dualism, Hefley perhaps unwittingly encapsulated the character of debates

between politically-active conservative evangelicals and many of their opponents.

In the early 1980s in particular, proponents and opponents of religious Right

stances often appeared to be talking past one another, an effect that I argue

stems from the fact that the two "sides" of these debates consistently argued

from two not so much *oppositional* as entirely *different* sets of premises,

premises that remained largely unarticulated.

To borrow Gene Burns' concept from The Moral Veto: Framing

Contraception, Abortion, and Cultural Pluralism in the United States, the Gablers

and their opponents relied upon two quite different "frames" by which to

understand and articulate what they each believed were the proper aims of

education, and what they believed constituted "the good" for individuals and for

society.[110] In nearly every encounter, both sides "implicitly legitimize[d] one way

of framing" debates over public school textbooks, and "implicitly" is an important

word.[111] In their responses to the Gablers, journalists and educators alike

presumed upon a basic level of agreement regarding the notion that education in

the United States was and ought to be *about* figuring out how best to develop

future citizens who would sustain democratic practices in a pluralistic society.

Thus, they were befuddled by those who, like the Gablers, were similarly

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[110] Burns explains, "By asking how people 'frame' contraception or abortion, I mean to ask, what do they think the issue is *about*? For instance, is abortion primarily about 'unborn children' (as the pro-life frame would insist) or is it about women's right to choose (as the pro-choice frame would insist)?" Gene Burns, The Moral Veto: Framing Contraception, Abortion, and Cultural Pluralism in the United States (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

[111] Ibid., 7.

presuming upon a basic level of agreement regarding their own, entirely different frame. They understood education as concerned first and foremost with children's "proper" moral and spiritual development, towards which there was only ever one right avenue. Using this frame, the Gablers understood "good citizenship" to be less the *aim* of "good education" than an inevitable byproduct of it, achieved only when children were taught what was to them *most* important – accepting the eternally-stable absolute "truth" of what they called the "Judeo-Christian Bible" (as, of course, the Gablers and their fellow conservative evangelicals understood and applied it).[112]

The Gablers' conservative evangelical religious identity (their understanding of themselves as "saints" – possessors of and missionaries for a single, unified system of God-given truth and morality) by its very nature undergirded and informed their political activities as concerned U.S. citizens. The rhetorical strategies that the Gablers use in their 1985 book <u>What Are They Teaching Our Children?</u> suggest, however, that the couple was aware that in order to reach beyond those who already adhered to their faith, their goals and concerns would have to be translated into what Jürgen Habermas has called "generically accessible language."[113] In this paper, I will first examine the way in which the Gablers attempt to create a kind of "common ground" between their allies and those less convinced of the Gablers' positions. They attempt to do so by appealing to the affective image of the child, asserting that children's safety

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[112] Gabler and Gabler, <u>Our Children</u>, 160.
[113] Habermas, "Political Theology," 26.

and well-being is the primary issue at stake in the choice between their view and their opponents' view. I will then proceed to look at the ways in which the Gablers deploy the language of democratic citizenship (raising questions of majority versus minority rights, taxpayer status, and what histories and values qualify as truly "American") in an effort to demonstrate that their perspective is not provincial, but applicable to all "true" Americans. Finally, I will identify the Gablers' *a priori* presumptions, rooted in conservative evangelical theology, that appear to together comprise the linchpin of their book's logic.

Philosopher Jonathan Glover uses the image of "a wire frame… made of many bits of rigid wire" to attempt to correct the erroneous idea that religious adherents operate within a system that is itself necessarily static.[114] "You can choose the shape of any bit of the frame," his analogy goes, "provided you allow the rest of the frame to bend and twist to accommodate it. The belief you want to preserve at all costs is the bit you hold rigid, letting this determine the shape of the rest of the frame."[115] Following this analogy, in their efforts to persuade those outside of religious Right circles, the Gablers were forced to choose which "bit" of their "frame" they were willing to bend. Despite their attempt to speak a "generically accessible language," their prioritization of their *particular* vision of "sainthood," and the way in which they framed all issues around that implicit vision, was precisely what was unacceptable to their opponents and non-negotiable for them. The rhetorical static that results is in part what perpetuated

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[114] Jonathan Glover, Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 266.
[115] Ibid.

the mutual frustration between opponents who both seemed incapable of ever

"answer[ing]... objections specifically."[116]

II.   Background: Making New Allies

"Mel and Norma Gabler are, without a doubt, the most publicized and

controversial couple in American education," Hefley claimed in his introduction.[117]

At least in the first half of the 1980s, there was some truth to this claim. The

Texas couple, long devoted to voicing their concerns about public school

textbooks, exemplified for many in the media and academia a critical point of

convergence, the intersection of the waves of political and religious conservatism

whose magnitude and power, after decades of more liberal trends, caught many

by surprise.[118] Republican Ronald Reagan swept past incumbent Democrat

Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, founded in

1979, was only one of a slew of similar religiously-grounded political

organizations proliferating at this time. There was also, in historian and educator

Diane Ravitch's words, "a palpable sense" nationwide "that something had to

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[116] Gabler and Gabler, Our Children, 99.

[117]Ibid., 5. For more on Hefley and his associations with the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1984, see Joni B. Hannigan, "James C. Hefley, Author of 'Truth in Crisis' Dies at 73," Baptist Press, March 22, 2004, http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=17899, (accessed May 2, 2013).

[118] Sociologist Nancy Tatom Ammerman, writing at the end of the 1980s, recalled, "The emergence of Fundamentalism in the 1970s, seemingly from nowhere, caught Americans by surprise... [I]n 1980, a large bloc of religious people, claiming the label Fundamentalist, opposed Carter, and we were faced with an even more serious challenge to our assumptions about what Evangelicals and Fundamentalists were, where they were located, and what might be expected from them." Nancy Tatom Ammerman, Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 1.

done to improve educational standards."[119] The 1983 national report, A Nation at

Risk confirmed this sense, declaring that "the educational foundations of our

society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens

our very future as a Nation and a people."[120] This, says Dona Schneider, "was

more than a call for reform – it was a scream."[121] In addition, the 1970s and early

1980s witnessed a growing and increasingly vocal concern about censorship

from within the educational community itself.[122] At the juncture of conservative

politics, conservative religion, educational reform efforts, and elevated concerns

regarding censorship, the Gablers suddenly found the work they had done

relatively quietly since 1961 in the national spotlight. Newspapers from the

. Washington Post to the Los Angeles Times told the story of how these "two little

Texans" had managed to use their state's textbook adoption process, which

allowed citizens to voice objections at public hearings prior to official statewide

adoption, to eliminate "material that distorts the Constitution, encourages

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[119] Diane Ravitch, Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 411.

[120] National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), 5, http://permanent.access.gpo.gov/lps3244 /ED226006.pdf (accessed January 8, 2014).

[121] Dona Schneider, American Childhood: Risks and Realities (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 83.

[122] After the Phi Delta Kappan, for instance, published article in October 1979 looking with alarm at the proceedings of the past decade, the journal in 1980 devoted an article almost every other monthly issue to the topic of censorship, as opposed to one or two every other year or so in the decade prior to that point. An article in the April 1980 issue was the earliest I could find mentioning the Gablers specifically, and in 1982, the Phi Delta Kappan devoted the entirety of their October issue to the topic, including publishing an article by the Gablers themselves.

evolutionary speculation, undermines the traditional role of the sexes and promotes secular humanism."[123] Because the Texas State Board of Education took citizens' objections seriously, publishers had to as well, and, as one newspaper article explained, "Because [Texas] is one of 22 states that select books statewide, what passes muster here sometimes sets a nationwide standard."[124]

Recent scholarship attempting to explain the conservative ascendancy that inaugurated the Reagan Era has noted the increasing interconnectedness, developed largely through migration, media, and communication networks, of people across the United States from the grassroots level and up who, like the Gablers, came to be identified as part of the "religious Right."[125] Daniel K. Williams observes that "by the summer of 1980," old enemies had set aside their differences, and "the evangelical unity that had seemed impossible to imagine only two years earlier had become a reality. Fundamentalists, charismatics, and evangelicals were working together in a political coalition to take the nation back

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[123] Dan Balz, "'Two Little Texans' in Thick of Textbook Battle for Young Minds," The Washington Post, August 16, 1982, http://search.proquest.com /docview/147421162?accountid=15053 (accessed January 11, 2014). According to Balz's article, Norma Gabler expressed incredulity at the opposition arising against "two little Texans," opposition that included Norman Lear's lobbying group People for the American Way and no doubt arose partly because the spotlight had turned on them at the dawn of the decade.

[124] Ibid.

[125] See Darren Dochuk's From Bible Belt to Sunbelt for an excellent and engaging treatment of this intricate web of relations between South and West in particular.

for the cause of Christ."[126] The interconnectedness and new sense of unity

fostered community and simultaneously fed the inflated sense of, in Falwell's

terms, "majority" status that publications from religious and political conservatives

consistently claimed. In 1982, the Gablers confidently claimed that while "fifteen

to 20 years ago we were rather lonesome in our battle," they were "now... only

two of many, many concerned individuals across our nation."[127]

The fact that they had acquired a much larger audience in the few years

preceding that statement likely fed'both the reality and appearance of an

expanding base of real and potential allies. The Gablers appear to have first hit

national news for the supportive role they played in the explosive textbook

controversy in Kanawha County, West Virginia in 1974. Multiple articles from that

point forward cite the Gablers' connections to Phyllis Schlafly, the leader of the

anti-ERA campaign and founder of Eagle Forum, and Jerry Falwell's Moral

Majority. By many accounts, the Gablers' in-home not-for-profit, Education

Research Analysts, had a mailing list of around 12,000 people at the beginning of

the decade.[128] Their visibility increased throughout the early 1980s, as they were

featured in national newspapers as well as on national television shows such as

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[126] Daniel K. Williams, God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 184.
[127] Mel Gabler and Norma Gabler, "Response: Mind Control Through Textbooks," The Phi Delta Kappan 64, no. 2 (October 1982), 96. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.wm.edu/stable/20386583 (accessed May 2, 2013).
[128] Journalist Dena Kleiman was among several to report that the Gablers had "a mailing list of over 12,000 and a staff of seven." "Influential Couple Scrutinizes Books for 'Anti-Americanism,'" The New York Times, July 14, 1981, https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.proxy.wm.edu/docvie w/120705749?accountid=15053 (accessed January 11, 2014).

CBS's <u>60 Minutes</u>.[129] The Texas couple may have rejoiced over their expanding

base of support, but the new curiosity in the Gablers and their efforts also

triggered deep concern among educators in particular. Expressions of this

concern were often accompanied by outrage over what many understood not just

as censorship efforts that were antithetical to healthy democratic society, but also

as an attempt to undo the gains made toward expanding civil rights and

accepting diversity that marked the decades prior. The reactions in the

mainstream media and in educational journals also revealed, however, a

profound befuddlement over rhetoric that appeared to them as at best logically

inconsistent and at worst blatantly dissembling: without fail, those who, like the

Gablers, were arguing for the removal or revision of "immoral" textbooks insisted

that the real "censors" were elitist "educrats."[130]

By 1985 a number of well-publicized court cases centering on the legality

and constitutionality of conservative evangelicals' concerted efforts to alter public

education were in process, emerging in tandem with quite vocal opposition to

such alterations by parents and educators around the country.[131] In addition, the

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[129] Frank Piasecki's doctoral dissertation provides an abundant compilation of media attention given the Gablers, which grew exponentially around the beginning of the decade. Frank E. Piasecki, "Norma and Mel Gabler: The Development and Causes of Their Involvement Concerning the Curricular Appropriateness of School Textbook Content" (PhD diss., North Texas State University, Denton, 1982).
[130] Gabler, <u>Our Children</u>, 99.
[131] Joan DelFattore has written an in-depth and passionate exploration of several of the most well-known court cases involving "fundamentalist ideology" and public school textbooks, including <u>Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education</u> (1987). Joan DelFattore, <u>What Johnny Shouldn't Read: Textbook Censorship in America</u> (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 3.

Gablers' own efforts in Texas had come under increasingly effective opposition, from Norman Lear's People for the American Way (P.F.A.W.) in particular.[132] I was unable to locate explicit evidence pointing to the Gablers' motivation for publishing their book at the particular moment they did. However, the explosion of interest in the couple at the turn of the decade, and the accompanying expansion of both support and resistance, strongly suggests that they felt compelled to speak no longer just to the assumed "majority" who already allied with their cause, but to persuade the unconvinced to join their efforts and to more thoroughly address their opponents' accusations.

The fact that the book was published by a religious press (Victor Press), contains scattered Bible quotations, and explicitly laments the fundamentalist "cop-out period" following the Scopes trial in 1925, suggests in part that it was intended for a conservative evangelical audience, an effort (to echo the Gablers' own frequent use of militaristic language) to "rally the troops."[133] Yet the frequent shifts from the rhetorical offense to the rhetorical defense imply another goal, as well. After calling for the reinstatement of the nineteenth-century McGuffey

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[132] It appears to be largely because of P.F.A.W.'s involvement that the rule stating that only opposition to textbooks could be voiced at the hearings was changed in 1982. See Robert Reinhold, "Textbook Debate Broadens in Texas," New York Times, August 3, 1983, http://search.proquest.com/docview/122305883?accountid=15053 (accessed January 11, 2014).

[133] Following the common narrative arch describing the split in the 1940s between fundamentalists and their more culturally-engaged evangelical counterparts, the Gablers write, "It was not until after World War II that conservative, Bible-believing Christians realized their mistake in not having used their influence to affect education. During this 'cop-out period,' ...It became popular among educators to ignore God, the Bible, the supernatural, the traditional family, and to regard majority opinion as 'unprogressive.'" Gabler and Gabler, Our Children, 30.

Readers, for instance, the Gablers gently insist, "All we want is good literature with a wholesome purpose" – a generic-enough agenda that few would be prone to frown upon such a desire. As if sensing, however, that what *equaled* "good literature" and "a wholesome purpose" might be the real issue of debate for their opponents (and that McGuffey might not pass either test for some) the Gablers suddenly shift gears to the defensive. "You may think our efforts simply reflect syrupy, moralistic, middle-class values," they accuse their reader, quite evidently a different "you" than that to which their humble submission was made a moment earlier; "Call them whatever you like. But we guarantee that the use of better textbooks would improve our schools and increase the likelihood of our children emerging as good citizens and worthy leaders of the next generation."[134] Such shifts suggest that the Gablers, by directly addressing (without directly rebutting) the accusations of those who aligned against their efforts, hoped to convince an audience beyond those who shared their conservative evangelical faith and heritage. To do so, however, the Gablers would have to suggest that what was at stake in this "battle" was something for which *everyone* would want to fight.

III.   "We Must Save Our Children"[135]

"Agents of the New Right are everywhere," proclaimed a 1982 Phi Delta Kappan article by an alarmed and irate Ben Brodinsky.[136] With an odd combination of echoes, both of anti-McCarthyism and of Cold War scare tactics,

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[134] Ibid., 95.

[135] Ibid., 160.

[136] Ben Brodinsky, "The New Right: The Movement and Its Impact," The Phi Delta Kappan 64, no. 2 (October 1982): 91, http://www.jstor.org.proxy.wm.edu/stable/20386581 (accessed May 2, 2013).

Brodinsky claimed that the nefarious "New Right" was "frightening parents, spurring them to leaf through schoolbooks to search for a dirty word, an offensive paragraph," warning his readers that "they are active on national, state, and local levels."[137] Brodinsky feared that a vast take-over of public education was in process, for "while educators' eyes were on themselves and on the rush of developments in education and society," the New Right had gathered enough steam to "[loose] the dogs of war against public education."[138] This was no minor battle, either. "The public schools in 1982 are the target of so powerful an attack that their very existence is in jeopardy," Brodinsky forewarned; "Radicals of the New Right are working toward exactly that end, that is, the remaking of the public schools in the image of the New Right – or else their destruction."[139] For Brodinsky, the democracy that public education was designed to sustain and perpetuate, the fate of the more free, more tolerant, and more critically-thinking American citizenry that the "the rush of developments" had aimed to create, were the core issues at stake in this battle.

The Gablers, in an article published as a response to Brodinsky's, suggested other issues at stake. "A nation that does not teach its values to its youth," they wrote, "is committing intellectual suicide."[140] For the Gablers, those values consisted of the promotion of "monogamous families, antihomosexuality, anti-abortion, American patriotism, morality, conservative views, teach of

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[137] Ibid., 91.
[138] Ibid., 87.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Gabler and Gabler, "Mind Control," 96.

honesty, obeying laws, changing bad laws through a legal process, etc."[141] Both

Brodinsky and the Gablers' arguments rest on unspoken assumptions about their

broad persuasiveness. Brodinsky assumed that his audience would agree that

"inject[ing] into each child's curriculum large doses of biblical material" and

"transmit[ing] facts, concepts, and attitudes on the rightness of Victorian morality

[and] free enterprise" are problematic enterprises for public educators teaching a

diverse student population.[142] The Gablers assumed that that same audience

would agree that their list exemplified the "basic foundational values," which they

term "Judeo-Christian" values and ethics, "upon which our nation was founded,"

and therefore the truly "American way" that *ought* to prevail in public

education.[143] The unspoken argument between Brodinsky and the Gablers, then,

was one over the accuracy of their equations and the appropriateness of

applying them throughout public education. Yet, as if they were aware that their

list of values might *not* be a widely-shared "common ground," the Gablers

attempted to offer an alternative point of agreement, a technique they used again

throughout What Are They Teaching Our Children? Not only did they, in this

article and in their book, insist that the America's future is at stake, the Gablers

insisted as well that the stakes involved were ones in which "the matter of

parental rights is basic," and were stakes that therefore, as the title of their essay

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[141] Ibid.

[142] Brodinsky, "New Right," 94.

[143] Gabler and Gabler, "Mind Control," 96.

("Mind Control Through Textbooks") insinuates, were over the immediate well-being of the bearers of that future – children themselves.[144]

The Gablers could expect references to the vulnerability of children to be emotionally affective precisely because of a continuing Romantic tradition of viewing young people as inherently innocent and childhood as peculiarly sacred. Sally Shuttleworth locates the beginning of this widespread cultural "sacralization" of children with the "Romantic writers [who] had established a cult of the child," a trend that only expanded over the next century.[145] Viviana Zelizer writes of the emergence around the turn of the twentieth century of the "economically 'worthless' but emotionally 'priceless' child," an expansion of the "cultural process of 'sacralization' of children's lives."[146] As Richard Lowry suggests in his work on Lewis Hine's child-labor photography, Progressive-era projects often depended heavily on the image of this "priceless" child, helping to establish a tradition of utilizing the affective quality of such images to emotionally, even if not rationally, persuade.[147] We can observe the Gablers' effort to

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[144] Ibid.

[145] Sally Shuttleworth, The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840-1900 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

[146] Viviana Zelizer, Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 3, 11.

[147] "By making the child's body visible for inspection," Lowry argues, "Hine brought into powerful conjunction two discourses – public concerns of progressive reform and the personal, even intimate imaginings of modern childhood... his images thrust the sacred child of the late-Victorian bourgeois home into the glare of the public sphere as the object of social action." Richard Lowry, "Lewis Hine's Family Romance," in The American Child, ed. Caroline Levander and Carol Singley (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 186.

implement this rhetorical strategy even in the title of their book, <u>What Are They</u>

<u>Teaching Our Children?</u> The title directly addresses parents, appealing to their

sense of responsibility for protecting their children. The title's form as a question

is vaguely ominous, the unidentified "they" threatening if only for the subject's

very ambiguity, the presence of the possessive "our" suggesting trespass or

violation. The Gablers' clear attempt to inspire outrage against "Mind Control

Through Textbooks" (as the title of their 1982 article responding to Brodinsky

phrases it) relies perhaps most heavily on the emotional appeal of the final word

– "children." Children are in danger, their book's front cover announces, and

parents have a responsibility – and a right – to protect them.

Childhood, the Romantics and their descendants would say, is sacred, in

the Durkheim-ian sense of something one ought to "protect and isolate."[148] It is a

life stage that ought to be untainted by too-early introductions to the realities of

adulthood. In their chapter "Lessons in Despair," the Gablers begin with a

statement that follows in this tradition. "If you think children read only bright,

wholesome, happy poems and stories in school," they warn, "think again."[149] This

is, however, a chapter arguing in part against the trend toward "realism" in public

school curricula, a trend that included the effort to recognize that schoolchildren

did not all experience the same "reality." A story that to others may have

appeared to simply to *describe* "violence, crime and rebellion" was in the

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[148] Emile Durkheim, <u>The Elementary Forms of Religious Life</u>, trans.
Joseph Ward Swain (1912; repr. New York: The Free Press, 1968), 56.
    [149] Gabler and Gabler, <u>Our Children</u>, 83.

Gablers' perception equivalent to a story that advocated those things.[150] Their

gestures toward protecting the sacred space of childhood, then, suggest an effort

to establish a level of agreement between themselves and those uncertain of the

validity of their dominate equation. What kind of parent wouldn't, the Gablers

imply, want their children's youth to be a space kept "bright, wholesome, [and]

happy"? If, the logic goes, the choice is *only* between children being "shocked

and shaken instead of being taught the moral and cultural principles on which

America was founded," any reasonable parent would choose the latter.[151]

The Gablers' use of the childhood-as-sacred-space trope is also evident in

their chapter arguing against "Miseducation in Sex."[152] Expressing their concern

about what they perceived to be inappropriate amounts and kinds of sexual

information given to children, the Gablers appeal first to one "Dr. Rhoda Lorand,

a respected New York clinical psychologist... who has written and studied

extensively in the field of childhood sexuality, [and who] outlines these programs'

potential harms."[153] The Gablers use their interpretation of Lorand's work to

momentarily switch gears away from identifying the key problem as being (what

is to them) the fact that "sex education in curriculum [*sic*] gives legitimacy to

immorality."[154] Rather, they attempt to appeal to those who may not share their

"Judeo-Christian" sense of morality – as emphasizing sexual abstinence outside

of heterosexual marriage – by shifting their argument toward the way in which the

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[150] Ibid., 93.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid., 65.
[153] Ibid., 75-76.
[154] Ibid., 77.

educational establishment views the child: "The creators of these [sex-ed]

programs regard the child as a miniature adult and therefore present him with

facts, concepts, and demands for self-appraisal which are not in harmony with

the developmental levels of the child and therefore disturb normal

development."[155] For the purposes of their argument against sex education, the

Gablers appeal to a psychology that supports firm boundaries around the

amounts and kinds of sexual information given children. Because, according the

Gabler's reasoning, children are *not* "miniature adults," what people like Ben

Brodinsky label "censorship" is really protection from "the kind of sex-ed now

being given to our children [that] is causing far more harm than good," if for no

other reason than that it invades the sacred space of childhood.[156]

The problem, however, with "what they are teaching our children," to

rephrase the Gablers' title, was for them a much more serious issue than one of

merely age-inappropriate material. Over and over, the Gablers insist that

educational materials that refuse to "make moral judgments over whether certain

behavior is right or wrong," judgments that align with the "Judeo-Christian ethic"

that the Gablers describe, are inevitably encouraging what is "wrong."[157] Again,

however, as if to express the seriousness of the battle in terms those who might

disagree with the ethic they describe could appreciate, the Gablers repeatedly

suggest that public schools' failure to promote that moral ethic puts all children in

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[155] Ibid., 76.
[156] Ibid., 79.
[157] Ibid., 84.

grave danger. In their chapter "Children Adrift," for instance, the Gablers open

with what they describe as a "parable" of the current state of public education:

> So the children are launched in their frail little boats while their parents
>
> stay home with mixed feelings. Most parents – remembering the wise
>
> guidance they had when setting out on their voyage of life – trust the
>
> schools implicitly. But some have heard disquieting reports: the schools
>
> have changed; children are being poorly equipped for this voyage.
>
> Students are being sent on their own without maps or a compass. But
>
> these troubled parents cannot afford to moor their children in safer ports.
>
> So they must, by law, send their children to this marina and trust that all
>
> will be well.

> The children are launched. The instructors fly overhead in
>
> helicopters, gauging their progress. Look, there's little Johhny [sic],
>
> headed toward an underwater reef. His boat will smash! He could be
>
> drowned! But don't worry, an instructor sees him and surely will wave him
>
> back. Wait! Has the instructor gone mad? He is telling Johnny, "Keep
>
> going in the direction you feel is right!"[158]

One of the Gablers' fairly reasonable operative assumptions behind this "parable"

is that no caring parent would wish their child to be kept in a place where

"drowning" would be all but a foregone conclusion. Nor would any reasonable,

loving parent be expected to tolerate their child undergoing "Mental Child Abuse,"

as one chapter, denouncing the godlessness of curricula like the controversy-

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[158] Ibid., 98-99.

ridden <u>Man, A Course of Study</u> (MACOS), is entitled.[159] The Gablers go further

still when they quote a friend and colleague who apparently equated requiring

children to read textbooks that did not promote the "Judeo-Christian ethic" with

"intellectual rape."[160] Not only is public education in its current state a kind of

violence against children, though. The Gablers argue that the lack of clear

definitions of right and wrong in public school curricula leads to self-inflicted

violence as well. The Gablers insist that it is "no wonder Johnny and Jane are

confused. At home they are taught one thing, at school they are led to question

family mores and decide their own values. Psychologically, this causes

frustration. Is it any wonder teenage suicides have escalated?"[161] The leap from

having to "decide their own values" to "teenage suicides" may not be an intuitive

one for most, but such highly-charged language used to describe the setting in

which vulnerable young children spend much of their time, and the supposed

consequences of such a setting, suggests high stakes indeed for the "battle" over

textbook content. The rhetoric of danger and violence toward children at one

level communicates the Gablers' own evident belief that the stakes *were* very

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[159] Diane Ravitch explains that "controversy over [MACOS], an NSF-funded anthropology course used in the upper elementary grades, brought the entire NSF curriculum-development effort under congressional scrutiny in 1976. Like other new curricula, MACOS was innovative in its content, its methodology, and its pedagogy...As the course began to be broadly disseminated, it came under attack in widely scattered communities by conservative critics who objected to its subject matter and its cultural relativism... MACOS survived the criticisms and challenges, but its notoriety" signaled the end of its broad implementation. Diane Ravitch, <u>The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980</u> (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 264.

[160] Gabler and Gabler, <u>Our Children</u>, 106

[161] Ibid., 154.

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high. It is also clearly calculated to incite as-yet un-persuaded parents to action, parents who might differ over the inherent goodness of the Gablers' "Judeo-Christian ethic," but who would *not* argue that protecting children was a parent's responsibility and right.

A problem persists however, with the Gablers' particular understanding of those parental rights. "Isn't it about time," they wrote in their response to Ben Brodinsky, "that parents regained the right to the minds of their children?"[162] Textbooks, they insist, and public education more generally, should correspond with the moral perspective parents wish to pass on to their children. Shelley Burtt reminds us, "Adult rule over children is so widespread that an effort to explain or justify it might seem beside the point: part of what it means to be a child is to be subject to the authority of adults."[163] Yet, as Burtt also points out, "there is little consensus in either real-world or scholarly debates concerning the nature and extent of such authority," and any assertion of parental rights contains a level of ambiguity about the "nature and extent" of adult rule. [164] The Gablers' writing conveys a strong sense of parental rights being the primacy of parents' interests and beliefs *over* the state's and child's. They argue repeatedly that any curriculum that "encouraged questioning of parental authority" or "suggested students form their own values, independent of the home" was a violation of their

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[162] Gabler and Gabler, "Mind Control," 96.
[163] Shelley Burtt, "The Proper Scope of Parental Authority: Why We Don't Owe Children an 'Open Future,'" in Child, Family, and State, ed. Stephen Macedo and Iris Marion Young, (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 243.
[164] Ibid.

rights as parents.[165] The couples' particular understanding of parental rights is

clearly rooted in a hierarchical notion of authority, and of family authority in

particular. This emphasis on proper order has been central to conservative

evangelical theology, and would, therefore, be attractive primarily to those who

already adhered to that theology.[166] In a clear effort to grab the attention of an

audience wider than those who *already* agreed with them, however, the Gablers

often attempt to wrap their vision for public school education in packaging that

would be more broadly attractive. Language drawing upon the Romantic vision of

the child – language that emphasizes the sacred space of childhood and

children's vulnerability through emotionally-charged accusations of violence and

abuse – peppers the Gablers' arguments. Their gestures toward that rhetorical

tradition, however, suggests their awareness not just of the limited appeal of their

version of "Judeo Christian values," but also of their emphasis upon a God-

ordained hierarchical order that would allow them to have absolute control over

what their children believed.

What is evident after even a brief textual analysis is that "common ground"

available to the Gablers and their not-yet allies remained strikingly small. If

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[165] Gabler and Gabler, Our Children, 18.

[166] "Dispensationalism," a theory regarding end times and a core
component of fundamentalist and subsequently conservative evangelical
theology, "was a system that depended heavily on notions of order and
obedience. It defined sin as 'disorder' and rebellion against God's rule as a latter-
day sign of religious apostasy and social anarchy... fundamentalists, and neo-
evangelicals as well,... had long upheld morally grounded homes as the best
proof of their separation from the world and the last Christian line of defense
against the inherent disorder of secular systems." Bendroth, Fundamentalism
and Gender, 8, 10.

"surrendering their own flesh and blood" is what public education demanded of all parents, the Gablers would most likely be quite right in their assertion that few parents would be willing to do so.[167] The problem lies in the fact that to reach even *that* level of agreement, the Gablers' opponents would have to also accept a wide array of unspoken premises. These include, to name a few, that "realism" is equal to promoting violence and hatred, that failure to instruct children in parents' understandings of right and wrong in the public school setting was equivalent to child abuse, and that the transmission of parents' values was something to be pursued at the cost of access to knowledge and the development of critical thinking skills. The Gablers argued that childhood should be kept a sacred space by filling it with only "positive" examples and prohibiting access to "adult" knowledge. They insisted as well that limiting information to *prescriptive* declarations of right and wrong behavior were essential to protecting vulnerable children. Vulnerable children are nonetheless future adults and citizens. Edwin Darden states concisely the political significance of public education: "Children are impressionable. They are viewed by adults as the future. By shaping their thoughts and directing their values, the theory goes, one can change the world for years hence."[168] According to Dona Schneider, "childhood became entrenched as an American institution" after World War Two, "a postwar

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[167] Gabler and Gabler, Our Children, 153.

[168] Edwin Darden, "Public Education, Private Faith," American School Board Journal 193, no. 11 (November 2006): 44, http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy.wm.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=11&sid=66fd3edf-f5c6-4a55-acf5-eff602cc1a61%40sessionmgr4004&hid=4212 (accessed February 23, 2013).

metaphor for the idealized human nature Americans wished to see in themselves."[169] The problem was that *what* exactly constituted that "idealized human nature" proved to be the debate around which the Gablers and their opponents skirted.

IV.   Claiming the "American Way": Translation Problems

The 1980s, as noted earlier, began with intense concern over the fate of public education in the United States. As Diane Ravitch notes, "The nation's schools were at the center of many of the social upheavals of this era... At this crucial moment, with schools trying (often reluctantly) to comply with the demands of the civil rights movement and with court decisions, along came pressures from the radical and countercultural movements to change the curriculum and the very nature off schooling."[170] Public education was a topic of national concern and conversation, and citizens of all religions heard the message proclaimed loudly in the title of the 1983 report – the nation, and all that America stood for, was at risk. To argue that one's agenda represented an attempt to *preserve* all that America stood for, then, was a timely rhetorical move, and one the Gablers pursue in their book with gusto. But it was a rhetorical move that required deciding beforehand just *what* America stood for – a matter of perpetual debate, but a debate in which the Gablers, if their writing is any indication, felt no need to join. They *knew* what America stood for. "Judeo-Christian" values were "American" values, and vice versa. The text suggests that

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[169] Schneider, <u>American Childhood</u>, 3.
[170] Ravitch, <u>Left Back</u>, 367.

while they were leery of depending solely on this equivalency to persuade a broad range of fellow Americans, the Gablers remained unwilling or unable to question the equation directly. As a result, their arguments in their book depend heavily on their efforts to use, in Habermas' phrase again, other "generally accessible language" equating other, less religiously-charged concepts with the essence of "America."

Educator Charles Park, writing in the election year of 1980, succinctly expressed what many others had silently assumed about this Cold War-era battle over public education:

> Beyond the political rhetoric of left or right, Republican or Democrat, liberal or conservative, lies an arena of agreement about American education. In our pluralistic society we agree on the right of students to learn to think for themselves, to have access to information, and to respect the rights of others to hold alternative views. Such are the dimensions of freedom in our land and in our classrooms. Few nations are prepared to trust children to become humane, independent thinkers... As our nation renews political debate during this election year, we can hope for a reaffirmation of support for the tenets of democratic schools. A commitment to the goals of freedom and democracy appears to be very much in order.[171]

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[171] J. Charles Park, "The New Right: Threat to Democracy in Education," Educational Leadership (November 1980): 146, http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy.wm.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=12&sid=66fd3edf-f5c6-4a55-acf5-eff602cc1a61%40sessionmgr4004&hid=4212 (accessed January 11, 2014).

Park's driving assumption in this passage is that the debate over public education will begin in an "arena of agreement" about the "tenets of democratic schools" in a "pluralistic society." But the implications of this assumption are significant. Those who disagree with Park's order of priorities – that education is first and foremost about achieving the goals of "freedom and democracy" – and his definitions of those two things are effectively disregarded as potential participants in the debate. In subtly-charged terms reflecting the Cold War binary that imagined political states as limited to either democracy or communism, Park's language implies that those who do not share a "commitment to the goals of freedom and democracy" – as he understood them – are therefore *anti*-democratic and therefore *anti*-American.

It was arguments like Park's to which the Gablers were in part attempting to provide an alternative in <u>What Are They Teaching Our Children?</u> But the very ideas that comprised the "arena of agreement" Park presumed upon were precisely the ideas that the Gablers found unconscionable. It was the very insistence upon "the right of students to learn to think for themselves, to have access to information, and to respect the rights of others to hold alternative views" – those things that were the essence of Park's "American way" – that threatened the "America" the Gablers wished to protect. "America," the Gablers agree with those like Park, *is* about freedom, but it is freedom, or "liberty," founded upon "Judeo-Christian principles," and it must therefore be defined

within the framework of those principles and the strict moral code that accompanied them.[172]

Throughout their book, however, the Gablers seem uncertain about which rhetorical tactics would be most persuasive. Indeed, they appear to recognize that some Americans may not hold to their version of "Judeo-Christian" religious principles at all, and that an argument intended to persuade more than those who *do* will require limiting their demands. "We're not asking for in-school catechisms and Bible lessons," the Gablers insist, in a clear gesture to imply that they accept "alterative views."[173] Nevertheless, "we *do* protest our children's textbooks being used as channels for attacks on biblical beliefs and Judeo-Christian morals. This," they insist, "clearly violates the First Amendment."[174] Appealing to First Amendment rights, however, leaves a much smaller space for the perpetuation of "Judeo-Christian morals" than does arguing that those morals are the foundation of the American ideal, and their insistence that they don't want "in-school catechisms and Bible lessons" in public schools reads as contradictory and perhaps disingenuous in light of their repeated argument that it is the very absence of those things that signals the disintegration of the "America" for which they advocate.

The Gablers wield a number of other rhetorical strategies that suggest an effort to present their textbook reform efforts in terms appealing to more than those who shared their vision for "America." For instance, in their arguments

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[172] Gabler, Our Children, 33.
[173] Ibid., 38.
[174] Ibid., 39.

against sex education in public schools, the Gablers address accusations of the partisan nature of their view. While "the sexologists and their allies in education would have you believe that only political and religious conservatives are against sex education in public schools," according to the Gablers, this simply isn't true.[175] Even renowned pediatrician "Dr. Benjamin Spock," they submit, whom they rightly noted "could hardly be included" among "political and religious conservatives," argued that "sexual intimacy" was, at the very least, a "serious and spiritual matter."[176] Obviously, the Gablers implied, there was a degree of bipartisan solidarity about this issue that ought to help persuade those who did not identify as "conservatives" to rethink their stance. Reiterating common complaints against the public education system and echoing the concerns in A Nation at Risk, the Gablers also implied that their efforts countered the declining intellectual quality of public education curricula. The Gablers begin by expressing a shared concern over textbooks' lack of intellectual rigor. "Textbooks have been 'dumbed down,'" the Gablers explained. "They've been made less difficult because students can't handle harder material."[177] The future employment of American children was at risk as well, but less because of "academic ineptness" and more because of unspecified "rotten attitudes."[178]

Whatever cross-party alliance against sex-education might have existed, however many people agreed that public education's intellectual quality had

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[175] Ibid., 77.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid., 20.
[178] Ibid., 21.

degraded, the "generically accessible language" upon which the Gablers depend

most heavily throughout the entirety of their book is that which directly counters

people like Park. Park was advocating an educational system that would protect

the pluralistic character of American society by creating space for minorities to

express "alternative views" – a project that would of necessity *not* allow majority

opinion to close that space. The Gablers, however, prioritized citizens' status as

taxpayers and the rights of the *majority* to argue the following: "Humanism

teaches the religion of moral relativism, because it accepts on faith the principle

that all morals are relative. This violates, in tax-supported education, the Judeo-

Christian moral principles of the great majority of Americans," and is therefore

un-American.[179] Not a statement calculated to welcome in the uninitiated – by

default those very minorities left as of yet outside of the "majority" fold – this

statement nonetheless succinctly captures the thesis of their work. The violation

of the majority view (and therefore the American one) is what truly, in the

Gablers' view, puts the nation at risk. The couple's outlook for the future is a

gloomy one. "If moral or ethical relativism continues to be taught unchecked in

American schools," the Gablers forewarn, "we will drift first into anarchy then into

a totalitarianism [*sic*]. And we, who protest relativism in textbooks, are the ones

who are compared to the Nazis!"[180]

For the Gablers, prioritizing education as a moral and spiritual enterprise

defined as "Judeo-Christian" put them from the start outside of the "arena of

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[179] Ibid., 100.
[180] Ibid., 103.

agreement" assumed, by those such as Charles Park, as the common ground

from which all arguments about public education would proceed. In order to

engage in that conversation, then, and in a clear effort to *persuade* those less

certain of America's "Judeo-Christian" character than they, the Gablers regularly

used terms from the democratic linguistic arsenal – appeals to the rights of the

majority, religious freedom, taxpayer status. Their "America" was unfortunately a

vastly different "America" than the one Park described, one unlikely to persuade

anyone beyond those already inclined to accept the veracity of the Gablers'

vision. If the debate in which they wished to participate was articulated in terms

of "democracy" and "American values," however, the Gablers, in order not to

compromise their own "Judeo-Christian" perspective, would have translate that

perspective into "generally accessible language" while (re)defining "democracy"

and "American" values in terms that would allow them to keep the "bit of the

frame," to reiterate Jonathan Glover's phrase, they were unable to bend. But

what precise "bit of the frame" was that?

<div align="center">V.   The Problem of Sainthood</div>

The Gablers, at least in their published writings, tended to avoid explicitly

identifying themselves as religious or religiously-motivated. This was most

certainly a decision made at least in part to try to avoid the frequent accusations

of religious partisanship and fanaticism thrown their way. The implications of

being understood as "education apostles of the fundamentalist right," as one

reporter labeled the couple, were serious, rhetorical strategies intended to point

out the *un*-representativeness of the Gablers' views and efforts, ways to mark the

couple as either quaint or potentially dangerous.[181] Thus, the few places in which

the Gablers do make explicit statements about their religious affiliation are

important and revealing. According to one reporter, the Gablers were "members

of a Baptist group called the Christian and Missionary Alliance," and they

understood "their textbook work in missionary terms."[182] Frank Piasecki, in a

1982 doctoral dissertation, mentioned that "Mel Gabler simply states that

Educational Research Analysts is operated as a faith missionary organization,"

trusting God's financial provision for endeavors the couple were certain that He

sanctioned.[183] These admissions suggest that the Gablers' work might be

fruitfully examined through the lens of a theological tradition tracing its roots back

to the unique characteristics of early twentieth-century fundamentalism. Margaret

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[181] Alison Muscatine, a reporter for the Washington Post, began her article about these "apostles" with the following description articulating both the sense that the Gablers' efforts were provincial and simultaneously ominous: "The retired East Texas grandparents captivated their audience of 50 – who had paid $15 each for a day-long seminar and a country luncheon of ham, turkey and mash potatoes – with their homespun, 'plain folk' sermon against the evils of secular humanism and the absence of traditional American and Christian values in the schools." Somewhat cute and homey, the imagery implies, the Gablers in Muscatine's view, while successful in their "censorship" efforts elsewhere, were nonetheless "not likely to get a foothold in Maryland," where their "country luncheon" took place. Alison Muscatine, "Couple Brings Textbook Crusade to Frederick," The Washington Post, October 16, 1983, http://search.proquest.com /docview/147600180?accountid=15053 (accessed January 11, 2014).
   [182] William Trombley, "Educators Fear Rising Tide of Textbook Censorship," Los Angeles Times, February 14, 1982, http://search.proquest.com /docview/153038034?accountid=15053 (accessed January 11, 2014).
   [183] "With his strong devout belief, he further indicates that God supplies all their needs with most contributions being received in small amounts. To his critics who do not believe that such could be the case, he acknowledges this would be a big obstacle to overcome. As no donations are guaranteed from one year to the next the Gablers attest that they must 'look to the Lord for funding.'" Piasecki, "Gabler," 78-79.

Bendroth, in her landmark study <u>Fundamentalism and Gender</u>, observes that

"fundamentalism emerged from a revivalist tradition."[184] Although the

fundamentalism whose history Bendroth describes originated in the North, she

recognizes that "its message resonated with the cultural Christianity of the

American South," and beginning in the 1920s the two traditions began to

intersect and overlap, divide and reunite, both theologically and regionally, until,

by the 1980s, it became most useful to use an umbrella term such as the one I

prefer, "conservative evangelical."[185] Darren Dochuk argues that the phrase

"revivalist" is an equally apt description for what he calls "southern

evangelicalism," as well.[186] This proselytizing, mission-oriented mindset made

those conservative evangelicals' religious and political endeavors inseparable.[187]

This history offers, then, not so much an alternative as much as a

complementary explanation of the Gablers' silence about their religious identity

and motivation. For the Gablers, as for so many other southern evangelicals,

political endeavors were not just *inseparable* from religious ones, however.

Political endeavors, like every endeavor, could only be understood as at their

core spiritual ones, to be aimed first and foremost at the perpetuation and

spreading of the faith.

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[184] Bendroth, <u>Fundamentalism and Gender</u>, 6.
[185] Ibid., 4.
[186] Dochuk, <u>Bible Belt</u>, 17.
[187] Ibid. "Driven by a sense of guardianship over their culture, and energized by the universal potential of personal conversion, evangelicals in the western South," including Texas, "folded the teachings of Jesus and Jefferson [into a formula for participatory politics. Unlike evangelicals in the Deep South who fashioned themselves the last great bulwark of Christian democracy, they looked confidently upon themselves as its last great vanguard." Ibid.

There are at least two presuppositions behind the Gablers' arguments that are clearly identifiable with conservative evangelicalism and its fundamentalist origins. The first is their acceptance of the equation of "facts" with "truth." The second is their insistence that there is only one absolute and indisputable truth applicable to all areas of life, which they, as believers in the Bible, possess. The conflation of "fact" with "truth" is a belief rooted in the emphasis on and peculiar understanding of order that is so unique to fundamentalist-influenced traditions. Nancy Ammerman, in her study of one particular fundamentalist church, notes that "Believers do not like living with uncertainty. When they have a question, they want an answer... In contrast to the chaos of the outside world, the believer's life is full of order. The ideological world in which [believers] live comes with a detailed and well-marked road map for living the Christian life."[188] A desire or valuing of order is not by itself a religiously partisan position; but the implications of the idea of order Ammerman describes are very much religiously partisan. This fundamentalist concept incorporates not just structure, but the assurance of knowable and stable answers – the accessibility of absolute truth – and "knowing what is right and wrong, what is God's plan and what is not, provides a structure that believers treasure."[189] Most importantly, understanding the Bible as "a detailed and well-marked road for living the Christian life" leaves no area of life, including politics and education, beyond the reach of those assured answers.

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[188] Nancy Ammerman, Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 41.
[189] Ibid., 42.

Tellingly, in the Gablers' declension narrative of public education, they

accuse "liberal theologians" who around the turn of the twentieth century "used

the methods of German 'higher criticism' to attack the authority and authenticity

of the Bible," of leading the country and its educators away from "American"

values. [190] This is a historical reference that not only helps confirm their

identification with the fundamentalist movement that grew largely out of a

reaction to German higher criticism, but also helps reveal the limited reach of

their definition of even "Judeo-Christian" values.[191] As implied throughout this

paper, the Gablers' use of this 1950s-era phrase to suggest a kind of religious

lowest common denominator between them and followers of other faiths. By

excluding "liberal theologians" (as well as Jews and Catholics, the other primary

religious groups referenced in this phrase) from the supposedly broad swath of

people the phrase by itself implies, however, the Gablers effectively *limit* the

definition of "Judeo-Christian" to the viewpoint shared by evangelicals following in

the fundamentalist vein.

We see the consequences of this limitation play out in the Gablers'

understanding of history in particular. Nancy Ammerman notes that the

fundamentalist believers she studied "not only claim special knowledge about

their own lives but also claim to understand the history and future of humankind.

What they know about the past is that God is the author of everything, and his

truth is unchanging... what is stable and familiar is more likely to be 'godly' than

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[190] Gabler and Gabler, <u>Our Children</u>, 28.
[191] Ibid., 28.

something new and different."[192] The past is then, for the heirs of early twentieth-century fundamentalism, always closer to the "truth," to the way things *ought* to be, while the present appears to inevitably be in a state of decline. The equation of the "facts" of the past that are most familiar with "truth," with all its connotations of moral good and stable meaning, occurs throughout the Gablers' book, from the introduction to the Gabler's book onward. James C. Hefley recounts how the Gablers originally became involved with the Texas textbook adoption process, explaining, "Mel and Norma have been concerned about textbooks since the day in 1961 when their sixteen-year-old son, Jim, insisted they take a look at his history book... Mel and Norma compared the book to older history texts and reached a startling conclusion: History hadn't changed, but the publishers sure had changed history."[193] This passage suggests that the reality that textbooks had changed – perhaps even more than *what* specifically had changed – signaled to the Gablers degeneracy. Their "conclusion" is that *truth* had been exchanged for falsehood – "history hadn't changed, but the publishers sure had changed history."

The Gablers' insistence that there is any sort of "absolute truth" about history would, of course, strike most contemporary historians as absurd. There are, of course, historical explanations for the roots of this quite common assumption that history is simply a collection of indisputable "facts," rather than, what is commonly accepted among present-day historians, a narrative that is

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[192] Ammerman, Bible Believers, 43.
[193] Gabler and Gabler, Our Children, 10.

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inevitably shaped by the "personal opinions of the writers."[194] As Jonathan

Zimmerman persuasively argues in his examination of textbook debates

throughout the twentieth century, while "historians have engaged in a rich

debate" over how to interpret American history, schoolchildren have long been

presented with a version of history that elides the debates over interpretations

and falsely suggests that such questions were "settled... long ago."[195] Thus, for a

couple who had themselves been through the public education system (and who

had had no further education in institutions in which Zimmerman's "rich debates"

would have occurred) to retain a belief in a static and idealized sense of the

American past should come as no surprise. Yet the equation of a (familiar)

historical "fact" with a positive moral good is perhaps less expected, at least until

we identify what presuppositions must be accepted to have that equation make

sense. Charles Park was completely accurate in his articulation of "the argument"

that many in the religious Right "advanced": "when education is presented

without reference to the truth as given by God, the schools in effect teach

students to become atheists."[196] For the fundamentalists that Ammerman studied

and for the Gablers, there simply *was* no such thing as a morally neutral "fact."

There is, for those like the Gablers, only truth or falsehood, good or evil, and

students must have a "map" to help them navigate toward the truth.

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[194] Ibid., 49.

[195] Jonathan Zimmerman, Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 222-223.

[196] Charles Park, "Preachers, Politics, and Public Education: A Review of Right-Wing Pressures against Public Schooling in America," The Phi Delta Kappan 61, no. 9 (May 1980): 609, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20385640 (accessed November 7, 2013).

The dualistic character of the fundamentalist perception of reality emerges

in the Gablers' regular insistence that "they are not censors or 'book burners,'" a

denial frequently accompanied in the same breath by their proud affirmation that

"over the years they have had considerable success in pressuring textbook

publishers to excise portions of books they find objectionable...."[197] These

apparently contradictory claims caused understandable confusion in the national

press coverage of the Gablers' efforts. Yet the Gablers' writing suggests that this

contradiction was in part evidence of their recognition that persuasion

necessitates some compromise and tolerance for other views. They claimed

repeatedly throughout <u>What Are They Teaching Our Children?</u> that they

"welcome discussion – when students are given adequate information on *both*

sides. We want balance. We simply object to one-sided indoctrination to suit the

ideology of the educational establishment."[198] On the surface this sounds fair, but

in the context of the rest of their rhetoric, a self-contradiction again emerges.

Their firm insistence that they are "not against intellectual inquiry" is not

contradictory *if* their readers accept their obliquely-stated premise – "intellectual

inquiry" is only valid *as long as* it occurs within the framework of "biblical beliefs

and Judeo-Christian values."[199] The key to their logic thus lies in the phrase "both

sides" – for the Gablers, there are only ever two choices. The choice as the

Gablers articulate it is between a worldview rooted in a particular understanding

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[197] Muscatine, "Textbook Crusade."
[198] Gabler and Gabler, <u>Our Children</u>, 60.
[199] Ibid., 100.

of the Bible – which is fully-revealed, non-negotiable, universally-applicable absolute truth – and a worldview that is rooted in anything else.

The equation of older ways of doing things with *better* ways of doing things emerges in the section headlined, "The Results of Poor Textbooks."[200] This is the section referenced earlier that begins with concerns over intellectual rigor and employment preparation. It takes a rapid turn toward darker matters, however, when the Gablers compare two lists comparing "the top offenses of public school students in the 1940s" and the top offenses of students in the 1980s.[201] Around World War Two, offenses were evidently benign, consisting of petty violations like "talking," "chewing gum," and "running in the halls."[202] "Forty years later," the Gablers claim, public school students ' "top offenses" included things like "rape," and "murder," as well "pregnancies," "suicide," "gang warfare," and "venereal disease."[203] The racialized character of this list is obvious, resonating with the Gablers' disapproval of integration in particular, disapproval that is evident in other areas of the book.[204] Yet what is also important about these two lists is the way in which they illuminate the commonality the Gablers

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[200] Ibid., 20

[201] The Gablers' footnote describes this list as one gathered from "private research." Ibid., 23.

[202] Ibid., 21.

[203] Ibid., 22.

[204] Perhaps the most explicit racism comes in the Gablers' complaints regarding "change" that appear to allude to busing: "Here's how it works. The educational social planners map out a program – say, to help 'protected' middle-class suburban children empathize with the lifestyles and problems of the inner city... The program is operating before most parents even know what's going on." Later on they ask, outraged, "Since when is a small segment of society the 'real' world?" Ibid., 123, 170.

presumed was behind *all* that was "wrong" with public education. Integration and the civil rights movement clearly rubbed them wrong, and the racist assumptions behind their language are undeniable. That very language and the comparison between the two lists suggests, though, that the Gablers would likely have found accusations of "racism" as incomprehensible as they found accusations of "censorship," however greatly they felt the pejorative quality of both. If we take them at their word, then what their rhetoric reveals is that for the Gablers, the issue was not, *in the end, about* race or even *about* censorship. Rather, their rhetoric implies that they persisted in understanding and framing projects like integration – a project many hailed as a long-withheld achievement of "American" values – as one sign among many of a much deeper, and essentially spiritual, problem. While willing to nod to conversations concerned with intellectual development and job preparation in order to build rapport with a wider audience, they could not leave for long what concerned them most – the apparent fall from an earlier state of innocence, a state represented by the 1940s list of offenses. There was for the Gablers one *single* trend of moral degeneracy, a fall to which integration contributed.

The arguments in <u>What Are They Teaching Our Children?</u> rest upon premises that derive from the tenets of twentieth century Protestant fundamentalism. For the Gablers, the battle over education was in its most basic form a battle over two simple issues – right and wrong. "Two religions" – and only two – "are in mortal combat for the souls and futures of our children and nation. One reverences God and the moral values of the Judeo-Christian Bible. The

other rejects God and the Judeo-Christian basis of the American family."[205] There are no other options. Furthermore, "change" is itself an echo of the Genesis Fall, humanity's rejection once more of an ideal reality already revealed and known by those who choose to believe it. "'Change'" the Gablers observed, "is the battle cry of 'progressive' educators. Society, they tell us, is changing. Religions, governments, mores and morals – all are changing. Nothing is stable, permanent, eternal. No institution, idea, or loyalty ever remains static."[206] For many observers, such change was a positive good; for others, it was simply a neutral acknowledgement of reality. For the Gablers, however, the *fact* of change and the fact that it was being encouraged, were signs of a threat that cut to the very core of their worldview – their belief that absolute truth existed, that it was eternal and all-encompassing, and that they held it in their possession. This was the "wire" they could not bend.

VI. Conclusion

What, finally, can the awkward tension in James C. Hefley's phrasing, "saints or censors," teach us about the particular historical moment at the beginning of the Reagan Era, and what can it teach us about religion and religious communities? The phrase is at one level purely descriptive, accurately assessing how the Gablers perceived their own efforts ("saints") versus their opponents in the media and public education in particular understood them ("censors"). What Are They Teaching Our Children? is also a compilation of

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[205] Ibid., 160.
[206] Ibid., 115.

common religious Right reactions against "liberal" social trends. Barely-veiled protest against racial integration, distaste for anything smelling of "big government" or "Communism" (most often conflated), alarm at the growing visibility of and influence of "gays," and a clear aversion to the feminist movement pervade their writing. Accusations of racism, McCarthyism, homophobia, and misogyny have hounded those on the religious Right, and with reason. However well-founded and even accurate those accusations, a close reading of the Gablers' rhetoric suggests that those accusations and the scholarly investigations pursuing those threads, however profitable in other respects, do little to explain the reasons why the Gablers, among many others, could with such apparent sincerity unwaveringly persist in *denying* those and similar accusations, or at least their pejorative connotations. I argue that understanding key components of fundamentalist thinking illuminates the fact that what for others were *the* issues in the religious Right's efforts to alter public education were important but secondary ones for the Gablers – mere manifestations of a single, deeper, and essentially spiritual trend, one with potentially catastrophic consequences.

The singular rhetorical ineffectiveness of the Gablers' reliance upon the Romantic tropes of childhood, as well as their use of non-religious "generically accessible language" to attempt to construct a common ground between themselves and those who did not adhere to their fundamentalist version of "Judeo-Christian values" exposes the reality that the Gablers and their opponents disagreed at a much deeper but unarticulated level. In their engagements with

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each other, educators, journalists, and the Gablers tended to take for granted

their own assumptions about the proper aims of education, the inherent

goodness or badness a pluralistic society, and the appropriateness of applying

claims of absolute truth to that society.

Winnifred Sullivan notes that "religion has proved to be not an irrational,

private, and authoritarian premodern relic destined to fade away, but has proved

remarkably vital and ubiquitous, refusing the place assigned it by the modern

consciousness."[207] Fred M. Frohock argues, "It is easy to forget, within the

comfortable landscape of social religions, that the metaphysical and the practical

are fused in a way of life throughout many cultures, and this way of life is

governed not by the social but by a transcendent reality, often configured as

God."[208] Nancy Ammerman insists that for fundamentalists (and their

conservative evangelical relations), religion "is grounded in an institution (the

church) and in a document (the Holy Bible), both of which make the unlikely

claim to ultimate truth. That truth, it is claimed, applies to all individuals and has

preeminence over the claims of all other institutions."[209] Close reading Mel and

Norma Gablers' largest work suggests reasons why, in conflicts involving the

religious Right, opponents have so often appeared to merely talk past each

other. Deeply concerned about the state of affairs in the United States and in its

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[207] Sullivan, Impossibility, 152.

[208] Fred M. Frohock, Bounded Divinities: Sacred Discourses in Pluralist Democracies (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 1.

[209] "Fundamentalists simply do not accept either the cultural pluralism or the institutional differentiation that have come to be assumed in the modern world." Ammerman, Bible Believers, 3.

public educational system, yet desiring to participate in a debate whose "arena of agreement" presumed upon a positive valuing of diversity in its many manifestations, the Gablers were faced with limited options. They could either submit their foundational premises as *the* matter of debate, or they could attempt to, through a variety of rhetorical techniques, translate their agenda into broadly persuasive terms. Unfortunately, using non-fundamentalist terms alone merely shrouded that deeper level of potential disagreement in apparent self-contradictions and rhetorical confusion. As Sullivan, Frohock, and Ammerman suggest, the Gablers' denial of the religiously-partisan character of their argument stems largely from the fact that they themselves apparently *saw* no division between, in Frohock's terms, the "metaphysical and the practical." Their anchoring presupposition regarded their possession of an absolute truth that *was* essentially American, they argued, but that, more importantly, was simply *right*. To question what was already certain was untenable, a challenge to God Himself, and to bring that assertion into the realm of open debate would have been to obliterate the foundation of the very framework that structured the Gablers' entire conception of reality – an event whose possibility would unnerve even the bravest.

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